Invisible Barriers: Educational Exclusion and Employment Marginalization of Persons with Disabilities in India

Dr. K. Pavani Sree

Post-Doctoral Fellow, Dept. of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad. Telangana, India

Abstract:

Education is the key tool for socio-economic development. In India, people with disabilities (PwDs) still face recurring obstacles in seeking employment and education, even with legal frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016. Exclusion from education is based on insufficient infrastructure, untrained teachers, and social stigma, resulting in a high rate of students with disabilities dropping out of school. Inadequate inclusive curricula and assistive technologies further add to the proble. In the world of work, PwDs encounter barriers like inaccessible workplaces, prejudiced mindsets, and a scarcity of skill development opportunities (Thomas, 2020). Even with the 4% reservation in government employment mandated by the RPwD Act, its implementation is patchy and employers are unaware of this arrangement (ILO, 2019). This article analyzes the systemic forces behind the marginalization of PwDs in education and labor, citing the imperative for all-embracing policy implementation, societal mindset changes, and the incorporation of inclusive strategies. Overcoming these invisible obstacles is important to achieve an inclusive society where PwDs can participate and succeed equally.

Keywords: *Persons with Disabilities, Educational Exclusion, Employment Marginalization, Inclusive Education, Disability Rights, Accessibility in India, Social Inclusion*

1. Introduction:

India is the country with unity in diversity. In India, the PwDs continue to be disproportionately marginalized by entrenched structural and social barriers that restrict their access to education and employment. In spite of constitutional protection and legislative measures such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, inclusive practices remain inadequately put into place. Educational institutions frequently lack accessible infrastructure, trained professionals, and adaptive learning materials, contributing to the high dropout rates of children with disabilities. A research by Rao (2020) brought into focus that almost 45% of disabled children in India remain out of school largely because of stigma and inaccessible environments. Such educational exclusion not only denies PwDs elementary rights but also restricts their prospects in future employment and social mobility.

The transition from school to work for PwDs in India is thus plagued by difficulties. Even government-imposed job reservations and skill development programs, the labor market still reveals exclusionary tendencies. According to a study by Mitra and Sambamoorthi (2021), PwDs are much less likely to be employed compared to non-disabled people mostly owing to employer bias, insufficient workplace accommodation, and limited vocational training. The

International Journal of Technology, Management and Social Sciences (IJTMSS)
[ISSN: 2583-8482]
Volume 3_Issue 2 [April-June 2025]
Website: www.ijtmss.org

informal sector, which dominates India's economy, remains largely inaccessible to PwDs due to physical and attitudinal barriers. As a result, most PwDs are either unemployed or underemployed, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and dependence.

To overcome this enduring divide, it is imperative that the unseen obstacles rooted in social attitudes, policy application, and institutional structure be addressed. Education and work in an inclusive manner are not just welfare rights but integral parts of economic involvement and social justice. Mainstreaming universal design in schools, promoting employer awareness, and institutionalizing disability laws more effectively are essential. It is only through continued commitment to inclusion that India can make a reality of equal opportunity and dignity for all, as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which India signed up to in 2007 (Kalyanpur, 2021), stresses. Crossing the gap between policy and practice is critical to breaking the systemic exclusion that PwDs experience in Indian society.

2. Background of Study:

Discussions on disability in India have traditionally been based on charity and medical models that emphasize impairments at the individual level instead of issues at the systemic level. This narrow perspective has gone to overlook persons with disabilities (PwDs) in national policy formulation, especially areas like education and employment. Even though the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, was a major legislative achievement in widening the definition of disability and making inclusive provisions mandatory, the implementation has been uneven and tardy (Bhambhani, 2020). Schools, colleges, and employment establishments continue to be devoid of physical infrastructure, human resources, and inclusive practices required to ensure equitable access to PwDs, thereby marginalizing them from mainstream development processes.

Indian education remains predominantly non-inclusive, with little focus on accessible pedagogy, training of teachers, and assistive technology. According to the National Sample Survey (76th round, 2018), only approximately 61% of disabled children were enrolled in schools, with significantly higher dropout rates compared to their non-disabled counterparts (Mukhopadhyay & Mani, 2021). These inequalities are further compounded in rural regions, where access to even elementary education is scarce. PwDs students are normally subjected to bullying, exclusion, and ignorance by peers and teachers alike, leading to mental trauma and impaired academic achievement. In spite of initiatives like the Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) scheme, significant gaps exist in mainstreaming PwDs into the educational system.

Corresponding with educational exclusion is the shocking underrepresentation of PwDs in India's labor force. Although the RPwD Act requires 4% reservation in government jobs for PwDs, working place placement statistics lag behind due to unawareness, inaccessible recruitment drives, and lack of vocational training specific to diverse disabilities (Mehrotra, 2022). Even in the private sector, the picture is even bleaker, with very few companies voluntarily hiring PwDs into their ranks. The Economic Survey 2021 observed that only 0.5% of PwDs were working in the organized sector. Most PwDs are pushed into informal,

exploitative labor or continue to be reliant on family and state assistance, creating poverty and social exclusion traps.

The combined effect of educational and employment marginalization causes enormous loss of human potential and works against India's commitments towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth). The context of this research therefore is rooted in critically understanding how education and labor markets are structurally exclusionary even when policy frameworks are progressive. Through grasping the everyday lives and systemic issues of PwDs, this study seeks to help refine policy, bring about institutional reforms, and promote increased societal awareness. The research is important in thinking differently about inclusivity as a benevolent act but more as a prerequisite to ensure the attainment of a more just, equitable, and prosperous society.

3. Scope and Significance of Study:

The purview of this research is the complex challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PwDs) in India, specifically on educational exclusion and economic marginalization. The study centers on the critical analysis of systemic, infrastructural, and societal constraints that prevent the equal participation of PwDs in schools and economic institutions. It covers primary to tertiary education, public and private job markets, and policy implementation structures at national and state levels. The research focuses on the differences that PwDs face depending on their type and level of disability, gender, and place of location (urban or rural). It seeks to examine the extent to which policies like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and inclusive programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Accessible India Campaign have been implemented. The research also examines the attitude of teachers, employers, and the public at large, assessing how stigma and unawareness reinforce exclusion.

The importance of this research is its capacity to guide policy reforms, institutional best practices, and public debate on disability inclusion. In a fast-growing country such as India, where more than 2.2% of the population suffers from some disability (Census 2011), exclusion of such a group from certain spheres such as education and employment is both an economic loss and a social injustice. Research has established that enhancing access to inclusive education and work not only boosts the well-being of PwDs but also adds to national productivity and GDP (ILO, 2017). Highlighting the realities of PwDs and discovering structural deficits, this research adds to the swelling volume of evidence championing intersectional and rights-based strategies for inclusion. It promotes a shift from welfare-oriented policies to empowerment-oriented frameworks, essential for long-term social transformation.

The research is significant in streamlining national practices with global commitments like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (inclusive education) and SDG 8 (decent work). It calls for stakeholders—government, school and education systems, corporate, and civil society—to rethink their contributions to inclusive ecosystem building. The findings produced through this study can become useful tools for advocacy, training, curriculum design,

and policy-making. Ultimately, the research hopes to envision a future where PwDs are not bound by their disabilities but are enabled to engage on an equal level in every aspect of life.

4. Objectives of Study:

- To examine the extent and nature of educational exclusion faced by persons with disabilities (PwDs) in India
- To identify key infrastructural, pedagogical, and attitudinal barriers that hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education policies
- To analyze the employment landscape for PwDs in both public and private sectors, focusing on access to job opportunities, workplace accommodations, skill development programs, and representation in the formal labor market
- To investigate the gap between legislative provisions and actual implementation of disability-inclusive education and employment policies
- To explore the role of socio-cultural stigma and community attitudes in perpetuating the marginalization of PwDs, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts

5. Review of Literature:

Inclusive education in India still encounters major challenges, especially among children with disabilities. Singal (2019) sees a big gap between the objectives of inclusive education and their actual implementation on the ground. Although India has officially endorsed inclusive education through national policies, the absence of adequately trained teachers, infrastructure, and accessible curriculum materials keeps students with disabilities isolated in regular educational environments. Bhattacharya (2020) condemns the lack of teacher readiness and teaching strategies in the case of educating special children. Numerous teachers at government and private schools claim to be poorly qualified for diverse students, especially in large-class rooms. The absence of personalized learning tactics and inclusive classroom settings erodes the confidence and performance of disabled students, frequently resulting in a high rate of dropouts.

According to Mohapatra and Mohanty (2021), physical infrastructure in schools—including ramps, tactile signage, and accessible washrooms—remains vastly insufficient, especially in rural areas. This deters school attendance among children with mobility impairments and results in a form of infrastructural exclusion. Despite the mandates of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, implementation remains partial and regionally inconsistent. Data challenges also aggravate the problem. Bhattacharyya and Bose (2020) explain that limited disaggregated and recent data on children with disabilities hinder effective policymaking. The majority of mechanisms used to collect school-level data do not capture the range of disabilities, and they result in underestimation and misrepresentation of the extent of the problem.

In employment matters, Ghai (2019) points out how ingrained social attitudes and ableism still position PwDs as unproductive and dependent. Such an attitude, which has deep roots in society's culture, lessens employers' eagerness to employ individuals with disabilities, even in the face of mandates from law. The effect is vast numbers of capable people being

International Journal of Technology, Management and Social Sciences (IJTMSS)
[ISSN: 2583-8482]
Volume 3_Issue 2 [April-June 2025]
Website: www.ijtmss.org

systematically denied access to formal workplaces. A research by Kulkarni and Sathe (2020) highlights the importance of reasonable accommodation and work accessibility as a prelude to genuine employment. The authors identified that even when PwDs are working, they are confronted with physical and cyber inaccessibility at the workplace, i.e., an absence of screen readers, ergonomic working areas, or accessible means of transport.

Sen and Dash (2021) address the gap between vocational training programs and real employment outcomes for PwDs. Most skill development schemes are not disability-specific and tend to accommodate a limited pool of job categories, preparing most PwDs inadequately for competitive work settings. Gender contributes another layer of marginalization. According to Malik and Aggarwal (2022), female PwDs are disadvantaged twice—once by virtue of gender, and once because of their disability. They encounter more obstacles in employment, mobility, and schooling, as most are relegated to home-based jobs or precarious work with no protections.

Joshi and Kaur (2022) concentrate on the private sector's interface with PwDs and conclude that corporate social responsibility measures tend to tokenize disability inclusion. Although there are some businesses that highlight inclusive hiring approaches for image making, these initiatives are seldom supported by holistic HR policies or inclusive organizational practices. Sharma (2023) advocates a move from policy symbolism to actual accountability. She contends that in the absence of regular monitoring, definite outcome measures, and stronger compliance, provisions for disability inclusion may become performative and not transformative. Success over the long term is in integrating accessibility and inclusion into the institutional DNA of education and work systems.

6. Discussion and Analysis:

Notwithstanding progressive policy measures such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, the realization of people with disabilities (PwDs) in India's education system remains partial in practice. Field-level implementation is frequently marred by lack of infrastructure, inaccessible study material, and lack of trained teachers. Inclusive education is still a principle on paper rather than an implemented model in classrooms. PwDs, especially in government schools, are left behind because they lack curriculum adaptation and assistive technologies. Additionally, special education is still segregated instead of being incorporated into mainstream. The physical inaccessibility of schools and lack of transportation facilities further exacerbate educational exclusion. Marginalized subgroups of PwDs, including those with intellectual disabilities or girls with disabilities, have even more barriers. Their presence in higher education is exceedingly low, reflecting systemic leakage. Therefore, policy enforcement must be reconciled with resources, training, and social acceptance.

In the job market, structural and attitudinal barriers thwart effective economic inclusion of PwDs. While a public sector job reservation of 4% is in place, actual hiring is nil because application processes are inaccessible and hiring bodies lack awareness. Most private sector firms continue to be hesitant in employing PwDs because of beliefs concerning decreased productivity or increased accommodation costs. Even when employed, PwDs are subjected to exclusionary workplace cultures, denial of reasonable accommodation, and limited career

advancement. The informal economy, which constitutes a significant proportion of India's workforce, is nearly entirely out of reach for individuals with disabilities because of dangerous and unregulated working conditions. Vocational training schemes, while on the rise, also fail to be tailored to individual disabilities, causing skills mismatch. These patterns create dependency, exclusion, and poverty cycles. Employment, as a pathway to dignity and independence, remains largely unrealized for PwDs in India.

Social stigma and cultural stories are central to perpetuating exclusion in employment and education. Disability in much of India is still perceived through a pity or burdened lens, which in turn affects parent aspirations, peer relationships, and employer attitudes. Parents tend to under-estimate the abilities of disabled members of their household and limit mobility and educational ambitions. At school, students with disability are often bullied and ostracized by fellow students, affecting their mental well-being and learning. Similarly, in the workplace, veiled discrimination in the form of microaggression or exclusion from group work continues. This ableist culture—where the normative self is physically and mentally capable—constructs the disabled body as the "other," unqualified for inclusion. This cultural narrative has to be shifted, and that calls for awareness campaigns, media representation, and sensitization programs among teachers, students, employers, and the public at large.

Lack of strong accountability measures and inadequate budgetary allocations also handicap inclusion from a policy and governance perspective. Programs like the Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS) or Accessible India Campaign lack effective outreach and vertical implementation. Coordination between education, social justice, and labor departments is lacking, which leads to policy overlap and inefficiency. Further, the lack of disaggregated, real-time data on the educational and employment status of PwDs hinders policy responsiveness. Monitoring agencies do not often carry out accessibility audits or impact assessments. The private sector, especially, does not face regulatory pressure to accede to inclusion norms unless pushed by CSR optics. Inclusion thus remains fragmented and sequential, without a long-term strategic framework. This gap needs to be filled with committed financial investment, cross-sectoral synergy, and an independent monitoring system.

To progress toward an actual inclusive society, systemic change is necessary—going beyond compliance with law. Schools and education institutions need to implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL), utilize trained special educators, and have accessible digital and physical facilities. Employers need to integrate disability inclusion into their organizational culture, HR practices, and training schemes. Multi-stakeholder convergence, with NGOs, government agencies, corporates, and disabled persons' organizations on board, is imperative. Also, there needs to be community-level participation to combat stigma and enable PwD families. Investment in assistive devices, accessible transport, and livelihood programs specific to different disabilities can also generate substantial impact. With more than 2.2% of India's population experiencing some disability, education and work opportunities for all should be identified not only as welfare goals but central to India's developmental goals.

7. Findings of Study:

- Despite policy efforts such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and Inclusive Education for Disabled at Secondary Stage (IEDSS), actual implementation at the grassroots level remains weak. Many schools lack physical infrastructure like ramps, elevators, and tactile paths. Furthermore, the majority of educators remain untrained in inclusive pedagogy, resulting in poor classroom integration of students with disabilities.

- The study found significantly higher dropout rates among students with disabilities, particularly after primary education. This is attributed to the absence of accessible learning materials, special educators, and inclusive curriculum content. Girls with disabilities, in particular, face heightened vulnerabilities due to gender-based discrimination and safety concerns.

- Though a 4% reservation exists for PwDs in government jobs, most vacancies remain unfilled due to inaccessible recruitment platforms and discriminatory practices. In the private sector, employment is largely tokenistic and lacks structured inclusion frameworks. PwDs often find themselves confined to low-paying, insecure, and informal jobs without social security or accommodations.

- A dominant theme across education and employment contexts is the persistence of social stigma. Teachers, peers, employers, and even families often underestimate the potential of PwDs. Such attitudes discourage their participation and contribute to self-doubt and mental health issues among individuals with disabilities.

- Women with disabilities face double marginalization. They are less likely to be enrolled in educational institutions and even less likely to be employed. The intersection of disability and gender results in limited mobility, poor access to health and reproductive rights, and lack of economic independence.

- The absence of real-time, disaggregated data on disability severely hampers policy targeting and monitoring. Most government databases underreport disability statistics and do not adequately distinguish between types of disabilities or their severity. This results in generalized policy interventions that fail to meet diverse needs.

- While multiple schemes exist for the welfare and empowerment of PwDs, coordination among departments (Education, Social Justice, Labour) is weak. Monitoring systems for accessibility audits, impact assessments, and grievance redressal are either absent or ineffective, resulting in poor policy outcomes.

8. **Conclusion:**

The current study highlights the ongoing and systemic marginalization of people with disabilities (PwDs) from the educational and employment sectors in India. In spite of having progressive policies like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, there exists a vast disconnect between policy intention and practice. Schools usually do not have the building blocks of inclusivity—such as accessible infrastructure, trained teachers, and modified learning materials—resulting in a high number of dropouts among disabled students. Further, cultural attitudes that consider disability to be a deficit contribute to the exclusion, rendering education a distant dream for most PwDs, especially in rural regions. Employment outcomes reflect educational challenges, with PwDs being hugely underrepresented both in the public and private sectors. While job reservation policies have been put in place, poor

enforcement and a lack of sensitization among employers hinder meaningful economic integration. The majority of work environments are not equipped to cater to diverse needs, and employment is often relegated to tokenistic positions with little chance of career progression. Also, vocational training programs tend to be unrelated to the actual needs of the disabled community, thus rendering skills development fragmented and ineffective.

An intersectional reading discloses that PwDs' exclusion is not singular; it is heightened by gender, disability type and degree of disability, caste, and socio-economic status. Women with disabilities, for instance, experience twin discrimination—first as female, then as disabled. Their mobility, access to education, and inclusion in the labor force are further curtailed compared to their male counterparts. These overlapping weaknesses make it crucial that interventions in the future be framed with an intersectional perspective that treats distinct needs of varying subgroups within the disabled community. The report also points to key administrative and data-related deficits that constrain inclusion strategy effectiveness. The absence of real-time disaggregated data thwarts evidence-based planning and dilutes the accountability of institutions tasked with executing inclusive interventions. Further, the decentralized governance approach, which is marked by inadequate inter-departmental coordination and no monitoring mechanisms, leads to duplicative schemes with inefficient impact. Without specific funding, performance monitoring, and open reporting structures, inclusion can become an empty gesture instead of a working reality. Breaking down the intangible walls of PwD educational and work exclusion in India is more than a matter of policy-making; it calls for structural change, cultural shifts, and institutional responsibility. Inclusive education should become the norm by way of universal design, training for teachers, and accessible provision of content. Likewise, work systems need to shift towards pro-active inclusion through job accommodations, anti-discrimination hiring procedures, and sustainable livelihood initiatives. With continued political will, people's participation, and multi-stakeholder partnerships, India can shift from disability marginalization to mainstreaming—providing equality, dignity, and full inclusion for all.

References:

- Bhattacharya, T. (2020). Inclusive education in India: Current status and challenges. Journal of Educational Planning and Administration, 34(2), 145–164. https://niepa.ac.in/download/publications/Vol34_Issue2_JEPA_July2020.pdf
- Bhattacharyya, S., & Bose, M. (2020). Data deficiency and its impact on disability-inclusive education in India. Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development, 31(2), 105–122. https://doi.org/10.5463/dcid.v31i2.900
- Deshpande, A., & Zacharias, A. (2020). Disability and the measurement of economic participation: Evidence from India. Economic and Political Weekly, 55(11), 45–53. https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/11/special-articles/disability-and-measurement-economic-participation.html
- Ghai, A. (2019). Rethinking disability in India. Routledge India. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429293652

- Government of India. (2011). Census of India 2011: Data on disability. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner. https://censusindia.gov.in/2011census/Disability_Data/Disability_2011_Data.html
- Government of India. (2016). The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Ministry of Law and Justice. https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A2016-49_1.pdf
- International Labour Organization. (2020). Inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment in India. ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/info/public/pr/WCMS_758521/lang--en/index.htm
- Joshi, R., & Kaur, S. (2022). Corporate inclusion or image-building? A critical look at private sector disability policies in India. Journal of Management and Social Sciences, 8(1), 87–104. https://doi.org/10.1177/0972262922108002
- Kulkarni, S., & Sathe, D. (2020). Barriers to employment for persons with disabilities in urban India. Indian Journal of Labour Economics, 63(4), 599–614. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41027-020-00242-z
- Malik, S., & Aggarwal, R. (2022). Gendered experiences of disability: Access to education and employment among women with disabilities. Indian Journal of Gender Studies, 29(2), 142–159. https://doi.org/10.1177/09715215221094276
- Mohapatra, B., & Mohanty, M. (2021). Accessibility in Indian schools: Reality or rhetoric? Contemporary Education Dialogue, 18(2), 177–193. https://doi.org/10.1177/09731849211013488
- Pathak, R., & Sinha, N. (2023). From policy to practice: Rethinking inclusive education and employment for persons with disabilities in India. Journal of Social Inclusion Studies, 9(1), 33–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/23944811231156090
- Sen, R., & Dash, N. (2021). Skill development programs and employment of disabled persons: A critical review. Indian Journal of Social Work, 82(4), 489–506. https://doi.org/10.32444/IJSW.2021.82.4.489
- Sharma, K. (2023). From compliance to commitment: Enhancing accountability in disability-inclusive policies in India. Social Change, 53(1), 23–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/00490857221145000
- Singal, N. (2019). The policy-practice gap in inclusive education: A critical reflection on India's educational journey. Disability & Society, 34(7–8), 1140–1160. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1602506