

Transformation of Traditional Rural Customs and its Impact on Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in India

¹Padam Narayan Pandey, ²Pushpendra Singh, ³Karnika Shukla, ⁴Suman Upadhyay, ⁵Preeti Jaiswal, ⁶Tej Bahadur Singh

¹Assistant Professor Sociology Department Janta Mahavidyalaya, Ajitmal Auraiya, pandeygjm@gmail.com,

Research scholar, Csjm university

²Assistant Professor Dept. Of Sociology, V.S.S.D.College Kanpur, Email id: pushpendra.yathartha@gmail.com
Orcid id: 0009-0009-3016-3701

³Research Scholar, Sociology Department, DAV P G College, Kanpur karnikashukla@yahoo.com

⁴Research Scholar, C.S.N.P G College Csjm University Kanpur supadhyaymsw@gmail.com

⁵Kanpur Vidhya Mandir Girls Degree College, Kanpur preetijaiswal100@gmail.com

⁶Professor And Incharge Department of Sociology, Pt Prithi Nath P G College, Kanpur, Orcid Id:0009-0000-5645-3402 Email Id:tbskanpur@gmail.com

(Corresponding Author; Prof Tej Bahadur Singh)

⁶Professor And Incharge Department of Sociology, Pt Prithi Nath P G College, Kanpur, Orcid Id:0009-0000-5645-3402 Email Id: tbskanpur@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT:

Inclusive education for children with disabilities in rural India is shaped by more than formal school access or policy recognition. Family beliefs, community attitudes, traditional customs, school readiness, and teacher practices influence whether children with disabilities are accepted, supported, and meaningfully included in education. This study examines the transformation of traditional rural customs and its impact on inclusive education for children with disabilities in India. It uses a qualitative research design based on case-study analytic methodology and synthesises five selected secondary sources on rural schooling, parental perceptions, cultural beliefs, access barriers, classroom inclusion, and disability-inclusive education policy. The findings show that traditional rural customs continue to shape how disability is understood within families and communities. Beliefs related to dependency, shame, fate, pity, and overprotection may restrict children's mobility, school participation, peer interaction, and educational expectations. However, rural attitudes are gradually changing as parents and caregivers increasingly recognise education as a source of dignity, socialisation, independence, and future opportunity. The findings further show that meaningful inclusion cannot be achieved through enrolment alone. Children with disabilities require accessible infrastructure, trained teachers, disability-responsive pedagogy, assistive support, peer acceptance, and strong family-school collaboration. The study concludes that inclusive education in rural India depends on the combined transformation of social customs and school systems.

Keywords: Inclusive education, children with disabilities, rural customs, special education, disability inclusion, India.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education has become a central concern in the education of children with disabilities, especially in countries where social inequality, poverty, rural marginalisation, and limited school resources continue to affect educational access. In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act recognises education as a legal entitlement and places responsibility on institutions to provide non-discriminatory and accessible learning opportunities for children with disabilities (Government of India, 2016). Equity, inclusion, and eliminating the barriers to meaningful participation of children from disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in school are also highlighted in the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). Legal recognition, however, is not sufficient for meaningful inclusion, particularly in rural areas where schools may be under resourced, with limited specialist support and significant social norms or attitudes about disability.

Rural India requires particular attention because the education of children with disabilities is influenced by both formal policy and informal factors such as beliefs within the family, expectations within the community, economic disadvantage, distance from school, transport and access to support services. While there has been a tremendous advancement in policy and programme level in disability inclusive education, a lot of work remains to be done at individual level of identification, enrolment, retention, participation, teacher preparation and monitoring of learning outcomes in India (UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, 2021). Therefore, inclusive education in rural contexts must be understood as both an educational and socio-cultural issue.

In this study, traditional rural customs refer to the rural family beliefs, community attitudes, stigma, overprotection, gender and caste expectations, religious-cultural interpretations and practices that influence the way disability is understood and schooling is experienced. These practices can shape the perceptions of children with disabilities as able learners, family members requiring care,

objects of pity or learners entitled to education. These beliefs can influence parents' choices, community attitudes, relationships with peers and the kind of support which children receive in and out of school. Rural norms are not static, however, and could change as a result of policy awareness, schooling, community exposure, parental aspirations, and disability-rights discourse.

Children with disabilities can also be excluded from school even if they are formally enrolled because of inaccessible infrastructure, unprepared teachers, poverty, negative peer attitudes toward disability, low expectations and limited participation in the classroom. National policies and guidelines for equitable and inclusive education highlight that creating an inclusive learning environment in school requires making the learning environment accessible, adopting inclusive pedagogies, preparing teachers, and providing support mechanisms (National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2021). The evidence from India indicates that the exclusion does not only happen prior to enrolment, but also in school within, while children are physically present, yet not able to take part in learning and social life (Bakhshi et al., 2017). This means that the process of assessing inclusive education has to be undertaken not just by access to school but also by participation, acceptance, the support given to children's learning and the quality of classroom experience.

Previous studies have focused on inclusive education policy, access barriers, parental perceptions, rural education, and disability related stigma. But fewer studies have made a conceptual linkage between the change of traditional rural practices and outcomes of inclusive education for children with disabilities in India. The debates on inclusion worldwide include the need for education systems to respond to diverse learners through addressing social exclusion, discrimination and unequal participation (UNESCO, 2020). There is also a pressing need to move towards disability inclusive education so that children with disabilities, not only are counted in schools, but are supported to learn,

belong and participate (UNESCO, 2022). In the context of this, the current research explores the impact of changing rural practices on educational access, acceptance, participation and special education practice.

This study aims to investigate the impact of the change of traditional rural customs on inclusive education of children with disabilities in India in terms of attitudinal changes of their parents, community beliefs, access to school, involvement in the classroom and practice of special education. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine how traditional rural customs shape attitudes toward children with disabilities and their education in India.
2. To analyse how changes in rural family and community beliefs influence access, participation, and acceptance in inclusive education.
3. To identify implications of socio-cultural transformation for special education practice, teacher preparation, and school-community collaboration.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Inclusive Education for Children with Disabilities in India

Inclusive education for children with disabilities in India has gradually shifted from a charity-oriented or segregated understanding of disability toward a rights-based approach that recognises children with disabilities as learners entitled to access, participation, dignity, and support. This change has been influenced by broader discussions about equity, social justice and access to education internationally and nationally. Inclusive education is more than just integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools; it involves a change of culture, of pedagogy, of the way children are assessed, of how they interact with each other, of the school environment, and of attitude among the community. The focus on equity and inclusion has been a growing aspect of policy commitments in Indian context, while everyday school practice is not uniform. The policy analysis of inclusion and equity in India's National Education Policy

indicates that inclusive education should not be seen merely as a policy objective but also as a process that needs to be viewed in the context of participation, quality, and lived experiences of learners (Rangarajan et al., 2025).

2.2 Traditional Rural Customs and Disability Beliefs

Traditional rural practices have a significant influence on family and community attitudes to disability. In many rural communities, disability might be understood in terms of beliefs about destiny, divine providence, family honour, reliance, shame or charity. These beliefs can shape whether a child with a disability is perceived as capable of learning or as someone who should remain protected within the family. Stigma, pity, low expectations and overprotection can limit children's socio-mobility and educational opportunities. Cultural and community belief systems can also provide enabling caring, compassionate, moral responsibility and acceptance. So, traditional customs are not necessarily always negative or uniform, but vary from family to family, region to region, religion to religion, caste to caste and school to school.

2.3 Parental Perceptions and Educational Decision-Making

Parents and caregivers play a key role in the school-based inclusion of children with disabilities and their influence is reflected in enrolment, attendance, school choice, aspirations and everyday support. Economic factors, access to schools, the nature of the disability, community attitudes and views on education all play a part in their decision making processes. Families might also be influenced by issues of safety, social judgment, transport, cost, and readiness of the school to meet children's needs. Parental choices may be made within broader social networks of rural communities where community acceptance and family reputation can play a role in whether or not children with disabilities stay home or attend school. Parental perception is not just an attitude but also a socio-cultural aspect that is associated with the rural

culture, social norms and educational opportunities.

2.4 Rural Schooling and Classroom Inclusion

The difficulties encountered with rural schooling in terms of inclusive education are quite unique, as schools may lack the necessary trained teachers, accessible infrastructure, the assistive devices, support for resources, and disability responsive pedagogy. Teacher attitudes are particularly significant because they affect the participation in class, acceptance by peers and expectations of children with disabilities. Research on Indian teachers revealed that the elements of teachers' training, awareness, institutional support and they are confident in managing diverse classrooms are the factors influencing their attitudes towards inclusive education (Kumar, 2016). The significance of place in determining educational opportunities is also evident in comparative evidence from Telangana, where children with disabilities living in rural districts may be less likely than their counterparts to receive specialised support and inclusive education in schools (Rose et al., 2021).

Peer relations and social acceptance are also important to classroom inclusion. Teachers need to encourage children with disabilities to engage in interaction, cooperative learning, and to set positive norms in the classroom in order to avoid their isolation. Teacher attitudes, classroom management and teachers' capacity to make room for diversity and to normalise it, determine the level of social acceptance in inclusive classrooms (Garrote et al., 2020). The teaching needs of children with disabilities are also pertinent, particularly those with developmental disabilities and autism spectrum disorders. Evidence-informed strategies, teacher professional development and contextual support are essential for teachers to be able to address diverse learners effectively, according to a South Asian scoping study (Sharma & Rangarajan, 2019).

2.5 Socio-Cultural Change and Inclusive Education

Socio-cultural change is integral to inclusive education, as the causes of the exclusion of

people with disabilities go beyond inaccessible schools to ideas and beliefs held by the community and the expectations of the institutions. International research demonstrates that school systems, cultures and practices need to change to ensure that all learners are recognised and supported (Ainscow, 2020). The child/youth with disability perspective on meaningful inclusion is based on membership, participation, supportive teachers, peer relationships and opportunities for contribution to school life (Paul et al, 2022). Review results elsewhere in the world also show that attitudes, family support, school services, accessibility, communication, and policy implementation are significant barriers and facilitators to the education of children with disabilities (Bani Odeh & Lach, 2024). A number of issues still remain to affect the accessibility and utilization of the school such as poverty, lack of awareness of parents, social attitudes, gender, infrastructure and teacher preparation in India (Limaye, 2016). Inclusive education is therefore not meaningful without the transformation of traditional rural customs, as this transformation will be incomplete if there is no institutional reform.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research followed a qualitative research design based on case-study analytic methodology to examine the transformation of traditional rural customs and its impact on inclusive education for children with disabilities in India. This design enabled the study to understand how rural family beliefs, community attitudes, disability-related stigma, parental expectations, cultural interpretations, school access, and classroom practices interact with the process of inclusive education. The transformation of traditional rural customs is not only a social change but also an educational issue because it influences how children with disabilities are perceived, supported, enrolled, and included in schools.

The case-study analytic methodology supported an in-depth examination of selected studies and policy evidence in their educational and socio-

cultural contexts. The method was useful because the study did not rely on primary field data but on selected published sources that provided evidence on rural schooling, parental perceptions, cultural beliefs, access barriers, and inclusive education policy. This approach made it possible to examine the complexity of inclusive education for children with disabilities in India as a process shaped by both school-level practices and wider rural social attitudes.

3.2 Data Sources

The research followed only secondary sources of information thus maintaining methodological consistency with the literature reviewed on inclusive education, disability, rural schooling, parent perceptions and traditional socio-cultural beliefs in India.

Singal (2016) investigated the school experiences of children with disabilities from the perspective of their parents' experiences and perceptions. The study highlighted the understanding of the benefit of school among parents, especially those from low income rural communities, for children with disabilities. The study proved helpful in examining the potential for change in the traditional rural attitude towards disability and education to be seen in parental expectations and aspirations.

The researchers Taneja-Johansson et al., (2023) explored the education of children with disabilities in government institutions in rural areas in India. Their research offered some evidence related to teacher practices, classroom experiences, and the mismatch between enrolment and meaningful inclusion. This source contributed to the understanding of the experience of inclusive education in rural school context and how children with disabilities can still be excluded when formally in classrooms.

Aruldas et al. (2023) studied factors affecting access to education for children with disabilities in Tamil Nadu, India. The evidence they developed in their research related to caregiver perspectives, children's experiences, transport, affordability, safety, school readiness, and social inclusion. The study was significant because it

explored the role of family-level decisions and problems in accessing, attending and participating in school.

UNESCO (2019) gave an overview of children with disabilities in India at the national level, which is educational and policy level. The report was leveraged to gain an understanding of the wider landscape of disability inclusive education, such as the overarching legal responsibilities, systemic barriers, school access, teacher training, and the need for increased disability inclusive education practices. This source was used to analyze the interaction between policy level transformation and rural realities.

Wilson (2019) analysed barriers and enablers provided by Hindu beliefs and practices for people with disabilities in India. This source was utilized to gain understanding of the cultural aspect of disability, beliefs about stigma, fate, karma, charity, dependency, care and social acceptance. It was useful in linking the traditional cultural interpretations of disability and their possible impact on educational inclusion to the wider cultural interpretations of disability.

3.3 Case Selection Criteria

Cases were chosen with a clear basis to make them relevant and analytical. All selected sources discussed one or more of the major aspects of the research topic such as children with disabilities, schooling in the rural areas, inclusive education, parental perception, traditional practices, cultural beliefs, stigma against disability, access to school, participation in class, implementation of policies in India.

The available studies selected dealt with both socio-cultural and educational issues related to disability. Some cases were limited to the school context in the rural area or focused on classroom inclusion, others on parental beliefs or caregiver experiences, cultural interpretations or national policy frameworks. This helped make sure that the analysis was not only school access but also rural customs, and shifting social views and values influenced inclusive education results.

Sources were not chosen at random, but were chosen purposively. They were added because they directly relate to the title and objectives of the study. Sources that were only related to disability content in general or to medical or other aspects of disability were excluded from the core analysis as were sources of general rural culture without connection to children with disabilities and rural education.

3.4 Data Analysis Technique

Qualitative secondary case analysis was the technique used in the study. The study was secondary in nature, and therefore published studies and policy documents were systematically analysed to understand the link between traditional rural cultures and inclusive education of children with disabilities in India. Every source was examined to see which explained something about the research problem, and to determine if a particular source explained disability beliefs, parental expectations, access to school, participation in the classroom, or policy implementation.

A cross-case comparative method was adopted to determine themes and patterns shared by the cases in the selected sources. The interpretation of the relationship between socio-cultural changes and inclusive education outcomes was done through thematic analysis, pattern matching and building explanations. The analysis looked at five main themes: traditional rural customs and disability beliefs, parents' perceptions and aspirations for their children's education, access to school and systematic barriers, inclusion in the classroom and teacher practice and socio-cultural transformation and inclusive education.

In this way, the chosen studies were not viewed as individual pieces of evidence, but rather as related pieces of evidence. This analysis focused on traditional rural practices that can potentially either facilitate or hinder the educational experiences of children with disabilities, and on changing attitudes within families, communities, and institutions that can facilitate inclusive education in rural India. As the study was based entirely on published secondary sources and did not involve human participants, formal ethical approval was not required.

4. Results

4.1 Traditional Rural Customs and Disability Beliefs

The analysis revealed that the traditional practices in the rural communities are still affecting the perception of disability within the families and communities. The idea of dependency, shame, fate, overprotection, charity and social vulnerability are all associated with disability. Such beliefs impact children with disabilities' perception of their own capacity to learn or of their role in the family as a person who needs to be protected. Traditional customs are not however, totally restrictive. Care, emotional support and moral responsibility can be fostered by some family and community values. The problem arises when care becomes over-protective and blocks children's opportunities to attend school, engage in peer interaction, and develop independence. Table 1 summarises how traditional rural customs influence disability-related expectations, family responses, community attitudes, and children's participation in inclusive education.

Table 1. Traditional Rural Customs and Their Educational Effects

Dimension	Rural Custom or Belief	Effect on Child	Impact on Inclusive Education
Disability meaning	Disability viewed through fate, misfortune, or dependency	Child may be perceived as less capable	Low educational expectations
Family response	Overprotection and restricted mobility	Child remains dependent on family support	Irregular attendance or delayed enrolment

Community attitude	Stigma, pity, or social discomfort	Child may experience isolation	Weak peer acceptance and participation
Cultural care	Family responsibility and compassion	Child receives emotional protection	Can support inclusion if linked with schooling
Social expectation	Limited belief in future independence	Reduced encouragement for learning	Lower classroom participation and confidence

4.2 Parental Aspirations and Educational Decision-Making

The results showed that there was a gradual shift in the attitudes of parents towards children with disabilities' education. Parents and caregivers increasingly view education as important for dignity, socialisation, future security, and independence. This indicates a shift from a mostly protective and passive approach to disability to a greater educational aspiration. However, this transformation is uneven. Parents

may value schooling but still have concerns when schools are distant, inaccessible, unsafe, expensive, or insufficiently prepared to support children with disabilities. Hence, while parental aspiration is important, education is not necessarily included unless it is supported practically in school systems and communities. Table 2 presents the relationship between parental aspirations, school trust, enrolment decisions, and the educational participation of children with disabilities.

Table 2. Parental Aspirations and Schooling Decisions

Dimension	Observed Pattern	Educational Effect	Inclusion-Related Meaning
Value of schooling	Education viewed as useful for future life	Increased desire for enrolment	Shift toward educational aspiration
Family concern	Worry about safety, transport, and school readiness	Irregular attendance or delayed schooling	Practical barriers weaken inclusion
Disability type	Greater uncertainty for children needing higher support	Uneven school participation	Inclusion depends on support availability
Parental expectation	Hope for dignity, independence, and socialisation	Stronger motivation to seek schooling	Transformation in family attitudes
School trust	Confidence depends on teacher support and accessibility	Affects retention and participation	Family-school relationship becomes central

4.3 School Access and Systemic Barriers

The findings revealed that although there is good policy and awareness creation for children with disabilities, there are various barriers facing rural children. These barriers are transportation issues, cost, distance, inaccessible infrastructure, lack of

assistive devices, lack of support services, and safety concerns. Enrolment is not just a question of formal enrolment. A child can be enrolled and not attend regularly, may not be able to take part meaningfully in the program or get appropriate learning support. The results suggest that

inclusive education can only be explained with regard to access, participation, learning support and social belonging. As shown in Table 3, access barriers such as distance, affordability,

infrastructure, support services, and safety concerns restrict the educational participation of children with disabilities.

Table 3. Access Barriers Affecting Inclusive Education

Barrier	Description	Effect on Schooling	Inclusion Outcome
Transport and distance	Schools may be far from home or difficult to reach	Reduced attendance	Unequal access to education
Affordability	Costs related to travel, materials, or support	Families may delay or discontinue schooling	Economic exclusion
Infrastructure	Lack of ramps, accessible toilets, or safe movement	Limited physical access	Partial or symbolic inclusion
Support services	Shortage of assistive devices and trained support	Learning needs remain unmet	Weak academic participation
Safety concerns	Fear of travel risks, neglect, or social harm	Families may restrict mobility	Reduced school participation

4.4 Classroom Inclusion and Teacher Practice

The analysis showed that there is limited implementation of inclusion in many rural school contexts. Children with disabilities might be physically in school but not fully part of the school's educational program. Meaningful inclusion is at the core of teacher preparation, classroom adaptation, peer interaction, and disability responsive pedagogy. If teachers are not trained or confident, they may implement the

same teaching strategies for all students, which is not sensitive to students' diversity in learning styles. Peer relationships also impact inclusion. When children with disabilities are placed in regular classrooms without active teacher support, they may remain socially isolated. Table 4 highlights the classroom-level factors that affect meaningful inclusion, including teacher preparation, adapted pedagogy, peer interaction, classroom resources, and active student participation.

Table 4. Classroom Inclusion and Teacher Practice

Classroom Dimension	Common Challenge	Effect on Child	Educational Implication
Teacher preparation	Limited training in inclusive pedagogy	Child receives insufficient support	Need for disability-responsive teacher education
Teaching method	Uniform classroom instruction	Diverse learning needs remain unaddressed	Limited academic participation
Peer interaction	Weak social integration with classmates	Child may feel isolated	Need for structured peer inclusion
Classroom resources	Lack of adapted materials and assistive support	Difficulty in completing learning tasks	Reduced learning outcomes
Participation	Physical presence without active engagement	Child is enrolled but not fully included	Inclusion must go beyond enrolment

4.5 Socio-Cultural Transformation and Inclusive Education

The cross-case thematic synthesis revealed that inclusive education in rural India requires a synergy between the transformation of social norms and school systems. The acceptance of children with disabilities as learners can be enhanced through changes in the aspirations of parents, attitudes of the community, disability awareness and rights-based thinking. These, however, changes must be accompanied by the accessibility of schools, prepared teachers, and inclusive pedagogy, as well as family-school

collaboration. The change of traditional rural customs can be seen in the realisation that a child with a disability should be at school, and that others should learn with them, and that they should receive appropriate learning support. However, the continued experience of stigma, overprotection, low expectations and barriers indicates that this change is not yet complete. As presented in Table 5, socio-cultural transformation can improve inclusive education when changes in family beliefs, community attitudes, policy awareness, and special education practice are supported by school-level reform.

Table 5. Socio-Cultural Transformation and Inclusive Education Outcomes

Transformation Area	Change Observed	Inclusive Education Effect	Continuing Challenge
Family beliefs	Growing value placed on schooling	Greater willingness to enrol children	Poverty and safety concerns remain
Community attitudes	Gradual movement toward acceptance	Improved social visibility of children	Stigma and pity may persist
School expectations	Recognition of children as learners	Stronger focus on participation	Low teacher preparedness continues
Policy awareness	Rights-based understanding of education	Increased demand for school access	Implementation gaps remain
Special education practice	Need for collaboration with families and communities	More culturally responsive inclusion	Support systems are still limited

4.6 Integrated Thematic Synthesis

The overall findings suggest that there is a social and institutional dimension of the effect of traditional rural practices on inclusive education. Customs shape the definitions of disability, community responses to disabilities in children, and interpretations of inclusion in school. Transformation happens as children are more and more perceived as learners with rights, abilities and future possibilities and not simply as

dependent or receivers of care. But such a change should be accompanied by real changes in the schools. Inclusive education remains incomplete without accessible infrastructure, teacher preparation, support services, peer acceptance, and family-school collaboration. Table 6 provides an integrated thematic synthesis connecting rural customs, parental aspirations, access barriers, classroom practice, and socio-cultural change with inclusive education outcomes.

Table 6. Integrated Thematic Synthesis of Findings

Thematic Area	Key Finding	Impact on Inclusive Education	Required Response
Traditional customs	Disability may be linked with stigma, dependency, or protection	Shapes expectations and participation	Community sensitisation
Parental aspiration	Families increasingly value schooling	Supports enrolment and motivation	Stronger family-school partnership
Access barriers	Transport, cost, safety, and infrastructure restrict schooling	Limits attendance and retention	Accessible rural school systems
Classroom practice	Enrolment does not always ensure participation	Children may remain marginalised in class	Teacher training and adapted pedagogy
Socio-cultural change	Attitudes are transforming but unevenly	Inclusion improves when beliefs and systems change together	Combined social and institutional reform

5. Discussion

The results reveal that inclusive education for children with disabilities in rural India is not only about school enrolment or policy implementation. The results indicate that traditional rural customs, family expectations, community attitudes, teacher practices, and school-level resources influence children with disabilities' participation in meaningful inclusion and engagement. The change of rural traditions, therefore, isn't isolated from inclusive education, but it has a significant impact on how children are perceived, whether they are encouraged to go to school or not, how they participate in classroom learning and whether families and schools cooperate in supporting them.

A key concern arising from the outcomes is the shift from deficit oriented views of disability. If disability is perceived primarily in terms of dependency, incapacity, shame or protection, children with disabilities may be excluded from the opportunity to learn. These attitudes can discourage and restrict children and families' educational opportunities. Disability needs to be understood more broadly, where social attitudes, inaccessible environments, and institutional

reactions also contribute to disability. This corresponds to modern disability discourses that shift the focus from a deficit-based to a social-relational perspective on disability and that highlight the need to tackle barriers in the environment, practices and systems of inclusive education (Selisko et al., 2024). This transformation is significant in rural India, where religious or community attitudes and norms could help shape the perception of whether a child with a disability is viewed as educable, capable, and entitled to participate in school life.

The findings also reveal the important role of parental aspirations as indicators of socio-cultural changes. While families remain poor, isolated, lack transportation and are uncertain about what services will be available at school, many of the families are more aware of the value of education in granting dignity, socialization, independence and future security. This shift challenges the belief that exclusion is only due to unwillingness in the family. Rather, the results reveal that parents' motivation for learning can be very high, and the school system may still be lacking in readiness to provide for the needs of children. Hence, it is necessary to build up family-school cooperation in inclusive education.

Parents/caregivers should not be treated as the recipients of policy but as key partners in the identification of barriers, attending and enhancing children's participation. Respectful communication between schools and families and acknowledgement of families' concerns can help to change traditional protective attitudes over time into confidence in schooling.

The results also reveal that teacher preparation is the key to success in inclusive education. In rural settings, teachers frequently face the challenge of limited resources, specialist support, assistive devices and training opportunities. Teachers may not have practical strategies for differentiated instruction, classroom adaptation, behavioural support, peer inclusion and disability sensitive assessment, even when they are willing to support children with disabilities. In addition to professional development, teacher support for effective inclusive education needs should include administrative support, collaboration, teaching resources, and practical guidance (Chow et al., 2024). The relevance of this is in the context of rural India, as teacher training can not be restricted to awareness programmes. It should contain classroom-based strategies, local teachable content, peer support strategies, and advice for engaging families and communities.

Another key consideration is the social aspect of inclusion as well as the pedagogical. The outcomes indicate that children with disabilities can be in the classroom physically, but socially isolated or even academically marginalised. This means that participation, belonging and peer relationships as well as learning engagement are the factors to consider when assessing inclusion, not just enrolment. Peer acceptance is not automatic and teacher-mediated interaction is particularly important. Research in inclusive settings suggests that instructional practices have a significant impact on social acceptance and interactions; for this reason, it is important that teachers plan for cooperative activities, promote positive interactions among peers, and facilitate opportunities where children with disabilities are able to interact meaningfully (Furrer et al., 2020). Such strategies could be particularly relevant in

rural schools where community attitudes and in-school classroom behaviours are closely interlinked. Teachers can help normalise diversity in the classroom and reduce disability-related stigma through inclusive teaching practices.

Another important finding is that inclusive education is a caring and responsive activity. Children with disabilities in rural settings may experience discrimination, fear, social judgement, neglect, or repeated experiences of being treated as different. In these settings, inclusion needs to take into account the emotional and social impact of marginalisation. Trauma-informed approaches to inclusive education highlight the importance of an environment that is safe, supportive and respectful, acknowledges vulnerability and reacts to learners' experiences (Liasidou, 2024). It is significant for the present study as traditional customs sometimes can create overprotection, shame, or silence around disability. Schools have therefore a responsibility to ensure that not only students can enter the premises but that they are also emotionally safe and comfortable, and feel a sense of belonging.

Another key issue is the policy/practice nexus. India has moved towards a rights based educational policies, however, this finding reveals that policy change does not necessarily translate to classroom change in rural areas. The implementation relies on teacher agency, school leadership, institutional support, and the interpretation of teachers regarding the inclusive policy from practical aspects in the classroom. Studies on teacher agency in the implementation of inclusive education policy in India reveal that teachers' readiness and capacity to act is influenced by school conditions, professional beliefs, institutional arrangements and teacher support (Tripathi, 2025). This means that, inclusion in the rural domain is not achieved solely through the issuing of guidelines. Teachers and schools must be equipped for local implementation of policy, be flexible and supported to do so.

The overall discussion demonstrates that the change of traditional rural customs and the development of inclusive education are processes

that are connected with each other. To help bring about change in rural attitudes, this helps to improve the visibility of children in schools, parental confidence, and acceptance. But institutional transformation is needed if socio-cultural transformation is to succeed. All of these components of accessible infrastructure, teacher preparation, assistive support, inclusive pedagogy, peer acceptance, and family-school collaboration are required. Without these conditions, children with disabilities may be enrolled but not meaningfully included. The overall conclusion is that inclusive education in rural India needs to be culturally responsive, rights-based and practice-oriented. It should acknowledge the importance of customs and beliefs, and support schools to be inclusive and suitable for meaningful participation, learning and belonging for all children with disabilities.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study is a qualitative secondary case analysis that does not rely on primary field data from children with disabilities, parents, teachers, special educators or community members. Thus the findings are not conclusions drawn directly from the field, but rather a theme based on selected pieces of published evidence.

The study is also limited to five purposive sources which were directly relevant to rural customs, disability beliefs, parents' perceptions, school access, classroom inclusion and disability inclusive education policy in India. Although these sources give a narrow focus for analysis they do not reflect the wide diversity of rural India in terms of region, language, caste, religion, school systems, and disability categories.

Although constrained, the study provides a targeted insight into the implications of the traditional ways of life in rural areas and their changing nature on inclusive education for children with disabilities. This analysis can be expanded through future field research that incorporates lived experiences of children,

families, teachers and communities in various rural settings.

7. Conclusion

The present study examined the transformation of traditional rural customs and its impact on inclusive education for children with disabilities in India. The results also show that inclusive education in rural schools is affected by factors besides policy, enrolment and access to school, such as family beliefs, community attitudes, disability-related customs, parental expectations, teacher practices, peer relationships and school-level support. Traditional rural practices continue to affect perceptions of children with disabilities within families and communities. If dependency, shame, pity, overprotection, or low expectations are linked to disability, children may be limited in their ability to participate fully in education and social life. The study also indicates that rural customs are being modified over time. Parental recognition of education as a source of dignity, socialisation, independence and opportunity in the future indicates that there is an important shift of attitudes towards children with disabilities. Socio-cultural changes are a necessary but not sufficient condition for inclusive education, as adequate infrastructure, teacher training, pedagogical approaches, assistive support, peer acceptance, and collaboration with parents and schools are all essential. The study concludes that both the traditional customs and traditional school systems need to undergo a change. Children with disabilities should not be viewed only as dependents or recipients of care, but as capable learners with the right to participate, belong, and learn. Being included in a classroom is not enough for meaningful inclusion in rural India – it must involve classroom participation, classroom acceptance, classroom learning support, feeling dignified and belonging in the classroom. Further studies are needed that include field studies with children with disabilities, parents, teachers, special educators and community members from various rural areas in India.

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