

Higher Education of Persons with Disabilities in India: Past, Present and Future

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The article aimed at providing glimpses of the status of higher education for persons with disabilities in India, starting with the distant past and moving on to present day developments. It describes the impact of legislations and policies on the educational support systems through the years.*

Method: *Desk review of relevant documents was undertaken and data was presented in the conventional narrative review style. Research questions address the status of higher education of persons with disabilities in India, the impact of Acts and policies and the support systems in place in the past and in the current educational systems. The main focus is on factors that lead to successful completion of higher education and challenges in accessing higher education by persons with disabilities in the country.*

Results: *In ancient India, during the Vedic period, there were no special arrangements for higher education of persons with disabilities. During the Mughal and British periods as well the education of persons with disabilities was not addressed. After Independence, although the provisions mandated by the Acts have increased the support systems in universities and colleges, higher education requires more streamlining to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. Universities that have made innovative arrangements for the education of persons with disabilities have been mentioned.*

Conclusion: *India has made giant strides in facilitating higher education for all, yet there are gaps in the educational system. The article puts forward some recommendations for achieving equitable higher education for persons with disabilities.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian educational system has a rich heritage that dates back to the Vedic period - 1500 to 500 BCE (New World Encyclopaedia, 2020) – a time when students lived with their teachers for a number of years and received education. During the Mughal regime education was propagated in *Madradas*, while the British regime introduced their higher education system to India in the 19th century (Krishnamoorthy, 2019). Since then, a considerable number of reforms have been made in the education system, with accreditation and regulatory bodies in place to ensure quality in higher education.

Special schools for persons with disabilities were established in the early 1900s, either by missionaries or by parents whose children were rejected from regular schools because of their disabilities. Those who managed to complete high school attended higher education institutions without having any special provisions made for them. In recent years the status of higher education for persons with disabilities has improved with the enactment of specific legislations that have empowered them with rights, equal opportunities and entitlements. The Right to Education Act (2009) has made education a fundamental right, thus ensuring that all persons, including those with disabilities, have access to appropriate education at all stages in life. The recent National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) has strengthened higher education for everyone, including persons with disabilities.

Objective

India has come a long way in terms of providing access to education for persons with disabilities. The present article aims to analyse the status of higher education for persons with disabilities in the past as well as in the current system with its strengths and challenges, and tries to assess what further needs to be done for ensuring equity and quality in higher education for persons with disabilities.

The specific research questions include:

1. What was the status of higher education for persons with disabilities in India in the past?

2. What is the current status of higher education for persons with disabilities in India?
3. What are the merits and challenges in the system of higher education?
4. What can be the way forward?

METHOD

Study Design

Desk review of relevant documents and literature was performed.

Data Collection

Data was gathered predominantly through focussing on the following content areas:

- Documents on constitutional obligations, Acts and policies, government schemes, and university regulation systems.
- Research, review articles and published information on higher education in India.
- Websites of specific higher education institutions that showcase specific arrangements made to facilitate education for persons with disabilities.

Data Analysis

The collected data was classified into past and current day content, and analysed to answer the research questions. The findings are presented as a conventional narrative review.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Initially the status of education in the past and in present day India is narrated in order to provide a background to the Indian educational system. Subsequently, the merits and challenges with regard to accessing education by persons with disabilities are discussed.

Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities in the Past

In ancient India, all students received education by staying with their teacher for a specific number of years. Such a system was called '*Gurukula*' (*Guru* in Sanskrit

language refers to teacher, *kula* refers to abode). The Guru was highly respected and was responsible for assessing the aptitude and abilities of his students and teaching them suitably, evaluating them for their proficiency and declaring them to have mastered the respective discipline (Pareek, 2021). In popular Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the teachers were highly revered and respected by everyone, including by emperors. *Gurukula* was also regarded as an institution of higher education (Chandi, 2021).

The University of Takshashila (currently in Pakistan) was established near the banks of the Indus River in 700 BCE during the Buddhist period, and is on record as the world's first higher education institute (Sanskrit Magazine, 2022). In addition to Takshashila / Taxila, India had world-class higher education institutes such as Nalanda and Vikramshila that set the highest standards of multidisciplinary teaching and research, and were reputed as they hosted scholars across different countries (Krishnamoorthy, 2019). The country was home to great scholars such as Charaka the physician, Sushruta the surgeon, Aryabhata the mathematician/astronomer, and Chanakya the statesman and philosopher, to name a few. These scholars made seminal contributions to the world knowledge in diverse fields such as mathematics, astronomy, Ayurveda (the medical science), yoga, architecture, fine arts, shipbuilding and navigation (Gopal, 1990a).

The literature sources from tenth century A.D. onwards give reasonable knowledge on the policies of education, the prominent sources being the Rigveda, the Aranyaka, the Upanishads, the Epics and the Puranas (Scharfe, 2002). It is documented that in the post- Vedic period, the teachers would instruct their students in metaphysics and its branches, and also on special secular subjects such as astronomy, mathematics and literature (Basham, 2004). With Buddhism and Jainism gaining popularity, education was imparted in the monasteries rather than in the teachers' homes. In the middle ages, these monasteries developed into true universities, the most popular one being Nalanda.

Education of persons with disabilities in the early years was not a formal system; however a few of them were geniuses. Ashtavakra, whose name literally means eight deformities (*ashta* -eight, *vakra* – deformities) that were congenital, was considered a born genius who studied in the ancient Mithila University (called Uddalaka Aruni Ashram) and was the wise advisor to king Janaka (Dalal, 2002). He has authored the book 'Ashtavakra Gita' (Gopal, 1990b). In *Gurukulas*, the teachers had a way of classifying students on the basis of their abilities and potential, and would teach them at the level of their understanding. In some cases,

special methods of teaching existed for the 'dullards' (Mookerji, 1951). Those who learnt did so by their own efforts or with some Gurus taking an interest in them. Chandragupta Maurya was the first emperor in the archaeologically recorded history to rule the entire Indian Subcontinent during 322 to 298 BCE. He had strategies to train persons with disabilities to receive on-the-job training, and established vocational training workshops for them so that they could earn their livelihood (Shekar, 2021).

Such episodic content is recorded in the literature as evidence of support to the education of person with disabilities. Not much authentic evidence is found in the literature on educational policies, if any, for persons with disabilities in ancient India. During the Mughal period, through the *Madrasas* and *Maktabs*, the Islamic tradition of education was introduced. Later, during the British regime, the higher education system underwent significant change with the introduction of British systems and no special provisions were made for higher education of persons with disabilities. Whoever managed to get educated in the mainstream systems of higher education, in spite of their disabilities, completed their education facing considerable challenges. The monograph by Miles (1997) is a detailed document on the history of care and education for persons with disabilities in the 19th and early 20th centuries in India. The document discusses informal and formal education in the early years, with anecdotal records. In ancient India, the attitude towards disability was more one of charity and compassion. Education was focussed on preparing these persons for a vocation or job skill, to earn a living to the extent possible.

Present Day Higher Education System

This subsection has been classified into two parts:

1. Focussing on the Government policies and legislations, and
2. Provisions made by various universities.

Government Policies and Legislations

The Constitution of India was framed in 1950, and refers to 'Education for all' (Article 45) and Right to Education, Work and Public Assistance for persons with disabilities (Article 41). However, a specific plan of action with focus on persons with disabilities emerged only in the 1990s with relevant legislations. The recent National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) has taken higher education a

step further with equitable and quality education of persons with disability. The Government and universities have brought about considerable changes in the system to facilitate higher education for persons with disabilities.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)

This replaced the earlier Act of 1995, to align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). As noted by Raub et al (2006), the UNCRPD outlines the legal duties of States to ensure full enjoyment of a wide range of economic, social, civil, and political rights specifically by individuals with disabilities, and education is one of the key commitments. UNCRPD's commitment to higher education is geared towards '...ensuring that persons with disabilities are able to access general tertiary education, vocational training, adult education and lifelong learning without discrimination and on an equal basis with others...' (Art.24.5, UNCRPD). The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) covers 21 disabilities and is in line with UNCRPD, ensuring the right to higher education and lifelong learning. The Act, 47.1 (b) emphasises disability related studies in all higher education, stating : 'induct disability as a component for all education courses for schools, colleges and University teachers, doctors, nurses, paramedical personnel, social welfare officers, rural development officers, Asha workers (health workers), *anganwadi* workers (early childhood workers), engineers, architects, other professionals and community workers. Focussing on research, Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (47. 2.) further states: 'All Universities shall promote teaching and research in disability studies including establishment of study centres for such studies and to take steps to include disabilities and research in higher education'.

Welfare and education of persons with disabilities have been integral aspects of planning by the Government of India. The Ministry of Education and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJ&E) have schemes for persons with disabilities. For instance, inclusive education is implemented by the Ministry of Education while special education is the responsibility of the Department of Disability Affairs of the MSJ&E. Though higher education is regulated by the Ministry of Education, the accessibility to academic material, barrier-free environment and such other supports are stipulated by the MSJ&E. The launching of Rashtriya Uchchar Siksha Abhiyan (RUSA, 2013), a scheme sponsored by the Central Government, has one of its noteworthy objectives in the context of education of persons with disabilities.

Higher Education System in India

A brief picture of higher education in India is provided to help in understanding how the education system reaches those with a disability.

Universities in India are classified into five types based on their management:

Central University, State University, Private University, Institutions-deemed-to-be-a-University and Institute of National Importance (Centre for Civil Societies, 2015). Colleges affiliated to a particular University award their degrees under the aegis of the respective University. The University Grants Commission (UGC) acts as the regulatory body to establish standards in higher education throughout the country. Furthermore, there are a number of professional councils such as the Medical Council of India, All India Council of Technical Education, National Council of Teacher Education, and Rehabilitation Council of India that regulate courses that are carried out by the respective Universities. All the Councils have made special provisions and reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, facilitating access and support for instructions and assessment procedures. The All India Council for Technical Education(AICTE) has developed guidelines for accessibility, promoting inclusive practices in higher education for persons with disabilities to be adhered to by all AICTE approved institutions of higher education (AICTE, 2022).

Rehabilitation Council of India

The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) was established by an Act of Parliament in 1992 to regulate professional education programmes in the area of disability rehabilitation (RCI Act, 1992). All the higher education and professional courses aiming at rehabilitation, such as special education, rehabilitation psychology, speech pathology and audiology etc., are regulated by the RCI. The curriculum, infrastructural facilities, conduct of the course by the Universities and other professional institutions are regulated and monitored by the RCI throughout the country, and the qualifying professionals are certified by the Council. In addition, the RCI also carries out continuing rehabilitation education programmes to update the professionals and to renew their certification to practice rehabilitation. This effort by the Government aims to maintain professional standards in higher education related to rehabilitation, which in turn leads to competent professionals working with persons with disabilities. Most of these courses are open to persons with disabilities, with specific accommodations and adaptations made.

Government Schemes for Higher Education of Persons with Disabilities

In the tenth Five Year Plan (2002 – 2007) and eleventh Five Year Plan (2008 – 2012) the focus on higher education for persons with disability led to specific plans and budget allocation in the name of 'component plan for the disabled' in various government departments, and scholarships were provided to pursue higher education (Tenth Five Year Plan, 2002). Barrier-free environment and other accessibility related issues received focus, leading to better awareness and support systems. Furthermore, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) 32(1) states that all government institutions of higher education and other higher education institutions receiving aid from the Government shall reserve not less than 5% seats for persons with benchmark disabilities.

A noteworthy scheme implemented during the tenth Five Year plan was the Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) scheme for students with disabilities pursuing higher education (Disability Law Initiative, 2002). It focussed on:

1) The establishment of special units for students with disabilities in various universities and colleges that would facilitate admission of student with disabilities; 2) To provide them with guidance and counselling, ensure accessibility with barrier-free environment; and 3) To provide assistive devices, special equipment to augment educational services for students with disabilities (Dawn, 2016a).

A number of universities and colleges have implemented the HEPSN scheme in the country. Pondicherry University took advantage of this scheme and established a disability friendly campus; the University then won the national award for the 'best training institution for the empowerment of persons with disabilities' in the year 2011. The facilities provided include free education including boarding and lodging for students with disabilities, accessible library with state-of-the-art facilities with hardware and software, all the buildings were made barrier-free buildings, single rooms for the persons with disabilities in the dormitories with accessible bathrooms, free transport for the day scholars with seats reserved in the buses, reading and scribe services for those who need, and well- informed faculty members to help the students meet their learning needs (Bharti, 2013; Pondicherry University website).

The Teacher Preparation in Special Education (TEPSE) scheme from the University Grants Commission provides financial assistance to higher education institutions

offering special education courses. There are also schemes by the UGC that provide financial assistance to teachers who are blind and National Fellowships for persons with disabilities (UGC, 2023).

These are some schemes available to a few students with disabilities, but India is yet to develop a national plan with clear guidelines so that every person with disability who wishes to pursue higher education has smooth access to those educational institutes that practice inclusion. A noteworthy point here is that every higher education institution is given guidelines to be followed for accessibility. Some of the practices are discussed in detail later.

NITI Aayog

NITI Aayog is a state-of-the-art resource centre of the Government, which is supposed to act with speed, promote research and innovation, provide strategic policy vision for the government, and deal with contingent issues. The scheme aims to set up dedicated institutes for technical education for persons with disabilities that would have direct impact on the job opportunities (NITI Aayog, 2017).

National Policies on Education

Considering the needs, changing trends and developments, the National Policies on Education have been brought out in 1968, 1986 and 2020 (NPE, 1968; NPE, 1986; NEP, 2020). The National Policy on Education 1986 included for the first time an exclusive subsection on education of students with disabilities. The major focus on inclusive education and specific programmes in higher education are given significant importance in the National Education Policy 2020.

National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC)

NAAC is set up by the UGC to conduct periodic assessment and accreditation of higher educational institutions to ensure quality of the institution. In addition to standards for barrier-free and accessible learning environments for persons with disabilities, it also has guidelines for the promotion of greater participation of persons with disabilities.

Efforts of Specific Universities in promoting Higher Education for Persons with Disabilities

With the Acts and policies in place, many universities have established special cells to address the specific needs of enrolled persons with disabilities. These cells, in addition to ensuring that the environment is barrier free, also address specific academic-related issues that the students with disabilities may face, ranging from organising books in accessible form, technological supports, examination related issues such as arranging for a scribe, and counselling support on any emotional issues, in short, being sensitive to the needs of the students. Some of the universities and institutes have made innovative efforts to accommodate persons with disabilities, a few of which are discussed here.

Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore (IIMB)

In IIMB, one of the prestigious business schools in India, an office of disability services was set up in the year 2010. At the time of admission, the specific needs of the persons with disability are assessed to determine the extent of support needed, and the information is passed on to faculty and facilities providers, so that these are available to the student without having to seek them each time. To name a few support systems: students with visual disabilities receive a copy of the PowerPoint file of their classes so that they can load it on a personal computer which has JAWS installed; students with hearing disabilities have a note-taker assigned in advance, who is present in every class; students with locomotor disabilities attend classes in rooms that are accessible without having to ask for them (Krishnan, n.d).

Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)

There are several IITs in India and they enrol students with disabilities. IIT Madras (IIT M) has specific 'Support Services for Students with Disabilities' (3SD). At the time of admission, the specific needs of the students are taken into account. IIT Madras also encourages the development of innovative projects related to disability and accessibility by the students, thus promoting indigenous development of products and programmes for persons with disabilities. (Think Change India, 2019; Outlook, 2021). All IITs in India promote technological innovations towards independent living of persons with disabilities. IIT Roorkee (IIT R) has established a school 'Anushruti Academy for the Deaf' (Anushruti, 2014) that lays the foundation for higher education of students who are deaf.

National Institutes

The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities has an exclusive programme on disability rehabilitation and has set up National Institutes in different parts of the country, each with a focus on a specific disability, namely, visual impairment, hearing impairment, locomotor/physical disability, intellectual disability, and multiple disability. These institutes and their regional centres aim at developing service models, innovate on aids and appliances, generate human resources in the field of the respective disability and carry out research and dissemination (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, 2022). All these institutes are affiliated to the universities in their region for conducting higher education programmes at Bachelor, Masters, M.Phil. and Doctoral levels. These courses have a certain percentage of seats reserved for persons with disabilities so as to enable them to become professionals in the area of disability rehabilitation if they wish. The Rehabilitation Council of India regulates the courses to ensure quality in the programmes.

Open University

At National and State levels there are a number of Open Universities that allow the students to enrol and study at their own pace. Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) is one such national university where a large number of persons with disability enrol to receive higher education. This university has a national centre for disability studies to cater to the educational, vocational and rehabilitation needs of persons with disabilities through a wide range of activities (IGNOU, 2022). Other Open Universities too have initiated efforts to make the university accessible to persons with disabilities. For instance, Tamil Nadu Open University has established a 'Centre for multimodal material production for differently abled' with the aim of making it a barrier-free university. Some of the efforts include production of Braille books, closed caption videos, computer assisted instructions and prosthetic and orthotic supports where needed (TNOU, 2012).

Skill Training

The Ministry of Labour and Employment also plays a role in the higher education of persons with disabilities by providing opportunities for skill training. This Ministry has established Vocational Rehabilitation Centres (VRC, n.d.), currently renamed as National Career Service Centre for the differently abled (NCSC-DA)

with 24 centres spread out in different parts of the country to provide training in specific skills for persons with varied disabilities. There are jobs reserved by the government for persons with disabilities and, typically, these centres aim at preparing the enrolled persons for these jobs. In addition, the Scheme for Implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, (SIPDA,1995) a scheme by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, focusses on skills training for persons with disabilities by establishing the Skill Council for Persons with Disability. This Council's objective is to create a robust and vibrant ecosystem for quality education and skill development for persons with disability in the country and to ensure barrier-free and accessible environments.

Universities dedicated to the Education of Persons with Disabilities

A few universities in India are dedicated to the education of persons with disabilities.

The Jagadguru Rambhadracharya Divyanga University (2001) was established in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh, to provide higher and professional education to persons with disabilities. The core aim of the university is to facilitate socioeconomic development by providing higher education to persons with disabilities. The university offers a disability-friendly campus, classrooms and courses enriched with traditional and modern knowledge. Besides providing boarding, lodging and essential requirements to the students, it also supports suitable job placement to persons with disabilities in public and private sector enterprises.

Dr. Shakuntala Misra National Rehabilitation University (2008) is the first State-funded university committed to providing needs-based higher education to persons with disabilities in an accessible and barrier-free environment. The university reserves 50% seats for students with disabilities in all courses. It promotes skill development and has job-oriented vocational / technical courses suitable to students with different disabilities, thus aiming at their social, educational and economic rehabilitation.

Dedicated Schemes and Institutions for the Deaf

The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD, 2015) has established the Indian Sign Language and Research Institute that conducts two programmes - DISLI (Diploma in Indian Sign Language Interpretation) and DTISL (Diploma in Teaching Indian Sign Language) - to develop professionals

competent in Sign Language. The DTISL is exclusively designed for deaf individuals to develop as teachers to teach Indian Sign Language (ISL). The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD, 2018) has also implemented a scheme for financial assistance for establishing colleges for deaf students in five zones of India. It provides financial supports for sustaining the existing special colleges for people who are deaf, with the objective of providing equal opportunities to students with hearing impairment for pursuing higher education.

Higher Education for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Higher education for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities is a challenge. In the past, typically, the special schools established by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) expanded to have vocational training units and/or exclusive vocational training units/sheltered workshops.

One such institute of higher education for persons with intellectual disabilities in India is

Manovikas Institute of Higher Education (n.d). This NGO, established at New Delhi, offers job oriented certificate and diploma level programmes to persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in particular. The college also focuses on life skill training leading towards independent living by persons with intellectual disabilities. One of the major achievements of this organisation is helping students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to enrol in higher education by preparing them for courses offered by the IGNOU. As these courses are offered by distance mode, the students are supported to learn and appear for the examination at their own pace. Manovikas Institute enrolls and supports these students with limited capacity for self-learning because it is an essential skill for distance education. This enables a number of students with intellectual and developmental disability to successfully complete graduation.

Technological Institutes supporting Education for Persons with Disabilities

Higher technological education is available for persons with disabilities as well.

The Kalasalingam University (KLU, 1984) offers inclusive technical education courses both at Diploma and Bachelor levels, such as a Bachelor of Technology (B.Tech). Students with and without disabilities can enrol in such programmes. The Dr. Ambedkar Institute of Technology for Handicapped (1997) was established in

Kanpur with a barrier-free campus which offers undergraduate /B. Tech courses. Diploma courses with an intake of 40 students each are offered exclusively for persons with disabilities, whereas 60 % seats are reserved in the B.Tech courses.

As can be seen from the examples cited, there are efforts by the Government, universities and civil societies to promote higher education for persons with different disabilities. The Government of India, through the University Grants Commission, has specified rules and regulations to enable quality and equitable education for persons with disabilities. Efforts at offering higher education for persons with disabilities are made by various government Ministries including the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the Ministry of Labour and Employment. In addition, universities, colleges and the private sector too reach out to enrol and educate persons with disabilities in the country. As a result, access to higher education for persons with disabilities is promoted.

Strengths in the Higher Education System

Acts and policies in the past three decades have ensured inclusive equitable education promoting lifelong learning for 'All' learners. Hence the needs of persons with disabilities are mandated to be met at all levels.

India has a dedicated Ministry and departments at the State and national levels for the empowerment of persons with disabilities, with provision for grievance redressal so that their voices are heard. The education policies in India are aligned to national priorities and global trends in early intervention, foundational literacy, inclusive education and higher education. India has regulatory bodies at more than one ministerial level, i.e., the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJ&E) which monitor human resource development in higher education. The Rehabilitation Council of India monitors human resource development exclusively in the area of capacity building related to rehabilitation of person with disabilities. Higher and technical education for persons with disabilities is greatly subsidised and sponsored by the Government through various schemes and policies apart from the reserved seats. Some Universities have offices specially to address the higher education needs of persons with disabilities.

Unless provisions are monitored, implementation is not ensured. In 2017, a year after the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act was enacted, in response to a plea

regarding non-implementation of reservation of seats for persons with disabilities and the environment not being accessible in the college, the Supreme Court of India directed the higher education institutions to comply with the provisions of the Act while admitting students in courses of higher education and to ensure accessible facilities. The Court directed UGC to form a committee to monitor the implementation of the provisions for persons with disabilities (Hindustan Times, Dec 15, 2017.)

These support and legal systems have resulted in an increase in the enrolment of persons with disabilities in higher education. A survey conducted by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for People with Disability (NCPEDP, 2005) reported 0.1% of the total number of students in universities had a disability. Dawn (2016b) reported that 8,449 students with disabilities were enrolled in higher education. In comparison to the 2005 NCPEDP figures and Dawn's data of 2016, the number of persons with disabilities enrolled in 2020-21 was 79,035 (Lakshman, 2023). Though there has been an increase in enrolment, it is not adequate considering the right to education and the support systems provided in the country.

Challenges Faced by the Students with Disabilities

While Government mandates and support systems to promote higher education for persons with disabilities are in place, poor enrolment is a cause of concern. Kunnath and Mathew (2019) carried out a qualitative study in six metropolitan areas of India, involving adults with disabilities who have had higher education, and found that poor planning and implementation of disability policies, lack of disability sensitisation in society and inadequate availability of resources were major challenges for persons with disabilities in pursuing higher education.

Attitudinal barriers are a major challenge to be overcome by persons with disabilities. In the words of the authors' colleague with disability, who works as a teaching faculty,

"Our ability is generally underestimated and we need to prove ourselves at every stage to exercise our rights".

Unless this issue is addressed, no amount of efforts towards inclusion will have the expected positive results.

India is a nation with diverse socioeconomic, religious, linguistic and geographical variations. These differences contribute to difficulties in imparting

education uniformly to all. Though some colleges and universities are made accessible and barrier-free, roads and transportation facilities to these colleges are not particularly disability-friendly, preventing many from accessing higher education. As observed by Zuber and Ramakrishna (2021), a major challenge among students with disabilities is lack of accessible infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, toilets, dining halls and space for sports and games; unsupportive / overcrowded classrooms without appropriate seating facility and poor acoustics. As rightly noted by Kaufman et al (2023), depending on the nature and severity of disabilities, creative thinking about equipment, technology, and sometimes more difficult-to-make accommodations and variation in presentation or participation are required, as in the case, for example, of hearing impairments and deaf-blindness. Specific focus on this aspect is essential for promoting higher education for persons with disabilities.

Another reason for poor enrolment in higher education is a lack of financial resources among persons with disabilities. As noted by Ambati (2009), many persons with disabilities are first-generation learners from poor families and have difficulty in affording higher education. Though there are scholarships provided by the Government, these are not sufficient to sustain them. Therefore, many opt to find jobs rather than go for higher education.

The real challenge in the higher education sector is to reach the unreached persons with disabilities. Research and development have not yet achieved an optimum level in the area of disability rehabilitation. India is an agrarian country with 70% being rural. Technological advances are yet to reach all corners of the country. Lack of awareness about government schemes and about special arrangements in some colleges and facilities regarding higher education are other major causes for poor college enrolment. Efforts have to be geared towards creating awareness on the rights, entitlements and policies related to higher education of persons with disabilities.

The Way Forward

Technological development has been rapid in the past three decades and persons with disabilities have increasingly better modes of communication and mobility, leading them towards independent living. There is a high demand for and focus on the information technology sector supported by policies of the government. Online education and virtual programmes are recent additions in most universities, enabling more students with disabilities to enrol in higher

education. While efforts are made to improve physical access to colleges, online courses by open universities can be a blessing in reaching higher education to persons with disabilities.

For achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2015), the National Education Policy 2020 accentuates that the entire education system be reconfigured and re-energised to support and foster learning, from early childhood up to higher education. A deadline of 2040 is set, wherein all higher education institutions shall aim to become multidisciplinary institutions and have larger student enrolments for vibrant communities. The Government has laid down certain steps which include, among others, developing and supporting technology tools for better participation and learning outcomes of persons with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Persons with disabilities in India can benefit from special provisions made in the higher education institutions and access such institutions largely as a result of the enactment of legislations and policies. Regulatory bodies function to ensure quality and equity in education. There are also exclusive higher education universities and colleges established by the Government and private agencies, at central and state levels, dedicated to the education of persons with disabilities. Special support cells are created in many universities and colleges to facilitate the education of persons with disabilities.

In spite of the systems that are in place, the enrolment rate of persons with disabilities is not optimal, though the numbers have increased in the recent past. Distances and lack of accessible transportation add considerably to this situation. The optimal use of technology in online education may contribute to an increase in enrolment.

Raising awareness about the potentials of persons with disabilities can contribute to diminishing the attitudinal barriers in society and can lead to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all life domains.

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