

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

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### **Abstract**

Consequent upon a worldwide movement, inclusive education has emerged as a way to eliminate discrimination, inequality and injustice in accessing school. The UN organs such as UNESCO and UNICEF have been active to pursue governments in developing countries particularly in the subcontinent to improve educational access through inclusive education. The countries i.e. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh have positively responded to the call for inclusive education. The context of three countries, however, varies in terms of religious beliefs, languages, cultural traditions and socio-economic realities. The response patterns of these countries clearly reflect the contextual differences in setting the goals and action plans for the implementation of inclusive education. The focus of inclusion in India and Pakistan seems to be the children with disabilities, whereas, the focus shifts to marginalized children in Bangladesh. Moreover, India launched its first Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities in Aug 20<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Bangladesh, 5 years later, revised its National Education Policy with the features of inclusive education in 2010. Pakistan, although introduced the concept of inclusive education in its National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in 2002 but it remained alien to Ministry of Education. The main objective of the study was to review the educational reforms in Subcontinent (Pakistan, India & Bangladesh) to improve the access to school for children with disabilities. Nature of the study is qualitative and descriptive analytical method was used to desk review policy and legislative documents along with empirical studies. This study examined the underlying assumptions shaping up the current practices of inclusive education in the subcontinent.

**Keywords:** Inclusive education, school access, children with disabilities, marginalized, inequalities

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## Introduction

The first decade of twenty first century witnessed a rise in the awareness among educationists and human right activists about the access and quality of education available to children with disabilities. The access to education was disproportionately limited to less than 10% of school going children with disabilities in the subcontinent (UNICEF, 2014). On global level, the world community joined hands to eliminate the lack of access to education for these children (Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action 1994, Dakar Framework for Action 2000, MDGs 2001, CRPD 2007). Inclusive education was gaining momentum as the most effective strategy for bringing the out of school children with disabilities to school in the region (Hameed, 2004). UNESCO emerged as the premier change agent for negotiating with the statement governments and initiating a simultaneous change in the policy. On the academic front several universities responded to the call and the departments of Special Education, in particular, were the first to accept this challenge (Hameed & Manzoor, 2014).

UNICEF (2014) conducted a study in which good examples of inclusive education in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan were documented. A series of consultative seminar and workshops were conducted to create a general awareness in the region. Unfortunately, the political disinterest resulted in less than meaningful dialogue to share these experiences in spite of concerted efforts made by UN agencies such as UNESCO, UNICEF and WHO. There were other players as well i.e. Sightsavers, ICEVI, Save the Children and Braillo Norway on the front. The efforts made by the global flag holders of inclusive education helped in developing a common agenda for launching a movement. Few pilot studies on inclusive education at a small scale were also conducted with positive results.

The first realization of diverse thinking on the definition of inclusive education surfaced during the UNICEF studies when a common definition of inclusive education with its major indicators was needed to guide the researchers in the countries of subcontinent. For example, the researcher from India was focusing on caste system whereas in Pakistan and Bangladesh children with disabilities were the prime concern. It appeared that cultural differences were driving the evolution of the concept of inclusive education. It became even more critical while interacting with other structural factors such as caste, gender and religion etc. (Singal, 2015). The differences in regional priorities later on shaped the strategic action plans on inclusive education in these countries. This study is an effort to unfold the forces that led to diverse strategic implementation plans for a common agenda of inclusive education in the subcontinent.

## **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?

## **Research Methodology**

Primarily, this is a descriptive analytical study of qualitative nature. This method is used to identify trends and make decisions through literature review. An in-depth review of the recent reforms in each of the countries (India, Pakistan & Bangladesh) of the subcontinent was undertaken. For this purpose, a desk review was designed to analyze policy documents, legislative covers and empirical studies regarding inclusive education, conducted since the independence/conception of these countries to 2017. For a comparison, the following parameters were used:

*Context:* It includes the review of cultural landscape comprising prevalence of disability; lingual, ethnic, religious and economic diversities with their similarities and differences. Particularly, how inclusive education was rationalized in the local socio-cultural realities? In what ways and at what levels the awareness for this substantial change was created in a society.

*Policy and legislation:* The chronological order of policy initiatives and the legislative cover to implement these initiatives was looked into with reference to placement options and school support. Especially the gap between the two was seen to determine the government seriousness in implementing inclusive education.

*Teacher education:* The training of teachers working in ordinary schools through pre-service and in-service institutions was reviewed. To what extent the teacher education curricula were aligned with the theory and pedagogy of inclusive education.

*School improvement:* Inclusive education remains in the rhetoric unless schools welcome all children including those with disabilities. Unsupported school can become a dumping ground instead of providing educational opportunities to all students. School improvement is a tangible indicator to show that inclusive education has taken off.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **The Context**

Subcontinent has shown momentous achievements in strengthening education systems and accessing more children to school in the last decade. According to South Asia Regional Study (2014), overall enrolment rates in primary education have reached 90 percent in 2011 up from 75 percent in the year 2000. Strategies for a more equitable education system are developed across the region. However, the standing of children with disabilities in accessing school is still a challenge for Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. With lowest literacy rates, subcontinent is the second highest populated region in the world (Sharma & Das, 2015).

According to national censuses of these countries, the prevalence of children with disabilities is very similar i.e. Pakistan 2.54%, India 2.1% and 5.6% in Bangladesh (Pakistan Census report, 1998; India Census Report, 2001 and UNICEF, 2003). The reasons of high prevalence of disability in Bangladesh include extreme poverty, overpopulation, lack of awareness, lack of medical care and illiteracy (Hameed & Manzoor, 2014). While the international agencies i.e. WHO, UNICEF and UNESCO report that about 10% of the population of the region is with some kind of disabilities and about 30% of them are children with disabilities (2015). The discrepancy between the statistics may be due to lack of standardized instruments, lack of reliable data on disabilities, absence of a clear definition, and inadequate skills to identify the full range of disabilities. In a recent study by Hameed and Manzoor (2014, 2016), UNESCO, (2015) an estimated prevalence of disability in these countries, based on projections by using standard methods, were estimated. These are presented in Table 1 that shows the magnitudes of disabilities:

**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

Source: (UNESCO, 2015).

The cultural context of all three countries differs from each other in one or the other way. In India, there is rich diversity regarding caste, religion, access to resources, language and ethnicity. Such diversity makes the concept of inclusive education more difficult to achieve the target. One strategy used in one school of north India might not work in the other part of south India (Sharma & Das, 2015). The most evident barrier in providing equal opportunities of education is scheduled caste system. This system not only affects the educational exposure for children but also creates immense obstacles in social inclusion. The prevalence of disability in this caste system makes it more complicated as a human rights issue.

Whereas, the situation in Pakistan is somehow different as the majority of population is Muslim and do not believe and promote caste system. The case of education is taken as a duty of every Muslim regardless of caste, creed, disability, color, language and financial status. The major barriers to access for education specifically for children with disabilities are lack of resources (disabled friendly buildings, teacher trainings and curriculum adaptations), multi grade school system, political will, awareness to the rights of persons with disabilities (PWD) and poor implementation of educational policies. On the other hand, acceptance of children with disabilities in local Maddras system is more welcoming but, due to limited resources, these institutions cannot play vital role. However, the situation is far better in Bangladesh where the educational policies are addressing the needs of children with disabilities equally in urban and rural areas across the country except in few states in spite of fewer resources (Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler, & Yang, 2013; Hameed & Manzoor, 2014).

The overview of these countries indicates that till 1880, philanthropists were predominant in the field for providing education to children with disabilities under tecontrol of Christian missionaries (Alur, 2002). After independence from British, the governments of these countries focused on establishing separate educational and research institutes for children with special needs in urban areas of the country. This approach was of care and segregation of these children from general education system (Misra, 2000). Unfortunately, this system was unable to provide access to all children with disabilities in rural and remote areas. In the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, a major shift in the way to educate these children was witnessed. There Charity and medical models were replaced

with a social and right-based models about disabilities. This shift brought about revolutionary changes in policy and practice on education of the children with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, (2006) became the focal point to formulate policies about persons with disabilities. Education was no more limited to “Education for About All” rather it started the inclusion of all marginalized children; by and large these children are still considered as charitable objects.

### **Policy and legislation**

Although, all countries of subcontinent are eager to provide doable best opportunities for education to all by recognizing its importance for economic growth of the countries but the policy initiatives are diverse to achieve the agenda. While comparing India to other countries of subcontinent the efforts for the educational reforms are more commendable and rapid. Education in India is a joint responsibility of central government and state. The central government is responsible for education while the state governs the structure of the education system (Department of Education, 2004). The reforms for the education of children with disabilities were undertaken during the last four decades. The first initiative from Government of India was Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC) scheme of 1974 (NCERT, 2011). The purpose of the scheme was to provide financial assistance to the families and retention of their children with disabilities in the general education system. In its next target for five years plan (1980-1985) the integration of children with disabilities was given a major priority in the scheme (NCERT, 2011).

The commitment of government of India towards the education of children with disabilities remained focused and was reflected in 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) with the target to include these children at all levels of education as equal partners (Sharma & Das, 2015). These initiatives became the source of structural changes in national policies and inclusive education movement in India. The District Primary Education Project (DPEP) in 1994-95 was one of the major projects by government with approximately 740 million US dollars funding in 149 districts of 14 states. Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 1996 was a milestone in the history of India towards the true integration of children with disabilities without any discrimination. This legislation was a hallmark but in such a diverse country it was not enough to bring substantial changes in the attitudes of society and other alliance departments.

In the wake of international commitments i.e. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and national integrity, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was launched in India 2001 with a policy of “zero rejection” on the basis of disability. In 2005, National Action Plan for the inclusion in education of children and youth with disabilities (IEDC) was implemented by the Ministry of Human Resource Development that was further revised as Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the Secondary Stage (IEDSS). The objective of this program was to provide inclusive education at secondary level. Afterwards, Right to Education Act (RTE), 2010 legally supported the inclusive education in India (Bhan & Rodricks, 2012). These policy and legislative initiatives by the country could reach only fringe of the issues related to inclusive education as Ministry of Human Resource Development (2007) reported that number of students served under the various educational programs/schemes of government has been constantly growing but could not reach all children with disabilities.

On the other hand, Pakistan is far away from the target of universal primary enrollment and has second the highest out of school population in the world (UNESCO, 2014). The country invests only 3 percent of its Gross National Product (GNP) in education that is not enough to meet the challenges of the situation. Additionally, it has not yet the same level of commitment towards the education of children with disabilities. There are several reasons for not having budgetary issues and one of the possible reasons is devolution of responsibilities at the provincial level. At the time of independence, only few institutions in the country were providing their services for children with disabilities mostly governed by NGOs. The National Commission on Education, 1959 recommended the provision of vocational education and training for children and adults with mental retardation. In the Education Policy of 1972, the funds for special education was increased. However, in the 1980s, a significant increase in government involvement was witnessed through increased budgetary provision for special education (Lari, 2006). The journey of educational reforms for persons with disabilities began during the presidential rule of late General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) who was the father of a girl with multiple disabilities. The strong international movement by UN for United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983-92) also strengthened the commitment and in 1985 Directorate General of Special Education was established as a segregated special education system at Federal level (Ahmad & Yousaf, 2011).

The only significant official document till now is National Policy for Persons with Disability (2002) that provides comprehensive outline regarding Pakistan government’s mission and vision about the education of children with disabilities. The policy promotes integration but practically it was a medical model approach. In 2006, National Plan of Action on the policy was formulated that suggested the access and equalization of education in form of inclusive education is not possible through isolated interventions

rather it needs collaboration from all other alliance. In 2011, Government of Pakistan ratified the United Nation Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). According to this convention, the State is responsible to provide equitable inclusive education. An important legislation has been passed recently by the government in form of Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2014. The Article 25-A of the constitution articulates “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” (p.15).

The review of literature reveals that the movement of Inclusive education has been primarily initiated and focused by INGOs (UNESCO, UNICEF) and NGOs in the country. No significant progress has yet been made specific to policy development for inclusive school program. The special schools and ordinary schools are currently working in complete isolation (Hameed & Manzoor, 2014). In 2014, the Department of Special Education, Government of the Punjab launched a pilot project in two districts of South Punjab with a huge budget of 170 million to implement inclusive education. Recently, University of Management and Technology, Lahore has passed “Lahore Declaration on Inclusive Education 2015” in the first ever International Conference on Inclusive Education (ICIE 2015) in Pakistan. A critical analysis of the education system for children with disabilities in Pakistan reflects that presently country has shifted from frozen concept of segregated special education to a new paradigm of inclusive education. However, the concept of inclusive education is still limited to the inclusion of children with mild to moderate disabilities in the minds of decision makers.

The commitment of Bangladesh is very clear on inclusive education. Right after its independence in 1971, policies were formulated for equitable, accessible and universal primary education. Article 17 and 28 of its constitution 1972 clearly utters about the provision of discrimination free education to all (Malk, M.S., Begum, H. A., Habib, M. A., Shaila, M. & Roshid, M. M. (2013)). Along with all international treaties, Bangladesh has taken many legislative initiatives for the education of children with disabilities. These initiatives include Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1990; National Education Policy for the Disabled, 1995; Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act, 2001 and National Education Policy, 2010 and Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Policy in 2012. All these policy documents present lucid vision of government of Bangladesh for the implementation of inclusive education in the country yet it requires structural and attitudinal reforms for its true implementation (Sharma, 2011).

### **Teacher education**

Inclusion in education needs a complete reform in the existing system including teacher training model. Several studies indicate a lack of disability acceptance, effective and suitable professional development opportunities for teachers that form negative concerns and attitudes about inclusive education in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Hameed & Manzoor, 2014; Sharma, U., Forlin, C., Deppeler, J. & Yang, G. 2013; Bindal & Sharma, 2010). Only few teachers translate these trainings into practical situation (David & Kuyini, 2002). Service structure, financial support, multi-grade and overloaded classrooms also create stress for teachers to welcome children with disabilities in their classrooms. The other aspect is curricula for teacher training and education for the implementation of inclusion. The research review revealed that almost in all these three countries the teacher education for educational reform is being taken as minimal, isolated and ad-hoc in pre-service programs in general and in-service programs specifically. Usually, these training courses for in-service teachers are for short period and without any technical support for curriculum and course material. Most of these courses are initiated as pilot project without follow up and practical evaluation.

According to Sharma et. al., (2013), there is no appropriate national teacher education program specifically in the realm of inclusive education in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. For the pre-service training courses, there are separated programs after graduations that provide training in the field of special education. These programs include one to two subjects that address inclusive education. Unfortunately, regular teacher training programs are deprived of any course material that may cultivate attitude to accept children with disabilities as a regular part of the education system. Resultantly, it becomes a greater barrier for access in general primary and secondary schools by teachers and administrators. According to Sharma and Das (2015), such type of teacher educational programs prepare teachers for exclusion not for inclusion. However, it necessitates for us to design such programs that prepare teachers with (heart, head and hands) knowledge, skill and practice for inclusive reform (Sharma, 2011).

### **School improvement**

Inclusive education remains in the rhetoric unless schools are made welcoming and accessible for all children including children with disabilities. Unsupported school can become a dumping ground instead of providing educational opportunities to all students. School improvement is a tangible indicator to show that inclusion has touched the ground. The Indian Government has taken some solemn steps for the provision of mainstream education to children with disabilities in country by making discernible school improvements. The foremost legislative document for the school improvement plan launched by Government of India was Integrated Education for Disabled Children

(IEDC) scheme 1974. According to this Centrally Sponsored Scheme, 100% financial assistance was provided to upgrade the general school for the admission and retention of children with disabilities in general school. This scheme came up with limited results. Further, according to PWD Act, 1995, it was decided to make all schools disabled friendly in the country by 2020. In reference to this Act, special interventions and pedagogic improvements were planned to be practiced in regular schools for the successful implementation of inclusion.

Another effort in the realm was made through Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan programs in India with the major goal of Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE) with reforms in admission policy in schools. The zero-rejection policy for all children age 6-14 years with the focus on three major aspects of UEE; access, enrolment and retention of children with special needs. Major reforms under SSA for the school improvement were identification, functional and formal assessment, appropriate educational placement, preparation of Individualized Educational Plan, provision of aids and appliances, teacher training, resource support, removal of architectural barriers, monitoring and evaluation and a special focus on girls with special needs (Sanjeev & Kumar, 2007). Right to Education Act 2009, is another supporting legislation for the better implementation of inclusive education by improving school environment.

Bangladesh with a centralized education system is also striving for the school improvement for the purpose of successful implementation of inclusive education in the country. With a number of other policy initiatives i.e. Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1990, National Education Policy for the Disabled, 1995, Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act, 2001 and National Education Policy, 2010, the actual transformation in education was distinguished with the launch of two major programs Primary Education Development Program (PEDP), 1997 and Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP) 2005. The purpose of PEDP was to improve primary education system. First phase 1997-2003 did not support the inclusive education in true spirit. However, the second phase 2004-2011 incorporated the component of inclusion for the regular school improvement to address diversity (Malket. al., 2013). Action plan for this program focused on the aspects of teachers training, curriculum planning, accessible school buildings having good infrastructures i.e. ramps, furniture and flexible admission policies to provide basic education in the existing schools of remote areas.

The other project (TQI-SEP) was jointly funded by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). This program was launched in Bangladesh to bring reforms in secondary education system to reduce discrimination, dropout and lack of accessibility to school. An admirable stride was taken for the inclusive education in

schools. The school capacity building to provide effective learning program for children with disabilities was one of the main components of this program. Another important component was classroom practices. To strengthen classroom practices in an inclusive school, teachers training and provision of equipment were given attention at large. According to Khan (2012), some changes were made in the classroom practices as a result of TQI-SEP professional learning but indifferent teachers' professional attitude was a more dominant barrier in the way of successful implementation of inclusive education.

The narration of school improvement programs in wake of inclusive education movement in Pakistan is not so mature. Primarily in 90s and early 2001s attention was given to the establishment of new and improvement of existing segregated special schools with the utilization of immense budgetary allocation through Ministry of Special Education. Devolution of education at provincial level is also different in policy initiatives of all provinces. However, in fulfillment of international commitment of Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) 2007, some formal and informal initiatives were taken by government and private agencies. The rapid initiatives were taken during last five years in shape of different pilot projects. Recently, Department of Special Education, Government of the Punjab has launched a pilot project on inclusive education in two districts of South Punjab funded by the Department for International Development DIFID. The main objective of the project is screening of children with disabilities and their enrolment in regular schools. The project is providing 40000 PKR to every school working with this project for the capacity building i.e. ramps, pathways. Teachers' training programs were also in agenda of the program for mitigating the classroom challenges for diversified learners. The private sector has been proactive in initiating the inclusive learning in their schools. Most of the school improvement planning comes from the medical or psychological professionals and the share of mainstream teacher education is negligible. As a result, the inclusive education cannot come out of the box of "medical model". The most popular model having official support is "Amin Maktib Model" in which psychologist plays the central role. The other is "Rising Sun Model" which is headed by a medical doctor. With this kind of leadership, the inclusive education will always be deprived of its true spirit based on social model and human rights approach. Ghazali Education Trust Lahore, a well-respected NGO in the field of education, has initiated Rural Inclusive Education Project (RIEP) in which remote rural private schools are transformed into inclusive schools. This effort is producing better result and expanding day by day. Efforts are also being made in other big cities by the private sector, but as mentioned earlier it is still a long way to go in this direction.

## **Conclusions**

The in-depth review of literature and discussion on the state of inclusive education in the Subcontinent i.e. Pakistan, India and Bangladesh reveal that these countries are committed to the similar agenda of inclusive education. The efforts made by these countries clearly show that inclusive education is not merely an obsession or slogan in educational reform rather it has taken a serious turn. Global acceptance and ratification for the equitable quality education is also playing a positive role to support financially as well as technically to take up this gigantic challenge. The thematic review on context, policy & legislation, teacher education and school improvement depict the situational analysis along with diverse strategic implementation plans of the countries. Thus, it can be argued that India and Bangladesh are more articulated in terms of inclusive education than Pakistan. Pakistan has to pick its pace in order to remain compatible with regional players.

The study indicated that countries of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh are still struggling at the same level for the challenges i.e. Education for All, 100% enrolment, educational access for children with disabilities, Right to Education and teacher education. Particularly, the context indicated the similarity among all three countries regarding disability statistics, geographic locations, school structure and teacher curricula, however, India is far better in establishing laws and policies for the education of children with disabilities in recognition of United Nations Convention on the Persons with Disabilities. Similarly, school improvement programs in India are also systematic in comparison to Pakistan. Bangladesh started working for the cause of education since its conception that resulted rapid progress in policy making and implementation in the field of special education.

## **Recommendations**

Following are the few recommendations to improve regional collaboration to achieve common agenda to improve educational access for children with disabilities:

1. Cross-border initiatives may be taken among India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to plan micro and macro regional strategies to utilize human and material resources of the countries to promote inclusive education.
2. Inter-regional research centers may be established to support states for statistic management and policy solutions.
3. Joint consortiums and conferences among all countries can provide a platform to professional for sharing of experiences and innovative practices in inclusion.

4. Unpacking inter-regional policy collaboration through comparative approaches may be used to achieve common goals for the education of children with disabilities.
5. Cross-boarder projects may be designed in a sequential way with realistic targets keeping in mind the economic and political situations of three countries.
6. International platforms i.e. UNESCO, UNICEF and DFID may be used to implement common treaties i.e. UNCRPD, Education for All and Sustainable Development Goals SDGs.
7. Substantial revamping is desired in teacher curricula in order to align its psychological, sociological and pedagogical foundations to the recent understanding about human diversity, human rights and inclusive institutions including educational institutions. Therefore, special attention may be given to this important aspect to address diversified needs of children with disabilities in providing access to education.

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