

PRASHAST and Inclusive Education in India: Implementation Strategies, Early Identification, and the Mainstreaming of Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

Inclusive education is essential for ensuring that children with disabilities can access meaningful learning opportunities, develop their capabilities and participate in school and community life alongside their peers. However, delayed identification, limited awareness among teachers, inaccessible infrastructure, social stigma and inadequate educational support can restrict their academic and social development. In India, the Pre-Assessment Holistic Screening Tool (PRASHAST), developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), provides a structured school-level mechanism for the early screening of children who may have disabilities. This article examines the implementation objectives and expected educational and social outcomes of PRASHAST within the broader framework of Samagra Shiksha, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the Right to Education Act, 2009, and the National Education Policy 2020. Adopting a qualitative policy-analysis approach, the article reviews official policy documents and the PRASHAST screening checklist to develop an implementation-oriented framework linking teacher observation, further screening, professional referral, educational accommodation and continued monitoring. The analysis conceptualises PRASHAST as an entry point to a broader support system rather than a diagnostic instrument. Expected outcomes include earlier recognition of learning needs, improved referral, greater teacher preparedness, reduced stigma, stronger family-school cooperation, increased participation and improved opportunities for educational progression. The article argues that screening must be accompanied by accessible infrastructure, individualised support, inclusive teaching practices and systematic follow-up if identification is to translate into meaningful educational inclusion.

Keywords: PRASHAST; Inclusive Education; Children with Disabilities; Early Identification; Samagra Shiksha; Educational Equity; Disability Screening; Mainstream Schooling.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental instrument of personal development, social participation and economic empowerment. For children with disabilities, schooling provides opportunities not only to acquire literacy, numeracy and subject knowledge, but also to develop communication, self-confidence, independence, friendships and life skills. Yet access to school does not automatically ensure equal participation or meaningful learning. Children may attend school while facing inaccessible classrooms, inflexible teaching methods, communication barriers, bullying, inappropriate assessment practices or insufficient learning support.

The challenge is particularly significant when a child's disability is not immediately visible. Specific learning disabilities, hearing difficulties, low vision, developmental conditions and certain communication difficulties may initially appear as poor academic performance, inattentiveness, withdrawal or reluctance to participate. If such difficulties are misunderstood as laziness, indiscipline or lack of ability, children may experience repeated failure,

reduced self-esteem and disengagement from education. Early, careful screening can help schools recognise when further assessment and support may be required.

India's inclusive-education policy framework addresses these concerns through legislation, national education policy and targeted educational programmes. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 establishes provisions relating to inclusive education and reasonable accommodation. The Right to Education Act, 2009 provides the framework for free and compulsory elementary education, including for children with disabilities within its applicable provisions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises equity, inclusion and appropriate educational environments. Samagra Shiksha supports the identification of children with special needs and the provision of educational assistance, assistive devices, special educators and accessible facilities.

Against this background, NCERT introduced PRASHAST (Pre-Assessment Holistic Screening Tool) as a school-oriented screening initiative. Its checklist covers the 21 disability categories recognised under the RPwD Act, 2016 and provides a structured process for initial teacher screening and further screening. The purpose is to facilitate early identification and appropriate referral, thereby supporting the broader objective of equitable and inclusive education. The significance of PRASHAST therefore extends beyond the use of a digital application. Its educational value depends on whether schools can convert screening information into timely assessment, classroom adaptations, family engagement and continuing support. A screening tool can indicate that a child may need further evaluation, but the child's learning opportunities improve only when suitable action follows.

Statement of the problem

Children with disabilities may encounter a gap between their formal right to education and their actual experience of learning. Delayed recognition of educational needs can result in inappropriate teaching strategies, limited participation, missed opportunities for intervention and avoidable exclusion from school activities. Schools also differ in their access to trained teachers, special educators, accessible facilities and referral services. PRASHAST offers a common framework for recognising potential disability-related needs, but its implementation requires coordination among classroom teachers, school heads, special educators, parents, health professionals and education authorities. The central problem addressed in this article is how PRASHAST can be implemented so that early screening leads to practical educational support and greater participation in mainstream schooling.

Literature Review

The development of inclusive education in India is closely associated with the recognition of educational rights, accessibility and equal participation for children with disabilities. The Government of India's National Education Policy 2020 emphasises the inclusion and full participation of children with disabilities in regular schooling, from the foundational stage through higher education. It highlights the importance of barrier-free infrastructure, appropriate accommodations, special educators and resource centres to address the diverse learning needs of students (Ministry of Education, 2020). Similarly, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 establishes a legal framework for inclusive education and requires educational institutions to promote access, participation and appropriate support for children with disabilities (Government of India, 2016). These policy provisions establish that educational inclusion requires more than school enrolment; it involves adapting teaching practices, learning materials and school environments to enable meaningful participation. In this context, early identification of disability-related needs is an important step towards reducing educational barriers and ensuring that children receive appropriate assistance.

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) introduced PRASHAST (Pre-Assessment Holistic Screening Tool) to facilitate systematic school-based screening of children who may have disabilities. The PRASHAST: A Disability Screening Checklist for Schools provides a structured two-part process: initial screening by regular teachers and further screening involving designated school personnel, including special educators and school heads (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2022). The tool covers the 21 disability categories recognised under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, including

conditions that may not be readily identifiable through physical observation. According to NCERT (2022), the initiative is intended to facilitate early screening and support the subsequent referral and certification process under the Samagra Shiksha framework. The PRASHAST 2.0 portal further describes school-level report generation to assist authorities in initiating the certification process (NCERT, n.d.). These features indicate the potential of PRASHAST to strengthen the systematic identification of educational support needs. Nevertheless, screening should be regarded as a preliminary process rather than a clinical diagnosis, and its educational value depends on appropriate assessment, referral and follow-up.

The broader literature on inclusive education policy also highlights the importance of connecting identification with classroom-level support, teacher preparedness and institutional accountability. Samagra Shiksha provides a programme framework for supporting children with special needs through measures such as assessment, assistive devices, teaching-learning materials, accessible facilities and specialised educational support (Department of School Education and Literacy, n.d.). The National Education Policy 2020 similarly emphasises the need for educational institutions to provide suitable accommodations and enable children with disabilities to participate fully in the regular schooling process (Ministry of Education, 2020). Taken together, these policy documents suggest that the success of PRASHAST should not be assessed solely through the number of children screened, but also through the completion of referrals, availability of educational accommodations, teacher capacity, student participation and learning progression. However, the official policy documents primarily establish programme objectives and implementation provisions; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate the measured impact of PRASHAST on academic achievement or social inclusion. This highlights the need for empirical research examining how effectively screening leads to timely support, improved classroom experiences, stronger peer relationships and greater participation of children with disabilities in mainstream education.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the implementation objectives and operational role of PRASHAST in identifying children who may have disabilities in schools.
2. To explain the importance of early screening, educational assessment and individualised learning support for children with disabilities.
3. To develop an implementation framework linking teacher observation, further screening, referral, educational accommodation and follow-up.
4. To identify the expected academic, social, emotional and institutional outcomes of effective PRASHAST implementation.
5. To recommend strategies for strengthening inclusive classroom practices and the participation of children with disabilities alongside their peers.

Research questions

- How can PRASHAST support early identification and referral within the school system?
- What implementation conditions are necessary to translate screening into educational support?
- What academic, social and emotional outcomes can reasonably be expected from an effective screening-and-support process?
- How can schools encourage the participation and progression of children with disabilities in mainstream educational settings?

Significance of the study

The article is relevant to teachers, head teachers, special educators, school administrators, education officials and policymakers. It shifts the focus from simply identifying disability to understanding the implementation process needed to improve children's educational experiences. It also emphasises that inclusion is not achieved merely by

placing children with disabilities in regular classrooms; it requires removing barriers and providing support according to individual needs.

Methods

Research design

The article adopts a qualitative, descriptive and conceptual policy-analysis design. It examines the intended function of PRASHAST and its relationship with the wider inclusive-education framework in India. The study does not report original fieldwork, student-level data, experimental results or a statistical evaluation of the app. Its findings are therefore analytical and implementation-oriented rather than empirical estimates of programme impact.

Sources of information

The analysis is based on publicly available official materials, principally:

- The NCERT PRASHAST Disability Screening Checklist for Schools, including Part 1 and Part 2.
- NCERT's official information on PRASHAST and its relationship with early screening.
- Samagra Shiksha's policy provisions for inclusive education for children with special needs.
- Government implementation documents describing identification, assessment, accessibility, teacher training and educational support.
- Relevant provisions and policy objectives of the RPwD Act, 2016, the RTE Act, 2009 and NEP 2020.

Analytical framework

The materials were examined through five implementation dimensions:

1. Identification: Whether school personnel have a structured method for noticing possible disability-related difficulties.
2. Referral: Whether initial observations can progress to further screening and appropriate professional assessment.
3. Educational response: Whether identified needs lead to suitable classroom adjustments, assistive resources and specialised support.
4. Participation and inclusion: Whether children can engage in classroom instruction, peer interaction, play, assessment and school activities.
5. Monitoring and accountability: Whether schools follow up on referrals and monitor the support and educational progress of individual students.

These dimensions provide the basis for the implementation model and expected outcomes discussed in the following sections.

Ethical considerations

The analysis treats disability as a matter of educational access, participation and individual support rather than as a basis for labelling or exclusion. Screening results should be handled confidentially, and a child's difficulties should not be treated as a confirmed disability without appropriate professional assessment. Any future empirical evaluation involving children should follow applicable institutional ethics procedures, parental consent requirements and child-protection safeguards.

Results

The policy analysis identifies six interconnected implementation objectives through which PRASHAST can contribute to inclusive education. These are presented as intended mechanisms and expected outcomes; their actual achievement depends on implementation quality and the availability of follow-up services.

Implementation objective I: Early identification of educational needs

The first objective is to establish a systematic process for recognising children who may need additional assessment or educational support. Teachers interact with students regularly and can observe their participation, communication, academic progress, mobility and responses to classroom activities. However, these observations need a structured framework to reduce arbitrary judgments and overlooked difficulties. PRASHAST provides a checklist-based process intended to help teachers recognise indicators across the 21 disability categories covered by the tool. The initial screening is followed by further screening and referral where necessary.

Expected outcome: Earlier recognition and referral

- Possible learning and developmental needs are recognised earlier.
- Children who require further assessment are less likely to be overlooked solely because their difficulties are not physically visible.
- Teachers have a more consistent basis for discussing concerns with school leadership and parents.
- Schools can initiate appropriate support without waiting for repeated academic failure.

Early identification should not become premature diagnosis. A child who struggles with reading, communication or classroom participation may face several possible barriers. The purpose of screening is to determine whether further evaluation may be appropriate, not to establish the cause independently.

Implementation objective II: Strengthening teacher capacity

Teachers are central to PRASHAST implementation because initial screening depends on their classroom observations. Their effectiveness, however, depends on training, professional awareness and the ability to distinguish a learning difficulty from a confirmed disability. The implementation process should include orientation on the checklist, observation techniques, disability awareness, inclusive pedagogy, confidentiality and referral procedures. Teachers also need to understand that students may demonstrate their knowledge in different ways and may require different levels of support. Samagra Shiksha explicitly includes sensitisation and training of general teachers, capacity-building for special educators, teaching-learning materials and resource support within its inclusive-education provisions.

Expected outcome: A more responsive teaching workforce

Effective implementation can help teachers become more confident in recognising learning barriers, using inclusive teaching methods, communicating with families and seeking specialist assistance. The expected result is a classroom in which differences in ability are addressed through support rather than interpreted as a lack of potential.

Implementation objective III: Establishing a clear referral and support pathway

Screening has limited value if the process ends when a checklist is completed. Schools therefore need a clear procedure for reviewing screening information, informing parents or guardians, arranging further assessment and connecting students with appropriate services. The PRASHAST framework distinguishes initial teacher screening from further screening. Its official checklist should guide school personnel in following the prescribed procedure. Formal disability certification remains the responsibility of the appropriate authorised medical or certification authority.

Expected outcome: Reduced gaps between identification and intervention

A clearly defined referral pathway can help reduce delays in further assessment and improve coordination among schools, families, special educators and health services. It can also make responsibilities clearer, helping schools move from recording concerns to arranging appropriate educational assistance. The effectiveness of this pathway depends on referral availability, family communication, local health and disability services, and the school's capacity to act on recommendations.

3.4 Implementation objective IV: Promoting participation in mainstream education

The purpose of identifying disability-related needs is not to separate students unnecessarily from their peers. It is to support their meaningful participation in education, subject to individual needs and appropriate support arrangements. Samagra Shiksha emphasises access, enrolment, retention, achievement, accessible infrastructure, resource support and full participation for children with special needs.

Expected outcome: Greater educational and social inclusion

PRASHAST can contribute to a process in which children who need further assessment are recognised and connected with appropriate support. When schools also remove physical, communication and attitudinal barriers, students have better opportunities to participate in ordinary school life, develop relationships and demonstrate their abilities. The goal is not to make every child learn in exactly the same way. It is to ensure that students can work towards meaningful learning goals through appropriate methods and support.

Implementation objective V: Building confidence, belonging and peer acceptance

School is an important social environment in which children develop their identities, interpersonal skills and sense of belonging. Children with disabilities may experience exclusion when their classmates or teachers misunderstand their needs, when inaccessible activities restrict participation, or when academic differences lead to ridicule or lowered expectations. A screening process alone cannot eliminate stigma. Its potential contribution lies in helping schools recognise support needs and respond constructively. Teachers should communicate about disability respectfully, protect students' privacy and encourage classmates to value cooperation, diversity and mutual respect. Inclusive practices can include cooperative learning groups, accessible sports and cultural activities, peer support where appropriate, anti-bullying procedures, and opportunities for students to express their preferences and participate in decisions affecting them.

Expected outcome: Greater confidence and belonging

- Children may feel more accepted when barriers to participation are addressed.
- Students can develop friendships and practise communication and cooperation.
- Classroom participation may strengthen confidence and independence.
- Peers can develop a better understanding of individual differences and shared responsibility.
- Schools can foster a culture in which disability is not treated as a reason for ridicule or exclusion.

These are expected pathways rather than guaranteed effects of the app. Their realisation requires sustained school-wide action.

Implementation objective VI: Strengthening school-level planning and accountability

Digital screening can help schools organise information and identify areas requiring follow-up. PRASHAST 2.0 describes school-level report generation, while the broader Samagra Shiksha framework includes identification, assessment, accessible facilities, teaching-learning materials and specialised support. School leaders can use appropriately managed information to plan teacher training, review referral needs, coordinate specialist visits and identify accessibility barriers. Education authorities can use aggregated, appropriately protected information to support planning for inclusive-education services.

Expected outcome: More responsive educational administration

A systematic implementation process can help schools identify unmet needs, allocate resources more appropriately and strengthen accountability for follow-up. Monitoring should focus not only on the number of children screened but also on whether identified students receive support and experience improved opportunities to learn and participate.

Table 1: Recommendations for School-level Evaluation, not official PRASHAST Performance Measures.

Dimension	Suggested indicator
Screening coverage	Proportion of eligible students screened according to the prescribed procedure.
Teacher preparedness	Number or proportion of relevant teachers oriented to PRASHAST and inclusive teaching.
Referral completion	Proportion of students referred who receive further assessment.
Follow-up	Proportion of assessed students with documented educational support or an appropriate follow-up plan.
Accessibility	Identified physical, communication and learning barriers addressed.
Participation	Attendance, classroom engagement and participation in school activities.
Learning progression	Progress towards individual learning goals and curriculum outcomes.
Student well-being	Student-reported sense of safety, belonging and acceptance, assessed using suitable age-appropriate methods.
Family engagement	Evidence of communication with parents or guardians and their participation in support planning.

Discussion

Why learning and disability support are essential in school life

Learning is central to children's intellectual, social, emotional and personal development. For children with disabilities, education can provide a pathway towards independence, meaningful relationships, further study, employment and participation in society. However, these opportunities depend on whether the educational environment recognises and responds to each child's needs. A student with a visual impairment may understand a lesson fully but be unable to access ordinary print materials. A student with a hearing impairment may struggle to follow spoken instruction in a noisy classroom. A child with a specific learning disability may understand concepts but experience persistent difficulty with reading or written expression. A student with a mobility impairment may be academically capable but unable to reach a classroom, laboratory or toilet because the school infrastructure is inaccessible. PRASHAST is relevant because it can help schools recognise possible support needs systematically. Its educational value is greatest when the information leads to appropriate assessment, accessible materials, adapted teaching, assistive resources and continued monitoring.

From identifying disability to recognising individual potential

An inclusive school should not define a child primarily by a disability or screening result. Instead, teachers should seek to understand the student's strengths, interests, communication preferences and learning requirements.

This approach has several practical implications:

- Teachers should identify what the student can do as well as where assistance is required.

- Learning difficulties should prompt investigation and support rather than punishment or humiliation.
- Students should be offered opportunities to participate in academic, cultural, sporting and social activities.
- Parents and guardians should be treated as partners in understanding the child's needs.
- Support should be reviewed as the child's abilities, circumstances and educational requirements change.

The objective is not to lower expectations automatically, but to make learning accessible and provide the support necessary for students to demonstrate their capabilities.

Mainstreaming and inclusive education

The terms mainstreaming and inclusive education are related but not identical. Mainstreaming generally refers to educating students with disabilities in regular educational settings, with placement or participation depending on the arrangements available. Inclusive education places greater emphasis on changing the educational environment so that students with diverse needs can participate meaningfully. For this reason, successful implementation should not be measured only by whether a child is enrolled in a regular school. It should also consider whether the student can access instruction, form relationships, participate in activities, receive reasonable accommodation and make educational progress. The Samagra Shiksha framework supports access, retention, achievement, accessible infrastructure, teaching-learning resources and specialised support for children with special needs. PRASHAST can contribute to this wider process by supporting early recognition and referral. It cannot independently provide all the educational changes required for inclusion.

Table 2: Linking PRASHAST with the wider policy framework

Policy or initiative	Relevance to PRASHAST implementation
RPwD Act, 2016	Provides the legal framework for inclusive education, accessibility and appropriate educational support.
RTE Act, 2009	Establishes the framework for free and compulsory elementary education, including applicable provisions for children with disabilities.
NEP 2020	Emphasises equitable and inclusive educational environments and the removal of barriers to learning.
Samagra Shiksha	Provides the broader programme framework for identification, assessment, assistive devices, special educators, accessible facilities and other support.
PRASHAST	Provides a structured school-level screening mechanism intended to facilitate early identification and referral.

Sources: NCERT and the Government of India's Samagra Shiksha policy documents.

The central implementation challenge is coordination. Screening, assessment, certification and educational support are different activities, often undertaken by different personnel or institutions. A functioning referral system is therefore necessary to ensure that children do not remain unsupported after screening.

Major implementation challenges

The expected benefits of PRASHAST may be constrained by several factors.

Limited teacher training. Teachers may misunderstand screening indicators or treat them as diagnostic conclusions. Regular orientation and access to specialist guidance are important.

Shortage of specialist services. A school may identify a possible need but have difficulty arranging timely assessment or specialised intervention. Inaccessible infrastructure and materials. Screening alone cannot remove

physical barriers, communication difficulties or inaccessible textbooks and learning resources. Social stigma. Families may hesitate to discuss concerns because of fear of labelling or discrimination. Respectful communication and confidentiality are essential. Digital and administrative constraints. Connectivity, devices, staff workload and differing levels of digital literacy can affect implementation. Weak follow-up. Schools may record screening information without establishing whether assessment, accommodation or educational support subsequently occurs. These challenges demonstrate why the app should be understood as an enabling mechanism within a broader system, rather than as a complete solution to disability-related educational exclusion.

Recommendations for effective implementation

The following actions are recommended for schools and education authorities.

1. Orient all relevant teachers. Provide practical training on the prescribed checklist, observation, confidentiality, referral and inclusive teaching.
2. Follow the official screening procedure. Use the NCERT booklet and the current app instructions rather than informal or improvised diagnostic criteria.
3. Strengthen referral arrangements. Establish clear contacts and procedures for appropriate professional assessment and certification.
4. Develop individualised educational support plans where appropriate. Use assessment findings and student and family input to determine learning goals, accommodations and responsibilities.
5. Improve school accessibility. Review ramps, pathways, classrooms, toilets, libraries, laboratories, communication formats and digital learning materials.
6. Promote peer acceptance. Integrate disability awareness, anti-bullying measures and cooperative learning into school activities without disclosing individual students' private information.
7. Engage families. Communicate concerns respectfully, explain available support and involve parents or guardians in decisions.
8. Monitor outcomes rather than screening numbers alone. Track referral completion, access to support, attendance, participation, learning progression and student well-being.
9. Protect children's information. Limit access to screening records and use them only for legitimate educational and referral purposes.
10. Review implementation regularly. School heads and relevant authorities should identify gaps in staffing, training, infrastructure and service access and plan corrective measures.

Table3: The expected outcomes can be grouped into four levels.

Outcome level	Expected change
Individual student	Earlier recognition of support needs, better access to suitable instruction and improved opportunities for independence.
Classroom	More responsive teaching, accessible learning materials, greater participation and improved peer interaction.
School	Stronger referral coordination, increased teacher awareness, better accessibility planning and systematic follow-up.
Education system	Better-informed planning for inclusive services, identification of unmet needs and more consistent attention to educational equity.

Source: Prepared by the Researcher

These outcomes should be treated as objectives for implementation and evaluation. Demonstrating actual improvement would require school-level data and a suitable research design.

Conclusion

PRASHAST represents an important step towards strengthening inclusive education in India by providing schools with a structured mechanism for the early screening of children who may have disabilities. Its emphasis on systematic observation and further screening can help address the problem of children whose learning or participation difficulties are overlooked, misunderstood or attributed to a lack of ability. The initiative is particularly relevant when disability-related needs are not immediately visible and when teachers require a common framework for deciding whether further assessment may be appropriate. However, the success of PRASHAST should not be judged solely by the number of students screened or the availability of a digital application. Its educational significance depends on whether screening leads to timely referral, appropriate assessment, accessible learning materials, individualised support, family engagement and continuing monitoring. It is therefore essential to integrate PRASHAST with teacher development, school accessibility and the broader inclusive-education provisions of Samagra Shiksha.

Ultimately, the purpose of identifying disability-related needs is to expand children's opportunities, not to categorise or restrict them. Children with disabilities deserve the same dignity, encouragement, educational aspirations and opportunities for participation as their peers. When schools recognise individual strengths, respond to learning barriers and create supportive classroom environments, children can participate more fully in academic work, friendships, cultural activities and school life. Effective implementation should consequently be assessed through improvements in access, attendance, participation, belonging, learning progression and the completion of appropriate follow-up—not through screening totals alone. PRASHAST can serve as a starting point for this transformation, provided that educational institutions treat identification as the beginning of a sustained support process. The broader goal is an inclusive school system in which disability does not become a preventable barrier to learning, confidence, independence or future opportunity.

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