The Plight of India’s Disabled Population

By: CG 6
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Abstract

This paper explores the societal issues that lead to lack of inclusion for India’s disabled population. The paper begins by analyzing how those with disabilities are depicted in the media and how this shapes public perceptions of India’s disabled population. Specifically, we examine how this impedes upon their efforts to enter the workforce. The paper goes on to highlight the differences between those with disabilities living in urban areas and those living in rural areas. Those living in rural areas have a higher unemployment rate than those living in urban areas. (Mitra, S & Sambamoorthi, U). The distance between rural and urban areas make some jobs more accessible than others. Accessibility influences whether or not certain routine barriers faced by person with disabilities can be overcome. We analyze this issue further by examining employment opportunities for disabled persons. We provide statistics to give the reader insight into India’s population working and living with disabilities. Furthermore, we discuss how unequal wealth distribution compounds the problems faced by those living with disabilities and how they are disproportionately affected by this. Lastly we explore the lack of opportunity extended to those with disabilities who wish to pursue an education. Media representation, location, employment and education opportunity (or lack thereof) all have a compound effect on those living with disabilities in India. This is a reality that affects sixty million people living in India. This paper brings awareness to the oppression and plight of India’s disabled population and analyzes how various factors complicate their ability to pursue their livelihoods.
The plight of India’s disabled population

This paper investigates how socio economic status (SES) compounds the issues faced by disabled individuals in India and how disabled individuals of low SES can obtain the resources they need to have successful futures. Disabled individuals in India are restricted in terms of employment (Mitra, 2006) and there are huge barriers for these individuals to overcome in their pursuit of successful futures. These restrictions and barriers seem to result from lack of education, a general atmosphere of disempowerment, negative media portrayals, and birth into families of low socioeconomic status. These factors make it very difficult for disabled individuals to advance in their careers and to become self-reliant. There are differences between life in a rural versus life in an urban community for disabled people (Parasnis, 1996). It is hugely important for the government and nonprofit organizations to work to destroy these barriers in order to alleviate the social norms and prejudices placed on these individuals. By identifying and bringing light to these issues we hope to raise awareness of the conditions and opportunities (or lack thereof) for disabled people in India so that effective interventions can be designed to give these individuals an opportunity to make socio-economic advancements. Throughout this paper, we will further discuss the exact nature of these barriers and restrictions and, ultimately, make it clear that disabled people are faced with inequitable challenges to success in their daily lives.

With education and awareness of the primary issues, there is huge potential to change the perceptions and judgements placed on disabled people. It is very important to make it clear that everyone has the right to equal opportunity regardless of disability. The right to success is not owned by any class of people, and we hope to address a serious issue and make it clear that disabled people should be welcomed with the same possibilities as non-disabled people. It is now
the time that we identify and discuss these barriers and put an end to the inhumane curtailments that disabled individuals face throughout their lives.

**Media Portrayal**

Numerous articles have examined the Indian cinematic representation of people with disabilities (Mohapatra, 2012) (Dawn, 2014). Although there have been a few cases that properly and carefully address the portrayal and issues of disabled people, the majority of past and contemporary movies failed to correctly depict life of disabled people with great sensitivity. For instance, in “The politics of cinematic representation of disability: the psychiatric gaze,” Ranjita Dawn (2014) picks out 26 Hindi movies from the 1960s to the 2010’s and six English movies that portray the life of the disabled to discover their problems and potentials. In most of these movies, filmmakers tend to construct the disabled characters as “objects of curiosity” (2014). They use stereotypes to de-normalize people with disability, which reinforces the negative attitudes that the general public holds against them and does not provide any more positive information (Dawn, 2014). Therefore, these movies do not offer a fair reflection of disabled individuals’ lives. Moreover, they often beautify the appearances of disabled people, especially when it comes to their romance life. The representations they create for people without disability is almost perfect, which is in stark contrast with those with disability. At the same time, the movies that address these issues properly usually have more educational and informative content and purposes imbued in them which.

Dr. Atanu Mohapatra’s article, “Portrayal Of Disability In Hindi Cinema: A Study of Emerging Trends of Differently-able” (2012), also provides key information on the portrayal of the disabled community in cinema. He describes that in the past, Bollywood cinematography has portrayed people with disability as diseased and people who require pity and sympathy. He
describes the new trend that has started in the Bollywood community of creating awareness for disability. However, it is unclear whether this change in trend is due to self-initiative by Bollywood film-makers or in light of continuous criticism towards Bollywood’s stereotypical portrayal of the disabled community. This is an important question to ask because the answer will provide information on the perception of the disabled in modern society. The answer to the question also shows the real attitudes of the population towards the disabled community. It is important to note that this new trend is a step in the right direction. Mohapatra (2012) argues that cinema has the power to influence an enormous amount of the Indian population and plays a powerful role in creating positive awareness for disability in India. Mohapatra’s (2012) use of cinematic examples highlights the message of the article. He describes the storyline in many cases to authenticate the information.

News coverage of disability related issues is similarly problematic because it is practically non-existent. Venkatesan et al (2014) define disability-related news as “what or how much media covers . . . disabilities, their problems, programs, perspective, events, issues, advocacy, empowerment or just everything for the cause of such affected persons.” The study explores the nature, extensity and intensity of disability-related news by examining print and online daily newspapers. Research suggests there is a gross lack of media coverage regarding disability related news. Venkatesan et al (2014) found that only 0.03% of 584 English pages (8 items) and 0.29% of 536 pages in local languages (13 items) had information on disability-related news. It was found that the majority of these article covered childhood disabilities. The amount of coverage was even less for the English pages and those articles also talked about childhood disabilities mostly. This highlights the gross lack of disability related news in Indian newspapers. While the article is enlightening, it fails to provide longitudinal information.
Moreover, the data collected is from only one month of news items, which proves to be a very short period of time. Further research on this issue should attempt a more sustained and systematic study of newspaper coverage of disability related issues for a longer period of time.

*Rural and Urban Disparities*

In addition to media representation of those with disabilities it is important to investigate urban and rural disparities as they relate to opportunities for the disabled community because it provides insight on quality of life and employment opportunities for communities in different regions. Sophie Mitra and Usha Sambamoorthi in their research paper “Employment of Persons with Disabilities: Evidence from the National Sample Survey” provide data on where disabled individuals live and their employment opportunities in those regions (Sambamoorthi, Usha, and Sophie Mitra) She explores the employment issues disabled individuals face in India. In the article, it is made clear that urban areas are of a higher social class than rural areas in India. By examining disabled employment rates in both rural and urban settings, it is surprising that statistics show it is in fact more beneficial for disabled individuals to be employed in rural areas than in urban areas. Mitra argues that this may be due to population scarcity which might lead to more job opportunities. She also highlights that most disabled people who work are, in fact, self-employed. This demonstrates that disabled individuals may face great barriers in the job market, including lack of opportunities, increased competition, and potentially lack of accessibility in urban regions, which self-employment and population scarcity account for in rural regions.

*Employment*

Additionally, it is important to analyze the role of socioeconomic status and employment within the disabled population in India. G.M. Antony and A. Laxmaiah in "Human development, poverty, health & nutrition situation in India" (2008) found that 260 million of
the 1.3 billion people of India are subject to poverty, comprising roughly 20% of India’s total population. By comparison, the U.S. has a total population of 318 million, meaning that the number of India’s population living in poverty is equivalent to 80% of the U.S.’s total population (Antony and Laxmaiah 2008). Although India’s economy has been on the rise and is currently the 4th largest economy in the world, wealth has not been evenly distributed. Those living in urban and rural areas and those who rely on farming to subsist have been left behind. It is clear that India’s disabled population is often left out of the equation. Many of those with disabilities face significant barriers when they attempt to enter the workforce. The article "Human Development, Poverty, Health & Nutrition Situation in India” provides both numerical and geographical context regarding this issue, but does not provide any solutions (Antony and Laxmaiah 2008). Simply put, it summarizes the current state of affairs. The fact that the article neglects to provide solutions is largely due to the prejudices held by employers and the negative social stigmas that have been affixed to those with disabilities.

There are approximately 60 million people living with disabilities in India and many desire to enter the workforce and live self-sufficient and fulfilling lives, but the demand for work from those who are disabled exceeds the number of jobs available, thus leaving many behind as India gains ground economically (Bahuguna, 2008). It is not an easy feat for those with disabilities to attain success, one has to navigate through both institutional and interpersonal barriers. Their competence is often questioned and scrutinized by those in positions of power and this often leads to many workers being restricted from performing menial tasks and rendered invisible by their employers. This ultimately impedes upon one’s pursuit to live a more fulfilling life.
While there has been a strong effort to better integrate the disabled into the economic mainstream by companies such as the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), the same cannot be said for the private sector. Nitin Bahuguna’s article “India: Enabling the Disabled” documents the progress that has been made but also the areas still needing improvement. Both macro and micro examples were provided to support the research done (Bahuguna, 2008). Macro examples being the information collected on the company level, and micro being the information following that of specific disabled individuals. While the examples listed throughout this source are very specific, the information they provide is too superficial to be used in greater depth. They fail to draw large-scale conclusions in their research. A large portion of the article is spent documenting the successes of disabled individuals. While their stories may be compelling, the story of one individual does not hold much weight in supporting research. The macro examples showed the efforts some companies have been making to provide economic opportunities for disabled individuals as well as the areas that still need improvement. While the authors acknowledge these problems and advances, they do not delve much further and seek out the root of problems or examine whether or if these efforts have been successful. I. Parasnis, in “Deaf adults' attitudes toward career choices for deaf and hearing people in India”(1996), also explains where problems arise for disabled individuals by describing which jobs are deemed suitable for deaf individuals and which are deemed unsuitable. It is made apparent that deaf people should be more inclined to focus on careers such as architecture, culinary arts, draftsman, and lathe operators. It is made clear that jobs as construction workers, miners, office managers, and physicians are more unsuitable for deaf individuals. In summary, the articles by Mitra and Parasnis document restrictions on disabled individuals but do not show signs of hope or ways for disabled individuals to overcome these employment barriers (Parasnis 1996; Mitra 2008).
Despite often times being qualified for certain positions, disabled people in India still often struggle to find work. Mukta Kulkarni’s (2014) article discusses the possible reasons why many companies and organizations do not employ people of disabilities and how this status quo can be changed. This article provided useful insight into a cause for why disabled peoples are underrepresented in the Indian work force despite the resources available and the efforts that are made to get disabled people better represented. One solution to this issue that was suggested by the article is the use of disability training agencies that train disabled people for a specific job and then connect them with potential employers. These agencies work extensively in getting more disabled persons represented in the workforce. However, employers tend to feign ignorance about these services and continue to be weary of hiring such individuals. Uitdewilligen (2013) delves into the reasons why people of disabilities in India often struggle to retain employment or to even find it in the first place. Uitdewilligen states that the lack of social acceptance by co-workers is a large reason as to why there is an abnormally high turnover rate for disabled workers and that the acceptance is the “cornerstone for the long-term acceptance of people of disabilities at work” (Uitdewilligen 473). While Uitdewilligen discusses why disabled people struggle to gain social acceptance and therefore employment, this article fails to discuss just how the concept of acceptance is important to sustainable employment of disabled people. The article writes about how disabled people are affected by a lack of acceptance in terms of society and the work force, yet it does not explain how the concept of acceptance is important for disabled people and sustained employment.

It is clear that disabled people, particularly in India, are a highly disadvantaged population in terms of treatment, access to resources, and opportunities. Vanmala Hiranandani’s "Disability, Economic Globalization and Privatization: A Case Study of
India” (2010), Ahmad R. Hosseinpoor’s “Socioeconomic inequality in disability among adults: a multicountry study using the World Health Survey” (2013), and Murthy Venkata S.Gudlavaletti’s “Access to health care and employment status of people with disabilities in South India, the SIDE (South India Disability Evidence) study” (2014) all discuss these tangible disadvantages disabled people of India have over the able bodied population. Hosseinpoor (2013) also discusses how SES compounds the issues of the disabled in India, concluding that while people who are disabled are mistreated across the country, those who are from wealthier populations still have more opportunity than those in poorer areas. These articles are useful for providing strong evidence and quantitative data for the fact that disabled people in India are severely mistreated compared to their able bodied counterparts in terms of access and opportunities. Furthermore, they discuss how socioeconomic status ties in and how it can compound the issues that disabled people face.

**Issue of wealth and poverty**

Wealth is not equally distributed in India. Low SES makes it difficult for disabled people in India to obtain the resources needed to ensure success. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), people with disabilities are likely to have limited opportunities to earn income (American Psychological Association, 2010). They also have increased medical expenses. In the U.S., the Americans with Disabilities Act assures equal opportunities in education and employment for people with and without disabilities and prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. However, people with disabilities remain overrepresented in the nation’s poor and uneducated (American Psychological Association, 2010). This source advocates a study regarding education barriers for people with disabilities. The results of this study show that of individuals 65 years and older, 20.9 percent of people
without a disability failed to complete high school, compared to the 25.1 and 38.6 percent of individuals with a non-severe or severe disability who failed to complete high school. The data from the APA also states that 6 percent of people aged 16-64 with a disability have obtained a bachelor’s degree while 17% of people without a disability have acquired the same educational status. India’s Persons with Disabilities Act (similar to the Americans with Disabilities Act) assures equal opportunities in India, however, disabled people in India still experience inequality in several aspects of life such as income, housing, and education.

**Education**

Education is another important factor to consider as not being equal between the disabled and the non-disabled. Both Pankajam as well as Bach and Alur argue very similarly that socioeconomic status is inextricably linked to the situation of unequal education. Pankajam raises four reasons why both physically and mentally disabled individuals in India are severely poor. First, the fact that disabled communities are denied access to education. Second, because families are not able to afford education. Third, the educational institutions are not accessible to disabled individuals which can often create physical barriers to their ability to enter such institutions. Finally, disabled students encounter challenges with motivation levels in school. (Pankajam 297). It is stated that the government had tried to resolve this problem by raising examples of “The Persons with Disabilities Act” under Chapter V entitled “Education,” by “ensuring, endeavoring, and promoting positive influences and improvements such as free education for the disabled until they are 18 and the removal of architectural barriers” (Pankajam 298). However, by examining the chapter, it is plausible to argue that being disabled will still limit access to education and employment which will lead to low socioeconomic status and
isolation. This book contributes to research on this issue by emphasizing the government’s inability to promote its ideals and the need for change.

It is not only the community that views disabled children in a negative parents, parents also do not necessarily hold positive views to the disabled children. Pankajam (2005) states in his article on “Education and Development” that “[i]t is a myth that only rich children do well with education. The poor do equally well.” However, the approach raised in the book that the author considers as an initial step towards solving the problem is worth noting more than what is written in the first. Bach and Alur (2010) argue that what is needed is “a whole community approach” a movement that is parent based, family based and community based is critical in order to change the education system and socioeconomic conditions for disabled children. When interviewing the parents of children who are disabled and non-disabled, Bach & Alur observed that parents with disabled children feared that their children would be bullied for being disabled. Parents with non-disabled children answered that they believe inclusive education will only cause their children to lag behind and imitate learning behaviors of the disabled (Bach & Alur 2010). If parents hold such beliefs, it is inevitable that their children will hold similar beliefs unless alternative viewpoints are presented.

Most disabled children are viewed as a burden and a lost cause by society. Their education is often neglected as a result of social stigmas. Singhal explores the notion of “Inclusive Education” in India and how well it is implemented (Singhal 2006). She analyzes the Indian independence, the education of children with disabilities, and inclusive education. She acknowledges the Indian Constitution guarantees education as a directive principle rather than constitutional right. This means that education was a crucial part of the governance of the country but is not legally enforceable. This illustrates the root of the education problem as a
whole. The disparities between children receiving education, gender and socio-economic status play a huge part in the issue. It can be observed that there have been many attempts at voicing the problem through a dual approach and the provision of funding for NGOs to open “special schools”. Singhal suggests that the Indian government should be more accepting towards disabled children rather than imposing prerequisites of “emotional” and “mental” readiness, which would address the problem rather than aggravate it. Singhal lays out the remedy for the problem of inclusive education, a schooling system more responsive to diversity and a self-re-examination of the government’s understanding of the goals of inclusive education. Throughout the article, however, Singhal explores a theoretical model of how school should be organized in India. She does not provide any example of implementation of her models. The article can be used as a guide for concepts for improving education however further research must be done into the feasibility of such an approach.

In conclusion, we examined five aspects that compound the issue of the quality of life of people with disabilities in India. Negative media portrayals including both cinematic and news representations reinforce the negative perception of and attitudes towards people with disabilities. Although there have been more attempts recently to correct the issue, more work is needed to effectively ameliorate incorrect perceptions. Geographic disparities in employment outcomes explain that job availability is higher for disabled communities in rural rather than urban contexts. More work needs to be done to discover ways to encourage and incentivize employers to hire and accommodate disabled workers. This paper’s examination of educational impediments faced by disabled communities highlight that the Indian Government should take steps to make equitable education a legal right. Because of the importance that education plays in
children’s development, and because of social stigmas attached to disability and their socioeconomic background, disabled individuals face many barriers to the access of education.

This paper analyzes additional issues that compound with an individual’s disability and low socioeconomic status to make obtaining necessary resources more challenging. While we have clearly defined these issues and cited examples, our analysis revealed that more research is necessary as to the barriers faced by disabled individuals in India. Further intervention by the Indian Government is necessary to guarantee access to basic rights such as accessible workplaces and inclusive schools. One non-profit has already begun this work. Indiability, an Indian non-profit organization dedicated to improving awareness and societal perceptions of disabled individuals in order to empower them to lead full lives.


