

## Visually Impaired Persons in Higher Education: With Special Reference to the University of Delhi

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### Abstract

Persons with disability are most vulnerable in society as they experience multiple disadvantages. Even after huge technological leaps, this section still faces problems in different aspects of their life. This reduces the number of opportunities available to them and hinders their way to live a proper dignified social life. Their education gets hit because of unavailability of necessary facilities in educational institutions. The program and policies made for them are poorly implemented. Improper implementation of inclusive education and absence of special schools and colleges forces them to move away from their hometown(s) at an early age. They also face huge inaccessibility inside and outside of the college and hostel. They have to struggle to participate in higher education, which is increased manifold on online platforms. Along with this, they also face huge discrimination in society, which further demotivates them. In this research paper, an attempt is made to understand the phenomenon of disability and the issues and challenges faced by visually impaired persons in higher education.

**Keywords:** *Visual impairment, impairment, Persons with Disabilities (PWDs), Accessibility.*

### Introduction

Conceptions of disability are highly contextual as different cultures define their norms of being and doing differently (Reddy & Sree, 2015). The subjective explanation of disability has evolved through time by use of several models of disabilities, such as the religious model, charity model, bio-centric model, and social model/rights-based model. In the present scenario disability to a large extent is no longer seen as the biological condition of an individual's body, rather it is perceived as a complex product of social, political, environmental and biological conditions (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).

The standard definition of Persons with Disabilities globally is the one which is given by The United Nations (2006) and Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016). It states that "Persons with disabilities are those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others". As per the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities Act, (2016) visual impairment can be divided into two terms of 'Blindness and Low-vision'. The act defines blindness as a condition where a person has any of the following conditions, a total absence of sight or visual acuity less than 3/60 or less than 10/200 (Snellen) in the better eye with best possible correction or limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of fewer than 10 degrees. And, Low-vision is defined as the condition where a person has any of the following conditions, namely - visual acuity not exceeding 6/18 or less than 20/60 up to 3/60 or up to 10/200.

It might not be wrong to say that visually impaired people are one of the most vulnerable people in society. Absence of facilities like; ramps, tactile paths, sound systems, Braille books, audiobooks increases their vulnerability to a large extent. In such circumstances, it becomes important to assess their situations in the field of education (Jameel, 2011). It is universally accepted that education plays a very pertinent role in the life of an individual. It not

only makes an individual confident, progressive, creative, informative, skilled and rational but also opens the door of opportunities to them (Dreze & Sen, 2013).

As said by Malcolm S. Forbes, “Education’s purpose is to replace an empty mind with an open one”. Charles and Selvi (2012); Salman and Santhosh (2018) also emphasized that education adorns oneself with all the attributes, knowledge and skills necessary to actively participate and contribute in all aspects of human life. But, the education system of most of the countries around the world is not fully accessible and favourable to the visually impaired people.

In developing countries like India, visually impaired persons face many problems in their access to and completion of education (Ahmad, 2017). The Census 2011 revealed a difference of approx. 20 per cent in the literacy rate of disabled persons and the whole population of the country (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, 2016). So, there is a need to upgrade the education system with this changing time and make it accessible for all. As Tata Institute of Social Sciences (2015) report states that “the dynamics of education and its role in national development and social transformation make it essential that educational programs keep continuously renewing to maintain its relevance to the changing societal needs, personal needs of the learner and to the emerging national development priorities” (p.51).

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) even after being the largest minority group in the world do not have enough access to quality education, which is taking place in an inclusive environment (Haakma, Janssen & Minnaert, 2018). But they remained an invisible, silent and marginal part of the society and have been subjected to exclusion, discrimination, oppression and inhumane treatment. This treatment is justified by the perception that PWDs ‘lacked’ something naturally Andrew A. (2015). So, this is one of the sections of society for which the government, as well as the civil society organisations, have to invest a lot, so that the disabled can also be on an equal level playing field.

## Review of Literature

To understand the issues and challenges faced by a person with disabilities and visual impairment with special reference to students in higher education, we have done a review of major research studies. Tincani (2004); Ahmad (2017) focused on issues and challenges faced by the students with disabilities in higher education. Ahmad (2017) mentioned that students with disabilities face many challenges in higher education, not only in terms of gaining physical access to buildings. Tincani (2004) & Madriaga et al., (2011) write about much wider access issues concerning the curriculum adaptation like: taking notes, handouts and other materials not being inappropriate format, and writing continuously in the exam and accommodation process. A report by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (2015) also mentions that some of the major barriers that students with disability faced in obtaining an inclusive education are institutional, socio-cultural and technological.

Ahmad (2017) argues that structural barriers alone are sometimes responsible for multiple barriers which include issues like; process of admissions for students with disabilities, their mobility on campus, interactions within the classroom especially in the case of students with speech impairments and visually challenged, networking or collaborating with other students. Jameel (2011) mentioned that the vast majority of students with disabilities indicate that moving away from home to university or college is a time when they have to confront their disabilities.

Reddy and Sree (2015); Thakur and Jayasena (2017) highlighted the issues of discrimination for persons with disabilities on the ground of gender. They stated that women with disabilities face two-fold discrimination, both on the grounds of gender and impairment. It is also noted that if they are poor, the discrimination and marginality further increase leading to triple discrimination. Poor disabled women are more vulnerable to exclusion and have limited social, political and economic opportunities. They also face a greater risk of sexual and physical violence, abuse and exclusion in the educational systems based on personality, family background, social attitudes, food habits and social life. Like men with disabilities, they face accessibility problems and other problems too.

Madriaga et al. (2011) & Van Hove et al (2014) emphasised on the issues and problems faced by

a person with disabilities on the ground of their identity. It was noted that if people are aware of a disability issue of a person, this influenced their attitudes. Students who do disclose this information often face negative attitudes and prejudices. Historically, people with disabilities have been stereotyped in many different ways. Some of the stereotypes used to label people with disabilities persist in the mind of the public today. Madriaga et al. (2011) also mentioned that there remains a predominant sense of normalcy that continues to marginalize disabled students. Evidence has shown that disabled students perpetually express dissatisfaction in their institutional, learning and assessment experiences.

Dolmage (2017) and Gulyani (2017) have focused on issues faced by government and educational institutions in dealing with the education of a person with disabilities. Gulyani (2017) highlights that there are still pressing issues in front of the government in the form of access and participation in education and the efficiency of the system. Also, despite the best efforts from the government and the presence of multiple policies, children with disabilities are still unable to avail full benefit of these policies. Children with disability hardly progressed beyond primary education and only 9 percent of children in India completed their higher education. Dolmage (2017) said that the main reason behind it may be that universities do not even have the educational resources, infrastructure, or pedagogical skill to accommodate them in the classroom. Though, Jameel (2011) stated that the main reason behind the low rate of higher education in persons with disabilities is the difference like education at primary to a higher level. He said that the inclusion of students with disabilities in primary education has not automatically meant that they are also included in higher education. Primary education and higher education are two quite separate entities in admission, curriculum, governance, finance and policy.

### Research Methodology

This paper has three main objectives (a) To understand the phenomenon of disability, (b) to identify issues and challenges faced by visually impaired persons in higher education, and (c) to understand the extent of facilities that visually impaired persons are getting especially in higher education.

**Research Design:** To understand the issues and challenges faced by persons with disability with special reference to higher education, this study has followed a descriptive research design. This design was used as it allows for usage of a wide range of methods, procedures and techniques. This design was very helpful in describing the phenomenon of disability and in highlighting the issues and challenges faced by a person with disabilities.

**Sampling and data collection:** This particular study has been conducted at the University of Delhi. Due to the lack of timing, financial resources and nature of the study population, the sample of this study was limited to 25 visually impaired persons only. For this study, data was collected from the primary as well as secondary sources. Primary data was collected through telephonic interviews with visually impaired persons after selecting the sample through snowball sampling.

### Discussions

#### Place of pre-matric education

It has been found that most of the visually impaired persons have done their pre-matric studies away from their home district, while very less number of visually impaired persons did their pre-matric studies in their home district. Along with reasons to get good facilities in low fee charges, cooperating environment and more opportunities, unavailability of schools is also a major reason behind this phenomenon of leaving the home district for education. Because of the absence of special schools and inappropriate implementation of policies, they faced many hurdles. This situation shows that inclusive education has yet not reached the ground and visually impaired people still have to find opportunities to study away from their homes.

#### Major issues and challenges

**Issues and challenges in taking admission:** The study has found that 24% of respondents faced various challenges during their admission to the University of Delhi. The decline in percentage of such respondents can be due to less structural barriers in university, support from the volunteer students and cooperation of administration. These 6 students (out of 25) faced challenges in doing written work, mobility in the campus, less cooperation from the administration, discrepancy in information between the respective department staff and admission staff and due to

absence of parents or any other relative during the admission process.

*Issues and challenges faced in the classroom:* It is found that (%) of visually impaired persons (16) faced challenges during the lecture, Ahmad (2017) and Dolmage (2017) report similar findings. They said that along with other issues and problems, students also faced issues in accommodating in the classroom due to a lack of pedagogical skills. The present study points out many reasons behind these challenges, like; most of the teacher not permitting recording of the lecture, writing in Braille during the lecture as it makes sounds, hurdles in recording and concentrating on lecture due to noise in and around the class, teachers negligence of students, unavailability of the recording device, language barriers, unavailability of space on the front of benches. The data in Figure number 1 shows that none of the respondents received notes in Braille format, only 1 respondent received recorded notes and 24 respondents got notes in PDF or printed form which is not directly accessible and needs many efforts before getting used in their studies.

*Travelling and residential issues:* The study has found that less than half of respondents (44%) received hostel facilities. The remaining others have to travel more than 2 km to reach their colleges/departments. For covering this distance they take help of various transport services like: DTC buses, DU special buses, autorickshaws, Uber bike/car, metro and metro feeder buses, rickshaws etc. While covering this distance they face many problems like issues in recognizing bus number and bus stop, inappropriate behaviour of bus staff, no availability of the audio system in buses, unavailability of reserved seats, unavailability of direct buses to their colleges, misbehaviour by people on the way, and denial to assist in crossing roads.

*Accessibility of campus:* The situation of accessibility of the university campus is somewhat similar to the situation of college complexes. The study found that campuses are inaccessible with lack of facilities for persons with disabilities. Most respondents said that there is an absence of pedestrian crossing, audio signals, special equipment and specific measures for participation in sports. Continuous tactile paths are missing and the situation of tactile pavements is not good for walking freely as

they are broken in between and many hurdles are there.

*Presence and accessibility of computer labs:* Present study revealed unavailability of proper computer labs in colleges/departments of the University of Delhi. This hinders visually impaired students' access to online platforms for learning. The present study also highlights a grim picture of the accessibility of these labs to visually impaired persons.

*Reading material in libraries:* Appropriate reading material for the visually impaired persons is unavailable in most of the colleges/department of the University of Delhi. The study has found that only very few colleges/departments have accessible material in the form of Braille books and audio recordings. This exposes the reality of implementation of policies aimed to provide an accessible educational environment to the visually impaired persons. In absence of these materials, they study through youtube videos, prepare notes for themselves in Braille format, use mobile and laptop applications that read PDFs, and procure material from the Braille library. Concept of inclusive education has been brought in India many years earlier, but till now it cannot be brought on the ground for creating an inclusive environment for PWDs especially visually impaired persons.

*Issues and challenges faced specifically by women/girls:* In this study, six visually impaired women/girls participated. Some specific questions were asked to them, to get in-depth information about the challenges they might be facing being a female. It was found that visually impaired women/girls faced more issues and challenges in comparison to men, such as hesitation of strangers in helping them due to their gender, sexual misbehaviour such as inappropriate touching, use of inappropriate words for them. They also face many issues from their family because of their disability, which they would not have faced if they would have been a man.

### **Major facilities**

*Availability of certain facilities in college complex:* The data in table number 1 has shown that more than half of visually impaired persons do not have facilities like; tactile paths, ramps, and separate washrooms in the colleges/

department. Very few campuses had installed Braille plates to help students with visual impairment.

Table No. 1: Facilities in College Complex		
Facilities	Response (N: 25)	
	Available	Unavail able
Tactile path	12	13
Ramp	12	13
Lift	16	9
Separate washrooms	11	14
Braille plates	6	19

*Scribes:* Scribes play a major role in the educational life of PWDs especially visually impaired persons. The award of the hard work done by them depends to a greater extent on the scribes. The study has found that visually impaired persons get scribes with the help of friends, siblings, special teachers appointed in college, a special cell in college and equal opportunity cells. But during the process of finding scribes and writing exams with them, visually impaired persons face problems such as ; denial writing the exam just before the exam date. In such cases, they have to get their exams written by the guards and peons of college/ department. Other issues are language barriers, bad handwriting and lack of coordination between writing and speaking speed. Also, many scribes deny writing an exam as they do not get the payment from the university in a short period, and many people demand more money. They do not get much help from the administration in finding scribe, and the main problem is faced by them in finding scribes at the time of internal exams, as no charges are given to scribes for writing internal exams.

*Equal opportunity cell (EOC):* Setting up of EOCs was done through provisions of Higher Education for Persons with Special Needs (HEPSN) in the year of 2000, with the mission to provide a barrier-free environment in the Universities, to run a resource centre that addresses the needs of persons with disabilities, and ensures non-discriminatory environment. But more than half of visually impaired persons said that they did not get much help from the EOC. They also said that they are not satisfied with the work of EOC. Even some of the

respondents do not know about equal opportunity cell, it’s constitution and functions. The major problem is that the institutions which were created to provide assistance and to eradicate problems of persons with disabilities are themselves inaccessible.

*Special cells/enabling units:* Special cells are the main institutions, which were promised to be created in colleges/departments to reduce problems and fulfil needs of persons with disabilities. It was found that many colleges do not have a special cell for persons with disability. Of all the colleges and departments that have special cells, only half of them are fully functioning.

*Unique identity card (ID):* The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) planned to make a Unique ID card for Persons with Disabilities, to make easy delivery of benefits under various Government-sponsored programs/schemes. But the plan to make Unique IDs has not reached the ground level properly. It was found that very few respondents (only 4 in number) have got a unique ID. Majority of respondents (15 out of 21) had information about it but did not apply due to various reasons. Few respondents (3 out of 21) even did not know about unique IDs. If this was the situation of persons with disabilities who are in higher education, then it is beyond imagination that how are non-educated disabled persons getting benefits of government schemes and what kind of problem they are facing?

*Participation in group activities, festivals and sports*

Most visually impaired persons do not participate in activities and festivals organized in their colleges/departments. They cite different reasons behind this like; lack of a participatory environment, high ignorant behaviour during the programmes and not receiving prior information about the activity. Neither had they been involved in sports activities conducted for all students nor the special activities for visually impaired persons. They are unable to participate in common social activities, such as college fests and sports activities. Also, they are not involved appropriately in celebrating special occasions in their college.

**Conclusions and way forward**

*Conclusion:* The findings of the study reveals that visually impaired persons still face many

issues in completing their education. They also don't get proper benefits of the policies made for them. This does nothing but raises questions on policy formation framework or improper implementation of existing policies and programmes. These loopholes may be due to incomplete understanding of needs and problems of visually impaired persons or no involvement of visually impaired persons while framing these policies. The improper implementation shows the inability and lack of willingness of executives and implementing agencies. The visually impaired persons are the most neglected people in the society; it is also evident from the findings of the study that along with the problems due to their ascribed social status, they faced problems due to the state of their body. They are still seen with the stigmatized and stereotyped mindset in the society. How society with persons with disability behaves serves as a constant reminder of their disability.

The visually impaired persons in higher education faced many problems. Along with others, many problems exist due to lack of training and support provided to teachers to create an inclusive environment. There should be proper implementation of policies for the wellbeing of visually impaired persons at university and college level too. Action Plan for Inclusive Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities, 2005 promised resource support in the form of special educators to assist mainstream teachers at all levels for making the class inclusive, but problems still exist even after 15 years of the enactment of this Act. Problems due to improper lectures may get multiplied when teachers do not provide study material in an accessible format.

**Suggestions:** Based on the findings of the study, following is a list of suggestions for providing a healthy and accessible environment for visually impaired persons in the educational institutes:

- The primary or basic information about the facilities and equipment should be given to visually impaired persons through workshops, training camps or any other medium so that

they may avail these facilities have a fully accessible environment.

- The behavioural or intangible problems need to be solved speedily. This can be done by introducing the disabled persons or their needs and problems to non-disabled students in educational institutions.
- There is a need for allotting college hostels to all the visually impaired persons, and the special bus should work properly to take students from university hostels to colleges. Also, sound systems should be installed on the DTC bus stops and inside the buses, for announcing the name of the bus stand and bus number as the visually impaired persons face problems in both these tasks.
- To solve the issues of infrastructural accessibility, online accessibility to websites of university and colleges must be made simpler. Also, the problems of inaccessible computers and dysfunctional equipment should be solved.
- There is a need to form a committee with visually impaired members, at the university level to assess and evaluate the implementation of policies, working of Equal Opportunity Cell, and other measures taken to increase the accessibility of visually impaired persons. The findings of that should be taken into consideration for making improvements.

**Scope for further studies:** There is need for further research with visually impaired persons or persons with disabilities as a whole who are working in government institutions, private institutions, engaged in politics and other fields as this study was focused only on visually impaired persons in higher education institutes.

Secondly, the study was done with a small sample of visually impaired people in only one university, so the findings may not be generalized to the whole population of visually impaired persons studying in universities all over the country. There is a need that some studies should be conducted with persons with disability and specifically with visually impaired persons studying either in state universities or in central universities.

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