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Inclusive Education for Children with Special Needs in Manipur: Challenges and Outlooks

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive education is a keystone of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. This paper critically analyses the status, challenges and outlook of inclusive education for Children with Special Needs (CwSN) in the state of Manipur. Drawing upon secondary data from UDISE+ 2024-25, Samagra Shiksha reports, NITI Aayog assessments and existing observational studies, the paper emphasizes that while enrolment of CwSN has improved modestly, significant gaps remain in infrastructure (ramps are accessible in only about 42-43% of schools), availability of well-trained special educators, availability of teaching-learning aids and socio-attitudinal obstacles. The hill-valley divide further combines disparities. The study concludes that attainment of equitable and quality inclusive education in Manipur needs strengthened teacher professional development, upgraded physical and digital support, community outreach and context-specific policy implementation under Samagra Shiksha and NEP 2020 frameworks.

Introduction

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Education is both a basic right and a powerful tool for social transformation. For children with disabilities, access to quality education is not merely a matter of enrolment but of meaningful participation, respectability and equal opportunity. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) and India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 together supply a strong regulatory foundation for inclusive education. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 further locates equity and inclusion at the center of educational reform, directing early identification, flexible curriculum, teacher training and the invention of an enabling school environment for Children with Special Needs (CwSN). Manipur, a north-eastern state of India portrayed by rich cultural diversity, a distinct hill-valley topography and a composite socio-political history, contributes unique opportunities and challenges in the comprehension of inclusive education. According to recent UDISE+ data, the state has made progress in identifying and enrolling CwSN; however, the proportion of CwSN in total enrolment remains low (approximately 0.6-0.9%), and critical enabling conditions available infrastructure, trained teachers and appropriate pedagogical support- are still inadequate. The recent years of ethnic conflict and replacement have further interrupted schooling for many susceptible children, including those with disabilities.

Review of Literature

Inclusive education is understood as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion from education (UNESCO). In the Indian context, inclusive education has progressed from earlier integrated education models (IEDC, IEDSS) to a more comprehensive approach under Samagra Shiksha, which includes pre-primary to senior secondary levels and contributes to identification, assessment, assistive devices, special educators, and barrier-free infrastructure.

Empirical studies on Manipur highlight several recurring themes. Research indicates a significant gap between the professional competence of special teachers and their actual classroom practices (Wangkheirakpam & Singh, 2017; recent comparative analyses). Studies conducted in Imphal East and West districts found that most mainstream schools lacked trained educators, specialists and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Infrastructure shortages particularly ramps, accessible toilets and CWSN-friendly facilities are well recorded in NITI Aayog and UDISE+ reports. Attitudinal barriers among teachers, parents and communities, language-related challenges (domination of English materials versus local dialects), and the severe shortage of special educators in hill districts further delay inclusion.

The Malsawm Initiative and similar civil society efforts prove that community-based, family-supported models can yield positive outcomes for children with disabilities when adequate support and suitable curricula are provided. However, such initiatives remain confined in scope and inclusion.

Objectives of the study

To explore the gap between policy ideals and classroom realities in Manipur, this study follows five distinct objectives:

1. To investigate the current enrolment status of Children with Special Needs in Manipur.
2. To identify physical and digital technology gaps across hill and valley schools.
3. To examine the gap between pedagogical proficiency and actual classroom practices.
4. To evaluate the impact of language barriers and context on inclusive schooling.

Materials and Methods

This paper integrates a descriptive and analytical research design based primarily on secondary sources. Data were drawn from:

1. UDISE+ 2023-24 and 2024-25 reports (Ministry of Education)
2. Samagra Shiksha and State education department document records
3. NITI Aayog school education reviews and related state report cards
4. Peer-reviewed research on inclusive and special education in Manipur and the North-East
5. Reports of civil society organizations like NGOs working with CwSN

Quantitative indices (enrolment, infrastructure, teacher availability) were synthesized with qualitative insights from existing literature to establish a holistic picture of the status and challenges of inclusive education in the state. The analysis is crafted within the policy mandates of the RPwD Act 2016, RTE Act 2009 and NEP 2020.

Results: Status of Inclusive Education in Manipur

Dimension	Manipur observational Reality	National Education Policy Criterion	Core Systemic Obstacles
CwSN Enrolment rate	3,500–4,000 students (<1% of total enrolment; high dropout rates)	Universal identification & retention (RPwD Act & SDG-4)	Uncovering in hills; social stigma; school unwillingness
Physical Access	42–43% schools with ramps; 11% with CwSN-friendly toilets	79% national ramp coverage; 100% barrier-free mandate	Unassertive compliance; severe hill–valley infrastructure deficit
Digital & Power	63.3% electricity; 38% computers; 36.6% internet connectivity	91.9% national electricity; DIKSHA & assistive tech integration	Inability to install digital assistive devices in rural/hill schools
Pedagogy & IEPs	Near-zero IEP usage; high teacher competence–practice backlog	Mandatory IEPs; trained IERTs & differentiated pedagogy	Congested classes (30–50); short-term orientation vs. in depth instruction
Language & Context	English-heavy TLM vs. Manipuri/tribal dialect; conflict displacement	Mother-tongue instruction & distress-sensitive support (NEP 2020)	Cognitive exclusion of limited in English learners; interrupted schooling

Enrolment Status of Children with Special Needs

In alignment with observational scrutiny of UDISE+ (2023-25) records displays a glaring demographic division between the regularity of childhood disability in Manipur and formal school participation. While Census reports document 54,110 persons with disabilities across the state, only 3,500 to 4,000 CwSN

representing roughly 0.6% to 0.9% of total school enrolment are enlisted in government and aided schools. This severe under-representation indicates systemic under-recognition, particularly across remote hill areas where early screening camps rarely penetrate, alongside persistent parental stigma and informal gatekeeping by mainstream schools unwilling to admit learners with moderate-to-severe impairments. Furthermore, high transition dropout rates between primary and upper-primary grades highlight that initial enrolment operations fail to sustain retention when foundational academic and rehabilitative supports are misplaced.

Physical and Digital Infrastructure Imbalance Across Hill and Valley

Addressing the fragmented infrastructural metrics displays a sharp spatial divide between Manipur's central Imphal valley and its surrounding hill districts. Statewide, only 42.6% of schools retained ramps, lagging far behind the national benchmark of roughly 79% and barely 11% are equipped with CwSN-friendly accessible toilets, meaning nearly nine out of ten schools lack basic hygienic dignity for students with locomotion impairments. Digital and power infrastructure reveals parallel deficits: only 63.3% of schools in Manipur have functional electricity (evaluated at 91.9% nationally), 38% have computers, and just 36.6% have internet connectivity. While valley institutions account for the majority of modest physical upgrades, schools in hilly terrains face hardened topography, dispersed habitations, inadequate public transport, and a severe lack of Inclusive Education Resource Teachers (IERTs), rendering digital assistive devices such as DIKSHA e-content and screen readers unapproachable to rural and hilly learners.

Pedagogical actualities and the Teacher Competence

In relation to classroom-level evidence explores an unsettling disconnect between teachers' theoretical knowledge and their day-to-day instructional routines a phenomenon conceptualized as the 'competence practice gap.' While pre-service and in-service training programs train special educators with foundational awareness of disability sections and inclusive principles, actual classroom execution remains virtually constant. Empirical studies in Imphal East and West validate near-zero implementation of mandatory Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Faced with overcrowded classrooms of 30 to 50 learners, inflexible syllabus timelines, standardized examination strains, and solid administrative records, general teachers routinely address CwSN as equal to non-disabled peers without curricular adaptation, inaccurately equating uniform treatment with educational equity.

Impact of Language barriers and context

Two contextual deficiency lines linguistic incompatibility and ethnic conflict strengthening educational exclusion for CwSN in Manipur. Firstly, although Manipuri (Meiteilon) and indigenous Ethnic languages

serve as the primary media of birthplace socialization and early classroom instruction, specialized inclusive teaching-learning materials (TLMs), Braille manuals, tactile charts, and educator handbooks are overwhelmingly produced in English medium. This linguistic disjoint enforces a double cognitive obligation on CwSN, forcing them to navigate inaccessible curricula in a novel language and producing what may be termed 'Intellectual Exclusion.' Secondly, recent ethnic violence and internal displacement have fractured delicate community and institutional support systems. For displaced CwSN living in relief camps or impermanent settlements, the defeat of assistive devices, discontinuity of therapeutic services, disconnection from familiar resource centers, and acute psychological upset have dramatically elevated school dropout risks.

Discussion

The data exhibits a classic implementation shortage. Policy frameworks (RPwD Act, NEP 2020, Samagra Shiksha) are developed, yet on-ground realities in Manipur reflect limited translation into practice. Several associated factors explain this scenario.

First, geographic and infrastructural limitations are severe. Dispersed habitation patterns in the hills, difficult landscape and insufficient transport make regular school attendance and home-based support difficult. Second, human resource development has not kept pace with need. Pre-service and in-service teacher education programs still assign inadequate space to inclusive pedagogy and disability studies. Third, attitudinal and socio-cultural factors- stigma, low expectations, parental indecision and limited community awareness- preserve to retain many children with disabilities out of school or on the perimeters of classroom participation. Fourth, the recent period of ethnic violence and displacement has disintegrated schooling and support systems for large numbers of children, compounding existing instability.

At the same time, positive developments survive. Civil society schemes such as the Malsawm Initiative have established effective models of early intervention, open-door services, parent support groups and participation with mainstream schools. Samagra Shiksha continues to impart financial norms for benefits and appliances, analysis camps, stipends and resource support. NEP 2020’s emphasis on foundational literacy and numeracy, flexible curriculum and teacher education reform furnishes a renewed opportunity to mainstream inclusion.

The competence-practice gap among special teachers points to the need for systemic support rather than individual responsibility: sufficient infrastructure, minimized administrative burden, mentoring, and continuous professional development are needed if knowledge is to transform into classroom practice.

Recommendations

Inclusive education for CwSN in Manipur is a work in progress. Enrolment achievements are delicate and incomplete without corresponding enhancements in accessibility, teacher preparedness and pedagogical support. The following recommendations emerged from the analysis:

1. **Decentralize Accessible Infrastructure to Hill Districts:** Prioritize targeted capital allowances under Samagra Shiksha for ramps, accessible toilets, tactile pathways, and steady electricity/internet in remote hill schools rather than uniform statewide distribution.

2. **Institutionalize Compulsory IEPs and Collaborative Teaching:** Implement school-level responsibility for Individualized Education Plans using digital screening devices like PRASHAST, pairing mainstream teachers with block-level IERTs to overcome large class proportions.

3. **Connecting the Competence-Practice Gap via Therapeutic Mentoring:** Transform SCERT and DIET pre-service and in-service teacher training from theoretical work to classroom-based coaching, reducing non-teaching administrative overload on special educators.

4. **Adaptation Inclusive Teaching-Learning Aids:** Advance Braille texts, tactile kits, audio-visual resources, and manual handbooks in Manipuri and major ethnic languages to eradicate linguistic exclusion.

5. **Balance Community-Centered Partnerships:** Incorporate civil society models such as The Malsawm Initiative into formal district resource networks to enhance early identification, home-based care, and stigma reduction among parents and School Management Committees.

6. **Implement Disability Inclusion in Displaced Educational Recovery:** Organize mobile resource units, distress-informed counselling, and rapid substitute of assistive devices for displaced CwSN impacted by ethnic conflict.

Conclusion

Inclusive education in Manipur remains at a critical crossroads between progressive legislative purpose and persistent ground-level barriers. While constitutional frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, Samagra Shiksha, and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 coherently present a clear vision of universal access, equity, and dignity, secondary evidence illustrates that Children with Special Needs (CwSN) in the state continue to face compounded limitations across enrolment,

constraint-free physical infrastructure, digital connectivity, pedagogical adaptation, and linguistic friendliness. The severe disparities between the Imphal Valley and the surrounding hill areas, further magnified by recent ethnic conflict and internal displacement, emphasize that uniform, grassroots-level policy launches are inadequate to achieve authentic educational inclusion. Bridging the gap between policy and classroom practice involves a coordinated, context-sensitive transformation of Manipur's school atmosphere. Preference must be placed on purposeful infrastructural investments in underserved hill schools, constant practice-oriented mentoring to limit the teacher competence-practice gap, the localization of assistive and teaching-learning aids into Manipuri and indigenous communal dialects, and formed partnerships with community-based associations such as the Malsawm Initiative. By aligning institutional accountability with distress-informed replenishment and localized pedagogical support, Manipur can proceed beyond formal enrolment toward significant, equitable, and empowering education for every child with special needs in this modern era.

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