



No One Left Behind: Inclusivity of Students with Disabilities in Accessing Higher Education in India.

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Abstract.

The students with disabilities (SwD) are having a legal right in accessing higher education. Such legal right is to ensure inclusive education in spite of the persistence of notable obstacles like physical infrastructure, attitudinal and technological arrangements. The enrollment ratio in higher education is increasing gradually nowadays, but still SwD struggles with inadequate support services and inaccessible curricula. The landscape of the higher education system in India is advancing day by day with the advent of National Education Policy which made a huge and significant transformation through the aspiration of inclusivity and equity in the higher education system in our country. Though this strategy has been considered, but still significantly, the focus that is given to the school level education is not given to the higher education. Even India's profile in Disability inclusive Education Practices in India - UNICEF Regional Officer for South Asia, states that the SwD are less in number to participate in and complete their higher education in comparison with other peers.

Undoubtedly the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016 states that inclusive education as the 'system of education wherein students with or without disabilities learn together and system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities.' The National Assessment and Accreditation Council also insist the adoption of criteria related inclusivity under 'Institutional Values

and Best Practices’ whereas it defines the criteria related to ‘differently abled (Divyangjan) friendliness’ with an intention to provide such facilities like lift, ramp/rail, braille software, restrooms, scribes for examination and special skill development programmes and etc.,

Despite these prominent legal frameworks on inclusivity in education, there is a significant gap between the ideals and their implementation in Higher Education Institutions in India. The absence of real understanding of barrier free acceptance and diverse environment undermines the principles of social justice and equal opportunity. This paper aims to put forth the very need of addressing the concerns of SwD in accessing Higher Education. This paper also highlights the role of higher education institutions to adopt the strategic approach in compliance with inclusiveness to enable the SwD to access the higher education without any impediments. Further, this paper intends to provide suggestions like how to structure training and sensitization programmes for all stakeholders that support the inclusiveness in the higher education institutions.

Keywords: Students with Disability, Higher Education, Accessibility, Inclusivity, Equal Opportunity.

1 Introduction

India is holding one of the best education systems in the world and possesses the world’s third largest higher education system. Despite this, there is no proper infrastructure with a capacity to meet the basic educational needs of students with disabilities. Currently there are about 88,748 PwD students enrolled in higher education, out of which 51,373 are male and 37,375 are female students.ⁱ Until the 1990s, access to many universities in India was highly restricted for disabled students and staff, as disability was largely viewed through an individualistic medical lens. A major shift began in the early 90s, which aimed to protect disabled individuals from discrimination and harassment. Earlier laws provided initial definitions of disability, but these were later consolidated through a major legislation and government initiations recognized disability as a

protected characteristic. Under those initiatives of the government, disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that has a long-term and substantial impact on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.ⁱⁱ Globally, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1994) emphasizes the need for recognition of rights of persons with disabilities to access education. As being a signatory country to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR 1948), and subsequently to the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), India obligated to bring the persons with disabilities to the mainstream with an assurance that there is no discrimination in protecting their human rights as well UNESCO (2019).ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly, the Indian constitution also emphasizes that providing education without any discrimination is the collective responsibility of both state and central governments. Disability in accessing higher education by the disabled persons has diverse implications right from school education level. When it comes for the persons of disabled facing the difficulties to access higher education will obviously impact their employability. Undoubtedly there are numerous volunteering groups supporting the persons with disability to access the school education, but the entry of them in higher education is still questionable. There is a misunderstanding of the term disability, whereas the term disability is always seen as handicap or impairment. Persons with such a disability have been viewed as charity or of medical aspects. Though this view is rapidly changing with an idea of the marginalization of persons with disability, the real understanding of disability should always be seen in the lens of human rights perception. "Disability is a condition that can limit a person's mobility, hearing, vision, speech or mental function and can be caused by an accident, trauma, genetics or disease." Person with disability means a person with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others. Impairment is a biological state, whereas disability exists as it is situated within a broader environment.^{iv} Persons with disabilities are among the most marginalised groups in society. They often experience multiple forms of oppression, discrimination, and social exclusion in everyday life. These challenges arise not only from their impairments but also from societal barriers, negative attitudes, and limited access to opportunities, which together prevent their full participation in mainstream social, educational, and economic activities.

2 Legislative framework

Around 15% of the global population approximately one billion people live with some form of disability, with a large majority residing in developing countries. The number is rising due to factors such as population growth, aging, chronic illnesses and advances in medical care that extend life expectancy. In India, about 26 million people, approximately, 2.21% of the population, as per Census 2011 are persons with disabilities.^v Educational attainment among this group remains low: nearly 45% are illiterate and among those who are literate, only a small proportion have completed secondary or higher education. Since independence, the Government of India has introduced various policies and initiatives to support the education of children with disabilities, especially following its ratification of the UNCRPD in 2007 (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay (2021)).^{vi} While these efforts have improved school-level enrolment, progress in higher education has been minimal. Despite longstanding legislation like the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, students with disabilities constitute only about 0.5% of total enrolment in higher education institutions. This highlights a significant gap between policy intentions and actual outcomes.

3 Constitutional Provisions

The Preamble of the Indian Constitution, among other things, aims to ensure that all of its citizens have equal status and opportunity, as well as freedom of opinion, speech, belief, faith and worship. Six fundamental rights are guaranteed to all citizens under Part III of the Constitution. These include the rights to equality, freedom, protection against exploitation, freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights and constitutional remedies. Even though this section of the Constitution makes no mention of people with disabilities, they are nevertheless entitled to all of these rights. Part IV of the Constitution incorporates the Directive Principles of State Policy.^{vii} Article 41 under Part IV of the Constitution enumerates that “the State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, right to education and right to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement are in other cases of undeserved want”.

Welfare and protecting the interests of people with disabilities and other weaker segments of society are included in the Eleventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution under Article 243 which deal with the powers and responsibilities of the panchayats and municipalities respectively, with regard to the implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice. “Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded” (Entry No. 26) is the eleventh schedule to Article 243-G. Article 243-W- Twelfth Schedule: “Safeguarding the interests of weaker sections of society, including the handicapped and mentally retarded” (Entry No. 09).^{viii}

Apart from the constitutional provisions, there are other legislations to protect the interest of persons with disabilities.

4 Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992

The Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 led to the establishment of the Rehabilitation Council of India as a statutory body responsible for regulating and standardizing the training of rehabilitation professionals in India. The Council plays a pivotal role in ensuring quality education and promoting research in the fields of rehabilitation and special education. It is entrusted with several important functions, including prescribing minimum standards for professional education, recommending the recognition of qualifications awarded by universities and institutions within India and abroad and ensuring that training programs meet required norms through inspections and evaluation of examinations.^{ix} Additionally, the Council maintains a central register of qualified rehabilitation professionals and personnel, and lays down guidelines regarding their professional conduct, ethics, and privileges, thereby ensuring accountability and uniformity in the field.

5 The National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999

The National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999 established the National Trust as a statutory body to support persons with autism, cerebral palsy, intellectual disabilities, and multiple disabilities.^x

Its primary aim is to empower individuals with disabilities to live as independently and inclusively as possible within their communities. The Trust works to strengthen family-based care, provide support to organizations offering need-based services, especially during family crises and address the needs of individuals without family support. It also promotes care and protection mechanisms in situations such as the death of parents or guardians, develops procedures for appointing guardians and trustees, and ensures equal opportunities, protection of rights, and full participation of persons with disabilities in society.

6 The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which came into force on April 19, 2017, categorizes disabilities into several broad groups to ensure better recognition and support. These include physical disabilities such as locomotor impairments including conditions like cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, dwarfism, and acid attack injuries, as well as visual, hearing, and speech-language impairments. The Act also covers intellectual disabilities, including specific learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder, along with mental illness under the category of mental behavior.^{xi} Additionally, it recognizes disabilities arising from chronic neurological conditions like Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis, and blood disorders such as hemophilia, thalassemia, and sickle cell disease. It also includes multiple disabilities, where individuals experience a combination of these conditions. The challenge is the implementation, after a decade the situation has not changed much.

This Act promotes inclusive education for students with disabilities by ensuring equal access and participation in both school and higher education. The Act emphasizes a shift from segregated to inclusive education, requiring institutions to provide barrier-free environments, reasonable accommodation, assistive learning materials, and curriculum adaptations to meet diverse needs. Though it supports early identification of disabilities and strengthens legal accountability for non-compliance. It faces challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, limited trained staff, and lack of accessible resources continue to hinder effective implementation.

7 RPWD Act and Inclusivity of SwDs in Education

In the process of welfare employment and education, the Ministry of Education has constituted a National Advisory Council especially for the persons with disabilities in the year 1995. This council aimed to advise the central government on issues relating to education, training, employment and provision of social and cultural amenities for the physically and mentally disabled and suggest the frameworks and policies. The government also introduced a Scheme on Integrated Education of Disabled Children (IEDC) which stressed upon the education even for children with minimal disabilities alongside two other schemes through a five-year plan such as National Leprosy Control Programme and National Scheme for Prevention of Impairment.^{xii}

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 has given a different dimension of understanding of the term disability in India. It moves away from helping people with disabilities and towards giving them the rights they deserve. This new law replaced the 1995 Act and brings Indian law in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Act considerably recognizes 21 types of disabilities which includes disabilities like Parkinson's disease, injuries from acid attacks and learning disabilities like Dyslexia. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act also talks about something called benchmark disabilities which are the disabilities that affect the 40% of the people.^{xiii}

The law also says that all public buildings, transport systems and digital systems have to be made accessible to people with disabilities within a time. The Act also provides for something called 'Guardianship' which helps people with disabilities who cannot make their decisions. One of the significant advantage of the Act is that it increases the number of jobs and seats in schools that are reserved for people with disabilities. This helps people with disabilities to be part of society and get jobs. The Act also gives power to people with disabilities by introducing penalties for people who break the law. The Act sets up courts to deal with cases where people with disabilities are treated badly and it also creates a system to make sure the law is being followed.^{xiv}

Even though the Act is a well-established law, it faces many challenges in the context of implementation. The minimum requirement of easy accessibility in the public places by the PwDs, difficulty in getting a

‘Disability Certificate’ especially in rural areas where the process is often slow and bureaucratic.

When it comes for the extended support of the Act, in promoting the inclusivity of students with disabilities (SWDs) in education, it guarantees their right to equal access and participation. The Act mandates free and compulsory education for children with benchmark disabilities aged 6 to 18 years and ensures at least 5% reservation in higher education institutions, thereby expanding opportunities for academic progression. It also emphasizes a shift toward inclusive education by requiring institutions to create barrier-free environments, provide reasonable accommodation, and adopt accessible teaching-learning materials such as Braille, sign language, and assistive technologies. The Act also supports curriculum adaptation and early identification of disabilities to address learning needs effectively. Despite these strong legal provisions, challenges in implementation such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained educators, and limited accessibility resources continue to affect the full realization of inclusive education goals.

8 Understanding of Inclusivity in Higher Education

Inclusivity in the education system must be observed as a strategy for the well-being of disabled and equity in education. Even the sustainable development goals stresses upon a pledge ‘leaving no one behind’ to ensure the inclusion of all without any discrimination and more over of bringing the person with disabilities together. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres emphasised that the contributions of 1.5 billion people should not be neglected or marginalized. He noted that many countries still lack crucial services for people with disabilities, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Additionally, it's crucial to embrace people with disabilities in policies, particularly regarding education. Recognizing and valuing people with disabilities is crucial for promoting inclusiveness at all levels. (Sarkar, 2016).^{xv}

The disabled people’s representation was based on the practices of stereotyping, by reducing people to the characteristics represented by nature. The disabled people continued to be portrayed as more or less than human throughout the twentieth century. The very need to address the concerns of SwD in accessing Higher Education. They often lived within institutions attended the segregated schools and were unemployed and considered unfortunate. (S.Anne (2024) The failure in recognising

disability in terms of quality and rights, the mode of oppression resulted in the inequality and exclusion by the disabled students remained unchanged till late 20th century. Currently market -oriented environment of the higher education is hostile to the development of inclusive educations in universities. Accessibility is the other part of inclusion in Universities libraries are viewed as the centers for the learning education, the resources for SwD must be provided in the accessible format. (Kawooya et al., 2026)

The notion of inclusivity in higher education can be linked with a liberal view were more involvement of individuals representing the groups of society that have traditionally been excluded, including on the basis of caste, gender, the socioeconomic status. This is view is also about broadening the access to the opportunity for thee enculturation and the reproduction of particular professional knowledge bases and practice. This further elevate to critical set of notions with successful participation which generate more options for the people in education and beyond. These factors affect access, participation and, the success but also criteria for judging the success. The inclusivity emphasizes the relation between two emphasizes the type of person and the graduate that an educational institution seeks to develop by decisions by balancing between the rights and the responsibility of the society. (Arora, 2023)

In an HEI, when a curriculum attempts for minimizing the exclusion, the stakeholder must be prepared for allowing the incorporation of the ideas and the values that contradict those that they hold. Inclusive education is one measure of the educational excellence and accepts the notions that education outcomes are the most appropriate indicators of excellence.

The formulation of the National Education Policy (NEP) by the Government of India, is a positive source aiming to transform Higher Education Institutions in India. The policy ensures access to the high-quality education for all the individuals in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the United Nations Agenda 2030. In India the multi-cultural diversity includes. religion, language, geography. Even though the educational policies of 1968, 1986 and 1992 mainly on the radical restriction, the special weightage to eradicate the discrepancies and equalize of education opportunities, it was unable to succeed as per the expectations of the government, this is the reason why there is still discussion on inequalities in the educational spaces.

India to bring the HEI and education landscape to eradicate the prejudice and enquire equal rights for all the citizens has both signed and ratified many international accords. The United Nations vision on Education 2030 highlights the significance of the inclusion and the enquiry in the educational policies and defines inclusion as the process helps to overcome the barriers limiting the presence, participation and the achievement of the learned. The main prerequisites for ensuring the inclusion in the higher education is the establishment of the national policies including the NEP, NMHP^{xvi} and NPPD^{xvii}, 2006. The NMHP mainly advocates the non-discrimination and the equal access to education for all the persons with disabilities, specifically non-discriminatory and equal opportunities for those with the mental conditions.

Further, addition to the policy measures the inclusion and the equity in Indian HEIs are ensured by the guidelines formulated by statutory bodies and the autonomous bodies includes All India Council for Technical Education and the University Grants Commission. Many Institutional policies of various HEIs such as the Delhi, Kerala, Meghalaya and Mumbai effectively incorporated the principles of inclusion and equity in their policy document.

The inclusive education is promulgated through laws in many countries. The gap is between the goal and the practice of inclusive education in different jurisdictions, how each jurisdiction is responding to student rights. The RPDA (2016) defiance the inclusive education as the system wherein the students with or without the disability learn together and the system of the teaching and learning is suitable to adapt to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities. In alignment with the 2016 Act, the NEP emphasis the inclusive education to extended beyond the academic activities encompassing various co-curricular activities including sports, arts, and vocational training.

9 Inclusivity of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in India: Issues and Challenges

Though there are well-established laws and frameworks to support students with disabilities entail them in accessing education, still there is a persistent low enrollment ratio and high dropout ratio. It replicates the insufficient accessibility of higher education institutions, poor support system, adverse societal attitudes, social isolation, and, possibly, finan-

cial incapability. Absence of real understanding of barrier-free acceptance and a diverse environment undermines the principles of social justice and equal opportunity. Providing the relevant resources to support their requirements to enable the PwDs is challenging for State/UTs and the local bodies. Persons with disabilities can excel in every field, such as education, sports, literature and culture, which creates an opportunity and circumstances to show their hidden talents and interests. But one of the difficulties that persists constantly is making others change their attitudinal perception towards persons with disabilities. Whereas the role of governments, whether it be state or central, or even the local bodies to imbibe the culture of accessibility standards at the designing, planning, and execution stage for creating a barrier-free environment for persons with disabilities.

Inclusivity in higher education is a critical component of social justice and national development, particularly for students with disabilities (SwDs). In India, several statutory measures have been introduced to promote equitable access to education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, mandates inclusive education at all levels and provides for a 5% reservation for persons with disabilities in higher educational institutions.^{xviii} Similarly, bodies such as the University Grants Commission and the Rehabilitation Council of India play important roles in framing policies, ensuring accessibility, and maintaining standards in disability-related education and services. In addition, schemes like scholarships, assistive technologies and Equal Opportunity Cells have been introduced to support SwDs. (Jameel, 2011).

Despite these measures, the enrollment ratio of students with disabilities in higher education remains significantly low. Studies indicate that only around 0.23% to 0.56% of total enrollment in higher education institutions consists of students with disabilities, which is far below the mandated reservation levels.^{xix} This stark gap highlights the limited effectiveness of policy implementation and the persistence of structural barriers. (Anand 2025)

Several challenges hinder the inclusion of SwDs in higher education. Firstly, infrastructural barriers such as inaccessible buildings, a lack of ramps, elevators, and assistive technologies make campuses physically difficult to navigate. Secondly, institutional challenges include inadequate implementation of government policies, a lack of trained faculty, and insufficient disability support services. Thirdly, financial constraints and limited awareness about scholarships and benefits discourage many

students from pursuing higher education. Fourthly, social stigma and negative attitudes toward disability continue to marginalize students, affecting their confidence and participation. Additionally, poor school-level inclusion and high dropout rates reduce the number of students with disabilities who qualify for higher education in the first place. Further there is no linkage between school and HEI; a few students with disabilities, who could cope with their disability related problems, reach the higher education level.

Higher education institutions play a crucial role in addressing these challenges. They are expected to create inclusive environments by ensuring barrier-free infrastructure, adopting flexible curricula, providing assistive technologies, and training faculty in inclusive teaching practices. Institutions must also promote awareness and sensitivity among students and staff to reduce stigma and discrimination. Establishing strong support systems such as counseling services, mentorship programs, and disability resource centers can significantly improve retention and success rates of SwDs. While India has made significant legislative progress in promoting inclusive education, the gap between policy and practice remains substantial.

Enhancing enrollment and participation of students with disabilities requires not only better implementation of existing laws but also a shift in institutional attitudes and societal perceptions. A collaborative effort between the government, educational institutions, and society is essential to ensure true inclusivity in higher education.

10 Measures to increase the enrollment ratio

One approach or model that India can follow is the Nordic Model approach. The Nordic countries regard the provision of inclusive education for children and young people with disabilities. The model is recognised for balancing the high academic standards, by balancing inclusivity they support education, equal opportunities and inclusion. Similar to India even though the educational values and policies are similar, their cultures are not identical.

Strict implementation of right to persons with the Disability Act of 2016. The support services within the education institution, which include disability-friendly facilities, ensure the success of the students with disabilities in their transition from school to a higher education institution (Mistry, H. S., & Panigrahi, S. C, 2023).

The enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education remains significantly lower than that of the general population, particularly in the developing countries. In the context of higher education, the situation for students with disabilities especially in countries like India remains challenging. Although legal frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and policy initiatives like the National Education Policy 2020 exist, their implementation is uneven. Many universities still lack accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and trained faculty. Social stigma, financial constraints, and weak support systems further limit participation, resulting in low enrollment and higher dropout rates among students with disabilities. Financial constraints and inadequate institutional support systems further discourage students with disabilities from pursuing higher education, leading to high dropout rates and underrepresentation. In contrast, the Nordic model—seen in countries like Sweden, Norway, and Finland—approaches disability inclusion through a rights-based and welfare-oriented framework. Education is largely publicly funded and inclusion is built into the system through the principle of universal design. This means campuses, teaching methods, and digital platforms are designed from the outset to be accessible to all learners. Students receive personalized support such as assistive devices, academic aides, and flexible learning options, ensuring that disability does not become a barrier to participation.

The Nordic experience demonstrates that when inclusion is embedded in policy, funding and institutional design, higher education becomes genuinely accessible, leading to higher participation and better outcomes for students with disabilities. This model intend to free or heavily subsidized schooling, inclusive policies and a state responsibility to ensure equal access for all citizens, including persons with disabilities.

To improve enrollment ratios of SwDs, similar measures can be adopted in India. Firstly, higher education institutions must implement universal accessibility in infrastructure and digital learning environments. Secondly, financial assistance, scholarships, fee waivers and funding for assistive technologies should be strengthened. Thirdly, universities should establish dedicated disability support centers that provide individualized academic and psychological support. Strengthening school-to-college transition programs and career counseling can also ensure continuity in education. Additionally, strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws and regular accessibility audits are necessary to ensure accountability. The statutory bodies regulating higher education

institutions should robustly look into whether the facilities and provisions granted for the SwD are available within higher education institutions or not.

11 Conclusion

SwDs face multiple challenges while accessing and pursuing higher education. Ableism can be a major challenge necessary for the support and the accommodation. The discussion of inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education is not new. However, there is a need for rigorous research to improve policies and practices for students with disabilities, as their number in university admissions continues to increase. The effort is feasible by prioritizing research on access paths, learning outcomes, transition and Universal Design. This has direct practical benefits for both the research community and students with disabilities. To promote diversity and inclusion in higher education, this condition will lead to a better understanding of impairments, organisations that support them, and research techniques that accurately reflect their experiences. Nonetheless, there are still issues and difficulties facing the relevant organisations and stakeholders, academics, university administration and the Ministry of Higher Education. These include unstructured services, poor infrastructure and technological accessibility, budgetary limitations, inadequate preparation among general and special education teachers, and interpersonal friction. Acknowledging these difficulties will also enable those in charge to plan, carry out, monitor and evaluate the steps taken to attain inclusivity for students with disabilities, particularly at the HEI level. The various stakeholders regulating the higher education institutions must ensure the inclusivity of SwDs are equally enabled to access education at the best through the supportive policy to advance the standard of living of those PwDs and live their life without any discrimination.

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