

Children with Disabilities and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA): A Conceptual Synthesis

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Abstract: Children with disabilities constitute one of the most marginalized groups within the Indian education system, often facing persistent barriers to access, participation, and achievement. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), launched in 2001, represents a landmark national initiative aimed at universalizing elementary education with a strong focus on equity and inclusion. This conceptual synthesis examines the evolution, provisions, and challenges of SSA in relation to the education of children with disabilities, drawing upon policy frameworks, implementation strategies, and contemporary debates within inclusive education. SSA introduced significant interventions—such as early identification and assessment, home-based education for children with severe disabilities, teacher training in inclusive practices, provision of assistive devices, resource support, and community mobilization—to bridge educational gaps. While these initiatives marked a shift from segregated special schooling toward inclusive mainstream environments, the synthesis highlights persistent systemic constraints, including inadequate teacher preparedness, infrastructural limitations, fragmented service delivery, and socio-cultural attitudes that continue to impede full inclusion. The abstract also emphasizes the transition from SSA to Samagra Shiksha, noting continuity and reform in inclusive education priorities. Overall, the paper argues that although SSA laid essential foundations for integrating children with disabilities into the education system, achieving meaningful inclusion requires sustained policy commitment, strengthened institutional capacities, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and contextually responsive pedagogical models. This synthesis contributes to a deeper understanding of policy–practice interfaces and the ongoing need for inclusive, child-centered, and rights-based educational approaches in India.

Keywords: Disability, Child-centered, SSA, Mainstream Mobilization, Inclusion

1. Introduction

In India, the framers of the Indian constitution incorporated relevant provisions in the constitution to secure primary and Elementary education. During the framing of Indian constitution the framers of the constitution realized the importance of education in the entire framework of a democratic nation. In Indian constitution Education was not initially included under the Fundamental Rights but was one of the Directive Principles, under Article-45 of the Constitution, where the state is urged to provide universal elementary education within the ten years from the commencement of the Indian constitution, i.e., till year 1960. But, right to education unfortunately still remains a dream rather than a reality though the demands for 'educated people' continues to grow. Almost 2/3rd population of the developing countries have no access to primary and elementary education. Against this alarming background the 1989 United Nations convention on the Right of the child reaffirmed the right of every child to education.

The well-known and famous verdict in the case of J.P. Unnikrishnan vs. State of Andhra Pradesh, the Supreme Court gave a land mark judgment which made the intent of the government a commitment, by clearly establishing education as a fundamental right in 1993.

"The citizen of this country have a fundamental right to education. The said right flows from Article 21."

Prior to 1976, education was primarily the state responsibility but in 1976 through 42nd Amendment of Indian Constitution Act was passed and this amendment made education a concurrent subject matter among Central government and State governments.

The National Policy on Education (NPE-1986), and its Program of Action (PoA 1992) are a step towards the Universalization of Elementary Education. The world declaration and the framework for action were adopted by the world conference on Education for All, at Jomiten March 1990 gave further push to the rational commitment to provide the basic Education For All (EFA). A number of essential step

Steps in the process of achieving EFA were decided. It was noted that large and populous countries face more challenges of both scale and diversity.

India considers basic education to be the key to sustained socio-economic development, hence, since early 1990's, the country has been making concerted effort to attain the Education For All, through the centrally sponsored scheme of District Primary Education Programme launched in 1994 as a major initiative to achieve the objectives of universalization of primary education.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)

A National Committee of Education Ministers was set up under the chairmanship of the HRD Ministry in 1998 to examine how a holistic approach to universalization of Elementary Education could be adopted. The National Committee submitted its report in 1999. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was designed on the broad recommendation of the committee. The SSA is an effort to universalize elementary education by involving the community and providing useful and relevant education of satisfactory quality.

The scheme of SSA, a national flagship programme is being implemented in all districts of the country. The aim of SSA (Which was launched in 2001) is to provide useful and quality elementary education for all children in the 6-14 years age

group including children with disabilities by 2010. It aims at achieving primary education by 2007 and universal Elementary Education by 2010. The *Abhiyan* focuses on elementary education of satisfactory quality education by providing schooling facilities and strengthening existing school infrastructures through provisions of additional classrooms, clean toilets, drinking water, maintenance grant, school improvement grants etc. The financial assistance under the programme of SSA was on a 85: 15 sharing arrangement during the 9th Plan, 75: 25 during the 10th Five Year Plan and 50: 50 sharing thereafter between the Central and the State government except for 8 North Eastern States, where 15% of the state there is met by ministry of DONER for the two years 2005-06 and 2006-07 (India, 2008).

The programme covers the entire country with special focus on educational needs of girls, SC/STs, and other children in different circumstances. SSA has a special focus on girls and children of weaker sections and on children with disability and specially abled. Education is the right of every child. It is the education which is the prime tool to equip a child to meet the challenge of life. The principle of equality of educational opportunity provides everybody an opportunity to get education. Discrimination on the basis of caste, colour, creed, gender and socio-economic status, physical and mental age are legally restricted. It is common saying that „knowledge is power“. But if people are not interested in it, it is not a power anymore; it wont help to only put knowledge, will and emotions together. It needs to become real power that can be translated into real wisdom, then it is a universal truth that education is the best tool to win over any problem. So an educated society is one of the best and the first indication of development of a country. India is trying its best to retain in the race of advancement. Therefore several policies have been implemented in the field of education. With the power of education not only a stout person but also a handicapped/disabled person can use the 'dron' technology in the battle field of this competitive and progressive world. The 21st century has indeed brought a new ray of hope for the differently abled persons. In initial years it was followed by the stage of pity and compassion mostly on religious consideration to reduce pain and misery of disabled persons. But slowly the realization came that differently able people also have a right to education and special schools were established, but they were apart from the general or „mainstream“ education system. Hence to bring the disabled children in the general and smooth stream of life the Integrated Education for Disabled (IED) scheme has been implemented in an effective way. Therefore, the transition from 'special school concept' to inclusive education can be treated as an evolutionary step in the education for children with disabilities, as the children with special needs must have access to regular and routine schools.

Children with disabilities comprise one of the major segments that are still outside the mainstream education. The initial scheme for the inclusion of children with special need under Integrated Education for the Disabled Children (IEDC) was introduced in 1970s, covering children with disabilities at all levels of school education. This Scheme was revised in 2009 as Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the secondary stage (IEDSS). The IEDSS scheme provided an opportunity to all children with disabilities completing eight years of

elementary schooling to complete four years of Secondary schooling (classes IX to XII) in an inclusive and enabling environment. This scheme is being implemented by different organizations/divisions under the Education Department of State Government on the basis of 100 per cent assistance from the Central Government. The Scheme covers all children of age 14+ passing out of elementary schools and studying in secondary level in government, local bodies or government aided schools, with one or more disabilities as defined under the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 and the National Trust Act 1999 in the age group 14+ to 18+, namely:

- 1) Blindness
- 2) Low Vision
- 3) Leprosy Cured
- 4) Hearing Impaired
- 5) Locomotor Disabilities
- 6) Mental Retardation
- 7) Autism
- 8) Cerebral Palsy

Inclusion is all about mainstreaming education by removing barriers at bringing all children together in school irrespective of their physical and mental abilities. It is about valuing the differences in the children and catering to their different needs and is based on the belief that all can learn and should learn together.

The fundamental aim of education is to bring about change in the person as well as in the society. Universalization of Elementary Education has been a cherished national goal of India since 1950. There have been various Commissions and Policies on education giving directions and guidelines on how this national goal could be achieved. Many programmes have been taken up by the government to achieve universal elementary education goal. To accomplish this goal, Article 45 of Indian constitution directs the states to provide free and compulsory education to all children till 14 years of age. For fulfilling this constitutional obligation the access to educational facilities has been improved with large number of new schools and providing the required facilities and the enrollment therefore has also tremendously increased.

The goal has received further inputs with the launching of nationwide programme known as SSA, which aims at achieving UEE by 2010. Education has been a primary concern for the government. Free and compulsory education for all children until the completion of 14 years was a commitment of Indian constitution mentioned in Article-45 in the Directive Principle of State Policy. Decades have gone by without actually realizing the commitment. Many Commissions and Committees were constituted to look into the matter and to suggest ways and means to accelerate the pace of universal elementary education. The constitution of India ensures equality, freedom, justice and dignity of all individuals, and implicitly mandates an inclusive society for all including persons with disabilities. In the recent years, there have been vast and positive changes in the perception of the society towards persons with disabilities. It has been realized that a most of persons with disabilities can lead a better quality of life if they have equal opportunities and effective access to rehabilitation measures. According to the Census 2001, there are 2.19 crore persons with disabilities in India and constitute 2.13 percent of the total population. This

includes persons with visual, hearing, speech, locomotors and mental disabilities. Seventy five percent of persons with disabilities live in rural areas. 49 percent of disabled population is literate and only 34 percent are employed. The earlier emphasis on medical rehabilitation has now been replaced by an emphasis on social rehabilitation. There has been an increasing recognition of abilities of persons with disabilities and emphasis on mainstreaming them in the society based on their capabilities. The Government of India has enacted some legislation for persons with disabilities viz.

- 1) Persons with disability (equal opportunities protection of right and full participation Act 1995, which provides for education employment, creation of barrier free environment, social security etc.
- 2) National trust for welfare of persons with Autism cerebral palsy, mental retardation and multiple disability Act 1999 has provisions for legal guardianship of the four categories and creation of enabling environment for as much independent living as possible.
- 3) Rehabilitation council of India Act, 1992 deals with the development of manpower for providing rehabilitation services.

SSA and Inclusive Education

Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) is the main objective of SSA. Three Important aspects of UEE are access, enrolment and retention of all children in 6-14 years of age. This goal of UEE has further been facilitated by the 86th constitutional Amendment Act, making free and compulsory elementary education a fundamental right for all children in the age group of 6-14 years. This amendment has given a new thrust to the education of Children With Special Needs (CWSN), as without their inclusion, the objective of UEE cannot be achieved. In fact inclusion of one of the groups, which is extremely crucial for UEE is perhaps that of the CWSN. Hence education of CWSN is an important component of SSA. 29-57 lakh CWSN have been identified till now under the SSA. Out of this 24.77 lakh CWSN (83.78%) have been enrolled in regular schools. The current coverage of CWSN is 26.47 lakh (89.53%) the states have shown an overall expenditure of 81.77% on CWSN inclusion related activities in 2008-09 (Suresh Kumar, DEPA-XXXI, 2010-11).

SSA provides up to Rs.1200/per child for the inclusion of disabled children as per specific proposal per year. District plan for children with special needs is formulated within the Rs.1200 per child norm. The interventions under SSA for inclusive education are identification functional and formal assessment appropriate educational placement; preparation of individualized educational plan, Provision of aids and appliances, teachers training, resources support, removal of architectural barriers, research monitoring and evaluation and a special focus on girls with special needs.

Pre-school and ECCE Facilities

Preparation of disabled children for education is equally essential. Preference should be given to the blocks where the schemes of Integrated Child Development (ICD) and Early Childhood Centre of Education (ECCE) exist while selecting blocks for implementation of the scheme support the services for disabled children will be available for instructional

materials and training of teachers. This would be an activity preparatory to the child coming into the regular school system with –

- Special training for the hearing handicapped children.
- Mobility and orientation training for the visually handicapped.
- Daily living and communication skills training required by children with other disabilities.
- Parents counseling and training in home management of these children.

Identification of Children with Disabilities

To identify disabled children in the blocks/districts where the scheme is yet to be implemented, there is a need to provide suitable orientation to all school teachers in the area for conducting a survey to identify disabled children in general school or out of school. Teachers may be provided a small honorarium for conducting the survey. The IEDC cell should provide printed survey forms for identification of these children. Assistance up to Rs.10,000 may be provided to the IEDC cell for this purpose. These efforts should be supplemented by publicity through mass media.

Assessment of Disabled Children

The coordinator of the programme will be responsible for arranging the assessment of the children and monitoring their progress on ongoing basis. A three member assessment team, comprising a doctor, a psychologist and a special educator will be formed.

Specialists will be drawn upon in consultation with the State Health Department. Wherever district rehabilitation centers have been established, its resources for assessment may be used. The non-government organization (NGOs) with infrastructural facilities may also be used for assessment purposes.

The assessment report should be comprehensive enough for educational programming: a profile of what a particular child can or cannot do during testing situations should be adequately reported. The report should specifically indicate whether the child can be put directly into school or should receive preparation in special school/special preparatory class in the Early Childhood Education Centre, specially equipped for this purpose.

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan has been built upon the experience of several primary education programmes that preceded it, including the *District Primary Education Programme (DPEP)*, *Shiksha Karmi Project (SKP)* and *Lok Jumbish Project (LJP)*.

It is a partnership project between the Central and State governments, which seeks to improve the performance of the school through a community owned approach with specific focus on the provision of quality education, the government is pumping more and more money in the SSA in every five year plan in order to achieve the goal of universalization of elementary education as soon as possible. The government of India in its latest five year plans has realized this and large amount of money have been allocated for education. During the tenth plan an allocation of Rs.17, 000 crores has been made for SSA.

2. Conclusion

The evolution of India's commitment to universal and equitable education reflects a long and complex journey shaped by constitutional vision, judicial interpretation, global influences, and national policy reforms. The constitutional framers recognized education as the foundation of a democratic society, yet its initial placement under the Directive Principles rather than the Fundamental Rights postponed its realization for decades. Landmark developments such as the *Unnikrishnan* judgment (1993) and the 86th Constitutional Amendment eventually affirmed free and compulsory education for all children aged 6–14 as a fundamental right, reinforcing the belief that no nation can progress without guaranteeing educational access to every child. Within this broader historical and policy context, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) emerged as a transformative initiative to universalize elementary education, including for children with disabilities—one of the most marginalized and underserved groups.

SSA recognized that inclusive education is central to the goal of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE), as ignoring children with special needs would render the vision of “education for all” incomplete. The programme introduced structured interventions such as early identification, functional and formal assessments, individualized education plans, teacher training, provision of assistive devices, accessibility improvements, and community mobilization. These measures signaled a shift from segregated education toward integration and, ultimately, inclusion. The expansion of schemes such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) and the later Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) further supported continuity in the educational journey of children with disabilities.

Despite these advances, substantial challenges persist. Inadequate teacher preparation, inconsistent implementation across states, infrastructural barriers, limited community awareness, and insufficient coordination among governmental departments often compromise the effectiveness of inclusive education efforts. Additionally, socio-cultural attitudes and rural–urban disparities continue to hinder the participation and retention of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. These issues highlight that inclusion must be understood not merely as placement in a regular classroom but as a systemic transformation requiring responsive pedagogy, institutional commitment, and societal acceptance.

Nevertheless, SSA has undeniably laid the groundwork for a rights-based, child-centered approach to education. It has expanded educational access, strengthened school infrastructure, improved enrolment of children with disabilities, and brought inclusive education into mainstream policy discourse. The programme's emphasis on community ownership, decentralized planning, and intersectoral collaboration has also broadened the base for sustainable educational reform. As India moves forward under the unified framework of Samagra Shiksha, the lessons from SSA remain invaluable. The need of the hour is to deepen inclusive practices, enhance teacher competencies, ensure barrier-free

learning environments, and provide continuous support to children with disabilities across all stages of schooling.

In conclusion, SSA represents both a milestone and a starting point. It has brought India significantly closer to achieving equitable elementary education, yet meaningful inclusion demands ongoing commitment, persistent innovation, and collective responsibility. Only through sustained efforts can the constitutional promise of equal educational opportunity for every child—including those with disabilities—be fully realised.

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