



## **Indian Knowledge Systems and Disability: Integrating the Vision of NEP 2020**

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### **Abstract:**

This chapter examines the relevance of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) in understanding disability within contemporary India, particularly in light of the National Education Policy 2020. Moving beyond a biomedical framework, disability is analyzed as a socio-cultural, ethical, and political phenomenon shaped by indigenous philosophical traditions, community practices, and institutional structures. Drawing on classical texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads, as well as sociological and anthropological scholarship, the chapter explores how disability has been historically conceptualized in India. It further interrogates the tensions between traditional interpretations such as karma and fate and contemporary rights-based approaches. By situating NEP 2020 within this broader intellectual landscape, the chapter argues for a culturally grounded yet critically informed model of inclusive education that integrates ethical values, social justice, and structural transformation.

**Keywords:** Indian Knowledge System, Disability, Inclusion, NEP 2020, Education, Sociology

### **Introduction**

Disability has never been a purely medical category; rather, it is a deeply social and cultural construct shaped by historical, institutional, and ideological forces. In India, the understanding of disability has evolved through multiple epistemological traditions religious, philosophical, colonial, and biomedical each contributing to the ways in which difference is perceived and managed. The emergence of modern psychiatry and disability studies has foregrounded rights, inclusion, and accessibility, yet indigenous frameworks continue to influence everyday practices and beliefs. Indian philosophical traditions promote the idea of universal equality and dignity of every human being. One of the most significant principles is Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which emphasizes that all individuals are part of a single global family and deserve equal respect and opportunities.



It is education that plays a vital role in ensuring equal opportunities for all individuals in society. However, historically, persons with disabilities have faced significant barriers in accessing quality education. These barriers include social stigma, lack of accessible infrastructure, insufficient trained teachers, and inadequate policy implementation.

India has made several policy interventions to promote inclusive education, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a major step toward creating an inclusive and equitable education system. It recognizes that children with disabilities belong to the category of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and emphasizes the need for special support mechanisms to ensure their participation and success in education.

At the same time, NEP 2020 also emphasizes the importance of integrating the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into the education system. Indian educational traditions have historically emphasized holistic learning, inclusivity, and the development of moral and ethical values. By combining modern educational practices with traditional Indian knowledge, the policy aims to create a more inclusive and culturally relevant learning environment.

The National Education Policy 2020 marks a significant shift in India's educational landscape by emphasizing inclusivity, equity, and the integration of Indian knowledge traditions. It recognizes the need to move beyond standardized, one-size-fits-all models of education toward more flexible and context-sensitive approaches. Within this framework, the differently abled are no longer viewed merely as recipients of care but as active participants in the learning process.

This paper seeks to bridge the gap between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary policy frameworks. It argues that the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), when critically reinterpreted, can provide valuable insights for developing inclusive educational practices. At the same time, it acknowledges the limitations of traditional frameworks, particularly their potential to reinforce hierarchical and exclusionary norms. By integrating sociological analysis with policy perspectives, the chapter aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of disability in India.

### **Indological Perspective on Understanding of Disability**

**Vedas:** In the Vedas, disability is not systematically theorized as a distinct category, yet references to bodily difference and impairment appear within a broader cosmological and ritual framework. The Vedic worldview emphasizes harmony, order



(ṛta), and balance, where physical and mental well-being are linked to cosmic and social equilibrium. Individuals with impairments are not necessarily excluded from the moral order but are often situated within a ritual context that associates health with purity and divine favor. At the same time, Vedic prayers frequently seek protection from illness and bodily affliction, indicating an early recognition of suffering. Thus, disability is implicitly understood as part of the human condition, though often framed through the lens of ritual purity, divine will, and the maintenance of cosmic balance.

**Upanishads:** The Upanishads offer a more egalitarian philosophical stance. Since the core idea is that the ātman (self) is universal and beyond the physical body, individuals with disabilities were not viewed as spiritually inferior. In principle, this implies a form of moral and spiritual equality. However, this equality operates largely at the metaphysical level; the texts do not directly address everyday social treatment or structural inequalities. As a result, while the philosophical outlook promotes dignity and respect, it does not necessarily translate into concrete social inclusion or rights in practice.

**Bhagavad Gita:** The Bhagavad Gita presents a practical and ethical discourse on duty, action, and self-realization, indirectly engaging with the idea of human limitation and suffering. While it does not explicitly discuss disability, its emphasis on karma yoga (selfless action) and the acceptance of one's circumstances offers a framework for interpreting physical or mental challenges. The Gita advocates performing one's duty without attachment to outcomes, suggesting that individual worth is not determined by physical ability but by ethical conduct and inner discipline. However, similar to the Upanishads, the Gita does not explicitly address the social treatment of disabled persons. Interpretations linking one's condition to past karma could sometimes lead to acceptance and resilience, but they might also justify unequal treatment or reduce the urgency for social intervention.

**Ramayana:** In the Ramayana, disability appears through various characters and narrative elements, often symbolically. Physical differences are sometimes associated with moral or social attributes, reflecting the cultural norms of the time. However, the text also contains moments of empathy and inclusion, where devotion, loyalty, and moral strength are valued over physical perfection. Disability is thus embedded within a moral narrative that emphasizes virtue and duty, though it can also reinforce hierarchical distinctions and normative ideals of the body.

**Mahabharata:** The Mahabharata offers a more complex and nuanced portrayal of disability through characters such as Dhritarashtra, who is blind, and others who experience various forms of limitation. These characters are not defined solely by their



impairments but are central to the narrative's exploration of power, ethics, and human frailty. Disability in the Mahabharata is intertwined with themes of fate, responsibility, and moral conflict, highlighting both the capabilities and vulnerabilities of individuals. This layered representation underscores the idea that disability is part of the broader human experience, shaped by social, ethical, and political contexts rather than merely biological factors.

Across all these texts, disabled individuals were generally not completely excluded, but their treatment was shaped by the religious and moral interpretations (karma, purity, fate). This results in a pattern of partial inclusion with underlying stigma, rather than full equality in the modern sense.

### **Meaning of Indian Knowledge System (IKS)**

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) refers to the rich and diverse body of knowledge that has evolved in India over centuries across disciplines such as philosophy, science, medicine, mathematics, arts, language, and social organization. It is rooted in classical sources like the Vedas and Upanishads, as well as texts such as the Arthashastra and Charaka Samhita, which collectively reflect the depth and diversity of indigenous knowledge traditions (Radhakrishnan, 1994; Sharma & Dash, 2006). IKS is not limited to written traditions; it also includes oral traditions, local practices, folk knowledge, and community-based wisdom systems, forming a dynamic and living body of knowledge (Kapoor & Danino, 2022).

At its core, IKS is characterized by a holistic and integrative approach, where knowledge is not fragmented into rigid disciplines but understood as interconnected. It combines material, intellectual, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of life, offering a comprehensive worldview that integrates values and lived experience (Chattopadhyaya, 1991). Unlike purely modern scientific systems that often emphasize objectivity and specialization, IKS incorporates ethics, sustainability, and context-sensitive understanding into knowledge production.

### **Importance of Indian Knowledge System in India**

IKS plays a crucial role in preserving India's cultural heritage and civilizational continuity by connecting present generations with traditional wisdom and practices, thereby fostering identity and belonging (Kapoor & Danino, 2022). Its holistic approach, particularly evident in systems like Ayurveda, emphasizes the interrelationship between mind, body, society, and nature, which is increasingly relevant in addressing complex contemporary challenges (World Health Organization, 2001).



Traditional Indian education systems such as the Gurukul system emphasized holistic development, including intellectual, moral, physical, and spiritual growth.

Key features of the Indian Knowledge System include:

1. Holistic education
2. Value-based learning
3. Respect for diversity
4. Community-based learning
5. Integration of knowledge and practice

These principles can significantly contribute to inclusive education.

IKS also complements modern scientific knowledge rather than opposing it. The coexistence of traditional and biomedical systems in India reflects a pluralistic approach to knowledge and practice, allowing individuals to draw from multiple sources of understanding (World Health Organization, 2001). Additionally, IKS emphasizes social and ethical values such as dharma (duty) and seva (service), which contribute to social cohesion and ethical responsibility.

Finally, Indian knowledge traditions recognize diversity in human experiences, including differences in abilities, lifestyles, and beliefs. When interpreted in a contemporary context, this provides a strong foundation for inclusive frameworks in education and society. Overall, the integration of IKS into modern systems, particularly through policies like NEP 2020, can foster a more holistic, inclusive, and sustainable model of development.

### **Indian Knowledge System and Conceptualizations of Disability**

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers a holistic and culturally grounded framework for understanding disability, one that aligns closely with the inclusive and multidisciplinary vision of the National Education Policy 2020. Moving beyond a purely biomedical model, IKS conceptualizes human diversity through philosophical traditions embedded in texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita. Concepts like ātman, dharma, and karma frame human diversity as part of a broader moral and cosmic order.

Within this framework, disability is not merely a biological impairment but a condition embedded in ethical and social relations. These traditions emphasize the intrinsic dignity and interconnectedness of all individuals, framing differences in ability as part of a broader ethical and cosmic order rather than as deficits alone. This perspective resonates with NEP 2020's commitment to equity, inclusion, and respect for diversity



within the education system. A key principle of NEP 2020 is the integration of Indian knowledge traditions into contemporary education, encouraging learners to engage with indigenous epistemologies alongside modern scientific approaches.

In this context, classical texts like the Charaka Samhita provide valuable insights into holistic health, where physical, mental, and environmental factors are seen as interdependent. Disability, in this sense, is not merely an isolated impairment but a condition shaped by the interaction of bodily constitution (prakriti), lifestyle, and social environment (Charaka, 1994). Such an approach parallels contemporary biopsychosocial models and supports NEP's emphasis on multidisciplinary and experiential learning. This perspective aligns with contemporary biopsychosocial models, suggesting that ancient Indian knowledge systems anticipated integrative approaches to health and well-being.

However, it is important to note that these traditional frameworks are not inherently egalitarian. They are embedded within broader social structures characterized by caste, gender, and class hierarchies. As such, the application of IKS to contemporary issues of disability must be approached with critical awareness.

### **NEP 2020 and Inclusive Education**

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a paradigm shift in Indian education, emphasizing inclusivity, flexibility, and multidisciplinary learning. It recognizes the need to create an education system that accommodates diverse learning needs and promotes equal opportunities. It underscores the importance of integrating IKS into curricula to promote multidisciplinary and culturally grounded learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). This integration encourages critical thinking while strengthening cultural awareness and contextual understanding. Furthermore, IKS encompasses sustainable and locally rooted practices related to agriculture, ecology, and health, which can contribute to addressing global concerns such as environmental degradation and climate change (UNESCO, 2017).

The National Education Policy 2020 reflects this philosophy by emphasizing inclusive and equitable education for all, particularly for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including children with disabilities. NEP 2020 advocates removing barriers that prevent differently abled learners from accessing education and promotes policies such as accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and inclusive classroom practices.

By aligning with the inclusive philosophy of the Indian Knowledge System, NEP 2020 aims to create an educational environment where diversity is respected and every



learner feels valued.

Key provisions of NEP 2020 include:

- Integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education
- Development of accessible infrastructure and learning materials
- Training of teachers in inclusive pedagogy
- Use of technology to enhance accessibility

NEP 2020 also foregrounds inclusive education, explicitly advocating for the participation of children with disabilities in mainstream schooling through appropriate infrastructural support, teacher training, and flexible curricula. The family-centered and community-based ethos of IKS complements this vision by recognizing care as a collective responsibility. Historically, care for the differently abled in India has been embedded within family and community structures. As noted by Sudhir Kakar (1982), Indian healing traditions often blur the boundaries between the psychological, spiritual, and social, thereby fostering a pluralistic approach to care. While this pluralism offers diverse pathways to care, it also presents challenges. The lack of standardization can lead to inconsistent quality of care, and the reliance on informal systems may delay access to professional treatment. Moreover, cultural interpretations of disability can influence help-seeking behavior, sometimes reinforcing stigma.

This pluralism is further evident in the coexistence of biomedical psychiatry, indigenous healing systems, and faith-based practices (Naraindas et al., 2014). While such diversity expands the range of therapeutic options, it also complicates the standardization of care and raises questions about efficacy, accessibility, and legitimacy.

At the same time, NEP 2020 implicitly challenges certain limitations within traditional systems. Despite the ethical emphasis on compassion (*seva*) and collective responsibility, the lived realities of differently abled individuals in India reveal persistent challenges. Families, while central to caregiving, can also become sites of emotional strain, dependency, and control (Rao, 2001). Gender and caste hierarchies further complicate these dynamics, often exacerbating marginalization. Moreover, stigma operates at multiple levels—affecting access to education, employment, and social participation. As Michel Foucault (1988) argues in a broader context, the categorization of abnormality is deeply intertwined with power relations, and this insight is particularly relevant in understanding how disability is socially constructed in India.

Stigma remains one of the most significant barriers to inclusion in India. It operates not



only at the level of individual attitudes but also through institutional and structural mechanisms. Disability can affect marriage prospects, employment opportunities, and social status, reflecting broader patterns of inequality.

NEP's rights-based orientation—echoing global frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006, CRPD) seeks to shift the focus from charity and dependence to agency, autonomy, and empowerment.

Cultural narratives and epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata also play a crucial role in shaping societal attitudes toward disability. Characters with physical or cognitive differences are woven into these narratives, indicating that disability has long been part of the cultural imagination. However, these representations are often ambivalent—simultaneously evoking empathy and reinforcing moral hierarchies. The association of disability with fate or divine will can normalize difference but may also discourage active intervention or social change. NEP 2020's emphasis on value-based education provides an opportunity to reinterpret these narratives in ways that promote empathy, inclusivity, and critical thinking rather than reinforcing fatalism or moral hierarchies.

Importantly, NEP 2020 also advocates for the integration of Indian knowledge systems into the curriculum. This creates an opportunity to incorporate ethical values such as compassion, respect, and social responsibility into educational practices.

### **Alignment of IKS and NEP for Differently Abled Learners**

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) has deep philosophical and educational traditions that emphasize inclusivity, holistic development, and respect for diversity. The National Education Policy 2020 recognizes the importance of integrating IKS into modern education to make learning more meaningful, culturally rooted, and inclusive. For differently abled learners, these principles align strongly with NEP 2020's goal of creating an equitable and inclusive education system where every learner can develop according to their potential.

### **Philosophy of Inclusivity**

Indian philosophical traditions promote the idea of universal equality and dignity of every human being. One of the most significant principles is Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, which emphasizes that all individuals are part of a single global family and deserve equal respect and opportunities.

The National Education Policy 2020 reflects this philosophy by emphasizing inclusive and equitable education for all, particularly for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged



Groups (SEDGs), including children with disabilities. NEP 2020 advocates removing barriers that prevent differently abled learners from accessing education and promotes policies such as accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and inclusive classroom practices.

By aligning with the inclusive philosophy of the Indian Knowledge System, NEP 2020 aims to create an educational environment where diversity is respected and every learner feels valued.

### **Holistic Learning**

Traditional Indian education systems such as the Gurukul System emphasized the holistic development of the learner—intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual. Education was designed to nurture each student according to their abilities, talents, and pace of learning.

Similarly, the National Education Policy 2020 promotes holistic and multidisciplinary education. The policy encourages flexible learning pathways, personalized learning, and competency-based education. This approach is particularly beneficial for differently abled learners because it allows teachers to adapt teaching methods according to individual learning needs.

Through individualized support, flexible curriculum structures, and continuous assessment, NEP 2020 ensures that differently abled learners are not restricted by rigid educational structures but instead receive opportunities to grow according to their capabilities.

### **Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning has always been an important feature of the Indian educational tradition. Ancient learning methods focused on learning through observation, practice, dialogue, and real-life experiences rather than memorization alone.

The National Education Policy 2020 strongly supports experiential and activity-based learning. It encourages teaching methods such as:

- Project-based learning
- Inquiry-based learning
- Hands-on activities
- Collaborative learning

For differently abled learners, experiential learning can be especially effective because it allows them to engage with learning materials through multiple senses and methods.



For example, visual aids, tactile materials, and interactive activities can make learning more accessible for students with different learning needs.

Thus, the integration of experiential learning within NEP 2020 reflects the principles of the Indian Knowledge System and contributes to making education more inclusive.

### **Yoga and Well-Being**

The Indian Knowledge System places significant emphasis on physical and mental well-being. Practices such as Yoga and meditation have been used for centuries to improve concentration, emotional balance, and overall health.

The National Education Policy 2020 encourages the inclusion of yoga, sports, and wellness education in school curricula. These practices can play an important role in supporting the well-being of differently abled learners.

For students with disabilities, yoga and mindfulness practices can help:

- Improve physical flexibility and coordination
- Enhance mental focus and emotional stability
- Reduce stress and anxiety
- Promote self-confidence and self-awareness

By incorporating these traditional practices into modern education, NEP 2020 supports the overall development of students, including those with special needs.

While IKS offers valuable insights into holistic care and ethical responsibility, it must be critically engaged to align with contemporary principles of equality and justice. Traditional frameworks, if uncritically applied, may perpetuate hierarchical norms related to caste, gender, and ability. Therefore, integrating IKS with rights-based approaches requires a reinterpretation of cultural narratives to emphasize empowerment rather than dependency. The World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) provides a useful bridge by combining biomedical and social perspectives. This convergence enables the development of inclusive policies that are both globally informed and locally relevant.

Importantly, NEP 2020 recognizes that barriers to inclusion are not merely infrastructural but also cultural and attitudinal. The persistent exclusion of differently abled individuals in India is shaped by stigma, social norms, and limited awareness—factors that IKS can help address through its emphasis on ethical responsibility and community engagement. At the same time, integrating IKS into education requires a careful balance to ensure that traditional beliefs do not perpetuate discrimination but



instead contribute to a more inclusive worldview.

### **Future Prospects**

The future of inclusive education in India depends on the effective implementation of NEP 2020. By integrating modern educational practices with the Indian Knowledge System, India can create an education system that is both inclusive and culturally rooted. The alignment of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) with the National Education Policy 2020 carries significant implications for both policy formulation and educational practice in India. Technological advancements, increased awareness, and stronger policy frameworks can further enhance educational opportunities for differently abled learners. A key area of intervention lies in curriculum development, where indigenous knowledge traditions can be meaningfully integrated with contemporary disability studies to create a more holistic and culturally responsive framework of learning. Equally important is teacher training, which must equip educators with the pedagogical skills and sensitivity required to address diverse learning needs and foster inclusive classrooms. Community engagement also plays a crucial role, as local knowledge systems, cultural practices, and support networks can be leveraged to strengthen inclusion and contextualize educational experiences.

Furthermore, there is a pressing need to promote interdisciplinary research that bridges sociology, education, psychology, and cultural studies, thereby deepening the understanding of disability within varied social contexts. Collectively, these interventions have the potential to transform the education system into one that is more inclusive, equitable, and aligned with both indigenous values and contemporary rights-based approaches.

### **Conclusion**

The intersection of the Indian Knowledge System and NEP 2020 presents a transformative opportunity to reimagine disability in India. By integrating indigenous philosophical insights with modern inclusive frameworks, it is possible to create an education system that is both culturally rooted and socially just. However, this integration must be guided by critical reflection to ensure that traditional values support empowerment and inclusion rather than reinforcing stigma or inequality. A sociologically informed approach is essential for realizing the full potential of NEP 2020 in fostering an inclusive and equitable society.

Inclusive education is essential for building an equitable and just society. NEP 2020 provides a strong framework for promoting inclusive education for differently abled learners. By recognizing the needs of marginalized groups, emphasizing teacher



training, improving infrastructure, and integrating technology, the policy aims to create a more inclusive education system. At the same time, the Indian Knowledge System offers valuable philosophical and pedagogical insights that support inclusive education. Its emphasis on holistic development, respect for diversity, and experiential learning aligns closely with modern educational principles.

However, significant challenges remain in implementing inclusive education effectively. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, communities, and families. By combining modern policy initiatives with traditional Indian educational values, India can move toward an education system that truly ensures education for all.

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