

## Inclusion of Disabled Children in Indian Schools — Status and Need

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### Abstract

*Each student is unique. Therefore, there must be no discrimination on the ground of class, creed, race, religion, colour, Intelligence Quotient (IQ) or ability, etc. In an educational setup, the term 'inclusion' is used for including and embracing this diversity without discrimination. One aspect of this diversity is 'disability'. This article emphasises the educational status of Children With Special Needs (CWSN) in the Indian context. It deals with the present status of the disabled population, especially children, and various policies and programmes pertaining to their education and provisions for inclusion. The educational status of CWSN has been inferred from the Report of Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MSPI), titled 'Disabled Persons in India: A Statistical Profile 2016'. The paper analyses that though various programmes and policies have been initiated from time-to-time, literacy rate among the disabled population is alarmingly low. Barriers regarding the inclusion of disabled children, drawn out of various studies, have been also highlighted in the paper. Besides, provisions for the inclusion of disabled children have been discussed. The article points out that meeting diverse needs is a challenge, but at the same time, it is an opportunity to enrich learning and school relations.*

### INTRODUCTION

“Millions and millions of persons have born and have died but no two persons are identical. Billion and billions of persons will be born and will die but no two persons will be identical. Trillions

and trillions of leaves will grow and fade away but no two leaves are identical. Nature is perfectly imperfect. Universe is designed to coexist with imperfection and individual differences” (Malhotra, 2002, as quoted in Bhokta, 2012).

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These lines reflect that no two persons are exactly similar to each other by nature. Each person differs from the other in one or many aspects. Therefore, there is perfection in imperfection and unity in diversity. Universe can be said to be an inclusive setting of all these diverse things. Inclusion in educational setting is a relatively similar concept.

According to the *Academic Dictionary of Education* (2005), “Inclusion is a process, whereby, students who are in special education programmes enroll in general education classes.” But this definition presents a narrower perspective of inclusion. The broader perspective covers all children across caste, class, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, IQ levels, ability, etc.

The paper tries to study one aspect of this diversity, i.e., ‘disability’. Disabled people are regarded as one of the most excluded groups in society. It is due to this exclusion that literacy level among the country’s disabled population is alarmingly low. According to the Census 2001, literacy level among the country’s disabled population was only 49 per cent. Inclusion is a way to guarantee justice to this group.

According to Barton, et al., (2014), over the last quarter of the twentieth century, the rate of inclusion among the disabled has increased by only around six per cent. It reflects that the situation is more or less the same till now. This paper tries to highlight the present status of the disabled

population, and various policies and initiatives related to their education and provisions for inclusion in the country.

## **STATUS OF THE DISABLED IN INDIA**

According to MSPI’s report titled ‘Disabled Persons in India: A Statistical Profile 2016’, out of 121 crore population, 2.68 crore are disabled (2.21 per cent). The Census 2011 states that among the disabled, 56 per cent are male and 44 per cent female against 51 per cent male and 49 per cent female in the country’s total population (Figure 1).

It is observed that there is an increase in the disabled population from 2.13 per cent (Census 2001) to 2.21 per cent as reported in Census 2011 (Figure 2). Therefore, with a rise in disabled population, the number of institutions catering specifically to their needs must also be increased.

From educational point of view, it is important to learn about age-wise disabled population. As per this report based on Census 2011, disabled people are found more in the age group of 10–19 years. It is observed that according to Census 2011, there are 46.2 lakh disabled people in the age group (Figure 3). People under this age group are in the stage of school education. According to the Right to Education (RTE) Act 2009, all children in the age group of 06–14 years are entitled to free and compulsory education. However, according to the Convention of the

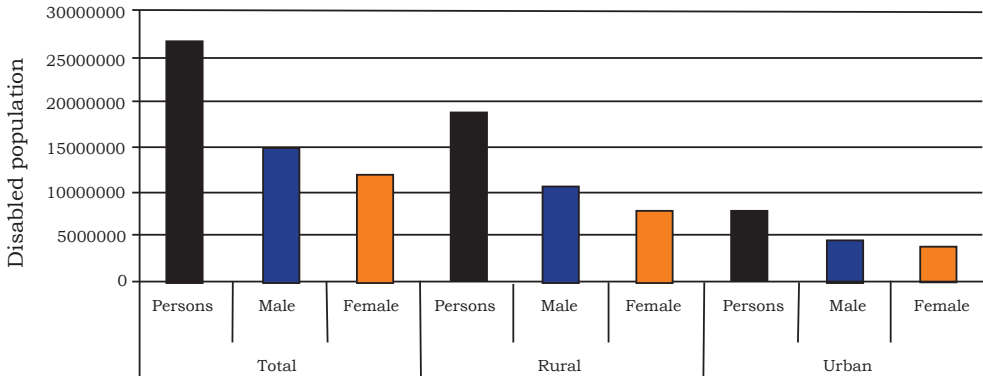


Figure 1: Disabled population in India according to Census 2011

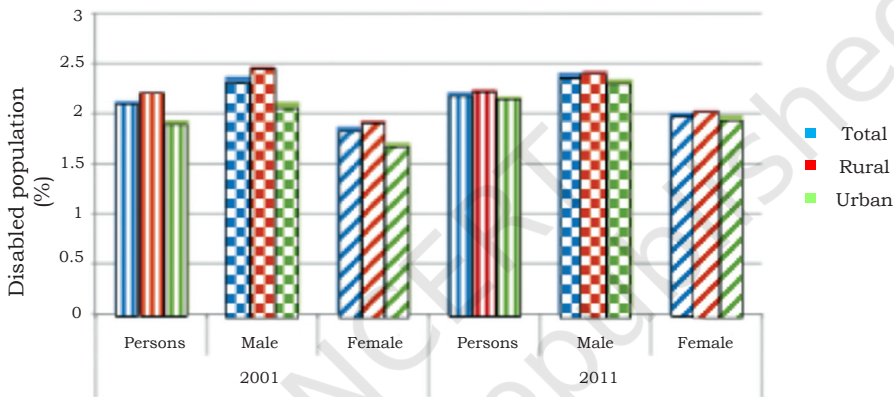


Figure 2: Percentage of disabled population in India — Census 2011 and 2001

Source: Disabled Persons in India: A Statistical Profile 2016

Rights of the Child (CRC), United Nations, 1989, CWSN are entitled to free and compulsory education till they attain the age of 18 years. This implies to India as well as it is a signatory nation to the CRC.

Figure 4 shows that only 61 per cent of the disabled children in the age group of 05–19 years are attending educational institutions and there are 27 per cent who never attended one.

According to the same report, the literacy rate among the disabled population is 55 per cent, of which

62 per cent are male and 45 per cent female (Table 1).

Figure 5 depicts percentage-wise level of education gained by disabled persons. It is observed that a meagre number of the literate disabled population has access to higher education.

From time-to-time, many policies and programmes have been formulated and implemented to ensure the education of disabled people. These initiatives have helped enrich their literacy rate. As part of these initiatives, special schools

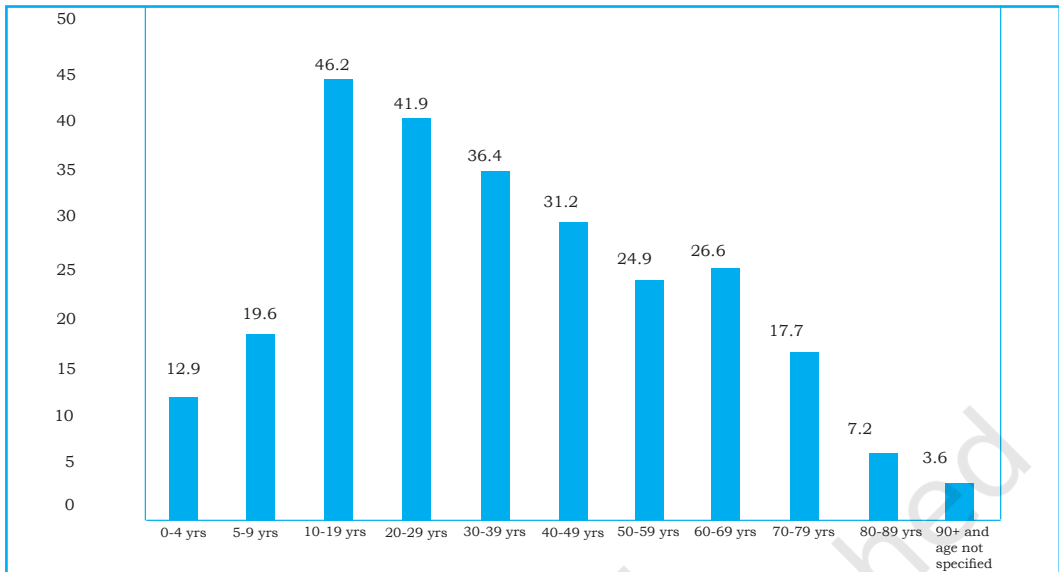


Figure 3: Disabled population in India as per age group (Census 2011)

Source: Disabled Persons in India: A Statistical Profile 2016

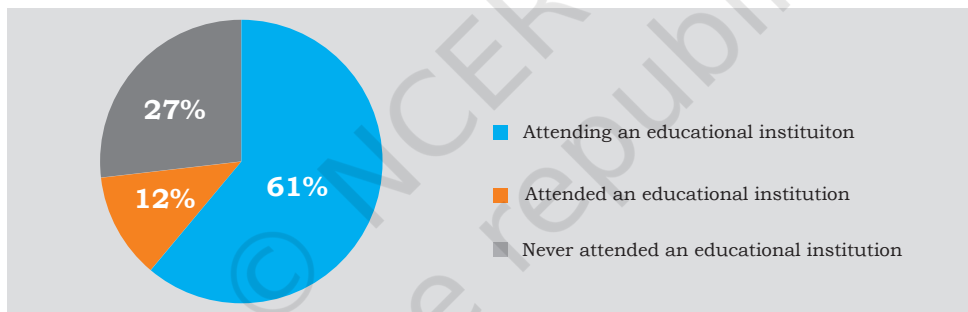


Figure 4: School attendance of disabled children in the age group of 5-19 years in India (in %) according to Census 2011

Source: Disabled Persons in India: A Statistical Profile 2016

were opened for them. Gradually, the concept of inclusion was introduced, which emphasised ‘inclusive education’ (Table 2).

### FROM SPECIAL EDUCATION TOWARDS INCLUSIVENESS

The ‘special education component’ refers to a separate system of education

for disabled children to meet their needs. It needs to be noted here that the concept of special education is older than inclusion. According to the report titled ‘Target Study’ (2018), “During the fifth and fifteenth century, the Church provided care for disabled children but modern methodology of special education was still amiss. From

the mid-fifteenth century, various special education programmes were being formulated and development of special education programme came under action by different physicians and educators. This concept arose in the 1880s in India” (Sidhu, 2017).

The concept of ‘integration’ was introduced in the Integrated Education for Disabled Children Scheme in 1974. It made special children a part of regular schools. The most popular concept in the field of education, i.e., ‘inclusion’ is comparatively recent. The concept

was mentioned in 1995 after the Persons With Disabilities (PWD) Act came into effect. It made special education an integral part of regular schools. The following policies and programmes served as a sequential path for the emergence of inclusive education programmes (Table 2).

### CHALLENGES RESTRICTING INCLUSION

Though various policies and programmes have been formulated and implemented from time-to-time to facilitate the education of disabled children, their enrolment rate is still

**Table 1: Comparison of literacy rate — general and disabled population**

| S. No. | Category | Literacy rate of general population (%) | Literacy rate of disabled population (%) |
|--------|----------|---|--|
| 1.     | Male     | 82.14                                   | 62                                       |
| 2.     | Female   | 65.46                                   | 45                                       |
| 3.     | Total    | 74.04                                   | 55                                       |

Source: Census 2011 and Disabled Persons in India: A Statistical Profile 2016

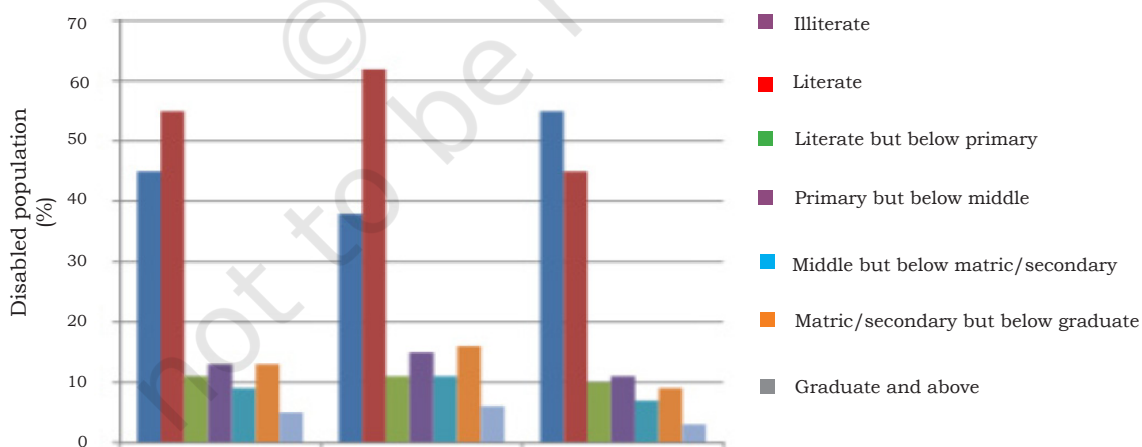


Figure 5: Educational status of disabled population in India (in %) according to Census 2011

Source: Disabled Person in India: A Statistical Profile 2016

low. The scenario becomes clear as Mall (2012) says: “The Indian scenario reveals that 20 million children in the age group of 6–14 years require special appeal to education, while the national average of gross enrollment in initial grades of many education has crossed 90% mark, less than 5% of children with disabilities have reached the school system”.

There are various issues that restrict the path of inclusion of disabled children. According to Singh (2014), lack of knowledge and understanding regarding individual differences and unwelcome attitude of teachers towards disabled learners play a major role in restricting the success of inclusive practices. Das and Kattumuri (2010) identify two major barriers to inclusion in their research, including bullying by non-disabled peers and

attitude of teachers. Singh (2016) observed that poor socioeconomic condition of many disabled children, lack of adequate human and material resources, negative attitude of teachers, community members, non-disabled peers and their parents, inadequate teacher training in special education, large size of classrooms and scant support services in classrooms are major challenges in implementing inclusive education in true spirit. To support his observations, he cites Das, Kuyini and Desai (2013), who found in their study that 87 per cent teachers in India did not have access to support services in classrooms. Therefore, these issues need to be taken seriously by the authorities concerned in order to ensure the success of inclusive education programmes.

**Table 2: Policies and programmes for inclusion**

| Year | Programmes and policies   | Focus  |
|------|---|--|
| 1974 | Integrated Education for Disabled Children  | To admit children with disability in regular schools               |
| 1985 | District Primary Education Programme  | To universalise primary education                                  |
| 1986 | National Policy on Education  | To integrate children with mild disability in mainstream education |
| 1987 | Project Integrated Education for the Disabled   | To encourage neighborhood schools to enroll disabled children      |
| 1995 | Persons With Disabilities Act   | To take actions encouraging inclusion                              |
| 1999 | National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Retardation and Multiple Disability | To promote inclusive education                                     |

|      |   |   |
|------|---|---|
| 2000 | <i>Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan</i>            | To provide universal access to education to children up to the age of 14 years, irrespective of class, caste, ability, etc. |
| 2002 | 86th Amendment to the Constitution      | Education made a Fundamental Right for all children in the age group of 6–14 years; for disabled children it is 6–18 years  |
| 2016 | Rights of Persons With Disabilities Act | To recognise 21 forms of disability   |

### PROVISIONS FOR INCLUSION

For the success of inclusion, a number of factors, including provisions, need to be modified. The context and environment of learning is one of them. It is required to modify and revamp the physical infrastructure in schools and other educational institutions to make it convenient for the disabled. Emphasis must be laid on cooperation and not competition in order to enhance interaction among children. Besides, there needs to be diversity in the use of teaching–learning material to ensure optimal learning of each learner. There must be flexibility in the selection of content during curriculum development so that the needs of all children are met. Individualised instruction is the best way to handle disabled students. Along with these changes, encouraging and welcoming attitude of peers is necessary for the success of inclusion.

According to Nanda, et al., (2009), “If inclusion is to be a feasible alternative to special education

placements, its success will depend largely upon the peer group’s readiness and willingness to accept disabled friends in regular class.” Besides, the role of a teacher is one of the most important factors for the success of inclusion. According to Chadha (2005), “Teacher is the ultimate key to educational change and social improvement.” Therefore, without providing appropriate and adequate training to teachers to handle diverse groups of learners, the cited strategies may become meaningless. There needs to be adequate pre–service and in–service programmes for the capacity building of teachers.

### CONCLUSION

The MSPI report points out that literacy rate among the disabled population increased from 49 to 55 per cent, i.e., merely six per cent from 2001 to 2011. It is because disabled children face discrimination in the form of unwelcoming attitudes

from teachers and peers, and lack of adequate policies and legislation. As a result, they are 'restricted' from realising their rights and become one of the most marginalised and excluded groups in the society. Therefore, the attitude of peers and teachers must be encouraging and welcoming to make inclusion more feasible. Moreover,

there is an urgent need to restructure and overhaul the educational system in India in order to ensure the empowerment of disabled students and transform them into self-reliant and self-sustained confident adults. Diversity of need is undoubtedly a challenge but is also an opportunity to enrich learning and social relations.

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