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RESEARCH ARTICLE

IMPLEMENTATION OF NEP 2020 AND THE RPWD ACT (2016) IN PROMOTING INCLUSIVE SPORTS IN INDIA

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Abstract

Inclusive sports programmes and systems designed to enable participation by persons with disabilities (PwDs) alongside their peers without disabilities are increasingly recognised as a powerful tool for promoting social inclusion, health, educational equity, and livelihood opportunities (Sherrill, 2004). In India, the integration of inclusive sports has gained momentum in recent years, especially following the enactment of two landmark frameworks: the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, which legally mandates accessibility and equal opportunity (Government of India, 2016), and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which envisions holistic education where sports and physical education are integral to learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020). Together, these frameworks provide both the legal obligation and policy vision needed to mainstream inclusive sports at all levels. This paper critically examines the relevant provisions of NEP 2020 and the RPwD Act in the context of sports inclusion, reviewing institutional mechanisms and programmes such as Khelo India (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2021), the Sports Authority of India's initiatives (Sports Authority of India, 2022), the Paralympic Committee of India (Paralympic Committee of India, 2022), and other schemes aimed at supporting participation and talent development.

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It further explores the strengths of current implementation, such as policy convergence and the increasing visibility of para-athletes, while also highlighting ongoing gaps in infrastructure accessibility, teacher and coach preparedness, resource allocation, and systematic monitoring (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

Introduction:-

Sport is increasingly recognised as a vital area for promoting inclusion, equality, and comprehensive development (United Nations, 2015). Beyond physical fitness, sports activities foster teamwork, discipline, resilience, and leadership skills. For persons with disabilities (PwDs), inclusive sports are especially important: they encourage social participation, challenge stereotypes, boost self-confidence, and offer therapeutic benefits that support cognitive and emotional well-being (Sherrill, 2004). Yet, in many contexts, barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure, insufficient training of educators and coaches, and limited awareness about adaptive sports options still prevent PwDs from taking part actively (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

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In India, two landmark frameworks have created unprecedented opportunities to change this situation. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides a legally binding mandate for ensuring accessibility and equal opportunity in all domains of life, including education, recreation, and sport (Government of India, 2016). Complementing this, the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) reimagines education to be holistic, inclusive, and multidisciplinary, explicitly acknowledging the role of physical education and sports as integral to learning outcomes (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The growing visibility of Indian para-athletes at international competitions, such as the Paralympic Games and the Asian Para Games, highlights the potential of individuals with disabilities to excel when provided with an enabling environment (Paralympic Committee of India, 2022). At the same time, grassroots participation remains uneven and often dependent on local initiatives or NGO-led projects (Rao, 2020).

Objectives of the Study:

The present paper aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To analyse the key provisions of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 related to sports, physical education, and inclusion of persons with disabilities (PwDs).
2. To examine the extent and effectiveness of implementation of these policy frameworks in promoting inclusive sports at school, higher education, and community levels in India.
3. To identify the institutional mechanisms, programmes, and schemes—such as Khelo India, Sports Authority of India (SAI) initiatives, and Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) activities—that contribute to inclusive sports development.
4. To evaluate the current strengths and achievements in the implementation process, including policy convergence, institutional support, and increased participation of para-athletes.
5. To explore the challenges and gaps that hinder effective implementation, such as infrastructural inaccessibility, inadequate teacher and coach preparedness, and limited financial and monitoring mechanisms.
6. To propose evidence-based recommendations and strategic measures for strengthening inclusive sports systems through adaptive physical education, accessibility audits, teacher training, sustainable financing, and coordinated policy action.

Policy and Legal Frameworks

National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020)

NEP 2020 emphasises inclusive and equitable education across all stages of learning, promoting participation in sports and physical education as part of holistic schooling (Ministry of Education, 2020). The policy calls for strengthened physical education, early identification of learning needs, removal of barriers to participation, and the use of assistive technologies and individualised support where required.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act)

The RPwD Act legally guarantees rights to equality, accessibility, education, and social inclusion for PwDs, and mandates measures by appropriate governments to ensure access to sports, recreational activities, and physical education (Government of India, 2016).

Institutional Mechanisms & Programmes Promoting Inclusive Sports

Khelo India and Para Initiatives

Khelo India — the national programme for development of sports — supports grassroots participation, talent identification, and infrastructure (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2021). The programme includes Khelo India Para Games, integrating para-sports in the national talent pipeline.

3.2 Sports Authority of India (SAI) and Targeted Schemes.

The Sports Authority of India (SAI) implements coaching, infrastructure and talent-scouting programmes. SAI and the Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports run the Scheme of Sports and Games for the Disabled, providing grants for coaching, adaptive equipment, and competitions (Sports Authority of India, 2022).

Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) and Civil Society

The Paralympic Committee of India (PCI) governs para-sports, organising elite and grassroots events, and partnering with schools, NGOs, and state bodies (Paralympic Committee of India, 2022).

Other Supportive Initiatives

Initiatives like the Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS) and National Para Games raise visibility and recognition of para-athletes (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2021).

Pathways of Implementation

School and Higher Education Integration

NEP 2020 calls for inclusive schooling and robust physical education through adaptive curricula, teacher training, accessible infrastructure, and collaborations with para-sport clubs (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Community and District Programmes

District-level sports under Khelo India and state departments enable inclusion but require better alignment with RPwD accessibility mandates (Government of India, 2016).

Implementation Strengths and Progress:-

- **Policy convergence:** NEP + RPwD create complementary mandates (Ministry of Education, 2020; Government of India, 2016).
- **Programmesupport:** Khelo India and SAI provide funds and tournaments (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2021).
- **Institutional actors:** PCI and state bodies coordinate para-sport pathways (Paralympic Committee of India, 2022).

Implementation Gaps and Challenges:

1. **Teacher capacity** gaps despite NEP training mandates (Kumar & Singh, 2021).
2. **Infrastructure accessibility** often poor despite RPwD provisions (Government of India, 2016).
3. **Resource allocation** is fragmented and short-term (Rao, 2020).
4. **Data and monitoring** are weak, limiting policy adjustments (Sports Authority of India, 2022).
5. **Transition pathways** from school to elite sport remain inconsistent (Paralympic Committee of India, 2022).

Recommendations:-

- **Policy & governance:** Joint plans between education, sports, and disability ministries (Ministry of Education, 2020).
- **Teacher development:** Mandatory adaptive PE training (Kumar & Singh, 2021).
- **Infrastructure:** Accessibility audits using RPwD Act provisions (Government of India, 2016).
- **Finance:** Ring-fenced budgets in Khelo India & SAI (Ministry of Youth Affairs & Sports, 2021).
- **Data:** Disability-disaggregated monitoring (Sports Authority of India, 2022).
- **Pathways:** School-to-elite linkages with PCI (Paralympic Committee of India, 2022).

Conclusion:-

The NEP 2020 and RPwD Act 2016 together provide the vision and legal enforceability for inclusive sports in India (Ministry of Education, 2020; Government of India, 2016). Progress is evident through initiatives like the Khelo India Para Games, SAI schemes, and PCI-led programmes that enhance participation and recognition of para-athletes (Sports Authority of India, 2022; Paralympic Committee of India, 2022). However, systemic challenges such as inadequate infrastructure accessibility, lack of teacher preparedness, and fragmented financing remain persistent barriers (Kumar & Singh, 2021; Rao, 2020).

For India to achieve genuine inclusion in sports, these gaps must be addressed through sustained policy convergence, robust monitoring systems, and capacity building of educators, coaches, and institutions. Beyond compliance, inclusive sports should be treated as a national priority that aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), particularly those on equity, education, and health. Inclusive sports are not only about physical activity; they represent a pathway to dignity, empowerment, and nation-building. By fostering resilience, leadership, and equal opportunity among children and youth with disabilities, India can move closer to building a

society that celebrates diversity and upholds the rights of every individual. Thus, embedding inclusive sports into the mainstream education system is both a legal obligation and a moral imperative that will shape a more inclusive future.

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