

Inclusive Education: Accessibility and Inclusion in Higher Education to Disable Students

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Abstract – Education play important role for crucial development of society as well as young generation, because it build and developed a person's beliefs, ideologies, values and take a substantial role to inclusive growth of any country. Inclusive education refer to empowering of every children with skills and knowledge's, given equal opportunity of every children to access education equally. Inclusive education is a strategy to universalize education and protect social equality regardless of disability. The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 emphasizes that, “Education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality”. Which has implications for development of an inclusive community and society at large. In order for policy to translate to practice, educational barriers, facilities and services for Children with Special Needs (CwSN) must be addressed. The NEP has infused the aspects of disability inclusion throughout the policy document with a dedicated chapter on equitable and inclusive education, focusing on issues, challenges and recommendations for bridging the gaps reducing the disparities in access and participation of all learners. Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) Act 2016 have helped create a comprehensive legal framework for inclusive Goal (SDG) 4 is Quality Education for all. The international framework comprising the UNCRPD and the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 4 and Agenda 2030.

Keywords – Inclusive Education, Special Education, Higher Education, Disabled Students, Persons with Disabilities, Equality.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Inclusion is not a strategy to help people fit into the systems and structures which exist in our societies. It is about transforming those systems and structures to make it better for everyone. Inclusion is about creating a better world for everyone” Diane Richler [1] Education, a fundamental right, in the Constitution of India is also essential for recognition as a useful productive member of one's community and for participation in the community life in a meaningful way [2]. In the rapidly changing time, such as the present, one of the major aims of education is to address individual needs of all learners, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Inclusion advocates diversification of the educational provisions and personalization of common learning experiences [3, 4]. When done appropriately this facilitates the highest degree of participation of all students, irrespective of origin and degree of abilities and disabilities. This also implies movement towards the Universal Design of Learning (UDL). Principals of UDL, suggests that diversity in the needs of all learners is to be addressed from the beginning of the teaching-learning process, [5]. This is in contrast to the traditional planning of the classroom activities, which is based on the “average” student. In other words, in traditional planning of teaching the activities are initially designed for ‘average’. Afterward, appropriate individualized interventions are made to address the needs of specific students, left out of the original plan of activities which was prepared by the logic of homogeneity instead of diversity. This brings ‘inclusion’ in the forefront. Inclusion in education implies that it is the responsibility of the society to change the environment so that the children with disabilities and disadvantages feel empowered to take part, on an equal basis, in the education system. Inclusion is concerned with the extent to which ‘socially just’, educational policy; pedagogy and teaching

practice are being followed in schools and colleges. In 2008, International Conference on Education, with the agenda of “Defining Inclusive Education” was organized by IBE, UNESCO [6]. The delegates of the conference reached the conclusion that diversity discourse is neither about students with disabilities or other special needs due to being immigrants or gifted nor is it about supporting teachers to carry out inclusive pedagogy practices. Inclusive education is all about building support system, infusing flexibility in all dimension of the schooling system and its practices, so that needs of all stakeholders, are met. The National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 emphasizes that, “Education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality” [7]. Which has implications for development of an inclusive community and society at large. In order for policy to translate to practice, educational barriers, facilities and services for Children with Special Needs (CwSN) must be addressed. The NEP has infused the aspects of disability inclusion throughout the policy document with a dedicated chapter on equitable and inclusive education, focusing on issues, challenges and recommendations for bridging the gaps reducing the disparities in access and participation of all learners. The issues and recommendations for inclusion of underrepresented students groups including children with disabilities has been subsumed in the policy and covered under the SEDGs i.e. Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) which is an umbrella term covering gender identities, socio-cultural and socio-economic identities, geographical identities as well as disabilities.

II. DISABILITY PREVALENCE IN THE WORLD

The World Report on Disability estimates that more than one billion persons in the world or about 15% of the world's population live with some form of disability, of which 80% reside in developing countries. Out of this population, an estimated 2 to 4% of those aged 15 years and older have significant difficulties in functioning. Studies indicate that this number is likely to be considerably higher than reported due to underreporting of disability prevalence in many countries, inconsistency in the definitions of disabilities internationally (e.g. focus on impairment vs. functionality) and the nature of the data collection tool itself. Finally, the number of people who experience disability will continue to increase because of demographic and epidemiological transitions, with global ageing bearing major influence on disability trends. At the same time, the prevalence of disability is higher for vulnerable groups such as women, those in the poorest wealth quintile, and older people. This is especially true for those in developing countries [8].

According to the 2011 census, India is home to 26.8 million persons with disabilities i.e. 2.21% of the total population in the country and a majority (69%) of them live in rural India. Among the persons with disabilities, 56% are males and 44% are females. Those with a disability in movement, hearing and seeing constitute the highest percentage of the group - 20%, 19% and 19% respectively. The number of disabled persons is highest in the age group of 0-19 years (29%, 7.8 million) 79 making a focus on primary and higher education essential [9].

The legal framework for disability in India is provided by Rights 80 of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, a comprehensive rights based legislation with detailed provisions for representation, 81 access, and reasonable accommodation [10]. Within the education context, the 86th Amendment Act, 2002 introduced the right to education as a new fundamental right (Article 21A) operationalized through the consequential enactment of the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009. It provides free and compulsory education to all children between the ages of 6 and 14 years, [11] including 82 persons with disabilities. The RTE (Amendment) Act, 2012 further brought all categories of children with disabilities (defined by disability 1-

-egislations) within its purview.

The RPWD Act, 2016 provides for inclusive education and notes that it must be imparted with due consideration to most appropriate modes and means of communication including suitable modifications in the curriculum and examination system. Within India, there are 3 modes of education offered to children with disabilities - mainstream schools, home-based education and through special schools. The RPWD Act, 2016 also defined inclusive education for the first time in country and has brought the concept of reasonable accommodations and necessary supports within the legal domain. RPWD Act, the number of disabilities covered has been increased from 7 to 21.

The New Education Policy 2020 for its part recognizes the importance of creating enabling mechanisms for persons with disabilities in both school and higher education and acknowledges that the use of technology for online and digital education should address concerns of equity.

III. STATUS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN INDIA

Indian census statistics calculate that Persons with Disability (PwDs) constitute 2.1% of the country's population. Unfortunately, persons with disabilities continue to be under-represented in education, with 45% of persons with disabilities unable to read or write, 13% completing secondary education and only 5% being graduates and above; 25% of children with disabilities between 5-19 years do not go to any educational institution [12]. Among those who get further marginalized are children with multiple disabilities and those living with mental illness. Data reflects that 54% of children with multiple disabilities and 50% of the children with mental illness have never attended educational institutions. Government data reflects that children with disabilities are the largest group of children who have dropped out of school. While the overall literacy level in the country stands at 74.04%, [13] statistics reflect that only 55% of the total population of persons with disabilities is literate.

IV. TARGETS BY THE SDGs FOR DISABILITIES AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

As the world works towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030, it is becoming increasingly imperative to pay due attention to the PwD population. Of the 17 targets by the SDGs, five are intrinsically linked to the disability sector. To achieve quality education (Goal 4), the international framework comprising the UNCRPD and the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 4 and Agenda 2030 [14]. SDG 4 focuses on addressing gender gaps, inequality and development of decent employment through education, Teacher training and a shift to the home-based education for PwDs has been underway since the declaration of RPWD Act in 2016, decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), reduced inequalities (Goal 10), sustainable cities and communities (Goal 11) as well as partnerships for the goals (Goal 17), the need to collaborate with the PwD community and cater to their needs is crucial. While each of these goals are vital, the key to creating large-scale societal, systemic change arguably lies in transforming the education sector.

V. ACCORDING TO INDIAN MINISTRY OF HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

The importance of education and literacy is often recognized, the experience of students with disability in higher education is grossly underrepresented. According to a study conducted by the Indian Ministry of Human Resource Development there were 85,877 Persons with Disability (PwDs) between the ages of 18 and 23 enroll-

-ed in higher education 1 out of 37.4 million total enrolment [15].

This lack of enrolment in higher education is often attributed to societal discrimination and stigma, poor implementation of policies encouraging inclusion, and inaccessibility of public spaces. These environmental, societal and institutional barriers negatively impact literacy, education standards and employment levels of PwDs. According to the Census of 2011, around 70% of the PwD population is unemployed [16].

VI. RPWD ACT 2016 AND THE NATIONAL POLICY FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES 2006

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016, which defines a Person with Disability as “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” [17]. While laws like RPWD Act 2016 and the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities 2006 encourage inclusion, the situation in educational institutions tell a different story. Despite reservation in educational institutions for students with disability under the RPWD Act of 2016, the enrolment numbers in higher education institutes are dismal. In a study conducted on higher education in India in 2018, it was found that the total enrolment in higher education across rural and urban environments has been estimated to be 3.74 crore, split between 1.92 crore boys and 1.82 crore girls. Girls constitute 48.6% of the total enrolment. In comparison, the enrolment of Students with Disability in higher educational institutes is dismal. There are only 85,877 Students with Disability enrolled in higher education out of which 56% are male and 44% are female 24.

VII. THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA HAS LAUNCHED VARIOUS PROGRAMS, CAMPAIGNS, SCHOLARSHIPS AND HAS ENACTED LAWS THAT PROMOTE THE INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY

Over the past few decades, the Government of India has launched various programs and campaigns, and has enacted laws that promote the inclusion and accessibility of PwDs into mainstream society. These include the Rights for Persons with Disability Act 2016, the Accessible India Campaign, and the expansion of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) to include Children with Disability (CwD). The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment also launched the Umbrella Scholarship Scheme called ‘Scholarship for Students with Disabilities’ in 2018 to reduce the drop-out rate of CwD from grade IX onwards. 17 This is particularly relevant since a study by UNESCO in 2019 indicated that 6 lakh CwD (constituting 28% of the total population of children with disability) aged between 6 and 13 years are not attending school compared to the national estimate of 2.97%. Of out of school children [18].

The Government of India has also taken extensive steps to promote inclusion of CwDs through scholarships such as the Post Matric Scholarship for Students with Disabilities by the Department of Disability Affairs and the National Scholarships for PwD under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. These scholarships provide students with disability financial assistance to pursue higher education.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS SUGGESTED TO BE EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTED

This details recommendations spanning both the short- and long-term for institutions looking to create more accessible and inclusive spaces for students with disability. A broad range of stakeholders - policy-makers, institute administrators, professors, families, and students with and without disabilities - can contribute to

improving educational opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities, as outlined in the following recommendations.

1. **Needs-based interventions:** It is important to conduct a needs assessment of students with disability to ensure that they receive relevant support and accommodations from the institution. This will allow for diversity of accommodations, given that some students may require only modifications to the physical environment to gain access while others may need interventions such as counselling and accessible text. This assessment will allow institutions to make relevant changes both at the organizational as well as environmental levels. Periodic data collection of needs will ensure that the institution stays up to date in its interventions and assistances. Institutions will be well advised to incorporate these practices into their admission procedures and continue this process periodically through the duration of the students' stay on campus.
2. **Annual orientations:** Before the start of the academic year, all students, staff, teachers and other stakeholders including administration and placement services on campus should be oriented on the issues faced by students with disability. This orientation should include sensitization on needs and assistances, accessibility options on campus and possible hurdles that may arise. From the primary data collected, most students with disability were unaware of the facilities available on campus and/or were not familiar with the procedures to avail these allowances. It is important to also include staff as well as students without disability in this orientation and sensitization activity so as to ensure inclusion and awareness on the experiences of disability on campus. Regular, thorough orientations can set the foundation for an institutional culture of inclusion and ensure that there is increased awareness about the experiences of students with disability.
3. **Multi-stakeholder involvement:** While the orientation sessions are suggested as a means to ensure awareness on the needs of those with disability, it is also important to include other stakeholders in the conversation surrounding disability. Workshops, seminars and other events could act as platforms to spread awareness and sensitization regarding disability and discuss the challenges, needs and recommendations for improvement. These workshops should focus on non-disabled stakeholders including the larger student body as well as administration. Institutes could benefit from involving external organisations (e.g. NGOs working in the space of disability) to facilitate these sessions and encourage uninhibited conversation. These platforms will then be important tools to inculcate a culture of inclusion across the institution.
4. **Customizing teaching materials, aids and methodologies:** It is important to make all teaching and learning materials accessible and inclusive to all students with disabilities. In technical courses like engineering, there can be difficulties for students with disabilities to understand and learn concepts. For example, without the availability of screen-readers and other accessibility devices, IT-related classes can be difficult for students with disability. With regard to curriculum and lesson planning, it is important to train teachers to move away from a one-size-fits-all model to flexible approaches in education that can respond to the diverse abilities and needs of all learners. Where curricula and teaching methods are rigid and there is a lack of accessible teaching materials, students with disabilities. Are at an increased risk of exclusion. Assessment and evaluation systems should ideally focus on individual progress rather than academic performance so that it is not restrictive for students with special education needs. Teaching assistance can

also be helpful as a support for students with disabilities so that they are not isolated from students without disability.

5. **Improvement in physical accessibility:** Physical access in buildings is an essential prerequisite for educating students with disabilities. Those with physical disabilities are likely to face difficulties in travelling. There may be problems with stairs, narrow doorways, inappropriate seating or inaccessible toilet facilities. Based on the needs of students with disability, the administration should take necessary actions to make the buildings and other physical structures accessible. There should be ramps, lifts, Braille signage, smooth flooring and proper lighting facilities in classrooms and labs. It is also necessary to provide accessible transportation facilities to enable mobility of students with disability inside the campus.
6. **Distribution of assistive devices:** Assistive Technologies, when appropriate to the user and the user's environment, are known to be powerful tools to increase independence and improve participation of PwDs⁵⁵. Assistive devices for learning and mobility should be provided by institutes according to the needs of students with disability. Wheelchairs, screen readers and other specialized software, laptops, magnifiers, listening aids, crutches, Braille readers, and access to prosthetics and orthotics should be provided by resource centers in each educational institute. These assistive devices will go a long way in aiding independence and empowerment of students with disability, assisting them not only in academics but daily life as well. It is important to note that institutions should take responsibility not just for the provision of assistive devices but also in ensuring that the users are trained in their use and maintenance.
7. **Placement support:** It is important for educational institutions to have a centralized job placement cell to facilitate equal opportunities for all students, ensuring that students with disabilities are not discriminated against in the hiring process. Institute placement committees can also seek the guidance of NGOs and other private actors who specialize in facilitating employment opportunities for Persons with Disabilities to ensure inclusive placement practices. All job descriptions, interview calls and written exams should be accessible for students with disabilities. Dedicated orientation and training sessions to prepare students with disabilities for placements can also be arranged, with a specific focus on interview skills, interpersonal skills and presentation skills. The placement offices can also arrange alumni buddies for each student with disability to guide them in job opportunities. Placement teams can be encouraged to invite companies known for inclusive hiring while simultaneously encouraging more companies to become inclusive in their hiring practices.
8. **Enabling a culture shift:** The physical presence of students with disabilities in educational institutes does not automatically ensure their participation⁵⁶. For participation to be meaningful and produce good learning outcomes, the ethos of the institution-valuing diversity and providing a safe and supportive environment - is critical. The attitude of teachers and students without disability is critical in ensuring that students with disabilities experience acceptance and inclusion. For this to happen, institutes need to stress on the importance of making spaces of leisure and entertainment accessible and inclusive. This will heighten interactions between students with and without disability, and encourage a relationship of equals. These spaces include sports, extra-curricular programs as well as co-curricular platforms such as robotics and hackathons in technical institutions. Most respondents reported feelings of discrimination and social exclusion. To overcome this, the institution administration as well as teachers and students without

disability should work together to create culture of inclusion, accessibility and acceptance. With more awareness and sensitivity, there will be more inclusion.

IX. CONCLUSION

Provision of inclusive and equitable education remains one of the most important steps for the achievement of an inclusive society. The past decade in India has been monumental in bringing out positive change in the education space, moving towards universalisation of education and right to education for all. This Paper focus on attitudinal changes (the need to sensitize multiple stakeholders and enable a culture shift towards inclusion) and removal of physical barriers (distribution of assistive devices and improved accessibility of infrastructure). A higher education experience helps individuals grow beyond their familiar circle and often develop thoughts, personalities, and ideas of their own. Children with disabilities have to face enormous challenges in their lives to get a formal education. This period of change is true for Students with Disability as well. Students with Disability have the same rights (against discrimination, to self-respect and dignity, and to self-assertion) as their non-disabled counterparts.

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