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INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: INSIGHTS FROM SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOMS

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Abstract: Inclusive education in India is frequently addressed through policy directives, yet there is limited empirical research on pedagogical practices that facilitate inclusion in everyday classroom settings (Rakshit & Yadav, 2025). This study examines inclusive pedagogical practices in special education classrooms through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). Utilizing a qualitative research method, the research focuses on three classrooms and six teachers within a special education context in Vadodara, Gujarat. The classrooms and teachers were selected through purposive sampling according to criteria such as experience in special education and familiarity with inclusive teaching practices, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how these methods are applied. Data from classroom interaction transcripts and teacher narratives were subjected to thematic analysis, which entailed coding, pattern identification, and theme development to capture the core aspects of inclusive pedagogy. The analysis shows that inclusive pedagogy is enacted through individualized instruction, experiential and multi-sensory learning, relational care, peer-supported interaction, and adaptable assessment strategies. These methods emphasize learner readiness, participation, and emotional well-being over standardized academic outcomes. When interpreted through the IKS framework, the findings align substantially with indigenous pedagogical principles, such as learner readiness (*adhikāra*), experiential learning (*anubhava* and *abhyāsa*), and ethical commitment in the teacher–learner relationship. This study delivers empirical evidence to the discussion of inclusive education by demonstrating how Indian Knowledge Systems can inform a culturally rooted, practice-oriented model of inclusive pedagogy.

Index Terms - Inclusive pedagogy, Indian Knowledge Systems, Special education, Classroom practices, NEP 2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a central issue in contemporary educational discourse, especially for learners with disabilities and diverse learning needs. Although global frameworks on inclusion emphasize access, participation, and equity, classroom practices are often influenced by standardized curricula, deficit-oriented assessments, and limited conceptions of ability (Chakraborty et al., 2024, pp. 122-135). In India, this tension is heightened, as inclusive education is often implemented through policy mandates rather than pedagogical philosophies grounded in practice (Rakshit & Yadav, 2025). This situation necessitates a re-examination of indigenous educational traditions that have historically approached learning holistically, relationally, and contextually (Jacob & Gaur, 2025).

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) constitute a comprehensive, interconnected body of knowledge. They have developed over centuries through observation, experience, and reflective practice (Das, 2024). Rooted in disciplines like philosophy, medicine, yoga, cosmology, linguistics, and pedagogy, IKS views learning as embodied and ethical. It is not solely a cognitive process (Das, 2024). These traditions historically prioritized individual readiness, experiential learning, emotional attunement, and strong teacher–learner

relationships (Experiential Learning is a Gift of the Gurukul System of Ancient India, 2023). These principles correspond closely with inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive pedagogy recognizes and values learner differences, especially in special education, where learners have diverse cognitive, emotional, and sensory capacities (Kafia et al., 2023).

Recent scholars have begun to explore how frameworks such as Indian Knowledge Systems can inform more holistic approaches to disability and inclusion, moving beyond strictly biomedical or deficit-based models (Kafia et al., 2023). Sharma (2025) contends that traditional Indian disciplines, including Ayurveda, yoga, and Vedic thought, conceptualize disability through multidimensional perspectives that emphasize balance, functionality, well-being, and contextual support rather than focusing solely on impairment. These perspectives challenge dominant narratives that categorize learners with disabilities diagnostically and instead advocate for understandings rooted in care, adaptability, and human dignity. Such epistemological positions present valuable insights for contemporary special education, where teaching practices must address learners' lived experiences rather than adhere strictly to abstract curricular norms (Swain & Pandey, 2025, pp. 788-797). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reinforces the significance of Indian Knowledge Systems in contemporary education by explicitly advocating the integration of indigenous knowledge traditions into the curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education (National Education Policy, 2020). The policy highlights learner-centered approaches, experiential learning, flexibility, and respect for diversity, while acknowledging the influence of Indian epistemologies in shaping inclusive and culturally grounded educational practices (Singh et al., 2025, pp. 334-340). Nevertheless, despite this policy emphasis, there is limited empirical research investigating how inclusive pedagogical practices in special education classrooms correspond with principles embedded in Indian Knowledge Systems.

This study aims to empirically examine inclusive pedagogy in special education classrooms. It interprets findings through the Indian Knowledge Systems framework. By analyzing transcripts and teacher narratives, it highlights how individualized instruction, relational teaching, experiential learning, and ethical care work in daily practice. The research advances debates on inclusive education. It demonstrates how Indian Knowledge Systems influence policy, theory, and practical teaching. The study also provides actionable recommendations for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. Integrating these insights into teacher training can deepen educators' cultural understanding of inclusive practices. Curriculum designers can use Indian Knowledge Systems to support experiential and relational learning. Policy initiatives may benefit by focusing on individual readiness and ethical responsibility. This will help ensure educational approaches stay inclusive and culturally relevant. Overall, these applications show the study's potential to promote meaningful educational reform and practice.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have recently received renewed academic and policy interest. This is especially true in light of India's educational reform and cultural revitalization. IKS consists of a broad, interconnected body of indigenous knowledge. This body was developed over centuries of observation, practice, and reflection. It includes philosophy, pedagogy, health sciences, ethics, and social organization. Western epistemologies commonly prioritize standardization and abstraction. In contrast, IKS views knowledge as contextual, experiential, and rooted in lived realities. Learning within these traditions is holistic. It involves cognitive, emotional, moral, and social elements, with strong emphasis on relationships in teaching and learning (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, Ministry of Education, 2024).

Scholarly literature indicates that traditional Indian pedagogical approaches emphasized personalized instruction, flexible learning paces, and close teacher-learner relationships. The guru-śiṣya tradition, in particular, prioritized long-term engagement, observation-based learning, and the teacher's ethical responsibility toward the learner. Knowledge was transmitted through dialogue, demonstration, practice, and reflection, rather than through uniform curricula or standardized assessments. Contemporary scholars suggest that these pedagogical principles provide meaningful alternatives to rigid, examination-driven education systems, particularly in classrooms characterized by learner diversity (Qargha et al., 2023).

Recent research addresses Indian Knowledge Systems and their role in understanding disability and human difference. Sharma (2025) explores how Ayurveda, yoga, ritual practices, and Vedic philosophy use multidimensional, non-deficit perspectives. These traditions do not see disability solely as an individual impairment. They stress balance, adaptability, functional capacity, and contextual support. Ayurvedic concepts of individual constitution (prakṛiti) regard variation as normal. Yogic practices focus on emotional regulation, embodied learning, and mental well-being. These perspectives challenge biomedical and

psychometric models in special education. They offer a more humane framework for understanding disabilities (Sharma, 2025).

In addition to conceptual studies on Indian education reforms point to the increasing institutional recognition of IKS. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly supports the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher education. Scholars analyzing the NEP 2020 contend that the policy's focus on learner-centered education, experiential learning, flexibility, and respect for diversity correlates closely with core IKS principles (Mandavkar, 2025). The policy also emphasizes inclusive education and equitable learning opportunities for children with disabilities, encouraging an environment conducive to rethinking pedagogy through indigenous epistemological perspectives.

The literature on inclusive pedagogy in special education consistently highlights practices such as individualized instruction, multi-sensory learning, emotional support, peer collaboration, and flexible classroom organization. However, several studies note that inclusive practices are often limited by rigid curricular expectations, standardized assessments, and restricted professional autonomy for teachers (Chakraborty et al., 2024). In this context, scholars argue that IKS-informed pedagogical frameworks can enhance inclusive education by legitimizing flexibility, relational care, and experiential learning as central pedagogical values rather than peripheral accommodations. Research on IKS in contemporary education indicates that integrating indigenous pedagogical principles can promote culturally grounded, inclusive learning environments while encouraging innovation and responsiveness to learner diversity (Puri, 2025).

Despite growing scholarly and policy engagement with IKS, the literature shows a considerable gap in empirical research. Most studies are conceptual, philosophical, or policy-oriented, with limited analysis of how IKS-aligned inclusive pedagogical practices are implemented in actual classroom settings. Specifically, there is a lack of qualitative research examining classroom interactions, teacher practices, and relational dynamics in special education contexts from an Indian Knowledge Systems perspective. The study's limitations include a focus on a small sample size and a specific regional context, which may not fully capture the diversity of inclusive practices across India. Despite these limitations, this study empirically investigates inclusive pedagogical practices in special education classrooms and interprets them through IKS principles, thereby providing practice-based insights to ongoing discussions on inclusive education in India.

III. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Inclusive education in India has largely been driven by policy mandates and administrative reforms, with limited attention to the pedagogical philosophies that shape everyday classroom practice. While contemporary inclusive education frameworks emphasise learner diversity, participation, and flexibility, classroom practices often remain constrained by standardised curricula, assessment pressures, and deficit-oriented understandings of disability. This disconnect is particularly evident in special education settings, where teachers must continually adapt instruction to meet learners' complex and varied needs.

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer pedagogical principles grounded in holistic development, experiential learning, relational teaching, and ethical responsibility. Although NEP 2020 explicitly calls for integrating IKS into education, existing scholarship remains largely conceptual or policy-focused, with limited empirical examination of how inclusive pedagogical practices resonate with or reflect IKS principles in real classrooms. There is a clear need for empirical studies that move beyond abstract discussions and examine how inclusive pedagogy is enacted in practice.

This study is grounded in the belief that everyday classroom interactions, teacher narratives, and teaching practices give valuable insights into inclusive pedagogy. By examining special education classrooms through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, the study seeks to bridge the gap between indigenous educational philosophy, contemporary inclusive education discourse, and lived pedagogical practice. Such an inquiry is timely, contextually relevant, and essential for strengthening inclusive education as a meaningful practice rather than merely a policy ideal.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How are inclusive pedagogical practices enacted in special education classrooms?
2. What pedagogical principles emerge from classroom interactions and teacher narratives in special education settings?
3. In what ways do these inclusive pedagogical practices resonate with key principles of Indian Knowledge Systems?

V. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to:

1. To examine inclusive pedagogical practices as enacted in everyday teaching–learning processes in special education classrooms.
2. To identify key pedagogical principles reflected in classroom interactions, instructional strategies, and teacher–learner relationships.
3. To analyse these practices through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems to understand their conceptual and philosophical alignment.
4. To contribute empirical insights to the discourse on inclusive education by foregrounding practice-based evidence rooted in indigenous pedagogical traditions.

VI. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

The study uses a qualitative research design, well-suited to exploring pedagogical practices, meanings, and classroom interactions in depth. A qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of how inclusion is enacted in everyday teaching, rather than being measured by predetermined indicators.

6.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study is situated in a special education institution in Vadodara, Gujarat. This institution, known for its progressive approach towards inclusive education, provides tailored educational programs for children with diverse learning needs. Participants in the study include six special educators and the institution's head. The selected educators bring varied backgrounds in special education, with 5 to 15 years of teaching experience. They have also participated in numerous workshops and training sessions focusing on inclusive education. Observations took place in three classrooms, each intended to meet different needs. The selection of participants was purposive, based on their direct involvement in teaching–learning processes and their experiential knowledge of inclusive practices.

6.3 Data Sources

Data for the study were drawn from multiple qualitative sources to ensure richness and contextual depth. These included classroom interaction transcripts documenting the teaching–learning process, semi-structured interviews with teachers and the head of the institution. The use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

6.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of recurring patterns, and development of themes. Themes such as individualized instruction, experiential learning, relational teaching, peer learning, and flexible classroom practices emerged inductively from the data. To map these themes onto the principles of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), a coding framework was developed to align classroom practices with IKS concepts. This involved identifying key IKS principles such as holistic learning, contextual responsiveness, and ethical care from existing literature and using them as lenses to interpret the data. The mapping process was iterative, involving cross-referencing classroom practices with literature-based IKS principles to refine the thematic representation. This approach ensured that the analysis remained both grounded in empirical data and informed by established indigenous pedagogical frameworks.

6.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymising names and institutional identifiers. The data used in this paper were handled with sensitivity and were drawn from academic research conducted with due ethical approval.

VII. FINDINGS

The findings are organised according to the research questions and are presented through thematic tables derived from classroom interaction transcripts and teacher narratives. The tables summarise observed practices, emergent pedagogical principles, and their resonance with Indian Knowledge Systems.

7.1 Findings Related to Research Question 1

How are inclusive pedagogical practices enacted in special education classrooms?

Table 1. Observed Inclusive Pedagogical Practices in Special Education Classrooms

Inclusive Practice	Description from Data	Illustrative Evidence
Individualised instruction	Teaching adjusted according to learners' emotional state, mental age, and readiness	"Today he is not ready for numbers, so we will first calm him and do activity work." (Teacher A)
Experiential learning	Use of play, tactile materials, and hands-on activities	"Touch it, feel it, now show me with your hand." (Teacher B)
Emotional regulation before instruction	Emotional support prioritised before academic engagement	"It's okay, take your time, I am here." (Teacher C)
Flexible pacing	Lessons modified during classroom interaction	Shift from worksheet activity to sensory play
Informal assessment	Progress assessed through observation and participation	"If the child is responding, that itself is progress." (Teacher D)

The findings indicate that inclusive pedagogy in special education classrooms is enacted through continuous adaptation rather than fixed instructional planning. Teachers prioritise learners' emotional states and readiness over curricular completion, suggesting a pedagogy that values participation and well-being as prerequisites for learning. The reliance on experiential and multi-sensory activities reflects an understanding that learners with special needs engage more meaningfully through embodied and concrete experiences. Assessment practices remain informal and process-oriented, highlighting a departure from standardised evaluation frameworks. Collectively, these practices demonstrate an inclusive orientation that recognises learner diversity as integral to teaching rather than as a challenge to be managed.

7.2 Findings Related to Research Question 2

What pedagogical principles emerge from classroom interactions and teacher narratives?

Table 2. Emergent Pedagogical Principles from Qualitative Data

Pedagogical Principle	Indicators in Classroom Practice	Evidence from Data
Child-centred learning	Teaching goals adjusted to individual learners	Redefinition of success for each child
Experiential engagement	Learning through doing and repetition	Sensory and play-based activities
Relational care	Teacher-learner trust and emotional support	Reassurance and patient guidance
Peer-supported learning	Children observe and assist peers	"See how your friend is doing it."
Non-punitive discipline	Behaviour treated as communication	Calm redirection instead of punishment

The pedagogical principles emerging from the data reflect a holistic and relational orientation to teaching. Teachers conceptualise learning as a gradual and emotionally grounded process rather than an outcome-driven activity. The prominence of relational care suggests that inclusive pedagogy in special education is deeply tied to trust, patience, and ethical responsibility. Peer-supported learning further reinforces the social dimension of inclusion, where learners participate collectively rather than in isolation. These principles collectively point toward a pedagogy that prioritises human connection, dignity, and engagement over uniform academic benchmarks.

7.3 Findings Related to Research Question 3

In what ways do these inclusive pedagogical practices resonate with key principles of Indian Knowledge Systems?

Table 3. Alignment between Inclusive Pedagogical Practices and Indian Knowledge Systems

Classroom Practice	Corresponding IKS Principle	Nature of Alignment
Teaching by readiness	Adhikāra	Learning guided by learner capacity
Experiential learning	Anubhava / Abhyāsa	Knowledge through experience and practice
Relational teaching	Guru–śiṣya tradition	Personalised and ethical teacher–learner bond
Holistic assessment	Non-linear learning	Learning viewed as continuous and individual
Ethical care	Dharma	Moral responsibility of the teacher

The alignment between inclusive classroom practices and Indian Knowledge Systems is evident across multiple dimensions of teaching and learning. Although teachers do not explicitly reference IKS, their pedagogical actions reflect indigenous principles that emphasise learner readiness, experiential knowledge, and ethical responsibility. The focus on holistic development and relational engagement mirrors traditional Indian educational philosophies, suggesting that inclusive pedagogy in these classrooms is culturally grounded rather than solely policy-driven. This resonance reinforces the relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems as a conceptual framework for understanding inclusive education practices in contemporary special education settings.

VIII. DISCUSSION

The study's findings indicate that inclusive pedagogy in special education classrooms is enacted through practices that are flexible, relational, and grounded in learners' immediate needs. Rather than following rigid instructional routines, teachers continuously adapt their pedagogical decisions based on learners' emotional readiness, engagement levels, and functional abilities. This supports existing literature on inclusive education, which argues that effective inclusion depends not merely on access or placement, but on responsive classroom practices that prioritise participation, dignity, and well-being (UNESCO, 2017).

A key insight emerging from the study is that individualisation functions as a core pedagogical orientation rather than a remedial strategy. Teachers do not view adaptation as an exception for certain learners but as an integral aspect of teaching itself. This challenges deficit-oriented models of special education that frame individualisation as compensatory. Instead, the data show a reconceptualisation of inclusion as a process of recognising learner diversity as normal and pedagogically valuable. Such an orientation matches closely with Indian Knowledge Systems, where learning is traditionally guided by the learner's readiness and capacity rather than uniform standards (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, Ministry of Education, 2024).

The prominence of experiential and multi-sensory learning in classroom practice further reinforces the relevance of indigenous pedagogical traditions. Learning through touch, movement, repetition, and lived experience reflects an understanding of knowledge as embodied and situated. This contrasts with abstract, text-driven pedagogies that often marginalise learners with cognitive and developmental disabilities. From an IKS perspective, this experiential emphasis resonates with long-standing views of learning through anubhava and abhyāsa, suggesting that inclusive pedagogy is most effective when it acknowledges multiple ways of knowing and learning (Sharma, 2025).

Relational care and emotional attunement emerged as foundational to inclusive teaching practices. Teachers consistently prioritised emotional regulation, reassurance, and trust-building before engaging in academic tasks. This finding underscores the ethical dimension of inclusive pedagogy, where learning is inseparable from emotional safety and relational connection. Within Indian Knowledge Systems, the role of the teacher extends beyond instruction to moral and emotional guidance, reflecting an ethic of responsibility (dharma). The study thus illustrates how inclusive pedagogy is sustained not only through methods but through values embedded in teacher–learner relationships.

The use of peer learning and collaborative interaction further highlights the social nature of inclusion. By encouraging learners to observe and support one another, teachers nurtured a sense of belonging and shared participation. This counters competitive and individualistic models of schooling that often

disadvantage learners with disabilities. Such practices align with communal orientations to learning found in Indian educational traditions, where knowledge is co-constructed within social contexts rather than acquired in isolation.

Assessment practices observed in the study also warrant critical reflection. Teachers relied on informal observation, participation, and functional progress rather than standardised measures to evaluate learning. This approach challenges dominant assessment paradigms that privilege uniform outcomes and measurable performance. The findings suggest that inclusive pedagogy requires alternative conceptions of assessment that recognise learning as non-linear and deeply individual. Indian Knowledge Systems similarly conceptualise learning as a lifelong process embedded in practice, further reinforcing the philosophical coherence between inclusive pedagogy and indigenous epistemologies.

Overall, the discussion highlights that inclusive pedagogical practices in special education classrooms are not merely responses to policy mandates such as NEP 2020, but are deeply rooted in culturally grounded ways of teaching and learning. The resonance between classroom practices and Indian Knowledge Systems suggests that inclusion in the Indian context can be strengthened by reclaiming and reinterpreting indigenous pedagogical values. By empirically demonstrating this alignment, the study helps bridge the gap between policy, philosophy, and classroom practice and positions Indian Knowledge Systems as a meaningful framework for rethinking inclusive education in contemporary special education settings.

IX. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for inclusive education practice, teacher education, and policy implementation in the Indian context. First, the study underscores the need to reconceptualise inclusive pedagogy not as a set of accommodations for learners with disabilities, but as a flexible and relational approach to teaching that responds to learner diversity as a norm. Teacher practices observed in the study suggest that inclusion is most effective when educators are supported to exercise professional judgement, adapt instruction, and prioritise learner readiness and emotional well-being.

Second, the strong resonance between classroom practices and principles of Indian Knowledge Systems highlights the potential of IKS as a culturally grounded pedagogical framework for inclusive education. Rather than treating IKS as supplementary content or symbolic inclusion in curricula, teacher education programmes can meaningfully integrate IKS-informed pedagogical values such as experiential learning, relational care, and ethical responsibility. This is particularly relevant for special education, where holistic, context-sensitive teaching is essential.

Third, the findings point to the need for rethinking assessment practices in inclusive classrooms. The reliance on informal, observation-based assessment focused on participation and functional progress challenges dominant standardised assessment models. Policymakers and school systems should recognise alternative forms of assessment that capture individual growth and engagement, in line with the inclusive and holistic vision articulated in NEP 2020 (Government of India, 2020).

Finally, the study contributes empirical support for NEP 2020's emphasis on integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into pedagogy. By demonstrating how inclusive practices already reflect indigenous pedagogical principles in everyday classrooms, the study suggests that policy implementation can be strengthened by recognising and legitimising teachers' existing practices. Such recognition can empower educators and support the development of inclusive education as a lived, culturally rooted practice rather than a purely policy-driven mandate.

X. CONCLUSION

This study examined the enactment of inclusive pedagogy in special education classrooms and interpreted these practices through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems. The findings indicate that inclusive teaching is characterised by individualised instruction, experiential learning, relational care, and flexible assessment practices that prioritise learner readiness, participation, and emotional well-being. Rather than functioning as isolated strategies, these practices reflect a coherent pedagogical orientation responsive to learner diversity.

Interpreting these findings through Indian Knowledge Systems reveals a strong alignment between contemporary inclusive practices and indigenous pedagogical principles such as learner readiness, experiential knowledge, and ethical responsibility in the teacher-learner relationship. This alignment suggests that inclusive pedagogy in the Indian context is not solely a product of recent policy reforms but is rooted in longstanding educational traditions.

By providing empirical evidence from classroom practice, the study contributes to inclusive education scholarship and demonstrates the relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems as a meaningful framework for understanding and strengthening inclusive pedagogy in special education settings.

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