

Accessibility and Quality Education of Persons with Disabilities in India: An Open Schooling Perspective

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Abstract: Recently under the Sustainable Development Goal 4, all the countries including India are mandated to achieve the goal to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations by 2030(4.5.) and 4.a: build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all. Various countries including India have taken proactive steps and mobilized huge resources for achieving Education for All by 2015. There were some policies and programmes devised to meet the goal of Education for All. However, the goal is still elusive. In this context, it is important to note how these children with Disabilities can be streamlined in the system of education, particularly through open schooling system. The paper discusses how NIOS as one of the largest open schooling system, has used various strategies for providing accessible and quality education for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). NIOS emphasizes on using Media and ICT support both in academic and evaluation system, recognizing and accommodating learners' needs and interests to provide them the quality education. The paper recommends for awareness and collaboration not only to provide accessibility but also to improve the usability of services rendered to the learners so that the goal of equitable participation of persons with disabilities in education can be ensured.

Introduction

Education is central to human welfare and development. It provides the opportunity for the individual to fully participate in society, to access a decent life and work opportunity, and to develop one's potential. Education also largely contributes to economic growth and social development. Therefore, various conventions such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) internationally approved declarations, including the World Declaration for Education for All (1990), the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disability (1993), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994), and the Dakar Framework for Action (2000) emphasized on achieving education for all, specially focusing upon the education of the hard to reach children such as Girls and People with Disabilities. Recently under the Sustainable Development Goal 4, all the countries are mandated to achieve the goal to eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and children in vulnerable situations by 2030(4.5.) and 4.a: build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all

Various countries including India have taken proactive steps and mobilized huge resources for achieving Education for All by 2015. There are number of policies and programmes were devised to achieve the goal of Education for All. However, the goal is still elusive. In this context, it is important to note how these children with Disabilities can be streamlined in the system of education. Therefore, it is desirable to examine the state of education of children in India. Further, this paper will examine the factors affecting education of Persons with Disabilities and how Open Schooling system of NIOS can cater to large number of learners are also discussed in this chapter. As methodology concerned, the secondary database was used to explore various facilities offered to facilitate education for PwDs.

Policy and Programmes for Persons with Disabilities

The initiative for the education of children with disabilities and special needs in India took shape in the late 1800s. For the first time in India, special schools were established for the Deaf in Bombay in 1883, and there was a special school established for the Blind in Amritsar in 1887. Influenced by these strides in the field of Special education, numerous special schools for the visually and hearing impaired children came into being by 1900s in

India. The concern for National Government's approach for Education of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) manifested in the Report of Kothari Commission (1964-66). The Report notes, *"We now turn to the education of handicapped children. Their education has to be organized not merely on humanitarian grounds of utility. Proper education generally enables a handicapped child to overcome largely his or her handicap and make him into a useful citizen. Social justice also demands it...on an overall view of the problem, however, we feel that experimentation with integrated programmes is urgently required and every attempt should be made to bring in as many children in integrated programs"*.

In 1974, the Scheme of Integrated Education of Disabled Children (IEDC) was implemented with emphasis on the need for educating children with mild to moderate disabilities in regular school settings.

The National Policy on Education, 1986 (with modifications undertaken in 1992) has very comprehensively envisioned the education of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs). The recommendations put forth are:

"The objective should be to integrate the physically and mentally handicapped with the general community as equal partners, to prepare them for normal growth and to enable them to face life with courage and confidence. The following measures will be taken in this regard: i) wherever it is feasible, the education of children with motor handicaps and other mild handicaps will be common with that of others.

ii) Special schools with hostels will be provided, as far as possible at district headquarters, for the severely handicapped children.

iii) Adequate arrangements will be made to give vocational training to the disabled.

iv) Teachers' training programmes will be reoriented, in particular for teachers of primary classes, to deal with the special difficulties of the handicapped children; and

v) Voluntary effort for the education of the disabled will be encouraged in every possible manner".

The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 (Ministry of Law and Justice, 1996), also came with similar approach of integrated education. It states that that,

"The appropriate Governments and the local authorities shall

- a. ensure that every child with a disability has access to free education in an appropriate environment till he attains the age of eighteen years;*
- b. endeavour to promote the integration of students with disabilities in the normal schools;*
- c. promote setting up of special schools in Government and private sector for those in need of special education, in such a manner that children with disabilities living in any part of the country have access to such schools;*
- d. endeavour to equip the special schools for children with disabilities with vocational training facilities"*.

The Act has come up with sharp focus on vocational education as an improvement over other policy framework. There was also strong focus on providing access to free education for PwDs till 18 years of age.

Sarva Siksha Abhiyan launched in 2001 was one of the landmark programme was targeted to address the problem of hard-to-reach population with emphasis on the children with disability. SSA ensures that every child with special needs, irrespective of the kind, category and degree of disability, is provided meaningful and quality education. Hence, SSA has adopted a zero rejection policy. This means that no child having special needs should be deprived of the right to education and taught in an environment, which is best suited to his/her learning needs. The major thrust of SSA is on inclusion or mainstreaming CWSN into the fabric of formal elementary schooling, which has been in operation since more than decades.

SSA adopted a more expansive and a broad-based understanding of the concept of inclusion, wherein a multi-option model of educating CWSN was implemented. The dual objective of this model was to bring more CWSN under the umbrella of SSA and to provide to CWSN appropriate need based skills, be it vocational, functional literacy or simply activities of daily living. Further, an attempt was made to provide these skills in the most appropriate learning environment.

In 2009, Inclusive Education of the Disabled at the Secondary Stage (IEDSS) came into effect. The objective of IEDSS was to enable the disabled children who have completed eight years of elementary education to continue

their education at the secondary stage in an inclusive environment in regular schools. No doubt, the Scheme of Integrated Education of the Disabled (IED) under SSA has helped to improve the infrastructure, but shortage of special teachers in the States, disturbances in tribal areas, poverty and social stigmas attached to disability, lack of modified/adapted curriculum, lack of awareness and sensitization, absence of secondary schools in the neighbourhood especially for girls are still the major issues of implementation of the scheme IEDSS in India (NCERT)

Recently, The Right of children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009 passed by the Indian Parliament mandates free and compulsory education of all children of 6-14 years age until they complete elementary education in a neighbourhood school. There is also a reference of children with disabilities in the Act, who are to be given elementary education in the age range of 6-18 year. The Act also has a provision for every child, who is above six years of age and has not yet been admitted to any school or could not complete his/ her elementary education due to any reason, to be admitted in a class appropriate to his or her age. No doubt, these policies have changed the mind-set of people. However, many children lack the awareness of these schemes and programmes.

The State of Education of Persons with Disabilities

In last seven decades of independence and even before independence, large-scale initiatives were undertaken especially after the 1990s but the aspiration to achieve the goal of making education accessible to all still continues after seven decades of independence. Millions of children are the risk and deprived of schooling. The teaching and learning mechanism in School is unfavourable and below the expectations of different stakeholders. The most affected of them are Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and children with disability, who of course requires special assistance catering to their inherent characteristics.

In India 1.67% of the 0-19 population has a disability. 35.29% of all people living with disabilities are children. Other estimates say that India has 12 million children living with disabilities. At a national level “out of an estimated 20.41 Core children in the age group of 6-13 years, an estimated 60.64 lakh children are out of school.” An estimated 21.39 lakh children (1.05%) in the age group of 6-13 years have been identified as Children with Special Needs (CWSN). Among the CWSN aged 6-13 years, 5.94 lakh children are out of school. Further, there are a number of states in North-east and Eastern Part of India where the percentages of out of school children with Disabilities are much higher than the national average. Out of the total Children with Special Needs (CWSN), 25.12% are suffering from Orthopaedic Disability, 19.59% from Visual Disability, 16.95% from Speech Disability, and 14.57% from Mental Disability. An estimated 11.81% children among CWSN suffer from more than one type of disability ((National Sample Survey of Estimation of Out of School Children in the Age 6-13 in India, 2014).

It was also reported that among the total estimated CWSN, 28.07% (6 Lakh) children are out of school. This is much higher than the nation estimated of out of school children (2.97%). Disaggregating by type of disability, 44.13% children suffering from more than one type of disability are estimated to be out of school. Among the children suffering from Mental Disability and Speech Disability, 35.97% and 34.82%, respectively, are out of school. Further, zone wise analysis reveals that 38% of CWSN in the Central zone, 36.27% in the North-East zone, and 35.35% in the North zone are out of school. This proportion is the lowest with West zone where 13.30% of CWSN are out of school

Although limited research has been undertaken on the education of disabilities, absence of adequate and appropriate resources in the mainstream schools is cited as the main reason for the low access of disabled in school education (RECOUP, 2008). Further, the inability of teachers to adapt to their teaching in mainstream school also adds to one of the factors impeding Education of Children with Disabilities. On the other hand, the inappropriateness of the pedagogy adopted and irrelevance of the curriculum followed in the mainstream school also one of the factors of children dropping out and/or shifting to a special school (Singhal, 2010). Further, the studies by NCERT point out various reasons for drop-out of children with Disabilities (CWDs). These are lack of awareness and sensitization; absence of necessary infrastructural and other facilities in school; and further absence of linkage between different inclusive schemes/interventions, between different departments, and between school and vocational education are the main reasons (NCERT, 2013). Even in many of the states, teachers are not trained enough to teach these categories of children.

NIOS and Education of Persons with Disabilities

While the absence of appropriate mechanisms in mainstream schools and lack of special schools in various parts of the country has been the major issues affecting the schooling of children with Disabilities, open schooling has

evolved as one of the alternative for these categories of children (NCERT, 2013). The advantages of Open Schooling System are that there is less opportunity for labelling or stigmatization among the Persons with Disabilities and Persons without Disabilities. The intertwining of Open Schooling Institutions and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has the larger scope to address the education of children and youth with disabilities not only by providing them equitable access but also by extending the scope of education with Self-esteem.

Based on recommendation of National Policy on Education 1986 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), Government of India, The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), formerly known as National Open School (NOS) came into being in November 1989. Towards fulfilling the vision of Sustainable inclusive learning with universal and flexible access to quality school education and skill development, NIOS aims to provide inclusive and barrier free educational opportunities to interested learners. NIOS offers Secondary Education Course and Senior Secondary Education Course through open and distance learning (ODL) mode. The Support to the students is provided mainly through the personal Contact Programme (PCP) at about 6000 identified Study Centres throughout the country. Further NIOS has about 100 Special Accredited Institutions for Education of the Disadvantaged (SAIED) centres to cater to the needs of the physically and otherwise challenged students, and those from the disadvantaged sections of society. Most of these centres are well-equipped with special facilities and infrastructures to address to the learning needs of PwDs and enabling them to access better schooling opportunities.

NIOS as one of the largest open schooling system has its inherent flexibilities, which has the potential to facilitate the education of children without limitations of time, distance and social and gender stereotype: Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) need equitable access to quality education—in terms of teachers, learning environments and curricula. But the mainstream school, particularly those, are located in the rural, and tribal pockets of India lack special teachers to provide education to children with Disabilities (CwDs). Sixteenth Joint Review Mission of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan reports that exclusion, poverty, and disability are linked and the poorest children in disadvantageous locations are likely to be most marginalized, since special teachers are not going to be available. It reported that a large majority of those with multiple disabilities and intellectual impairment remain excluded from mainstream education (MHRD. Only 12 states have appointed special teachers while other report lack of trained faculty and the recruitment policies of the States. Further, lack of funding is also the major issues affecting the lack of infrastructure for providing education for CwDs (NCERT, 2013).

Table -1
Percentage of Schools exclusively for Children with Special Needs (CWSN)

Year	Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	All
2010-11	0.86	5.70	6.08	5.85
2012-13	0.86	2.06	2.57	2.10
2013-14	0.88	1.98	2.71	2.01
2014-15	NA	1.38	1.65	1.43

(Source: U-DISE, 2010-11, 2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15)

The percentage of special schools exclusively for PwDs is decreasing year by year from 5.70 per cent in 2010-11 to 1.38 per cent in 2014-15 at Secondary level. Similarly, there is the decrease in Higher Secondary level from 6.08 per cent to 1.65 per cent at all India level. On the other hand, there are 19 states and 17 states where less than 1 per cent Special schools are available exclusively for CWSN at Higher Secondary and Secondary level respectively (NUEPA, 2010-11, 2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15). In this context, NIOS having the flexibility of providing education at any time and any place can be beneficial for the large spectrum of CwDs to benefit from Open Schooling system of education. Learners are provided the scope to study at their convenience and can use ICT to facilitate their education to interact with tutors. As a result of flexibilities offered by NIOS, the enrolment of Persons with Disabilities is increasing year by year from 3708 in 2010-11 to 5051 in 2015-16.

Table-2
Enrolment of Learners with Disabilities in Secondary and Senior Secondary level of School Education

Nature of Disability	Years of Admission					
	2015-16	2014-15	2013-14	2012-13	2011-12	2010-11
Loco Motor	882	117	129	661	251	379
Visually Impaired	204	69	44	33	77	29
Hearing Impaired	620	611	361	242	153	352
Leprosy Cured	19	9	4	37	44	101
Mentally Retarded	385	214	94	119	1339	100
Mental Illness	22	12	8	22	10	69
Multiple	220	340	313	163	53	112
Cerebral Palsy	1256	230	808	686	526	1208
Learning Disabilities	1443	675	684	448	552	1358
Total	5051	2277	2445	2411	3005	3708
Total Admission	502561	492796	524566	510788	490354	466580

Source: Statistical Report, NIOS

Lack of finances was also the major concern among parents of Children with Disabilities (CWDs).Singhal (2010) cites the financial conditions of the family did not allow them to spend money on one child's education. On the other hand, there is a gender gap in enrolment in eleven States out of the thirteen States. The evaluation by NCERT shows that the enrolment of girl students with disabilities is decreasing year by year. The enrolment was 43.57% in 2009-10, 43.07% in 2010-11, 41.51% in 2011-12, and 40.21% in 2012-13. There is also state variation in the percentage of out of school children with Disabilities (CwDs) ranging from 46% in Chhattisgarh and 80% in Mizoram to 6% in Gujarat and 7% in NCT of Delhi. NIOS having the facilities of Scholarships and also low fee structure can help many PwDs to access education at minimal costs. Further, NIOS provides the learner an opportunity to choose subjects as per his/her need and interest. Even at Sr. Secondary level, there is no concept of streams. One can opt for any combination of subjects according to need and interest, which is core to the needs of Children with Disabilities (CwDs).

Apart from financial considerations, Children with disabilities experience labelling and stigmatization that often result in differential treatment in schools and educational institutions. Open Schooling having the flexibility and facilities for learning at his/her time and space can improve accessibility to content.

The recruitment of special resource teachers is essential for facilitating the education of CWDs. But the teacher shortage is a major issue in many states, particularly in the North East. In 2007, A study commissioned by RCI states that the total number of special teachers requirement for all categories of children with disabilities in India stood at 1, 79,116 (IAMR, 2009) - a shortfall of approximately 1.4 lakh special teachers.

NIOS, in recent years, has streamlined to the use modern means of Information Communication Technology in Distance Education. Audio and Video programmes are also significant components of the multi-media packages offered by NIOS for its various courses of study. The audio/video programmes complement and supplement the other modes of learning such as printed self-learning materials and personal contact programme.

Most of the programmes use documentary, docu-drama, and other exciting formats and the topic/ theme in these programmes are presented in a simple, interesting and engaging manner. These programs provide learners a clear understanding and insight into the subject matter. The audio-video cassettes are also sent to study centres and Regional Centres of NIOS.

The proactive measures like introduction of Talking books and the books with large prints have also leveraged the education of learners with disabilities in a great way. NIOS has also developed the mechanism of Virtual Open Schooling platform where the learners can learn online sitting at home and learn at his/her convenience. It provides opportunities for individuals whose disabilities have prevented them from traveling to classes, participating in class discussion, or using obvious accommodations such as personal attendants. Within the online environment, Learners with Disabilities feel comfortable to share their thoughts during a discussion and/or their contributions to a group project rather than feeling stigmatized by their disability (Boyd & Moulton, 2004).

Recently, NIOS has introduced Mobile Apps, where the learners can access all the study materials on their mobile. Mobile devices are useful for those with learning difficulties, to help them organize their lives and achieve some

independence in learning. Mobile learning has been found beneficial as it engages the learner in situated learning and also makes use of context-specific resources. It also enables learners to move seamlessly across different settings and to connect up learning in various locations.

NIOS has the facilities of On Demand Examinations, in which learner has the scope to appear NIOS Examination in particular subjects whenever learner find convenient for him/her. On Demand Examination System (ODES) are held in 13 subjects at Secondary level and 18 subjects at Senior Secondary level. The flexibilities provided in these examination patterns offer enormous scope for improvement and also to remove the threat of failure in examination unlike the formal system of education. There is less scope for frustration, loss of self-esteem, peer group ridicule, depression, etc. in open schooling system of examination

Conclusion

NIOS as one of the resource organization in the field of open schooling caters to the learners of a significant number of Persons with Disabilities, but many learners and their parents are not aware of flexibilities offered by NIOS. Therefore, there is need of developing the mechanism of awareness and capacity building particularly among organizations working in disabilities sector so that more Persons with Disabilities can access education through open schooling and benefit from its programmes. NIOS, through the use of ICT, can help to provide multiple advantages of educating learners with Disabilities. However, there is need of collaborating with NGOs and other government agencies not only to provide accessibility but also to improve the usability of services rendered to the learners so that the goal of equitable participation of persons with disabilities in the knowledge society can be ensured.

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