

A Review of Inclusive Education Reforms in the Subcontinent: Similar Agenda, Diverse Strategies

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Abstract: *In response to a global movement, inclusive education has surfaced as a means of doing away with prejudice, injustice, and inequality in the educational system. The governments of developing nations, especially those in the subcontinent, have been actively pushed by UN agencies like UNESCO and UNICEF to increase educational access via inclusive education. The nations of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan have reacted favorably to the demand for inclusive education. However, the theological views, linguistic backgrounds, cultural customs, and socioeconomic conditions of the three nations differ. The response patterns of these nations distinctly demonstrate the contextual variations in establishing the objectives and plans of action for putting inclusive education into practice. In Bangladesh, the emphasis of inclusion tends to move to disadvantaged children, whereas in India and Pakistan, the concentration seems to be on children with disabilities. Furthermore, on August 20, 2005, India unveiled its first Action Plan for the Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities. Bangladesh updated its National Education Policy in 2010 to include inclusive education elements after five years. Although Pakistan included the idea of inclusive education in its National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in 2002, the Ministry of Education was not familiar with it. Examining the Subcontinent's educational reforms to increase children with disabilities' access to schooling was the study's primary goal. The study is qualitative in nature, and in addition to empirical research, policy and legislative texts were also reviewed using a descriptive analytical technique. This research looked at the underlying presumptions that influence inclusive education methods in the subcontinent today.*

Keywords: Access to schools, marginalization of children with disabilities, inclusive education, and inequality

I. INTRODUCTION

In the first ten years of the twenty-first century, advocates for human rights and educationists became more conscious of the availability and caliber of education for kids with disabilities. Less than 10% of school-age children with disabilities in the subcontinent have disproportionately restricted access to education (UNICEF, 2014). Globally, the international community came together to end these children's lack of access to education (Dakar Framework for Action 2000, MDGs 2001, CRPD 2007; Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action 1994). The most successful method for getting out-of-school children with disabilities back into the classroom in the area was inclusive education, which was gaining traction (Hameed, 2004). In order to negotiate with the statement governments and start a concurrent policy shift, UNESCO emerged as the leading change agent.

Regarding academia, a number of colleges answered the call; in particular, the departments of Special Education were the first to take up the challenge (Hameed & Manzoor, 2014). In a 2014 research, UNICEF verified effective instances of inclusive education in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. To raise broad knowledge in the area, a number of workshops and consulting seminars were held. Unfortunately, despite persistent attempts by UN organizations like UNESCO, UNICEF, and WHO, the political apathy led to a discussion that was not very useful in sharing these experiences. Sightsavers, ICEVI, Save the Children, and Braillo Norway were among the other participants on the front. The worldwide inclusive education flag bearers' efforts aided in creating a shared agenda for

the movement's debut. Positive outcomes were also obtained from a few small-scale pilot studies on inclusive education.

Diverse perspectives on the idea of inclusive education initially became apparent during UNICEF studies, when researchers across subcontinental nations sought a uniform definition of inclusive education along with its key indicators to guide their work. For instance, although children with impairments were the main issue in Pakistan and Bangladesh, the Indian researcher was more interested in the caste structure. It seemed that the idea of inclusive education was developing as a result of cultural differences. When it interacted with other structural elements like caste, gender, and religion, etc., it became even more crucial (Singal, 2015). Afterwards, the strategic action plans on inclusive education in these nations were formed by the disparities in regional priorities. The goal of this research is to identify the factors that contributed to the various strategic implementation strategies for the subcontinent's shared goal of inclusive education.

Objectives of the study

This study was conducted to:

1. Review the educational reforms in the Subcontinent (Pakistan, India & Bangladesh) to improve the access to school for children with disabilities.
2. Identify the similarities in recognizing inclusive education as a tool for 'Education of All'.
3. Unfold the diversity of strategic plans for the implementation of inclusive education in the Subcontinent.
4. Identify the gaps in theory and practice so that the countries of subcontinent (Pakistan, India & Bangladesh) can bridge the gaps.
5. Recommend measures to propose a structure for regional collaboration.

Research Questions

The study was conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of educational reforms were initiated in the Subcontinent to improve the access to school for children with disabilities?
2. What are the similarities in recognizing inclusive education as a tool for 'Education for All'?
3. What are the diversified practices on inclusive education agenda?
4. What are the gaps in the theory and practice of inclusive education?
5. What measures can be taken to improve the regional collaboration?

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is mostly a qualitative descriptive analytical research. Through a survey of the literature, this approach is utilized to spot patterns and make choices. A thorough analysis of the most recent reforms implemented in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India—the three nations that make up the subcontinent—was conducted. In order to do this, a desk study was created to examine policy papers, legislative summaries, and empirical research on inclusive education that have been carried out from these nations' founding until 2017. The following parameters were used for the comparison: Context: It covers an analysis of the cultural environment, including the incidence of disabilities and the parallels and discrepancies among linguistic, ethnic, religious, and economic diversity.

Specifically, how was inclusive education justified in light of the sociocultural conditions of the area? What methods and degrees of awareness were used to bring about this significant shift in society? Law and policy: With regard to placement possibilities and school assistance, the historical sequence of policy measures and the legal framework enacted to carry them out were examined. It was believed that the difference between the two would reveal how serious the administration was about adopting inclusive education.

Teacher education: Preservice and in-service institutions' provision of training to teachers employed in regular schools was examined. How closely the inclusive education philosophy and methodology were included into the teacher education programs. School improvement: Until schools accept all students, including those with impairments, inclusive education will remain a pipe dream. Unsupported schools run the risk of turning into landfills rather than

places where all pupils may get an education. The improvement of schools is a measurable sign that inclusive education is succeeding.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Context

Over the last ten years, the Subcontinent has made significant progress in bolstering its educational institutions and gaining access for more youngsters. The South Asia Regional Study (2014) reports that total primary school enrollment rates increased from 75% in 2000 to 90% in 2011. All around the area, plans for a fairer educational system are being established. Nonetheless, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh continue to face difficulties in granting school access to children with impairments. The subcontinent is the second most populous area in the world with the lowest rates of literacy (Sharma & Das, 2015).

The proportion of disabled children is quite comparable in these nations, according to national census data: 2.1% in India, 5.6% in Bangladesh, and 2.54% in Pakistan (Pakistan Census Report, 1998; India Census Report, 2001 and UNICEF, 2003). According to Hameed and Manzoor (2014), Bangladesh has a high incidence of disability due to a number of factors, including severe poverty, overcrowding, a lack of knowledge, inadequate medical treatment, and illiteracy. While the WHO, UNICEF, and UNESCO, among other international organizations, estimate that 10% of the region's population has a disability of some type, with children accounting for 30% of those cases (2015). The disparity in the figures might be caused by a number of factors, including the absence of standardized tools, trustworthy data on impairments, a vague definition, and insufficient knowledge to recognize the whole spectrum of disorders. A recent research by UNESCO (2015) and Hameed and Manzoor (2014, 2016) evaluated the prevalence of disability in these nations based on forecasts made using conventional methodologies. Table 1 displays them together with the corresponding levels of disability.

Table 1 Estimates of disability in the subcontinent

Attribute	Pakistan	India	Bangladesh
Total population	179.2 million	1.237 billion	163.7 million
Persons with disabilities.	2.54%	2.1%	5.6%
School going age children with disabilities	1.34million	7.79million	2.73million

Every one of the three nations has a different cultural background from the others in some manner. The variety of caste, religion, language, ethnicity, and resource accessibility is abundant in India. The idea of inclusive education is more challenging to implement as a result of this variety. A method that is effective in one north Indian school may not be effective in another in a different region in south India (Sharma & Das, 2015). The scheduled caste system is the clearest obstacle to equitable educational chances. Children's exposure to school is impacted by this system, which also makes social inclusion very difficult. It is particularly difficult to address as a human rights problem given the prevalence of handicap in this caste structure. On the other hand, because the majority of people in Pakistan are Muslims and do not support the caste system, the situation there is quite different. It is believed that every Muslim, irrespective of caste, creed, handicap, race, language, or socioeconomic situation, has an obligation to pursue education. Lack of resources (disabled-friendly buildings, teacher training, and curriculum adaptations), the multi-grade school system, political will, awareness of the rights of persons with disabilities (PWD), and inadequate implementation of educational policies are the main obstacles to access for education, particularly for children with disabilities. On the other side, the Maddras system in the area accepts children with impairments more warmly; but, because of a lack of funding, these institutions are unable to fulfill essential roles. Though there are fewer resources, the situation is far better in Bangladesh, where educational policies, with the exception of a few states, equally address the needs of children with disabilities in both urban and rural areas (Sharma, Forlin, Duppeler, & Yang, 2013; Hameed & Manzoor, 2014). According to an analysis of these nations, up until 1880, charitable individuals dominated the area of teaching disabled children under the supervision of Christian missionaries (Alur, 2002). Following their independence from the British, the governments of these nations concentrated on building unique educational and research facilities in the nation's cities for kids with special needs.

This method included taking care of these kids and keeping them apart from the regular school system (Misra, 2000). Regrettably, not all children with impairments in rural and distant places could use this method. The last ten years of the 20th century saw a significant change in the approach of teaching young kids. Social and right-based models regarding disability have supplanted the charity and medical models in that location. This transition resulted in radical adjustments to the practices and policies surrounding the education of children with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) served as the cornerstone for the development of disability-related policy. Education began to include all underprivileged children; most of these children are still seen as charity cases, but it was no longer restricted to "Education for About All."

Policy and legislation

While all of the subcontinent's nations are willing to provide everyone access to the greatest educational possibilities since they understand how important education is to their economies, different policy strategies are being used to accomplish this goal. When comparing India's attempts at educational reform to those of other subcontinental nations, they are more praiseworthy and swift. Both the state and the federal governments share responsibilities for education in India. While the state controls the way the school system is organized, the federal government is in charge of education (Department of school, 2004).

Over the last forty years, there have been improvements implemented regarding the education of children with impairments. The 1974 Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) plan was the first government of India effort (NCERT, 2011). The program's goal was to support families financially so that their disabled children may remain in the mainstream school system. The integration of children with impairments was given a high priority in the program in its next aim for five years plan (1980–1985) (NCERT, 2011). The National Policy of Action, the National Policy on Education/Programme of Action (NPE/POA, 1986–1992), and the Project Integrated Education Development (PIED; Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1987) all demonstrated the government of India's continued commitment to the education of children with disabilities, with the goal of including them as equal partners at all educational levels (Sharma & Das, 2015).

These projects served as the impetus for the inclusive education movement in India as well as fundamental adjustments to national laws. One of the largest government initiatives from 1994 to 1995 was the District Primary Education Project (DPEP), which was funded in 149 districts across 14 states for over 740 million US dollars. The 1996 Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act was a turning point in Indian history for the full integration of disabled children into society without facing prejudice. Despite the fact that this law was a model, it was insufficient to significantly alter societal perceptions or those of other allied departments in such a varied nation. With a policy of "zero rejection" on the basis of handicap, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was introduced in India in 2001 as a response to international obligations, such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and national integrity. The Ministry of Human Resource Development launched the National Action Plan for the Inclusion of Children and Youth with Disabilities (IEDC) in 2005.

It was then changed into Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the Secondary Stage (IEDSS). The secondary inclusive education that this program aimed to deliver was its goal. Later, India's inclusive education was legally backed by the Right to Education Act (RTE), 2010 (Bhan & Rodricks, 2012). Although the number of students served by the various government-run educational programs and schemes has been steadily increasing, Ministry of Human Resource Development (2007) reported that these policy and legislative initiatives could only address a small portion of the issues surrounding inclusive education. This is because not all children with disabilities could be reached by these initiatives. However, Pakistan has the second-highest percentage of unenrolled students worldwide and is far from achieving the goal of universal primary enrollment (UNESCO, 2014).

The nation devotes only 3% of its GDP, or gross national product, to education, which is insufficient to address the problems at hand. Furthermore, it does not currently dedicate the same amount of resources to the education of kids with impairments. Devolution of responsibility at the provincial level is one of the likely explanations for the absence of fiscal problems. There were very few facilities for disabled children in the nation at the time of independence, and most of them were run by non-governmental organizations. For both adults and children with mental impairment,

occupational education and training should be made available, according to the 1959 National Commission on Education.

Special education funding was expanded under the Education Policy of 1972. On the other hand, increasing funding for special education throughout the 1980s indicated a notable rise in government engagement (Lari, 2006). The late General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), the father of a daughter with numerous impairments, was a presidential ruler when the road toward educational reforms for people with disabilities started. The United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983–1992), a powerful global movement, further solidified the commitment, and the Directorate General of Special Education, a segregated special education system at the federal level, was founded in 1985 (Ahmad & Yousaf, 2011).

The National Policy for Persons with Disability (2002) is the only noteworthy official document available to date, offering a thorough overview of the Pakistani government's goals and objectives for the education of children with disabilities. Although the policy encourages integration, in practice it followed a medical paradigm. The National Plan of Action on Policy was developed in 2006 and said that cooperation from allies is necessary to ensure that education is accessible and equitable in the form of inclusive education. Isolated efforts cannot achieve these goals. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was approved by the Pakistani government in 2011. This treaty states that the State must offer comprehensive, equal education. The government has just enacted a significant piece of legislation known as the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2014.

"The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law," states Article 25-A of the constitution (p. 15). A survey of the literature indicates that the country's NGOs and INGOs (UNESCO, UNICEF) have been the main initiators and concentrators of the inclusive education movement. In particular, there hasn't been any noteworthy advancement in the creation of policies for inclusive educational programs. As of right now, both special schools and regular schools operate in total seclusion (Hameed & Manzoor, 2014). With a massive budget of 170 million, the Department of Special Education, Government of the Punjab, initiated a pilot project in two districts of South Punjab in 2014 to promote inclusive education. "Lahore Declaration on Inclusive Education 2015" was recently approved by the University of Management and Technology, Lahore, at the first International Conference on Inclusive Education (ICIE 2015) in Pakistan.

A comprehensive examination of Pakistan's special education system for disabled students reveals that the nation has moved from the antiquated idea of segregated special education to a new paradigm of inclusive education. But in the views of decision-makers, inclusive education currently only refers to include students with mild to severe impairments. Bangladesh's stance on inclusive education is unambiguous. Primary education policies were developed for universal, equal, and accessible access as soon as the country gained independence in 1971. Its 1972 constitution, namely articles 17 and 28, states unequivocally that everyone should be entitled to free and inclusive education (Malk, M.S., Begum, H. A., Habib, M. A., Shaila, M. & Roshid, M. M. (2013)).

Bangladesh has implemented many legal measures to support the education of children with disabilities in addition to adhering to all international treaties. The Compulsory Primary Education Act of 1990, the Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy of 2012, the National Education Policy for the Disabled of 1995, the Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act of 2001, and the National Education Policy of 2010 are some of these efforts. The government of Bangladesh has outlined a clear vision for the implementation of inclusive education throughout the nation in all of these policy papers, but for it to really happen, structural and behavioral changes must be made (Sharma, 2011).

Teacher education

A thorough overhaul of the engaging system, including the teacher training paradigm, is required for inclusion in education. Numerous studies show that in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, teachers' negative attitudes toward inclusive education are a result of a lack of professional development opportunities that are appropriate, effective, and disability-accepting (Hameed & Manzoor, 2014; Sharma, U., Forlin, C., Deppeler, J. & Yang, G. 2013; Bindal & Sharma, 2010). A small number of educators apply these trainings to real-world scenarios (David & Kuyini, 2002). It is stressful for instructors to accept students with disabilities into their classes because of the service structure, financial assistance, multi-grade classrooms, and overcrowding. Curricula for teacher education and training in the application of inclusion

constitute the second part. According to the study evaluation, pre-service programs generally and in-service programs specifically perceive teacher education for educational change as limited, isolated, and ad hoc.

This is true in practically all three of these nations. These in-service teacher training sessions are often brief and devoid of technological assistance for the course content and curriculum. The majority of these courses are started as pilot projects without any kind of follow-up or actual assessment. In Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, there isn't a suitable national teacher education program that focuses on inclusive education, claim Sharma et al. (2013). Following graduation, there are several programs that provide pre-service training in the area of special education.

One or two of the disciplines covered in these programs deal with inclusive education. Regretfully, there is no course material available in conventional teacher training programs that may foster an attitude of acceptance towards students with disabilities as full members of the educational system. As a result, instructors and administrators find it more difficult to get access in regular elementary and secondary institutions. Such teacher education programs, in the opinion of Sharma and Das (2015), educate teachers for exclusion rather than inclusion. That being said, it is imperative that we create curricula that equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and practice necessary for inclusive reform that is, with their hearts, heads, and hands. (Sharma, 2011).

School improvement

Until schools are made friendly and accessible for all students, including those with disabilities, inclusive education will remain a pipe dream. Unsupported schools run the risk of turning into landfills rather than places where all pupils may get an education. Improvements in schools are a measurable sign that inclusion is taking hold. By observably enhancing schools, the Indian government has made some serious moves in giving disabled children in the nation access to mainstream education. The Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) initiative, introduced by the Indian government in 1974, was the primary legal instrument for the plan to reform schools. A 100% cash grant was given under this Centrally Sponsored Scheme to renovate the general school in order to accept and retain students with disabilities in general education.

This plan had mediocre outcomes. Furthermore, it was determined to make all schools in the nation handicap accessible by 2020, in accordance with the PWD Act, 1995. With regard to this Act, it was intended for ordinary schools to use specific interventions and pedagogical advancements in order to successfully implement inclusion. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programs in India, which have as their main objective the Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) alongside changes to school entrance policies, represent another attempt in this area. The three main components of UEE access, enrollment, and retention of children with special needs are the focus of the zero-rejection policy, which applies to all children aged 6 to 14 years.

Identification, formal and functional assessment, appropriate educational placement, creation of an individualized educational plan, supply of appliances and aids, teacher preparation, resource support, removal of architectural barriers, monitoring, and evaluation were among the major SSA reforms for school improvement (Sanjeev & Kumar, 2007). A special emphasis was also placed on girls with special needs. Another piece of legislation that supports enhancing the school environment and implementing inclusive education more effectively is the Right to Education Act of 2009. Bangladesh, which has a centralized educational system, is also working to enhance schools in order to successfully execute inclusive education throughout the nation.

The Compulsory Primary Education Act of 1990, the National Education Policy for the Disabled of 1995, the Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act of 2001, and the National Education Policy of 2010 are just a few examples of other policy initiatives. However, the real transformation in education was marked by the introduction of two significant programs, the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) in 1997 and the Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP) in 2005. PEDP was designed to make the primary education system better. The first phase, which ran from 1997 to 2003, did not fully promote inclusive education. In order to address diversity, the inclusion component for regular school improvement was added during the second phase, which ran from 2004 to 2011 (Malket et al., 2013).

The program's action plan concentrated on training teachers, developing curricula, and designing accessible school facilities with furniture, ramps, and flexible admissions procedures to provide basic education at the existing remote region schools. The Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and

the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) all contributed funds to the other project, known as TQI-SEP. This initiative was started in Bangladesh with the goal of improving the secondary education system to reduce prejudice, dropout rates, and barriers to enrollment. A commendable step toward inclusive education in schools was made. One of the key elements of this approach was increasing school capacity to provide students with disabilities an optimal learning environment. Classroom procedures were an additional crucial element. In order to improve classroom procedures at an inclusive school, equipment supply and teacher training received significant attention.

Khan (2012) states that while TQI-SEP professional learning resulted in some modifications to classroom practices, a more significant obstacle to the effective implementation of inclusive education was teachers' apathetic professional attitudes. In Pakistan, the narrative around school development initiatives after the inclusive education movement is not well developed. With significant financial support from the Ministry of Special Education, the development of new and improved segregated special schools was the main focus throughout the 1990s and the first part of the 2000s. Every province has various policy efforts regarding devolution of education at the provincial level.

However, government and private organizations have made a few official and informal steps in order to satisfy their international responsibility under the 2007 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The past five years have seen the quick efforts take the form of several pilot projects. A new inclusive education pilot project, sponsored by the Department for International Development (DIFID), has been introduced by the Punjabi government's Department of Special Education in two districts of South Punjab. The project's primary goal is to assess kids with impairments and have them enrolled in mainstream schools. Every school involved in the initiative would get 40,000 PKR for capacity development, such as ramps and paths. The program's agenda item for minimizing classroom problems for diverse learners included teacher training initiatives.

When it comes to implementing inclusive learning in their schools, the private sector has taken the lead. The medical and psychiatric fields provide the majority of the planning for school reform, with normal teacher education making up very little of the total. Consequently, inclusive education is unable to escape the confines of the "medical model." The "Amin Maktib Model," which places a psychologist at the center, is the most widely accepted approach with governmental approval. The other is called "Rising Sun Model," and it is run by a physician. The fundamental spirit of inclusive education, which is founded on the social model and human rights approach, can never be restored under this kind of leadership. The well-known non-governmental organization (NGO) Ghazali Education Trust Lahore launched the Rural Inclusive Education Project (RIEP), which converts isolated rural private schools into inclusive ones. This endeavor is growing daily and yielding greater results. The private sector is also making efforts in other major cities, although as was previously indicated, there is still a long way to go in this direction.

IV. CONCLUSION

A thorough analysis of the literature and a discussion of the situation of inclusive education in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh, or the Subcontinent, show that these nations have a common goal for inclusive education. The initiatives done by these nations amply demonstrate that inclusive education has taken a significant turn in educational reform and is no longer just a pet peeve or catchphrase. Financial and technological assistance for taking on this enormous problem is also being positively impacted by the global acceptance and ratification of egalitarian, high-quality education. The situational analysis and various strategic implementation strategies of the nations are shown in the theme study on context, policy & law, teacher education, and school improvement.

Therefore, one may say that Bangladesh and India have better ideas about inclusive education than Pakistan does. Pakistan must proceed cautiously to maintain compatibility with other regional players. The survey found that the issues of education for all, 100% enrollment, educational access for kids with disabilities, the right to an education, and teacher preparation continue to be met by Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh at the same level. In particular, the context showed how similar the three nations' teacher curricula, school structures, geographic locations, and disability statistics are; nonetheless, India has done a far better job of enacting laws and policies that support the education of children with disabilities in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Persons with Disabilities. In a similar vein, Indian school development initiatives are more structured than those in Pakistan. Since its founding, Bangladesh has worked to advance education, which has led to quick changes in the creation and application of special education policies.

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