



REVIEW ARTICLE

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EDUCATION OF PERSONS WITH VISUAL DISABILITIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Historically in India, the persons with disabilities enjoyed co-existence, though at different times, the treatment and attitudes were at variance. Out of all the types of disabilities, visual disability poses greater challenges than other types. In recent year's changes in legislation, as reflected in the Right to Persons with Disabilities Act and the Right to Education Act, have provided a much needed focus on education of persons with disabilities. Specific legislations have been put in place to ensure educational empowerment of persons with disabilities. The department of empowerment of persons with disabilities (Divyangjan), Govt. of India and National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities has developed many service models. Through Rehabilitation Council of India, a statutory body, human resource development programs are standardized. Many Non-Government Organizations have started special education, integrated education, inclusive education and vocational training programme. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) seeks to ensure that every child in the age group of 6-14 years with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education. Every child with a disability should have access to appropriate preschool, primary and secondary level education by 2020 as per National Policy.

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INTRODUCTION

Though the Constitution of India guarantees equality of all citizens, persons with disabilities have been, in reality, facing stigma, discrimination in education and neglect due to socio-psychological and cultural reasons. Historically in India, the persons with disabilities enjoyed co-existence, though at different times, the treatment and attitudes were at variance. In other words, they were never excluded from society by confinement to institutions. Rather, they lived with their families. As far as education was concerned, even the Gurukula Ashram promoted the basic education principals of special education to meet the social expectations of their prospective interests. Education is the most effective vehicle of social and economic empowerment. Despite decades of

educational reform through various schemes such as Operation Blackboard, Integrated Education for Disabled Children (IEDC), it was realized that a vast majority of children were still out of the educational stream and efforts made by the states were insufficient to achieve universal elementary education. The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) was conceived as a Centrally sponsored scheme at the end of the Ninth Five Year Plan to improve the educational status in the country through interventions designed to improve accessibility, reduce gender and social gaps and improve the quality of learning. The SSA laid down a framework for achieving the goals of universal enrolment through time bound targets and was conceived in a mission mode. The SSA seeks to ensure that every child in the age group of 6-14 years with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education.

Under the SSA, the focus of the education programme for children with special needs has been on mainstreaming children with special needs (CWSN) in regular schools and supporting their participation in the schooling process. The main components of the interventions for children with special needs include (i) identification, functional and formal assessment, appropriate educational placement, preparation of Individualized Educational Plan, provision of aids and appliances, teacher training, appointment of resource teachers and therapists, establishing resource rooms to provide specialized support to children with disabilities, and provision of ramps, handrails and disabled friendly toilets, monitoring and evaluation and a special focus on girls with special needs; (ii) special training for children with special needs with a view to preparing them for schools and promoting their effective inclusion in elementary education; (iii) home-based education for children with severe and profound disabilities with the objective of preparing children with special needs for schools and for life by imparting to them basic life skills; (iv) financial support for integration of children with special needs, as per specific proposal. These provisions have resulted in increased identification and enrollment of CWSN.

Historical perspective in India

In visual disability, unlike other disability the history of special education has not been very encouraging. The first school for visual disability was established by Miss Annie Sharp, a Christian missionary from England in Amritsar in 1887. There were just four schools for the blind at the turn of the Century. But the efforts in this direction by the voluntary organizations and the Christian missionaries continued. By 1944; when the report on blindness in India was submitted, there were 32 schools in undivided India. Most of these schools were being managed by private agencies, with grants from some state governments. After independence, there has been some growth of special education in our country and it has been seen that during 1951 and 1979, 104 schools were established. Education and empowerment of disability is mainly a state subject. "Relief of the disabled and unemployable" figures at S. No. 9 in "List II" (State List) in the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. "Disability" also appears in the 11th & 12th Schedules (pertaining to Panchayats & Municipalities) of the Constitution in this manner. 11th Schedule: Entry No. 26:- "Social Welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded", and 12th Schedule: Entry No.9 "Safeguarding the interests of weaker sections of society, including the handicapped and mentally retarded." On the recommendation of the expert committee first Braille press in 1951; first Vocational Training Centre for the Adult Blind Women in 1957; and first School for the Blind by the Central Govt. in January 1959; Dehradun has been established. The Government initiative in 1973-75; to gauge the impact of its schemes for the welfare of the blind led to the decision to set up one apex level National Institute for the Visually Handicapped in 1979; at Dehradun. By 2016, the special education centers were 973.

Indian Constitution and Legislation

The percentage of persons with disabilities in the USA is 12%, in the UK is 18%, in Germany is 9%, in Sri Lanka is 5%, in Pakistan is 9%. This variation is due to the way we estimate disability. According to Census 2011, there are 2.68 crore Persons with Disabilities in India (who constitute 2.21 percent

of the total population). The number of persons with various disabilities according to the 2011 Census is shown on table- I. Out of the total population of Persons with Disabilities, about 1.50 crore are male and 1.18 crore female. These include persons with visual, hearing, speech and loco-motor disabilities; mental illness, mental retardation, multiple disabilities and other disabilities. In this sector, there are four legislations namely, Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992, Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995; National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999 and Mental Health Act, 1997. (Out of these, the first three legislations are dealt in the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and the fourth in the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare)

The RTE Act, 2009 was amended in 2012 and the RTE Amendment Act, 2009 which came into force with effect from 1 August 2012, provides for inclusion of children with disability as contained in the Right to Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 and the National Trust Act under the purview of RTE Act and providing them free and compulsory education. Further, the RTE Act also provides to parents of children with severe and profound disabilities the right to opt for home based education. The Act has been instrumental, to a large extent, in changing public perceptions about the abilities of children with special needs (CWSN).

Current scenario

Even though the last few years have seen an increased focus on the education of children with disabilities, fundamental issues remain in relation to how differences are understood and responded to in the Indian context. A major challenge in special education is to ensure that as far as possible; every child with special needs is mainstreamed and provided the needed resource support. In pursuance of this objective and with the view to enriching academic assistance to CWSN, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) has developed exemplar materials on inclusive pedagogy and practices with the key objective of enhancing the skills of regular teachers on handling CWSN in a mainstream classroom so that teachers could extend need-based academic support to CWSN. SSA provides upto Rs.3000/- per child for the inclusion of disabled children, as per specific proposal, per year. District plan for children with special needs is formulated within the Rs.3000/- per child norm, with Rs. 1000/- ear- marked exclusively for engagement of resource teachers. Over the years, government has funded special schools through grants-in-aids (under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment) and integration in mainstream schools through programmes, such as the Integrated Education for Disabled Children (under the Ministry of Human Resource and Development). In policies and practice, deterministic viewpoints about children's ability remain largely unchallenged and naïve statements about where to educate children with disabilities exist. For instance, the MHRD, 2013 document, provides a list of children who can be taught in the mainstream, and the important variables for doing so are IQ score and the nature of impairment.

Recent research in India highlights that education is a priority even for parents with children with disabilities and in some cases they are equally willing to make the investment in private education. Parents of children with visual disability

equated education with increased employment prospects for their child, leading to a better quality of life than they had. More significantly, young people with disabilities who had attended school for 8 years or more, discussed the impact of schooling in terms of developing a positive self, related it to notions of respect and dignity, development of basic skills such as reading newspapers, accessing information on public transport, and heightened sense of independence.

Furthermore, as we work towards developing an educational system capable of accommodating greater human diversity, we must be creative in our undertaking. The need is to develop 'value free' transition points between different educational streams (special, mainstream etc), and where the participation in one system will not stigmatize learners for life. While there is no argument against the fact that all groups of children should be provided access to a learning environment which is engaging and empowering, it is still not clear *how* this is best achieved. Most of special schools are funded by Govt. of India. According to the study of Rao and Reddy, various services are available across these centers, as shown on table II.

Skill Training Programs for Persons with Visual Disability

Improving vocational training and employment opportunities for persons with visual disability is a critical element for enhancing the quality of life for individual with visual disability, their families, but there are also substantial gains for the broader economy. There were only 32 institutions for the blind in India before partition. It was, generally, believed that most blind people were gifted with musical ability. Many of them learnt music and were career music teachers in the community. There were very few opportunities for vocational skill training or other forms of economic rehabilitation. A few traditional crafts such as re-caning, weaving, doormat making formed the subject matter of vocational services for the visually impaired. According to the Census 2011, about 1.34 crores persons with disabilities are in the employable age of 15 to 59 years. About 99 lakh persons with disabilities in the employable age group were non-workers or are marginal workers. It is also fact that persons with visual disability are among the poorest in the population. Today, a wide range of vocational courses are available for the blind, some striking examples being training in light engineering, providing computer-aided services, stenography, physiotherapy, acquiring middle-level managerial skills, along with training in a range of conventional occupations.

Common Braille Code

There was almost complete absence of a common Braille Code for Indian languages. About 10 different Codes were being used by schools in different parts of the country. There was no Braille printing facility, nor a unit for the production of basic assistive devices. In November 1950, Bharati Braille came to be accepted as the National Code. Thereafter, the Central Braille Press and the Workshop for the Manufacture of Braille Appliances – the first ever such unit in the country came to be established in Dehradun. The number of Braille printing presses has been going up steadily in the country. Many of these printing houses are now producing books in Braille with the help of very high-speed computerized Braille embossers. Equipments like Perkins Braille Writers are also available in the country at substantially reduced costs.

National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disability (Divyangjan)

The NIEPVD, was setup by Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India, in 1979 with the main objectives to undertake or sponsor the training of trainers and rehabilitation professionals and to conduct, sponsor, co-ordinate or subsidize research in biomedical engineering leading to the effective evaluation of special appliances/instruments or suitable surgical or medical procedures or the development of new special appliances/instruments. The Institute's human resource development activities comprise degree, diploma and certificate level courses in special education, orientation and mobility, refresher/orientation courses for field functionaries and service providers; diploma and certificate courses in vocational training and schooling for visually impaired children up to higher secondary level. Short term training programme are run with sole aim of improving capacity of major institutions and of individuals providing services to the public in general and Persons with Disabilities in particular.

Rehabilitation Council of India

Not surprisingly, issues of access and location remain paramount in discussions and little regard is given to the quality of classroom based processes. The lack of teacher preparation and training in responding to the needs of children with disabilities is noted even by the National Council for Teacher Education, which reflects on the "inadequate preparation of teachers to address diversity in the classroom". Additionally research evidence is growing in relation to the challenges faced by teachers. Furthermore, the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), a statutory body, enacted by an Act of Parliament, is entrusted to regulate and monitor the training programmes in the field of special education and disability rehabilitation. RCI facilities development of human resources in the disability sector for 16 categories of professionals allocated to it. For this purpose, a number of courses have been developed, standardised and approved at Certificate, Diploma, Degree, P.G. Diploma, Master, M.Phil and Ph.D. levels. These courses are being offered by more than 620 institutions including more than 50 universities across the country. Until now, RCI has registered approximately more than 1, 00,000 professionals.

Technology for the Visual Disability

Person with visual disability can do most of the things that a visually normal person can, but with the help of appropriate technologies and tools and perhaps using modified ways and means. However, the technology and tools may not reach the needy persons at appropriate time/place. Some reasons for this are given below:

Availability: Right kind of tools, especially those that are meant for persons with disability are not available in the general market. Lack of proper distribution system is also to be blamed for the lack of availability.

Affordability: Cost of technology or tools are often prohibitive. For example, the screen reading software is the basic technology to be used by persons with blindness or low vision to work on the computer. This software costs more than the computer hardware.

Table 1. Population of Persons with Disabilities in India by Type of Disability

| | Population in Lakh | Percentage of the total population of India |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---|
| Seeing | 50.32 | 18.8 |
| Hearing | 50.71 | 18.9 |
| Speech | 19.98 | 7.5 |
| Movement | 54.36 | 20.3 |
| Mental Retardation | 15.05 | 5.6 |
| Mental illness | 7.22 | 2.7 |
| Multiple Disabilities | 21.16 | 18.4 |
| Other | 49.27 | 7.9 |
| Total | 268.10 | 100 |

(Source: Census of India 2011)

Table 2. Services available at the Special School in India

| Facilities / services | % of special schools |
|---------------------------|----------------------|
| Residential | 26 |
| Vocational Skill Training | 37 |
| Sheltered workshops | 12 |
| Early Intervention | 31 |
| Pre Education Management | 13 |
| Integrated services | 17 |
| Inclusive Education | 65 |
| Special Education | 38 |
| Multiple disabilities | 21 |
| Higher Education | 16 |

(Source: Organizational aspects of special schools in India, International Journal of Rehabilitation Research 2004; Vol. 27, Issue 2.

Awareness: The potential beneficiaries often are not even aware of what is available for their benefit.

Language: Currently, the latest and the most effective technology available in developed countries are not available in Indian languages. For example, a scanner can be used by blind persons to read printed books. This technology which is in use for English language for the past 20 years, is not available for any Indian language till date. For this reason, most of these tools are useful to that small percentage of English-knowing blind persons

Action Plan of the Govt. of India

To empower persons with disability and ensure quality accessible education, the institutional framework of the Govt. of India consists of office of Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Rehabilitation Council of India, National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities, and nine National Institutes dedicated to different disabilities, Regional and District-level Centres for Persons with Disabilities and Composite Regional Centres and 199 District Disability Rehabilitation Centres. These organizations are involved in providing rehabilitation services, education, training and research, regulation and developmental activities. The nodal department's two Central Public Sector Enterprises viz. ALIMCO and NHFDC are involved in manufacture of aids and assistive devices and providing financial assistance for economic empowerment of the PwDs.

Right to Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, ensure free and accessible education to persons with disabilities in the age group of 6 to 18 years. In keeping with the action plan, all the schools in the country will be made disabled friendly by 2020 and all educational institutions including hostel, libraries, laboratories and building will have barrier free access for the

disabled. There are many positive and promoting features to make disabled education a success.

Since it is the understanding that the creation of better environment can reduce the hardship of disability, the Central Government has undertaken several initiatives in this area in a planned manner. Some of the important schemes of the Department of empowerment of persons with disabilities under implementation are enumerated below:-

- The scheme, Rajiv Gandhi National Fellowship has been introduced on 01.04.2012 to enable students with disabilities to pursue M.Phil/ Ph.D courses.
- National Scholarship schemes for students with disabilities under National Fund as well as Trust Fund, provide financial assistance to students to pursue post matriculation, professional or technical courses and various skill development courses for their empowerment.
- Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme (DDRS), envisages financial assistance to NGOs for providing education, vocational training and rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities.
- Scheme of Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/ Fitting of Aids/Appliances (ADIP Scheme), provides grant - in- aid to various implementing agencies (NGOs/National Institutes/DDRCs/ALIMCO/ State Handicapped Development Corporations/other local bodies) for purchase/fitting of aids & assistive devices for the physical rehabilitation of PwDs.
- Scheme for Implementation of Persons with Disabilities Act (SIPDA), provides grant-in-aid to State Governments, organizations of Central/ State Governments, including autonomous bodies and Universities, for creating barrier free access to their buildings; making websites accessible, and for early detection and diagnosis of hearing impaired.
- Scheme of Incentive to Employers in the Private Sector for Providing Employment to Persons with Disabilities, provides employers' contribution for Employees Provident Fund and Employees State Insurance for three years for Persons with Disabilities employees, employed in the private sector with a monthly salary upto Rs.25,000/-

Conclusion

With the ratification of the UNCRPD on 1 Oct 2007 by the Govt. of India, many milestones have been left behind in the path, significant achievements have been made and opportunities have been created for the disabled. Much has been done but much remains to be done. The greatest challenge for the Central Government and the State Governments is the achievement of quality education in inclusive and accessible setup for persons with visual disability. The Government alone cannot accomplish this task of making the "Right Real". Interestingly, there was a paradigm shift in approach towards Persons with Disabilities since the Ninth Five Year Plan, from the earlier welfare based approach to a rights-based approach. National Policy for Persons with Disabilities also advocated a multi-sectoral and multi-collaborative approach to ensure education to persons with visual disability.

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