



The State of Special Education for Neurodivergence in India

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Abbreviations

NEP2020: New Education Policy 2020; SSA: Samagra Siksha Abhiyan; RPwD: Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act; ADA: Americans with Disability Act.

Introduction

“Apathy” and “ignorance” These two words perhaps aptly describe the current state of the education for children with any form of neurodivergence, namely Intellectual Disability, Autism and Learning disabilities, in India. Historically, the country has ignored neurodivergent people. Our institutions by and large still use the term “mentally retarded” when referring to people with intellectual disability. We exist in a culture that continues to believe neurodivergence is something to be cured and not accepted, a culture where the very concept of a learning disability is regularly denied. Parents refuse to acknowledge their children require a different standard of care and the parents who do acknowledge it have no options on how the care is provided.

Take Intellectual Disability as a case. Intellectual disability varies greatly in severity. Those with mild disability can function in regular society as a productive member while the severest of cases struggle to deal with basic life functions. The current set up clubs all forms of intellectual disability into the same special schools with curriculum which is dry and uninteresting, consisting almost exclusively of activities of daily living. The curriculum as it stands currently provides no scope for any productive development for children with higher capabilities. By clubbing everyone under the same category, children with the capacity to learn even at a college

level are consistently denied any development, rendering them forever dependent on their families. Children with Autism have very few remedial options. Those with milder symptoms regularly struggle in a regular school environment and are still often enrolled into the same special schools as those with intellectual disability. These children, perfectly capable of learning at a regular and even higher level to that of normal children are actively deprived of the learning process and remain dependent.

The way special schools are set up in India continually reinforces the notion of neurodivergent children as life-long dependents and make very little effort to promote their development in order to make them self-sufficient or reduce their dependency on others. The New Education Policy 2020 (NEP2020), the Samagra Siksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD) 2016 make specific reference to learning disabilities and autism and prescribe inclusion for these children. This prescription has proven practically unfruitful with poor implementation across the board. The goals of the new education policy are barely stated and too general for any state action to implement the policy. Take Tamil Nadu as an example. The necessity for vocational training is a major goal of the NEP, as skills are far more effective for those with intellectual disability. Rather than allowing these students to learn practical skills that could lead to some form of independence, the government schools twist themselves into knots to get these students to pass the 10th grade where they are no longer a problem of the ministry of education.

The system suffers from a constant need for certification. To avail any of the benefits a student may require, like scribes,

extra time and a calculator for exams, reservations in higher education or the emoluments and transfers from the trust, a diagnosis is required through which they may apply for a certificate. Emphasising on diagnosis to avail help excludes the most vulnerable, who may not have the time and resources, from receiving the benefits despite their acute need for the same. The current set up to enact any policy on special education is an administrative nightmare. Due to the overlaps, projects get tied up in bureaucratic procedures of the departments of disability affairs, ministry of education and the ministry of women and children. This makes it practically impossible for any practical reform to take place within the current system.

The RPwD act 2016, section 32(2) allows for an age relaxation of 5 years in college admission for applicants with benchmark disabilities which includes Intellectual Disability and Autism under Section 34. When we approached the relevant departments to enquire about the usage of this provision, we were met with the reality that the overwhelming majority of these students never reach a level where they could aspire to college, that the rate of conversion from secondary to higher secondary was barely 10% and that of higher secondary to college was barely 5% on a liberal estimate. Many of the people in these departments understand the issues and try their best to do good, but the massive overlap in departments when it comes to disability creates a thick web of bureaucracy that make it nearly impossible to get anything beyond surface level change done. Every program involves a minimum of two ministries and three departments along with all the internal politics that are inherent in them. Despite the good intentions of the department, the current set up reinforces disappointment and apathy creating a veil of demotivation. In any systemic change, momentum is key and the current set up ensures momentum either builds at a sluggish pace or never builds.

The situation in India today is in a limbo. Regulations end up ineffective, the departments in charge are unable to help and are too demotivated to try, and the public is unaware of the true scope of the issue. An estimated 30% of school going children in India have learning disabilities, which converts to nearly 8 crore children. Nearly a third of school going children are unable to reach their potential as the education system is not built to accommodate them. Public schools lack the resources, manpower and training to deal with children with autism and ADHD, often asking the parents to transfer the child to another school. The education system, in meeting their bottom line often leaves behind these children.

For a solution we need to turn to our contemporaries. In the USA, the burden of special education is on public schools, unlike in India where its mostly the private sector picking up the slack. The no child left behind policy makes it a duty of

public schools to help students who are struggling to learn on par with their class. The difficulties they deal with can range from needing extra tutoring all the way to severe cases of autism and dyslexia. This policy, by monitoring students at every level helps to identify any issues early and provide early intervention, which has proven to be the most effective remedy. Beyond school policy exists the Americans with Disability act (ADA) which, as a piece of legislation, protects its beneficiaries more effectively than the RPwD act. The ADA extends to both public and private bodies and makes it a burden onto institutions to provide the reasonable accommodation the beneficiaries require. Those requesting do not have a duty to disclose their condition, they only need proof they require these accommodations. By having an accommodation first approach, the act extends to everyone who requires help, with or without a diagnosis. Those who's issues are not severe enough to qualify for a diagnosis but still impedes their participation are granted access. The ADA flourishes in many areas the RPwD act falters. The culture is also far more positive especially when it comes to learning disabilities. The early intervention programs make it so the students are never too excluded from their peers and stand on par with them. Autism is seen less as a disease and more as a fact of life that can be dealt with. Universities offer various relaxations when it comes to assignments, attendance and exams.

To create a system where special education is functional and beneficial rather than a last resort, we require proper acknowledgement of the issues and a strong law to enforce changes. The release of "Taare Zameen Par" should have marked a landmark moment in our country for the awareness of learning disabilities but its only lasting impact seems to have been schools rushing to add art programs that do not remove any of the stress of regular classes. Since the release of the movie, private education has become not only more prevalent with the bottom line of profit preventing the schools from investing in identifying the issues in the students, but also brute forcing better grades through extra hours and rote memorisation. We as a society need to re-evaluate our priorities in education on the whole to address the discrepancies in special education.

The RPwD act cannot reach full potential without the creation of sufficient rules and subordinate legislation. There needs to be an effort by states to widen the scope of education and invest in identification of problems and teacher training programs to ensure these students can keep up with their peers to a level where their cognitive differences are no longer labelled a "disability". Various other modes of education need to be explored rather than sticking to the classroom lecture model that has repeatedly proven ineffective, even to typical students. Neurodivergent children represent a massive chunk of our population we

have largely ignored. The complacency in what we consider “regular practice” is poisoning the well and actively reducing the capacity of these children. With greater regulation and

freedom from bureaucracy, we may one day hope to reach and even exceed the standards of other countries in how well we utilise our population.