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Understanding Intersectional Schooling: How NEP 2020 has Impacted Disabled Students

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Abstract: ***India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) represents one of the most ambitious overhauls of the country's educational architecture in three decades. While it articulates a vision of inclusive, equitable, and holistic education, its implications for students with disabilities — especially those navigating multiple axes of marginalisation such as caste, gender, rurality, and poverty — remain deeply underexamined. This article undertakes a critical, intersectional analysis of NEP 2020's framework for disability inclusion, tracing the policy's conceptual underpinnings, its relationship with constitutional and legislative commitments, and its translation into school-level realities. Drawing on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and empirical studies of classroom practice, the article reveals a persistent gap between the policy's aspirational language and structural preparedness. Particular attention is given to intellectual disability, neurodiversity, vocational training, teacher readiness, and rural resource constraints. The article concludes with targeted policy recommendations aimed at transforming NEP 2020's promise of inclusion into practice.***
Keywords: Disability, NEP 2020, Inclusive Education, Intersectionality, India

I. UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN EDUCATION

Education is not experienced uniformly. For students with disabilities in India, the school is not merely a site of learning but a complex social institution in which multiple hierarchies — of ability, caste, gender, class, and geography — converge to shape access, participation, and outcomes. Understanding how NEP 2020 has impacted disabled students requires, first and foremost, a conceptual framework that moves beyond simple binaries of inclusion and exclusion. Intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) in the context of race and gender, provides precisely such a framework.

Intersectionality posits that social categories are not independent but mutually constitutive. A student with a physical disability who also belongs to a Scheduled Caste community, lives in a rural area, and belongs to a low-income household does not experience four separate disadvantages in addition — rather, these categories intersect to produce a qualitatively distinct form of marginalisation that is not reducible to any single axis. In the Indian educational context, this intersectional lens is indispensable. The National Sample Survey (NSS 76th Round, 2018) found that persons with disabilities in India have a literacy rate of 55.02 per cent, compared to 76 per cent for the non-disabled population. However, these aggregate figures conceal the layered disadvantages experienced by, say, a Dalit girl with a hearing impairment in rural Bihar versus an upper-caste boy with dyslexia in an urban private school.

The social model of disability, which emerged from disability rights movements in the United Kingdom and has been increasingly adopted in Indian policy discourse, distinguishes between impairment (a physical, sensory, or cognitive difference) and disability (the social and structural barriers that prevent full participation). Under this model, it is not the wheelchair user's inability to walk that constitutes disability, but the absence of ramps in schools. This distinction is foundational to understanding NEP 2020, which at its best embraces this social model and at its worst reverts to a medical or charity model that locates the problem in the child rather than in the system. Intersectional schooling, as a conceptual framework for this article, refers to the study of how schools reproduce, ameliorate, or transform the overlapping disadvantages that disabled students face. It asks: who gets access to inclusive classrooms, who benefits from assistive technology, who is streamed into vocational programmes rather than academic tracks, and whose disability is recognised and accommodated? These are not merely questions of policy intent but of institutional culture, resource distribution, and social power. NEP 2020, for all its rhetorical commitment to equity, operates within a political economy characterised by stark inequalities that the policy alone cannot resolve. This article proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 situates NEP 2020 within the broader legal and policy architecture governing disability and education in India. Chapter 3 examines the specific provisions of NEP 2020 relevant to disability, with particular attention to intellectual disability and neurodiversity. Chapter 4 analyses the translation of these provisions into school-level practice. Chapter 5 addresses teacher training and classroom readiness. Chapter 6 identifies critical gaps, and Chapter 7 proposes actionable recommendations.

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II. POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

A. International Commitments and Constitutional Foundations

India's engagement with disability rights in education is shaped by a layered architecture of international commitments and constitutional obligations. At the international level, the most significant instrument is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which India ratified in 2007. Article 24 of the UNCRPD obligates state parties to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels, requiring that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, that reasonable accommodations are provided, and that support is offered to facilitate effective education within the general education system.

India's constitutional framework provides a parallel set of commitments. Article 21-A, inserted by the 86th Constitutional Amendment in 2002, guarantees free and compulsory education for all children between six and fourteen years as a Fundamental Right. Article 41 directs the state to make effective provision for securing the right to education for persons with disabilities, while Article 46 mandates the promotion of educational and economic interests of weaker sections, which has been interpreted to include persons with disabilities.

The Directive Principles, though not judicially enforceable in the same manner as Fundamental Rights, create a normative framework that informs policy formulation.

The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 was India's first comprehensive disability legislation. It required that every child with a disability be provided free education in an appropriate environment until age eighteen. However, the 1995 Act was criticised for its categorical approach — recognising only seven disability categories — and for its failure to create enforceable mechanisms. The shift from a welfare-based to a rights-based approach was only fully articulated with the passage of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

The UNCRPD's influence on Indian constitutional interpretation has been substantive. In Disabled Rights Group v. Union of India (2018), the Delhi High Court invoked Article 24 of the UNCRPD to hold that the exclusion of disabled students from mainstream schools violated their right to equality under Article 14. This jurisprudential development is significant because it creates a higher standard against which NEP 2020's provisions must be measured — one that goes beyond mere formal enrolment to guarantee meaningful participation and learning.

B. Contemporary Legislative Framework for Inclusive Education

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act) represents a landmark shift in India's disability law. Expanding the recognised disability categories from seven to twenty-one, the Act explicitly includes autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disabilities, mental illness, multiple sclerosis, and intellectual disability, among others. Section 16 of the Act mandates that every government institution of education shall provide inclusive education to children with disabilities. Section 17 extends this obligation to private schools that receive government aid.

The RPWD Act introduces the concept of 'reasonable accommodation,' defined as necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments, not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, to ensure persons with disabilities enjoy all human rights on an equal basis. In educational contexts, this includes adjustments to curricula, assessment formats, physical infrastructure, and instructional methods. The duty to provide reasonable accommodation is one of the most operationally significant provisions of the Act, yet it remains poorly understood and inconsistently implemented at the school level.

The Right to Education Act, 2009 (RTE Act), while primarily concerned with universal elementary education, contains provisions relevant to disability. Section 3(2) guarantees free and compulsory education for children with disabilities aged six to fourteen. However, the Act has been criticised for its silence on inclusive pedagogy, teacher training for disability, and the specific needs of children with intellectual or developmental disabilities. The RTE Act's emphasis on age-appropriate grade placement, without corresponding provisions for differentiated instruction, has paradoxically worked against some children with intellectual disabilities who are placed in grade-level classrooms without adequate support.

Together, these legislative instruments create a framework of entitlement and obligation. However, as subsequent chapters demonstrate, the distance between statutory rights and lived experience remains formidable. NEP 2020 was developed within this legal landscape and is expected to operationalise its principles. The extent to which it succeeds in doing so is the central question this article investigates.

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III. NEP 2020'S APPROACH: ADDRESSING INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY AND NEURODIVERSITY

A. *The Vision of NEP 2020 and Disability Inclusion*

NEP 2020, released by the Ministry of Education in July 2020, articulates an ambitious vision for transforming Indian education. The Policy's foundational values include equity, inclusion, and the belief that every child has unique capabilities that education must identify and nurture. Chapter 6 of NEP 2020 is specifically dedicated to equitable and inclusive education, and it explicitly addresses children with disabilities under the broader category of 'Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups' (SEDGs).

The Policy commits to ensuring that all children with disabilities have access to an education of the highest quality, in a system that is fully inclusive from the foundational stage to higher education. It endorses the move from a 'medical model' of disability towards a 'social model' and calls for 'special emphasis on the enrolment and participation of children from diverse backgrounds' in mainstream schools. The language of NEP 2020 is, at its best, rights-affirming and socially conscious. It recognises the need for individualised support plans, flexible curricula, universal design for learning (UDL), and the empowerment of families.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a framework originating in disability education research, calls for the proactive design of educational materials, methods, and assessments in ways that are accessible to all learners from the outset, rather than making post-hoc accommodations for students who do not fit a 'standard' mould. NEP 2020's endorsement of UDL principles is a conceptually sound and internationally recognised approach. However, UDL implementation requires trained teachers, flexible curriculum frameworks, and investment in accessible materials — conditions that are far from uniformly present in Indian schools.

The Policy also commits to the establishment of a National Curriculum Framework for inclusive education and calls for the development of National Book Promotion Policy to ensure the availability of accessible books and materials. However, critics have noted that NEP 2020's disability provisions, while philosophically sound, lack specificity regarding implementation timelines, resource allocation, monitoring mechanisms, and accountability structures — a criticism that echoes concerns raised about previous Indian education policies.

B. *Intellectual Disability and Neurodiversity within NEP 2020*

The treatment of intellectual disability and neurodiversity in NEP 2020 is a mixed picture. On the one hand, the Policy explicitly acknowledges the diversity of learning needs and endorses 'multiple representations of knowledge,' 'multiple means of expression,' and 'multiple means of engagement' — principles directly drawn from UDL and directly relevant to students with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and specific learning disabilities (SLDs) such as dyslexia and dyscalculia.

NEP 2020 recognises neurodiversity as a legitimate dimension of human variation and calls for educational systems to accommodate, rather than pathologise, neurodiverse learners. This represents a meaningful departure from earlier policy frameworks that frequently categorised neurodiverse students as deficient or educationally unmanageable. The Policy calls for 'gifted students and students with special talents' to receive appropriate support alongside students with disabilities, acknowledging the considerable overlap between these populations.

However, the Policy's treatment of intellectual disability is less satisfactory. Students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities — those who may require substantial modifications to curriculum goals, intensive support, and alternative communication systems — receive only limited attention. The Policy's emphasis on 'learning outcomes' tied to grade-level benchmarks, while appropriate for most students, risks marginalising those whose learning trajectories diverge significantly from age-grade norms. There is insufficient clarity on how learning outcomes frameworks are to be differentiated for students with significant intellectual disabilities, and the tension between standardised assessment regimes and the learning needs of this population is not adequately resolved. The situation is further complicated by the inadequate supply of trained special educators in India. The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) currently recognises a range of special education qualifications, but the overall number of trained professionals falls far short of what would be required for meaningful inclusive education. NEP 2020 acknowledges this gap and calls for the expansion of special educator training, but the policy's targets and funding commitments in this area lack the specificity needed to translate aspiration into structural change.

C. *Vocational Training, Assessment Structures, and Ground-Level Realities*

NEP 2020 places considerable emphasis on vocational education, proposing that all students receive exposure to vocational skills from Grade 6 onwards and that vocational qualifications be integrated with mainstream academic pathways through a credit framework. For students with disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, vocational training can offer pathways to economic participation and social inclusion — but only if it is designed and delivered with genuine inclusivity.

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The historical record in India gives reason for caution. Vocational programmes for persons with disabilities have frequently been criticised for reinforcing social hierarchies rather than challenging them, channelling students with intellectual or developmental disabilities into low-status, low-wage occupations while reserving academic pathways for non-disabled students. NEP 2020's commitment to credit-based equivalence between vocational and academic qualifications is a step in the right direction, but its implementation will require active measures to prevent vocational tracking from becoming a new mechanism of disability-based segregation.

On assessment, NEP 2020 proposes a significant shift away from high-stakes board examinations towards continuous and comprehensive evaluation, competency-based assessments, and flexible assessment modes. This is potentially transformative for students with disabilities, for whom conventional pen-and-paper examinations under time pressure represent a structurally exclusionary form of assessment. The Policy's endorsement of 'alternative assessments' and 'portfolio-based evaluations' offers a more equitable framework — but again, the critical question is implementation. In many government schools, continuous and comprehensive evaluation has been reduced to administrative checkbox exercises rather than genuine pedagogical tools.

D. Benchmark Disability, Legal Reform, and the UDID System

The RPWD Act 2016 introduced the concept of 'benchmark disability,' defined as a disability certified at forty per cent or more by a competent medical authority, which triggers specific entitlements under the Act including reservations in government employment and educational institutions. The relationship between benchmark disability and educational entitlements under NEP 2020 is a complex and often misunderstood area.

The Unique Disability ID (UDID) system, launched by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, aims to create a centralised database of persons with disabilities to streamline benefit delivery and reduce the burden of obtaining multiple certificates from different authorities. The UDID card consolidates medical and social information and is intended to serve as a single identification document for accessing disability-related entitlements, including educational accommodations.

While the UDID system represents a significant administrative improvement, it has faced substantial implementation challenges. Coverage remains uneven, particularly in rural areas, and the process of certification continues to involve bureaucratic complexity that is difficult to navigate for families with limited literacy or administrative resources. For students from marginalised communities, obtaining a UDID card — and thereby accessing the formal entitlements that NEP 2020 and the RPWD Act promise — remains an unequal process. NEP 2020 does not specifically address the UDID system, and the lack of horizontal policy integration between disability certification systems and educational entitlements represents a significant governance gap.

IV. TRANSLATING POLICY INTO PRACTICE: SCHOOL-LEVEL PROVISIONS

A. A Case Study: Teachers' Lived Experiences in Inclusive Classrooms

While quantitative data on school enrolment and infrastructure provides one window into the state of inclusive education, the lived experiences of teachers navigating inclusive classrooms offer a more granular and humanly resonant picture of the distance between NEP 2020's aspirations and ground-level realities. Qualitative research conducted across government schools in Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh illuminates several recurring patterns. In a study conducted in 2022 across twelve government primary schools in rural Maharashtra, teachers described their experiences of teaching students with disabilities in heterogeneous classrooms as simultaneously rewarding and deeply challenging. A primary school teacher in Nashik district described teaching a class of forty-two students, three of whom had been identified as having intellectual disabilities and one who was classified as having autism spectrum disorder: 'I have no training for this. I love these children and I want to help them, but I do not know how. The textbooks do not help. The syllabus does not help. I do what I can, but it is not enough.' This testimony is representative of a structural reality: the majority of teachers in government schools across India lack any formal training in special education, inclusive pedagogy, or differentiated instruction. NEP 2020 commits to reforming teacher education to ensure all teachers receive training in inclusive practices, but this reform is in its early stages and the gap between existing teacher capacity and what inclusive education requires is enormous. The Policy's commitment to a four-year integrated B.Ed. degree is a meaningful step, but the transition will take years to cascade through the system, leaving current teachers largely without the preparation they need. Teachers also reported tensions between the administrative demands of inclusive education — documentation of individual education plans (IEPs), coordination with special educators, communication with families — and the time and resources available in government school contexts. Special educators, where they exist, are frequently shared across multiple schools, arriving once or twice a week in a peripatetic model that makes sustained instructional support difficult. Several teachers noted that in the absence of adequate support structures, students with significant support needs spent much of their school day in passive attendance rather than active learning.

B. School Culture, Peer Relations, and Social Inclusion

Inclusion in education is not only a matter of physical presence in mainstream classrooms; it encompasses belonging, participation, and social acceptance. Research on peer relations in inclusive settings in India reveals a complex picture. Where inclusion is managed well — with proactive teacher facilitation, structured cooperative learning, and explicit social skills instruction — disabled students report positive social relationships and a sense of belonging. Where it is managed poorly, they report experiences of isolation, bullying, and social exclusion that can be more damaging than the academic disadvantage they face.

NEP 2020 recognises the importance of social and emotional learning and calls for the inclusion of values such as empathy, respect for diversity, and non-discrimination in school curricula. However, the operationalisation of these values in classrooms — particularly with respect to disability — requires deliberate pedagogical intervention that most teachers are not currently equipped to provide. Disability awareness education, peer sensitivity programmes, and inclusive extracurricular activities are under-resourced and inconsistently implemented.

The physical environment of schools also shapes social inclusion. Inaccessible infrastructure — the absence of ramps, accessible toilets, tactile pathways, and adequate seating — continues to exclude students with mobility impairments or visual impairments from full participation in school life. NEP 2020 commits to ensuring that all school buildings are made accessible, but the scale of the challenge is vast. A 2021 audit by the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) found that fewer than thirty per cent of government schools in rural India had disability-accessible toilets, and fewer than twenty per cent had ramps for wheelchair users.

The social dynamics of inclusive classrooms are further shaped by the attitudes and behaviours of parents of non-disabled students, who in some contexts have actively resisted the inclusion of students with disabilities on the grounds that it slows down the pace of instruction for their children. This resistance reflects a deficit understanding of disability that NEP 2020's emphasis on universal design and differentiated instruction could, over time, help to transform — but only if it is accompanied by substantive community engagement and parent education.

C. Intersectionality, Resource Constraints, and Rural Challenges

The intersectional dimensions of inclusive education are nowhere more stark than in rural India, where disability overlaps with poverty, caste-based marginalisation, gender discrimination, and the chronic under-resourcing of government schools. Rural disabled students face a compounding of disadvantages that urban-focused policy frameworks frequently fail to capture.

Transportation remains one of the most fundamental barriers to school access for rural students with disabilities. NEP 2020 calls for the provision of appropriate transport facilities, but in practice, the distances between rural homes and the nearest school with any special education provision are often prohibitive, particularly for students with physical disabilities who cannot travel independently. Studies in Rajasthan and Jharkhand have found that transport barriers are among the most frequently cited reasons for the non-enrolment or dropout of rural students with disabilities.

Gender intersects with disability in ways that are particularly consequential for girls. Disabled girls in rural India face a double burden of stigma — both as disabled persons and as girls — that their families and communities attach to the question of education. The perceived economic futility of educating a disabled daughter, combined with concerns about safety and the logistical challenges of travel, results in significantly lower school enrolment rates for girls with disabilities compared to boys with disabilities. NEP 2020's gender inclusion framework, while commendable, does not specifically address this disability-gender intersection with the urgency it requires.

Caste intersects with disability in the allocation of even the limited resources that exist. Dalit students with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to discrimination within schools, from teachers, administrators, and peers alike. The social stigma associated with both caste and disability compounds the marginalisation each would produce individually, creating conditions of extreme educational vulnerability that require targeted, intersectionally informed interventions.

V. TEACHER TRAINING AND CLASSROOM READINESS

A. Gaps in Professional Preparation

The quality of inclusive education is ultimately determined by the capacity of teachers to respond effectively to diverse learning needs in heterogeneous classrooms. NEP 2020 recognises this and commits to transforming teacher education through a four-year integrated B.Ed. programme, enhanced pre-service and in-service training, and the mainstreaming of inclusive education content across all teacher preparation programmes. However, the current state of teacher training for inclusive education in India falls far short of what these commitments require.

A 2021 study by the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) found that fewer than fifteen per cent of B.Ed. programmes across India devoted more than ten hours of instruction to inclusive education or special needs. Most programmes addressed disability in a single unit or elective, treating it as a supplementary concern rather than a core competency. The content, where it existed, tended to be categorical and deficit-oriented — focusing on the characteristics of different disability categories rather than on inclusive pedagogical strategies applicable across the diversity of learners.

NEP 2020's proposed National Mission for Mentoring is relevant here: by creating networks of experienced educators who can provide on-the-ground support to teachers in inclusive classrooms, the Policy creates an institutional mechanism for the kind of practical professional development that formal pre-service training alone cannot provide. However, the pool of experienced inclusive educators who could serve as mentors is itself limited, and without targeted investment in building this cadre, the mentoring mission risks becoming a structure without content.

The situation is exacerbated by high teacher turnover in government schools, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Even where teachers receive training in inclusive education, the benefits of that training are lost when teachers transfer or resign — a cycle that many state education systems struggle to break. NEP 2020's commitments to teacher welfare, professional development, and career progression are potentially relevant here, but their disability-specific implications are not elaborated.

B. Ability Setting and Its Consequences

One of the less discussed but educationally significant features of many Indian school systems is the practice of ability grouping or setting — the arrangement of students into homogeneous instructional groups based on perceived academic ability. While NEP 2020 does not explicitly endorse ability grouping, neither does it clearly prohibit it, and in practice, many schools — particularly in urban private and semi-private contexts — operate tracking systems that concentrate students with disabilities or learning difficulties in lower-ability groups.

The research on ability grouping is largely unfavourable. Meta-analyses consistently show that homogeneous low-ability groups produce worse outcomes than heterogeneous groups for low-performing students, while having minimal benefit for high-performing students. For students with disabilities, placement in low-ability groups often results in reduced expectations, less qualified teachers, a narrowed curriculum, and diminished social contact with non-disabled peers — a combination that tends to reproduce rather than reduce educational inequality.

The consequences of ability setting extend beyond academic outcomes. Students placed in low-ability groups internalise the message that they are less capable, with consequences for self-concept, motivation, and long-term educational aspirations. For disabled students who are already navigating disability-related stigma, placement in a low-ability group adds another layer of stigmatising categorisation that can be psychologically damaging. NEP 2020's vision of a flexible, multidimensional approach to learning — in which students can progress at different rates in different areas — is fundamentally incompatible with rigid ability grouping, and future implementation guidance should make this incompatibility explicit.

C. Structural Inequalities and Dropout Risks

The risk of school dropout is significantly elevated for students with disabilities in India, and it is a risk that is compounded by the structural inequalities discussed throughout this article. NSSO data indicates that approximately sixty per cent of persons with disabilities in India have not completed primary school, and the dropout rate at the transition from primary to secondary school is particularly acute. NEP 2020 aims to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio at the secondary level to one hundred per cent by 2030, but achieving this for disabled students requires targeted intervention in the factors that drive disability-related dropout.

Dropout among disabled students is rarely attributable to a single cause. Instead, it reflects the accumulation of unmet needs over time: the absence of accessible infrastructure, inadequate instructional support, unsympathetic peers or teachers, the economic opportunity cost of continued school attendance, and the expectation in many communities that disabled individuals will not participate in formal employment or social life regardless of their educational qualifications. Addressing dropout risk requires a holistic approach that attends simultaneously to academic, social, physical, and economic dimensions of school participation.

NEP 2020's proposed system of 'School Complexes' — clusters of schools that share resources, personnel, and facilities — offers potential for improving the efficiency of special education resource deployment. By pooling special educators, assistive technologies, and accessible infrastructure across several schools, the complex model could make quality inclusive education more financially viable in resource-constrained contexts. Whether this potential is realised will depend on the seriousness with which disability inclusion is integrated into complex-level planning, rather than being left as an afterthought.

VI. GAPS IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

The preceding analysis reveals several significant gaps between NEP 2020's stated commitments and the structural conditions required for their realisation. These gaps operate at multiple levels — conceptual, institutional, financial, and intersectional — and are mutually reinforcing.

At the conceptual level, NEP 2020 oscillates between rights-based and welfare-based framings of disability, at times embracing the social model and at others reverting to medical or charitable constructions. This inconsistency undermines the policy's transformative potential and provides insufficient guidance to school administrators, teachers, and education officials who must translate policy language into practice. A coherent, consistently rights-based conceptual framework is a prerequisite for effective implementation.

At the institutional level, the gap between policy aspiration and implementation capacity is vast. The shortage of trained special educators, the inadequacy of pre-service and in-service teacher training in inclusive practice, the inaccessibility of school infrastructure, and the weakness of monitoring and accountability mechanisms collectively undermine the delivery of meaningful inclusive education. NEP 2020's institutional commitments — to teacher training, school accessibility, and the development of inclusive curricula — are necessary but insufficient without the financial investment and governance infrastructure to realise them.

At the financial level, NEP 2020 does not specify adequate budgetary commitments for disability inclusion. The Policy calls for raising public expenditure on education to six per cent of GDP, but it does not earmark a specific proportion of this expenditure for disability-inclusive measures. Without ring-fenced funding for special educator salaries, assistive technology procurement, infrastructure accessibility upgrades, and disability-sensitive teacher training, the Policy's disability provisions risk being perpetually subordinated to competing priorities.

At the intersectional level, NEP 2020's treatment of disability as a single, homogeneous category — distinct from but parallel to other forms of marginalisation — fails to capture the compounding disadvantages faced by students who experience disability alongside caste, gender, religious minority, or geographical marginalisation. The Policy's equity framework addresses these dimensions in separate sections, but does not develop an integrated intersectional approach that would allow policy makers and practitioners to identify and respond to the specific needs of students navigating multiple axes of disadvantage simultaneously.

Furthermore, the policy's silence on some critical areas is itself significant. NEP 2020 does not address the specific educational needs of students with psychosocial disabilities — mental health conditions — despite the growing evidence of their prevalence and their educational impact. It does not adequately address the needs of students with multiple or complex disabilities, who require the most intensive support and are most vulnerable to educational exclusion. And it does not grapple with the challenges of inclusive education in the context of private unaided schools, which are legally exempt from many of the policy's obligations and which collectively educate a substantial proportion of India's school population.

VII. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, this article proposes a series of evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the disability inclusion provisions of NEP 2020 and improving their translation into practice. These recommendations are organised across five thematic areas. First, with respect to legislative and policy coherence, the Ministry of Education should issue comprehensive implementation guidelines that align NEP 2020 with the RPWD Act 2016 and the UNCRPD. These guidelines should provide specific direction on reasonable accommodations, individualised education planning, and the obligations of private schools under the inclusive education mandate. The guidelines should adopt a consistently rights-based framing of disability and explicitly foreground intersectional considerations, including the specific vulnerabilities of disabled girls, Dalit disabled students, and rural disabled students. Second, with respect to teacher education and professional development, the NCTE should mandate the inclusion of a minimum of one hundred hours of inclusive education content in all B.Ed. programmes, covering not merely disability awareness but practical, evidence-based inclusive pedagogical strategies. In-service training programmes should be developed and delivered at scale, with particular attention to teachers in rural and underserved areas. The proposed National Mission for Mentoring should establish a cadre of inclusive education specialists who can provide regular, in-person support to teachers in inclusive classrooms. Third, with respect to resource allocation and financing, NEP 2020's implementation plans should include a disability-specific budget line that earmarks funds for special educator recruitment, assistive technology procurement, infrastructure accessibility, and disability-sensitive curriculum development. State education budgets should be evaluated against disability inclusion benchmarks, and central financing mechanisms should include disability-sensitive conditionalities. The UDID system should be integrated with school management information systems to enable real-time tracking of the enrolment, attendance, and outcomes of students with disabilities.

Fourth, with respect to assessment and curriculum, the National Curriculum Framework should develop explicit differentiation guidelines for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, providing clear frameworks for individualised curriculum modification that maintain high expectations while recognising diverse learning trajectories. Assessment frameworks should be redesigned to accommodate diverse modes of expression, and high-stakes assessments should include robust reasonable accommodation provisions enforceable at the school level. The proliferation of ability grouping should be discouraged through specific policy guidance that aligns with NEP 2020's heterogeneous classroom vision.

Fifth, with respect to intersectionality and targeted interventions, NEP 2020's implementation should develop targeted schemes for disabled girls, Dalit disabled students, and rural disabled students that address the compounding disadvantages these groups face. Transport schemes for rural disabled students should be expanded and adequately funded. Schools in tribal and rural areas should be prioritised for infrastructure accessibility upgrades. Community engagement programmes addressing disability stigma should be developed with the participation of disabled persons' organisations and should be sensitive to the caste and gender dimensions of disability discrimination.

VIII. CONCLUSION

NEP 2020 represents both a genuine advance and a missed opportunity in India's pursuit of inclusive education. Its endorsement of universal design for learning, its recognition of neurodiversity, its commitment to transforming teacher education, and its articulation of an equity framework that encompasses disability are meaningful contributions to the policy landscape. They represent a qualitative improvement over previous education policies in the depth of engagement with disability as a dimension of educational equity.

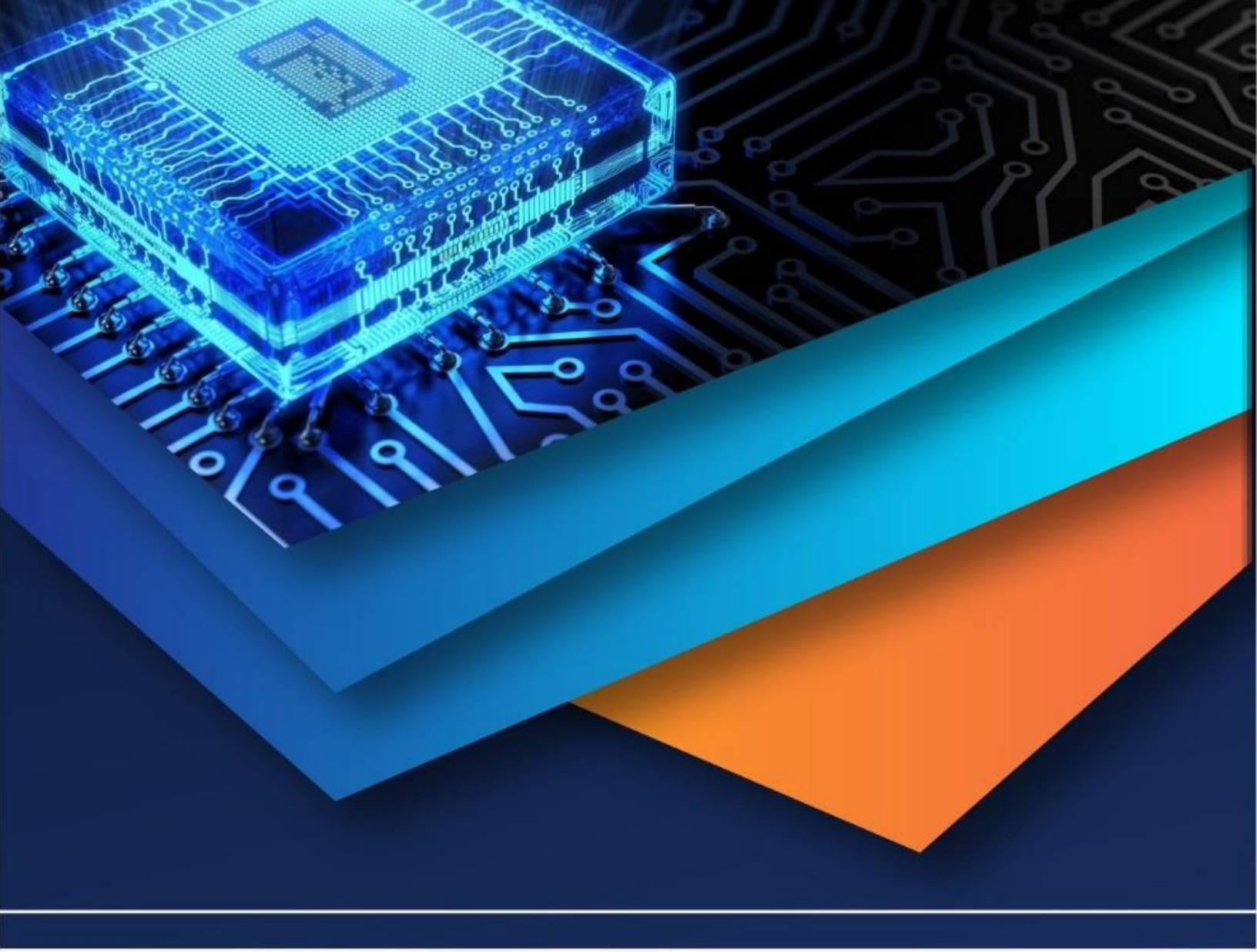
Yet the Policy's aspirations remain, in large measure, aspirations. The structural conditions for their realisation — adequately trained teachers, accessible infrastructure, sufficient special educators, ring-fenced funding, integrated monitoring systems, and a coherent rights-based framework — are not yet in place. And the intersectional dimensions of disability, which are most acute for students who experience marginalisation along multiple axes simultaneously, receive insufficient attention in a policy framework that tends to treat social categories as parallel rather than intersecting.

The students most at risk of educational exclusion in India are not those with disabilities in the abstract, but those with disabilities who are also poor, who are also Dalit or Adivasi, who are also girls, who also live in rural areas, and who also attend under-resourced government schools with overworked and under-trained teachers. NEP 2020 will be judged, ultimately, not by its language but by whether it makes a measurable difference to the life chances of these students. That judgment remains, for the moment, pending — contingent on the seriousness and specificity with which the Policy's implementation is pursued in the years ahead.

This article has argued that realising NEP 2020's potential for disability inclusion requires a deepening of policy coherence, an expansion of institutional capacity, a ring-fencing of financial commitment, and a genuine embrace of intersectional thinking. None of these is beyond the capacity of the Indian state. What is required is political will proportionate to the scale of the injustice — a will to place the most marginalised learners, those at the intersection of disability and multiple other forms of disadvantage, at the centre of educational planning rather than at its periphery.

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