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## **Inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education in India: Some issues and suggestions**

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Higher education has its own importance in terms of employability, political power, and national development. The Right to Persons with Disabilities Act (formerly the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995) (2016) indicates that persons with disabilities should have access to education at all levels, and efforts have been made to improve the status of higher education for the disabled. Despite initiatives by the government of India, the enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is still very low, and this group is lagging far behind in comparison to the 3% of reservations that are available to them. This article reports on the status of students with disabilities in higher education and various initiatives taken by the government of India for the higher education of students with disabilities. The paper also highlights the issues affecting the higher education of students with disabilities in India and possible ways in which the issues could be addressed.

**Keywords:** Higher education, Inclusion, Students with disability, India, Issues, Suggestions

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## **Introduction**

An estimated 1 billion people, or 15 percent of the world's population, experience some form of disability or impairment, and 80 percent of them live in developing countries (WHO, 2019). Statistics show that the number of disabled people is steadily increasing as a result of population growth, aging, the emergence of chronic diseases, and medical advances that preserve and prolong life, resulting in an overwhelming demand for health and rehabilitation services (Srivastava & Khan, 2008). India, the world's second-most populous country, has 26 million disabled people, accounting for 2.21 percent of its total population of a billion and a quarter people (Census, 2011). Among the 26 million disabled Indians, nearly 12 million (45 percent) are illiterate. Only 13% of the 14 million (55%) literate disabled population has a secondary education, and only 5% has a graduate or higher education (Census, 2011). The Government of India has undertaken several initiatives since independence in 1947 for the education of children with disabilities, and efforts have been made towards inclusion of children with disabilities in general education after ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007. India has made considerable progress in terms of putting in place a robust legal framework and a range of programmes and schemes that have improved the enrolment rates of children with disabilities in schools (UNESCO, 2019). But when it comes to their higher education, it seems there has been no improvement or almost zero improvement even after decades of implementation of the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act 1995. There are only a little over 0.5 percent of students with disabilities enrolled in the higher education institutions of India (NCPEDP, 2015). Thus, this article is an attempt to understand the possible reasons contributing to poor performance in India with regard to providing higher education to persons with disabilities and to offer possible ways to overcome the issues. Prior to delving into the issues, it is critical to understand the various initiatives undertaken by the government of India to promote higher education for people with disabilities.

### **Policies, Programmes and Legislation for the Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities into Mainstream Education in India**

The origins of inclusive education in India can be traced back to 1966, the first time the Education Commission suggested integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education. As an experiment in integrated education, the central government implemented the scheme of Integrated

Education of Disabled Children (IEDC) in selected blocks of the country in 1974. The National Policy for Children (1974) was designed to provide guidelines to the Ministries of the Central Government, State Governments, and other agencies for an integrated approach to child development. The success of the IEDC scheme led to priority consideration of integrated education in the Sixth Five-Year Plan (1980–1985).

In 1986, the National Policy on Education (NPE) laid special emphasis on the removal of disparities and the equalisation of educational opportunities at all levels by attending to the disability-specific learning needs of children with disabilities, who have been denied equality so far (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 1986). The main objective of NPE was to integrate the physically and mentally handicapped with the general community as equal partners, prepare them for normal growth, and enable them to face life with courage and confidence. The adoption of the Programme of Action (POA) in 1992 paved the way for this initiative. The successful implementation of Project Integrated Education for the Disabled (PIED) resulted in both regular school teachers and students becoming more receptive towards students with disabilities (Azad, 1996).

The implementation of the District Primary Education Programme (DPEP) in 1994–95 laid special emphasis on the integration of children with mild and moderate disabilities in line with world trends. It was one of the largest programmes in terms of funding, with a budget of 740 million INR in 149 districts across 14 states (NCERT, 2011). In accordance with the 1995 Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation) Act, all states and union territories were expected to guarantee that people with disabilities had access to the same educational opportunities and fundamental human rights as their peers without disabilities. The act further emphasised that, whenever possible, students with disabilities should be educated in regular school settings. The Government of India set up the Ramamurthy Committee (1992) to comment upon NPE/POA stipulations and make recommendations for early identification of children with disabilities, formulation of stimulation programmes, integrated education of the children with disabilities, and bringing about mutual reinforcement of the pedagogies of special and general education.

Since the passage of the PWD Act in 1995, a number of other significant initiatives have taken place as well. Those include the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (Education for All) movement launched in 2001 that included a

policy of "zero rejection." It proposed that no child with special needs be neglected or denied enrollment because of a disability. These legal mandates have helped to shape the comprehensive National Action Plan for Inclusion in Education of Children and Persons with Disabilities (IECYD) (MHRD, 2005). The key goals of this plan were to make sure that (a) no child is refused entry to a mainstream school; (b) no child would be turned away due to a disability; and (c) mainstream and specialty training institutes serving people with disabilities, in the government or non-government sector, enable the growth of a cadre of teachers ready to work within the inclusion principles. The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognised that persons with disabilities are a valuable human resource for the country and sought to create an environment that provided them equal opportunities, protection of their rights, and full participation in society.

The landmark passage of the Right to Education Act 2009 marks a historic moment for the children of India as it guarantees their right to quality elementary education by the state. RTE provides a ripe platform to reach the unreached, with specific provisions for disadvantaged groups, including children with disabilities.

The University Grants Commission (UGC), a statutory body of the Government of India, is supporting universities and colleges in the country to engage in special education activities to empower persons with disabilities. Since the Ninth Five-Year Plan, the UGC has been implementing the scheme of assistance to universities and colleges for Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN), which is primarily intended to create an environment at higher education institutions to enrich the higher education learning experiences of persons with disabilities. Creating awareness about the capabilities of persons with disabilities, engaging in construction aimed at improving accessibility, purchasing equipment to enrich learning, etc. are the broad categories of assistance under this scheme. The working group report on the development of the eleventh five-year plan (2007-12) recommended the inclusion of disabled children, disabled friendly schools, an inclusive system of education policy, teacher training in managing children with disabilities, and the establishment of a disability cell in all higher education institutions.

## **Status of Education of Persons with Disabilities in India**

Higher education has its own importance in terms of employability, political power, and national development. Diversity in terms of caste, creed, and physical appearance is seen on the campuses of higher education institutions; they need to be ready to cater to the needs of such diverse students. Being an important contributory factor for ensuring social justice, there is a need to provide vertical mobility to deprived sections of society by making higher education accessible to them, which in turn will improve the quality of their lives (Azad, 2008, p. 19). The Warnock Committee Report (1978) emphasizes the importance of reassessing the needs of students with disabilities well before they enter the world of higher education.

People with disabilities have a right to get higher education, and not making adequate provisions to facilitate their proper education would amount to "discrimination" (The Supreme Court of India, as cited in the Hindustan Times, December 15, 2017). It is not only necessary to provide necessary education to persons with disabilities, but it is also necessary to ensure that such education is imparted to them in a fruitful manner so that they can lead an independent, economically self-sufficient, and fully participatory life. Lack of inclusive measures at the higher education level limits the opportunity for professional growth and suitable employment for these persons with disabilities (TISS, 2018). It directed the government institutions of higher education and other such institutions, which were receiving aid from the government, to comply with the provisions of the 2016 Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD) (Hindustan Times, December 15, 2017). The RPWD Act 2016 (formerly PWD Act 1995) indicates that persons with disabilities should have access to education at all levels, and efforts have been made to improve the status of higher education for the disabled. At present, the government of India has undertaken several initiatives for the higher education of persons with disabilities. Some of these initiatives include the establishment of an equal opportunity cell, coaching schemes for the National Eligible Test (NET) and State Eligible Test (SET), higher education of persons with special needs (HEPSN), teacher preparation for special education (TEPSE), financial assistance to visually impaired teachers, the National Fellowship for students with disabilities, the National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology (ICT), the Central Polytechnic Scheme for Persons with Disabilities, the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC) scholarship, etc. Despite these efforts, the enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education institutions is still very low.

According to the World Bank Report (2009), primary enrollment of children with disabilities has significantly improved since the early 2000s. The enrolment of children with disabilities in regular schools increased sharply from 566,921 in 2002–2003 to 2.35 million in 2012–2013 (NUEPA, 2014). Presently, there are 21,08,918 children with disabilities receiving school education (from classes I to XII) under Samagra Siksha in India (MHRD, 2019). However, it is also evident that their learning outcomes remained substantially worse than the rest (Soni, 2013). Thus, despite the Indian government's efforts to increase the enrollment of children with disabilities, progress has been very slow (Singal, 2016). Even the number of enrolled children with disabilities drops significantly with each successive level of schooling in India (UNESCO, 2019). This could be gauged from the fact that only 85,877 students with disabilities enrolled in higher education institutions in India against an estimated total enrolment of 37.4 million (AISHE, 2019). This is only 0.23% of the total enrolment of 3,73,99,388 students in higher education institutions in India. This reveals that the actual figure of 85,877 is nowhere close to the expected figure of 18,69,969 based on the 5% reservation availed to them. This brings to light the stark reality that, despite the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), only 0.23 percent of the mandated 3 percent (now 5% under the RPWD Act, 2016) has been implemented, raising the question of why the Indian higher education system is inaccessible to students with disabilities. To find an answer to this question, the authors have reviewed the available literature on higher education for students with disabilities in India.

## **Method**

### **Systematic Literature Search**

Literature on higher education for students with disabilities were identified through a systematic literature search. The search was conducted using Sodhganga (an Indian research repository) to identify relevant studies, and an additional internet search was conducted for relevant papers from April to June 2022. A text search was conducted for keywords using the “higher education” and “students with disabilities” OR “disabled students” OR “special educational needs” and “issues” OR “problems.”

### **Selection of Papers**

The search resulted in a total of 1079 studies. The titles and abstracts of these studies were screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria given below, prior to consideration of the full review. The following inclusion criteria were used for the review: (a) The literature focused on higher education of students

with disabilities. (b) The data were collected from the students with disabilities. (c) The studies conducted in education field. (d) The literature were published between 2010 and 2022. Apart from these, the exclusion criteria used for the review were: (a) The studies conducted in other disciplines (health science, sociology, psychology, physical education, economics etc.) than education. (b) The literature aimed at teachers, parents or other stakeholders. (c) The literature was aimed at school education of students with disabilities. (d) The literature focused on learning difficulty or disability. (e) The studies were on experiment or intervention programmes. (f) The studies were not written in English. The titles of the studies were initially screened for eligibility, which resulted in the exclusion of 951 studies because they were conducted in other disciplines than education or focusing on the school education or special education, or based on experiment or were not published in English. Following this stage, 128 studies remained. The abstracts of these studies were checked against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which resulted in a further 113 studies being excluded as they did not present the findings on issues related to higher education of students with disabilities. A more detailed screening against the inclusion and exclusion criteria was conducted using the full texts for the remaining 15 studies, which resulted in the removal of a further 4 studies. Reasons for removal at this stage included: the studies were solely focused on learning disability. Eleven studies remained for review (see Table 1). Figure 1 shows the flow diagram of the search results.

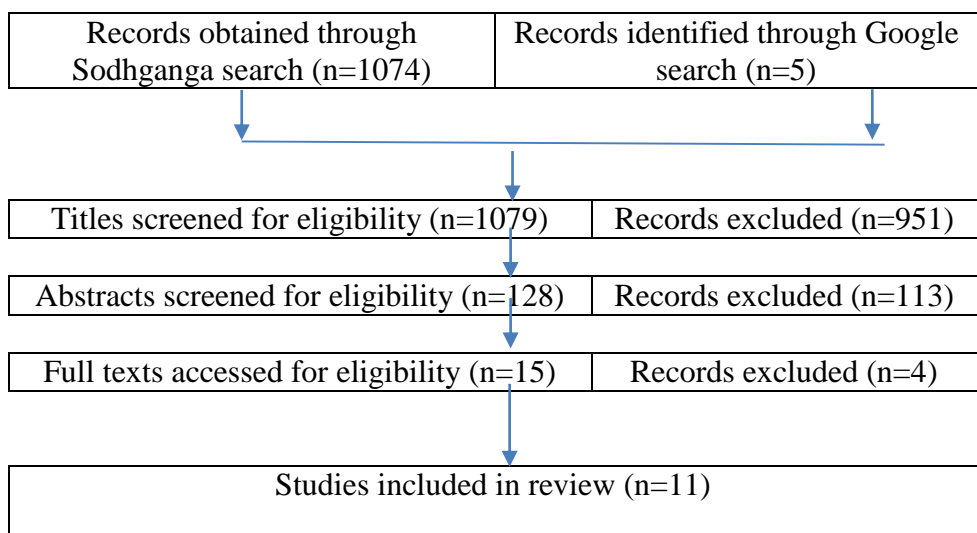


Figure 1: Flow Diagram of Search Phases

*Table 1: Overview of the Nine Studies on Higher Education of SWD Resulted out of the Review*

<b>Author</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Disability Category</b>
Ahmed, W.	2016	--	Review article		All
Gupta, R.	2018	New Delhi	Survey	120 SWD	All
Kunnath, S. K. & Mathew, S. N.	2019	--	Focus group	43 SWD	All
Manzoor, B.	2022	Jammu & Kashmir	Interview	22 SWD	All
Mistry, H. S.	2013	Gujarat	Survey	143 SWD	All
NCPEDP	2015	--	Status survey		All
Omkar, P.	2018	Andhra Pradesh	Survey	126 SWD	All
Palan. R.	2017	Maharashtra	Interview	46 SWD	All
Rao, A. N.	2012	Andhra Pradesh	Survey	100 SWD	All
Singh, R.	2017	Uttar Pradesh	Interview	60 SWD	VI
TISS	2015	Maharashtra	Accessibility Report		All

## Results

There were eleven studies found that met the criteria of a study of higher education of the students with disabilities, covering at least one major category of disabilities, conducted in India, and published between 2010 and 2022. Most of the literature were doctoral dissertations identified through the Sodhganga search while the identified records from Google were a status survey (NCPEDP, 2015), review article (Ahmed, 2016), accessibility report (TISS, 2015) and M.Phil. dissertation (Manzoor, 2022). These studies used mainly survey questionnaires (Mistry, 2013; Rao, 2017; Gupta, 2018; Omkar, 2018) or interviews (Palan, 2017; Singh, 2017; Manzoor, 2022). Except for a study by Singh (2017) that focused on students with visual impairment, the majority of studies focused on all types of disability. The studies covered varied regions of India, such as Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra, Gujarat,



Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttar Pradesh. The sample ranged from 22 students with disabilities (Manzoor, 2022) to 143 students with disabilities (Mistry, 2013).

### **Issues Identified**

The reviewed studies identified a number of issues affecting the higher education of students with disabilities in India. Some studies addressed all disability categories, while one addressed visual impairment. The categories included in the studies were physical, visual, hearing, and intellectual disabilities. For the purpose of this review, students with disabilities were used when discussing issues of higher education for students with disabilities. When appropriate, more specific terms are used. Also, some additional literature on school education and policies are also mentioned in support of the arguments.

### ***Lack of Awareness***

One reason for the low enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education institutions could be a lack of awareness among people with disabilities about the various provisions and schemes, which prevents them from applying for the area of their interest in higher education (Kannauth & Mathew, 2019; Mistry, 2013; Singh, 2017). Even many of the students with disabilities are not aware of the reservation quotas available to them for their education. Many of the authorities, teachers, and even parents were also not aware of the provisions and legislation for the education of students with disabilities (Gupta, 2018; Manzoor, 2022; Mistry, 2013; Rao, 2012). This greatly affects the higher education of students with disabilities, as some authorities will deny admitting the students with disabilities in courses of their interest due to their disability, and teachers who are not aware of the learning needs of students with disabilities will remain inattentive towards the students with disabilities. The findings of the research studies on the school education of children with disabilities also support this finding by revealing that the majority of the teachers were unable to support inclusion because they had not received any training and had no experience teaching students with disabilities (Shah, Das, Desai & Tiwari, 2013; Das, Gichuru & Singh, 2013). Among the disabilities, the majority of the students with disabilities in higher education institutions were orthopaedic impaired (Gupta, 2018; Mistry, 2013; NCPEDP, 2015), but the enrollment in the categories of visual impairment, hearing impairment, and mental illness is very low. So it could be said that the lack of awareness about these disabilities was a major hindrance to their higher education.

### ***No Strict Implementation of the 1995 Persons with Disabilities Act***

The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation) Act of 1995 (now replaced by the Right to Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016) requires that every child with a disability have access to free education in an appropriate environment until the age of eighteen, as well as a 3% reservation for persons with disabilities in all educational institutions and other educational institutions receiving government aid (Ministry of Education, 2016). However, even after more than 20 years of its implementation, the situation has not changed much. For instance, based on the 1995 Act, all higher education institutions have a quota of 3 percent (now 5% under RPWD Act, 2016) for students with disabilities. Research studies over the last few years have consistently highlighted a lower enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education. One of the hindering factors affecting higher education of the SWD in Jammu and Kashmir was absence of implementation of UGC schemes (Manzoor, 2022). A survey conducted by Mistry (2013) in Gujarat across 9 general universities noted that only 188 (0.3 percent) students with disabilities were there against the total enrolment of 53734 students. In another survey of 150 higher education institutions across the country, NCPEDP (2015) found that about 0.56 percent of seats go to disabled candidates, though there is reservation to the extent of 3% in public institutions. This affects the higher education of students with disabilities, despite the government's efforts for strict implementation of the PWD Act (1995) and the recommendation of the National Policy of Persons with Disabilities (2006) that persons with disabilities will be provided access to the universities to pursue higher and professional courses (Rao, 2012). Lack of monitoring about the provisions granted under the act in higher education institutions may also hamper actual implementation (Mistry, 2013).

### ***Lack of Disability-Friendly Facilities***

The type of support services provided was critical in ensuring the success of students with disabilities in their transition from high school to college (Webster, 2001). In addition to braille books and low vision kits, hearing aids, braces, crutches, wheel chairs, tricycles, and callipers are available in school education. According to U-DISE data, such facilities benefited 4081 students (NUEPA, 2019), but such facilities are lacking in higher education institutions in India (Kunnath & Mathew, 2019; Manzoor, 2022; Mistry, 2013). After the RPWD Act was implemented in 2016, higher education institutions began to reduce architectural barriers by providing ramps and accessible buildings, but

there is still much work to be done in providing disability-friendly facilities and supporting services (Mistry, 2013; Omkar, 2018; Palan, 2017; Rao, 2012; Singh, 2017). Students with orthopaedic impairment must stay in a hostel or as paying guests due to mobility issues, increasing the burden of lodging and boarding costs in addition to their study costs for their higher education. But no free lodging facilities are available to students with disabilities in higher education institutions (Mistry, 2013). Even the views of the SWD towards accessibility in the universities of Andhra Pradesh were found to be poor (Omkar, 2018). Implementing an IT-enabled white board in higher education institutions is a good attempt as audio-visual programmes can be used along with teacher inputs in the teaching contents, but it is a question of investigation as to how many teachers are using the white board in real classroom teaching. Disability-friendly computer software, books in Braille, appropriate desks and chairs, and disability aids and equipment like wheelchairs, tricycles, and hearing aids are not available in most higher education institutions (Gupta, 2018; Mistry, 2013). Even the hostels in India are not disabled-friendly and accessible for them. Without the required facilities for their learning, it might be difficult for them to cope with the academic challenges. Inaccessible buildings and premises also make it difficult for their mobility (Gupta, 2018; Rao, 2012). Some facilities and extra time for writing in examinations are available in higher education institutions, but the scholarships and bus/train concession pass facilities are meant for all students, and the students with disabilities could get them by sheer chance, while the writer facilities for blind students are available, but blind students have to arrange writers themselves (Mistry, 2013). There were two girl students enrolled in the Fine Arts course, but a sign language interpreter facility was not available to them, and that was the main reason for their low grades in examination (Mistry, 2013).

### ***Insecure Future***

A report on inclusion and accessibility of students with disabilities in higher education noted that, due to a lack of inclusive measures at the higher education level and at the professional level, even well-qualified students with disabilities are unable to find suitable employment, limiting their professional growth (TISS, 2015). Despite being better educated and ready to contribute to society, these young people have very less opportunities in employment due to distrust in their abilities (Kunnath & Mathew, 2019). Thus, even after completing higher education, students with disabilities will have problems finding jobs, as there are only a handful of companies in India that hire disabled people. Workplaces consider only minor orthopaedic impairment suitable for the job because they don't have many problems except for mobility

issues, whereas some fields, such as teaching, prefer only people with orthopaedic impairment or visual impairment (Mistry, 2013). Most workplaces are not inclusive because it is assumed that people with disabilities cannot work normally. This could be one of the main reasons for the low number of students with disabilities in higher education. Strict implementation of the 5% reservation in the employment sector, both in government and private, can be of great help for their secure employment, which in turn will attract more persons with disabilities to higher education.

### ***Lack of Trained Manpower at the Higher Education Level***

Landrum (2008) stated that if teachers receive experience with the disability or are provided with support, they will be more willing to include students with disabilities. But unlike the elementary education level, there is no pre-service or in-service training to train the manpower engaged in higher education. Currently, the teacher training course provides a Creating Inclusive Schools subject to pre-service secondary school teachers, but it is limited to theory and provides no hands-on or practical experience. The Government of India is providing in-service training related to inclusive education to the elementary school teachers through the SSA and DIET, but the higher education institutions are neither employing the trained manpower nor providing any kind of orientation, induction, or refresher training to the teachers and administrators that could help them in working with students with disabilities at the higher education level. This might be the reason of poor overall higher educational experience reported in the study by Omkar (2018).

### ***No Linkages between Schools and Higher Education Institutions***

The government's reports like DISE note a sharp increase in the enrollment of children with disabilities, from 566,921 in 2002–2003 to 2.35 million in 2012–2013 (NUEPA, 2014). But this figure decreases as the level of education increases, and very few students with disabilities, who could cope with their disability-related problems, could reach a higher education level. The DISE (2016–17) reports 20,973,315 enrollments of children with disabilities in elementary schools, 2,182,261 in secondary schools, and 62,649 in higher secondary schools in India (NUEPA, 2018), while only 8,449 students with disabilities could make it possible to reach a higher education level (NCPEDP, 2015). So the students with disabilities either drop out during their secondary schooling or leave the education system due to a lack of supporting services or financial constraints. Most of the students with disabilities entering higher education are coming from general schools, while there is very little higher education opportunity for the students with disabilities who are receiving

education in special schools. So it is clearly evident that there is no linkage between the schools and higher education institutions.

### ***Attitudinal Barriers***

Attitudinal barriers are found to be the major obstacle when it comes to the inclusion of students with disabilities in educational institutions (Jameel, 2011). One of the biggest challenges to achieving equality of opportunity and social inclusion is attitude barriers, which lead to stigmatisation and discrimination and deprive persons with disabilities of their dignity and potential (Wapling & Downie, 2012, p. 21; UNICEF, 2013, p. 11; Heymann et al., 2014, p. 6; Brujin et al., 2012, pp. 21–22). Thus, negative attitudes create a disabling environment across all domains (WHO & World Bank, 2011, pp. 193-262). When compared to high-income environments, attitudes toward persons with disabilities can be more extreme in low- and middle-income countries, and there may be a greater degree of stigma and shame (Mont, 2014, p. 24). "Misconceptions, stereotypes, and folklore associating disability to punishment for past sins, misfortune, or witchcraft" can contribute to these attitudes (Groce & Kett, 2014, p. 5; Rimmerman, 2014; Burns et al., 2014, pp. 43–44). A 2005 World Bank survey in UP and TN reveals low acceptance of children with disabilities attending regular schools, and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities still continued as government officials, educators, and health workers had the highest rates of negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities in Orissa (Swabhiman, 2005). A survey by Gupta (2018) conducted in New Delhi revealed that most of the SWD opined that the attitudes of society towards them are negative and they faced societal negligence. The attitude of society towards persons with disabilities is important for acceptance of this group in society, and a positive attitude can lead to positive collective actions for the welfare of this group of students, but they continue to face negative attitudes and stereotypes in the education system (Ahmad, 2016). Lack of knowledge about and sensitivity to disability issues on the part of some educators, staff, and students can make it difficult for students with disabilities to access educational services equally (Ahmad, 2016).

### ***Lack of Proper Finance***

Data show that people with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries have less access to education than their nondisabled peers (Groce et al., 2011. P. 1496). As an illustration, a study that used data from fifteen developing nations with internationally comparable statistics found that the majority of them have "much higher multidimensional poverty as well as lower educational achievement" due to disability (Mitra et al., 2013). The report of

NCPEDP (which undertook an analysis of Union budgets at the national level since 2008) reflects clearly the very low priority accorded to disability in budgetary allocations, with India spending only 0.0009% of its GDP on disability (cited in Singal, 2016). The reason for the lower enrollment of students with disabilities in higher education institutions could also be financial problems due to low family income and a lack of proper funding for pursuing higher education (Gupta, 2018). Lack of proper finance could also affect students with disabilities who are already enrolled in higher education institutions, which leads to either discontinuation of their study or a lack of educational necessities and the inability to select a course as per their interests (Mistry, 2013). The GOI, through the Department of Disability Affairs, is providing scholarships to students with disabilities of Rs. 700–750 per month for day scholars and Rs. 1100–1600 per month to hoteliers for graduation courses (Department of Disability Affairs, 2018). This is a good effort, but the big question emerges here: how can one maintain the entire study cost at a higher education level with such a low amount of scholarship money? A small scholarship can lead to dropout or low achievement because it is impossible to cover the entire cost of education with such a small scholarship. This results in the study being discontinued. Recently, UGC made a good attempt by starting the fellowship for research students with disabilities pursuing research degree courses (M.Phil. or Ph.D.), and the rate of the fellowship is the same as UGC-JRF. But looking at the very low number of students with disabilities in higher education institutions, it is a question of investigation as to how many students with disabilities are enrolled at the M.Phil. or Ph.D. level.

### ***Equality (Minus Disability) Cell***

The finding of the study by Mistry (2013) shows that the majority of the equality cells located at higher education institutions are looking for welfare and issues related to the SC and ST only. Persons with disabilities in India suffer greatly from a lack of political lobbying because they do not receive the same political support and benefits as other marginalised sections of society, such as SC/ST and religious minorities. Though the disability-related provisions and policies remain in the documents, nothing is done in real life for the welfare of students with disabilities, and thus the cell remains as an equality cell minus the disability cell. The study of the activities and assistance provided by equality cells to students with disabilities in higher education institutions can provide a true picture of equal opportunities for students with disabilities in higher education institutions. The formation of a disability unit in every higher education institution can be of great help to the students with

disabilities for their higher education, awareness regarding provisions and schemes, and guidance and counselling.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the above-identified issues, the authors would like to suggest the following measures to improve the status of higher education for students with disabilities in India:

- Strict implementation of the RPWD Act (2016) in all higher education institutions and year-wise and category-wise maintenance of enrollment data should be made compulsory. Collaboration between universities and both special and general schools can be extremely beneficial in bringing people with disabilities into higher education. More efforts are needed for strict implementation and the advertisement of the number of seats available for students with disabilities. Every university and department needs to advertise the number of reserved seats available for persons with disabilities, along with the other reserved quotas for marginalised groups like socially and economically backward classes, scheduled castes, and scheduled tribes. Developing transition goals from school to college or university and a course of study prior to entering higher education will provide opportunities for youth with disabilities to take the necessary course work as per their interest, aspiration, capabilities, and abilities.

- Scholarships for every student with a disability in the proper amount can be of great help to them for their educational, transportation, and other necessities. The government should provide scholarships with adequate amounts of financial assistance to these students so they can complete their studies without any financial constraints. Also, disability-friendly supporting devices and equipment and medical facilities should be made available to them. For this, collaboration between universities and NGOs working for the welfare of people with disabilities will be beneficial. Cost-free accommodation in the university hostel throughout their studies will be of great help to the students with disabilities due to financial constraints and mobility problems. This can also benefit their social lives. Training in some vocations based on their interests and aspirations can help them earn a living while also reducing their financial problems by allowing them to earn while they learn. The government should provide appropriate scholarships to all needy students with disabilities pursuing higher education so that they can complete their education

without financial difficulties and their drop-out rates can be reduced. Strict implementation of the three percent reservation in the employment sector can be of great help for their secure employment. In turn, this will lead to growth in their higher education.

- Students with disabilities who have mobility issues due to their disability should be provided with free or separate hostel accommodations so that they can attend classes on a regular basis. This could be of immense help in the socialisation and mainstreaming of students with disabilities, as the study by Sharma (2004) revealed that learning can increase by placing the children with intellectual disabilities in the hostel, where they will get exposure. All universities should provide writer facilities for students with visual impairments, interpreter facilities for students with hearing impairments, extra time for writing in examination facilities, and special equipment such as disability-friendly computer software, braille books, appropriate desks and chairs, and disability aids and equipment such as wheelchairs, tricycles, and hearing aids. Collaboration between universities and voluntary organisations working in the field of disability could be a great help in this direction. Awareness regarding disability policies and acts should be spread among them through print or electronic media. The formation of a disability unit in every higher education institution can be of great help to students with disabilities.

- Awareness of the various disabilities among society members, teachers, and other students, as well as encouragement to students with disabilities, could be extremely beneficial in overcoming feelings of inferiority.

- Timely remedial measures can be extremely beneficial in reducing their difficulties in subjects. Also, arranging English coaching classes from the concerned subject teachers of the university or SCOPE centre in the university will be helpful for all the students, including students with disabilities who are facing difficulties due to the English language, which is the language for higher education.

- For improving the status of persons with disabilities in higher education, concerted efforts by the government and society at large should be made for strict implementation and continuous monitoring of the PWD Act (1995) in terms of giving them the opportunity to pursue higher and professional courses. Also, awareness programmes about the provisions for people with disabilities, the various disabilities among them, teachers, and



other people will be extremely beneficial in improving the educational status of people with disabilities at all levels. The government should make efforts to bring the school community and higher educational institutes closer to each other so that higher education institutes can admit students with disabilities directly from the integrated and special schools. Career guidance programmes for students with disabilities in high school can be beneficial in diverting them in their interests. Job security following completion of higher education for this group of students will entice more people with disabilities to pursue higher education.

- All students with disabilities pursuing higher education should be provided with free education or scholarships with adequate financial assistance. This will in turn reduce their financial, academic, and other problems. Free lodging and boarding should be provided so that their mobility problems can be minimised and they can devote more time to studying than to wasting time in the daily community. Vocational training based on their interests, aspirations, and abilities should be provided beginning in high school so that they can be diverted in some vocation. UGC recommended the formation of a disability unit in all universities through the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006), but no university has started one. UGC should look into this matter, and efforts should be made to start the disability units as soon as possible, which will be of great help to this group of students. This unit should be provided with all the requirements regarding the disability, like guidance regarding higher education, provisions available for persons with disabilities, and their problems and needs. Collaboration with GOs and NGOs working for the welfare of persons with disabilities will be a great help in the education of persons with disabilities.

- UGC and higher education institutes should look at whether the provisions and facilities granted for persons with disabilities are available in reality in the higher education institutes or not.

- Needy students with disabilities should be provided with disability-friendly supporting devices, aids, and equipment such as wheel chairs, tricycles, and hearing aids to help them cope with their disability. Also, disability-friendly supporting services recommended by the UGC, like computer software, books in braille, appropriate desks and chairs, etc., should be made available in all higher education institutions. Strict implementation and monitoring of all these supporting services in higher education institutions

will go a long way toward ensuring that students with disabilities get the most out of their education.

## Conclusion

Looking at the status of higher education for students with disabilities and their lower enrollment reveals that most of the policies and recommendations regarding the education of students with disabilities have not been properly implemented and that much work has to be done to improve the status of higher education for students with disabilities. Though the Indian government attempted to improve the status of higher education for students with disabilities by implementing the RPWD Act (2016) in all Indian higher education institutions, there is still much work to be done. The suggestions provided in this paper, if implemented timely and immediately, will ensure the expected improvement in the higher education of students with disabilities. If they will be encouraged to take higher education and prepare them for a career, then in turn they will become productive and successful citizens, leading independent, economically self-sufficient, and fully participatory lives.

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