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Democracy and Differently Abled

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Abstract

At Independence India a liberal Democracy with a written Constitution that provided a Parliamentary system with both individual and group rights for disadvantaged section particularly the persons with Disabilities (PwDs) or Differently Abled as they are known today. Undoubtedly, the foundation of this inclusiveness was laid with the solid edifice democracy that was build brick by the founding fathers of our democracy like Jawaharlal Nehru and Baba Sahab Amedkar. But this has not been an easy process. India could build the structure of democratic institutions propelled as it was, by the anti-colonial struggle of our people. Infuse it with the life blood of inclusiveness required much greater effort, much deep commitment to navigate the complexity of the emerging globalized world. There is a plan, a purpose and a value to every life, no matter what its location, age, gender or disability. The need is to recognize the fact that persons with disabilities are the most inspiring people. Give them equal opportunity and they will prove to be much stronger and capable with their different abilities than the “normal” people. If we all have a mindset to accept this fact, then we might just see a change in the society.

Key Words: Democracy, Inclusiveness, Equality, Accessibility, Empowerment.

Introduction:

“Genuine culture consists in being a citizen of the universe.....” – Russel.

It is now well established that social, economic growth and prosperity in India has generally bypassed a large number of marginalised and disadvantaged people such as the disabled persons, and people living in remote areas, who have remained voiceless and ignored. The crux of such a hopeless situation for them lies in their inability to access and retain their rightful entitlements to public goods and services due to institutionalised structures and processes of exploitation. Excluded differently abled group are disadvantaged in many ways. They are victims of prejudice, are ignored, and are often treated as less than human beings by the village elite and government officials. They live in remote hamlets and are thus geographically separated from the centres of delivery. Their hamlets are scattered so that the cost of contacting them is higher. Finally it is their extreme disabled and poverty that prevents them from taking advantage of government schemes, whether it is free schooling (children are withdrawn because their labour is needed at home or for work), or immunization (they migrate along with their parents and therefore not present in the village when the health worker visits).

In towns and cities, however there is far greater anonymity and occupational mobility, which enables blurring of caste identities. It has been documented that urban migration by disable persons

is often impelled not only by economic compulsions, but also by the desire to escape the social degradation of tolerance. It is important to understand that Differently abled persons are vulnerable not only because they are poor, asset less and illiterate compared to the general population; often their distinct vulnerability arises from their inability to negotiate and cope with the consequences of their forced integration with the mainstream economy, society, cultural and political system.

Democracy: Democracy, literally, is rule by the people. The term “Democracy” is derived from the Greek word ‘demokratia’, which was coined from ‘demos’ (“people”) and ‘kratos’ (“rule”) in the middle of the 5th century. Burns defined democracy as – “Democracy, as an ideal, is a society not of similar person but of equals, in the sense that each is an integral and irreplaceable part of the whole. ‘Democracy’ word is described as letter by letter – D= Decentralisation of power, E= Education, M= Motivation, O= Organization, C= Co-operation, R= Rights & Responsibilities, A= Active part, C= Creativity, Y= Yearning for truth. Churchill defined democracy as “the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried.” Democracy, the least bad system, has been the flavour of the 21st century. According to Amartya Sen, “democracy remains the only system of government that commands global respect.” Ironically, democracy is in trouble in many places, even as its triumph is proclaimed. There is a lot of backsliding as well setbacks in countries that experienced democratic revolution following the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Larry Diamond, author of *The Spirit of Democracy*, calls it ‘Democracy recession.’ There is also consolidation of dictatorships among authoritarian rulers wary of democratic advance in their neighbourhoods. Even though democracy is not yet ‘sell-by-date’, we may have progressed democratically but democracy is regressing.

However, the idea of democracy is open to multiple interpretations. It is true that parliamentary democracy with universal adult franchise is the most acceptable form of democracy in the world today, but it is often more representative than participatory. The representative democracy has been criticised for retaining the people and the state. The state, even in a democratic system, must derive its legitimacy from the degree to which the people feel capable of shaping their own destiny, their own institution, articulate and realise aspirations effectively. It is inclusiveness which works as the bridge between a representative democracy and a participatory democracy.

The Democracy of a nation is reflected by the way it takes care and supports its vulnerable population group including persons with disabilities (PwDs). India with a home to over one third of world’s population with disabilities and one half of world’s blind population (Balaram,2011), needs a series of affirmative action plans to emerge from a charity to a social model approach of disability. For an India that aspires and strives for a developed future, concerns of human equity supported through democracy in infrastructure and information shall play an important role.

The discourse on democracy in India usually gets initiated and then gets defined only with the needs of PwDs rather than enlarging its scope to cultural, economic and social forms of human diversity. Cultures of sympathy have been yet another strong impeding factor in the journey of democracy towards inclusion of PwDs in all walks of life. It needs constant innovation through education, media and other possible ways of human connect to spread awareness and bring the question of understanding disability to the forefront. Disability is not about highlighting a difference, but about accepting a shade of diversity in human life to which, our living environments must adapt and make adequate provisions without a sense of discrimination. In the words of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore, - “The problem is not how to wipe out all differences, but how to unite with all differences intact.”

Inclusion: The concept of inclusiveness works at multiple levels which are deeply enmeshed with each other. You cannot have economic inclusion if large sections of society suffer social discrimination. Similarly, inclusive democracy presupposes the freedom to various social and religious groups to practice their faith without any fear. All this requires a structure of democracy that has institutionalised the values of freedom, equality, secularism and social justice. It is quite obvious that inclusiveness is premised on a fundamental change in the power structure of state and society to empower the marginalised and rework their relationship in a non-hierarchical and equitable manner.

Inclusion, the converse of exclusion, is affirmative action to change the circumstances and habits that lead to (or have led to) social exclusion. The World Bank defines social inclusion as the process of improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of people, disadvantaged on the basis of their identity, to take part in society.

People with disabilities face a wide range of barriers such as attitudinal, physical, and social that affects social inclusion. The attitudinal barrier such as negative attitude of society towards people with disability acts as a social stigma about disability. The society believes that disability in a person occurs due to past sin or karma (fate) and no one can change this situation as it is God's punishment. The cumulative effect of these barriers is to marginalise people with disabilities from the mainstream of society and the economy. They experience disadvantage in many aspects of daily life compared with non-disabled people. The adverse outcome experienced by many people with disabilities reduces quality of life both for themselves and for their families. Many of them feel isolated, unwanted and society may feel that they are a burden to society. Their families – parents, children and siblings – can also face negative attitudes, poverty and social exclusion. Many feel that they spend far too much time fighting society when they should be receiving the support they need to help themselves.

The problems of groups with multiple disadvantages due to disability are understood through cross-cutting of gender dimension with other social factors like caste, ethnicity, religion, location, region etc. Both, disability and gender are physical constraints that totally ignore the person. To be a disabled man is to fail to measure up to the general culture's definition of masculinity as strength, physical ability and autonomy. To be a disabled woman is to be considered unable to fulfil the role of homemaker, wife and mother, and unable to conform to the stereotype of beauty and femininity in terms of physical appearance. They are the most marginalized and the most abused – physically, mentally and socially and for century, have been subjected to deliberate neglect, verbal abuse, physical assault and sexual harassment.

Equality: Equality means, that adequate opportunities are laid open to all. According to Oxford English Dictionary equality means – (i) the condition of having equal dignity rank or privilege with other; (ii) the condition of being equal in power, ability, achievement of excellence; (iii) fairness, impartiality, due proportion. Through the Constitution of India guarantees equality of all citizens, persons with disabilities (PwDs) have been, in reality, facing stigma, discrimination and neglect due socio-psychological and cultural reasons. Disability when compounded with discrimination doubles the quantum of disability. There is a wide spread underestimation of the abilities and potential of persons with disabilities due to general public perception and prejudices, thereby creating a vicious cycle of under achievement. This in turn results in inferiority complex among them which further harms their growth. It has taken a long period of time to educate ourselves to demystify the meaning

of disability and fight myths and misconceptions of disability. We need to keep these new ideas alive everyday so that the old negative attitudes and perceptions do not assert themselves.

Our Constitution ensure equality, freedom, justice and dignity of all citizens of the country including persons with disabilities without any discrimination, which implies an inclusive society for all. Article 41 of the Constitution of India relating to right to work, to education and to public assistance in certain cases, states that “the State shall, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, make effective provision for securing the right to work, to education and to public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement, and in other cases of undeserved want.”

A society which cares for persons with disabilities is considered to be the best, as disability affects not only the individual and family but also society and the nation. Studies have shown that non-inclusion of persons with disabilities in the development process has several implications, as stigma of disability may result in loss of income and additional cost to the person with disability, for their care providers and other family members. This also results in loss of education and social exclusion to them and their family. Social inclusion at time leads to loss of right with long-term loss of productive potential of the person with disability due to lack of appropriate environment and access. Persons with disabilities and their families due to stigma of disability often suffer extreme isolation and experience higher rates of poverty and deprivation than non – disabled people. The imperative need of the hour is their speedy empowerment to emphasise the importance of mainstreaming disability issues as an integral part of relevant strategies of sustainable development. We need to recognise that children, women and girls are often at greater risk, (both within and outside the home) of violence, injury or abuse.

Accessibility: Accessibility as a term does not need exclusive approaches to decode and interpret but requires a sensitization of our minds, living cultures, social approaches and human response. Accessibility is not merely physical but also cognitive, social and institutional. In simple terms, it is an experience of life wherein one is able to move, communicate, work, participate and perform daily activities without or with minimal human dependence and loss of human dignity. A further holistic way to interpret this would be by asking a question, ‘Are we able to move, communicate and perform independently in our existing environments with dignity and equity?’ If yes, then possibly we have had a truly accessible experience of life and if not, we need to analyse the key factors and their interrelationships that led to inaccessibility. We may then realise that accessibility is an outcome of complex interactions and interfaces between human functioning and space. If the space supports human functions for all, it can be termed as completely accessible and if it supports human functions with reservations, it would be partially accessible. Likewise, it could be in accessible, if it does not support major human functions.

Accessibility is about giving equal access to everyone and without being able to access the facilities and service, persons with Disabilities (PwDs) will never be fully included .United Nations (2007) convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to which India is a signatory , under Article 9 casts obligations on the government for ensuring to PwDs accessibility to

- (a) Information
- (b) Transport
- (c) Physical Environment
- (d) Communication Technology and

(e) Accessibility to Services as well as emergency services.

For the differently-abled, Universal Accessibility is critical for enabling them to gain access for equal opportunity, living independently and participating fully in all respects of life in an inclusive society. Persons with Disability (equal opportunities protection of rights and full participation) Act, 1995. Under Section 44, 45 & 46 categorically provides for Non-discrimination in transport, Non-discrimination on the road and Non-discrimination in built environment respectively.

A developed future waits for India to respond. And a responsive way forward is to create opportunities for equity through access to all human forms of existences including PwDs without discrimination. Creation of accessible environments through a universal design philosophy must thus gain a high priority amidst other national challenges in order to support newer challenges of India's demographic futures. Development of an Accessibility index and its advanced application shall soon become a measurable phenomenon in Indian urban contexts. This should further include urban and rural contexts to translate accessibility as concepts where majority of India exists. Let's begin to look at environments, information systems and infrastructures as disabling and enabling agents than people with diverse impairments. It is only then we will focus on them and not on PwDs alone to create accessibility. It shall then prove to be an investment with huge returns through inclusion than an expenditure with no value. Let an accessibly inclusive India be a shared reality of our shared future!

Empowerment: Empowerment is having control over one's life as an individual. And social empowerment means all sections of the society having equal control over their lives and opportunity to take important decisions. It, however, has different connotations for different people. For the differently abled, life is a different story altogether. Their disability often makes them feel that they are a burden on society. Their requirements for empowerment are very different thereby requiring programmes customized to suit their needs. Initiatives like Technology development project, inclusive education for the Disabled at secondary stage, Accessible India campaign, disabled rehabilitation schemes, etc. have encouraged the differently abled achieve quality of life.

Empowerment is indispensable to achieving quality of life for people with disabilities and it is both a continuous process as well as a result. Empowerment is typically implemented at the four following levels: -

- (1). **The individual level** – where the person values him/herself and actively wants to participate in life.
- (2). **Family level**_- where the family gets guidance and support for social rehabilitation of their members with disabilities.
- (3). **Community level**_- where awareness programme can be conducted. Social support from the community along with government policies leads to social inclusion where a person is encouraged to thrive in his/her personal situation and inclusive environment.
- (4). **Social politics level**_- impacting local and national level actions to promote social equity and inclusion of all persons with disabilities.

Conclusion: It is an understood philosophy of a democratic state that it cannot ignore the problems of its population. The government of the country is duty bound to address the problems of its vulnerable sections. Social security is, therefore, one of the essential factors in good governance. As John F. Kennedy said, - "If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich." A democratic government that believes in governance of the poor and for the poor

has necessarily to plane and execute policies and programmes for social security of the vulnerable section.

We have come a long way. Inclusiveness is the future. Power to the people is the future perhaps the time has come to redeem the pledge to our destiny really substantially. Let us keep our ears to the ground and listen to the horizon whispering ever so softly “the meek shall inherit the earth”.

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