



Including the Differently Abled

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Introduction

In a society which gives a dimension of 'faith' to disability, considering it as a punishment for the sins of present or former birth, inclusion of people with disability is a long process. Usually sympathy overrides rights based perspective. Preference is mainly or solely for care, cure and rehabilitation (rehabilitation is generally restricted to admitting in an institute which will take care of their basic needs on charitable grounds) and disability is perceived as the problem of individuals and their families.

"I can never forgive myself for the misery I have caused to my son. Why did I neglect when I was told not to attend the funeral of my uncle while I was pregnant? My child is suffering because of by disobedience. I made him handicapped" - A graduate mother

Even though India is committed to education for all by the 86th amendment of the Constitution making education fundamental right to all children, both the government and private institutions lacks clear understanding about its meaning, relevance and a clear definition¹.

In India disability is getting least priority compared to class, gender, religion, color etc. Only less than 5% of disabled children have joined schools (UNESCO 2000) and only 0.51% of students with disability are enrolled in mainstream educational institutions at school level as noted by a Government study carried in 2004 (UNICEF 2006). The situation is not very different in many other countries too.

Not much data is available regarding the inclusion of disabled in livelihood and in other social, economic and political processes.

The discussion in this article includes the major domains which need to be considered for inclusion,

how to address the issue of inclusion and what are the major challenges involved.

Towards inclusion

Inclusion of the disabled should necessarily also mean inclusion in family, community/society, educational institutions, work and elsewhere along with strategies to address the personal and gender issues related to disability.

Personal

The very reason of disability itself leads to lack of self-confidence and limits children's accessibility to experiment and explore compared to their peers. They also lack motivation to realize their inherent potentials, both from their peers and the adult world. The dependence they are forced into and discrimination they experience leads to feelings of worthlessness, frustration, shame etc. which effects their personal and social development.

Gender related

The negative strokes they experience in the 'normal' world can lead to a 'keep-away' attitude, a sort of self-exclusion, especially for girls. A disabled girl is usually an easy target of sexual exploitation by people who generally volunteer to help her.

"I enjoy swinging a lot. My mother used to take me to the near- by park when I was young. As I grew older we started getting assistance from men around to carry me to the swing from the wheel chair and back, as it became difficult for her and other women. But slowly I started realizing the bad touches by some men who volunteered to help. I could not react as they were doing a favor. So I have decided not to swing anymore, even though I still love it."

- A 14 year old girl with Cerebral Palsy

Family related

Emotions in the family, which range from denial to self-pity to believing quacks and in miracles, usually take a long time to accept realities related to a special child. Families often lack the knowledge and skills and time to cater to the needs of the child along with the required insight regarding the future of the child. This can end up either as over protection or denial of acceptance of the disabled child, both being equally destructive with less possibility of appropriate care and support. Financial issues can add to this scenario along with physical, emotional and social overburdens on the family, especially on the mothers.

Education related

Both education and poverty are interrelated and “Disability may be seen as both a cause and an effect of poverty, and poor educational opportunities for disabled people have a major bearing on the perpetuation of this association” (Goodlad, 2005).

Most schools in India, whether urban or rural, lack resources, including trained teachers and infrastructure, to address the special needs of the children, which in turn lead to low quality of education and/or high dropout rate.

The perceived purpose of educating children with disabilities revolves around preparing them for adjustment to a socio-cultural environment designed to meet the needs of the normal. (Sharma 2002, p.407)

Enrolment of disabled youth for higher education continues to be very low, even after 3% reservation, as they are pressurized to compete with the students from normal backgrounds. In comparison with their special school background, this can result in feelings of inferiority and create adjustment issues. Distance, lack of disabled friendly transport and infrastructure facilities along with the physical/mental limitations to satisfy the requirements of various courses add to this.

Community/Society related

The social model of disability (Oliver, 1990), reflects the view that impairment is not necessarily disabling. Some impairment undoubtedly have an impact on an individual's daily life, for example,

having a visual impairment, a progressive condition, a learning difficulty or a mental health difficulty may pose practical and economic problems for people trying to participate fully in all aspects of social experience. However, aspects of the social, economic, cultural and physical environment play a key role in determining the extent to which impairment leads to social exclusion².

Psycho-social related

The disabled children usually have a low self-image for the main reason that they are disabled. Inability to perform at par with their peers, social exclusion, the different treatment they experience from the family and society, isolation, lack of motivation, inspiration and aspiration etc are the other major factors which contribute to this condition. Their disability restricts them from getting exposed to the opportunities which are readily available to their peers.

Livelihood related

This is comparatively neglected area mostly due to the overshadowing of an attitude of charity and pity associated with the disabled. Along with their own lack of awareness and skill to assess their potential and ability gap, society also assumes a shield of sympathy and wish to do ‘for’ them rather than helping or allowing them to do things by themselves.

The absence of research studies in this dimension and lack of job mapping for the disabled adds to the problem. Employers are not open to include the disabled, even after promises for incentives. The labour market which is working on the principle of the survival of the fittest ignores the ‘unfits’. Many employers agree with the need for inclusion, but tend to find excuses to practice the same. The tendency of finding cheap labor in disabled also exists.

Not much attention has been given to understanding and bridging the gap between employer expectations and the skills and capacities of the special employees.

How to make inclusion possible

In developing countries interventions are created on the assumption that long-term welfare

assistance should be the primary response to the needs of people living with disabilities (Lang and Upah, 2008). This has emerged from the assumption that the disabled persons cannot be productive and need to be cared for. The social model, which considers disability as an integral and normal part of the society, is yet to gain momentum and has not reached the majority of the population. People's attitudes, beliefs and practices play a major role in bringing about any social change, which is true for disability too. So understanding the attitudes, beliefs, practices and prejudices of people and addressing them appropriately need to be the first step towards the process of inclusion.

The issue of self-exclusion and gender issues needs special attention. Activities to address their poor self-image along with awareness build up on their rights and the 'normal' citizens their duties, is the need of the hour.

Parents and families of the disabled can play a major role in making inclusion possible, but lack the necessary knowledge, skill and time for the same. Even though, certain NGOs have initiated programs for capacity building of parents to enable them to work towards inclusion of their wards, the sustainability of these programs is not guaranteed

due to the NGOs' dependency on external funding. A recommended solution could be for the local governing bodies to include this issue in their regular agenda.

Effective implementation of Disability Act and the programs listed in the 12th Five year plan, proper job mapping, plugging the gap between the skills of the disabled and the requirements of job market, sensitization of potential employers are the other domains which needs attention.

Challenges

Accessibility, infrastructure and acceptance of the disabled being the major constrains for inclusion, the lack of proper research also contribute to the same. Many organizations working in the field lack a holistic approach to the issue of disability and their activities are more or less restricted to preparing their beneficiaries getting into semi-skilled works viz. mobile or automobile mechanic, hotel suppliers, telephone/lift operators etc. to name few. The lack of motivated, trained and skilled teachers at schools and employers and work force at the work place are other challenges.

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