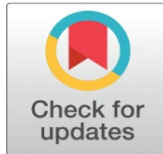
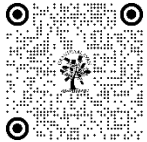


NAVIGATING COVID-19: CHALLENGES FACED BY PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus disease outbreak a pandemic due to its rapid global spread. The COVID-19 pandemic posed a significant threat to all members of society, with persons with disabilities being disproportionately affected by attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers. Basic hygienic precautions such as frequent hand washing, physical distancing, the use of face masks, and avoiding contact with infected surfaces presented numerous challenges in the daily lives of persons with disabilities. Physical distancing directives proved to be a double-edged sword for those requiring additional support, while mask-wearing hindered communication for individuals who use sign language. The severe disruptions to essential services further exacerbated the physical and mental health of persons with disabilities during COVID-19. This highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive and coordinated response system to address the specific issues and concerns of people with disabilities during such crises. The paper aims to examine the critical challenges faced by people with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis in India and proposes strategies for addressing them effectively.

Keywords: Covid-19, Persons with Disabilities, Impacts, Students, Internet

1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus, initially identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, rapidly evolved into a pandemic with 14.5 million cases and over 6 million deaths by July 2020. In response, most nations implemented lockdown measures, confining human life within the four walls of homes with limited physical movement allowed only for purchasing essential items and medicines. The constant emphasis on protocols such as "social distancing" and regular handwashing heightened fears of infection. The world witnessed the emergence of a new daily life vastly different from before, characterized by altered behaviours, emotions, lifestyles, and social relationships influenced by social distancing measures and heightened infection concerns.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and compounded challenges for persons with disabilities worldwide. In developing countries such as India, the lives of persons with disabilities have been significantly affected by the pandemic, amplified by factors such as poverty, underdevelopment, and limited access to essential resources—both symbolic and material. The present paper aims to analyze the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of persons with disabilities in India.

2. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

During the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals with mobility issues, such as those with locomotor or visual impairments, faced significant challenges in performing routine navigation tasks due to physical distancing measures. Rising Flame, an NGO dedicated to persons with disabilities, documented instances where people were unwilling to assist individuals with mobility issues. Visually impaired individuals encountered difficulties in accessing government public health messages because notifications, advisories, and orders were often scanned and unreadable by their accessibility software. The lack of accessibility features in applications like the Arogya Setu app further heightened their sense of marginalization.

Accessing in-person consultations for psychological issues without digital means became nearly impossible, as government health facilities were prioritized for COVID care. Despite India's "Accessible India" campaign launched in 2017 to enhance accessibility in hospitals and government offices for disabled individuals, the quality of healthcare for Persons with Disabilities in many government hospitals during COVID-19 underscored the limitations of these initiatives. The lockdowns and subsequent home isolation and social distancing measures had profound impacts on the lives of children with disabilities. Disruptions to daily routines, including the suspension of regular activities and limited social interaction, posed significant challenges. Changes in learning formats and the absence of necessary services further affected their emotional well-being.

During the pandemic, parents often found themselves overwhelmed by the added responsibilities of caring for their children. Many struggled to assist their children with digital learning due to their own limited experience with technology. Fear that their children might regress during this period heightened parental stress and affected their emotional well-being. The lack of support services and isolation at home led to a deterioration in marital relationships among parents, further impacting children with disabilities negatively.

Research on the psychological effects of mass trauma highlights the severe impact on the mental health of Persons with Disabilities during the pandemic, exacerbated by limited access to socioeconomic resources and supportive social networks. Studies from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine indicate that social isolation and loneliness can exacerbate heart disease, dementia, and other health issues. Government policies implementing medical care rationing inadvertently reinforced discriminatory attitudes towards disabled individuals during crises, heightening their anxiety about falling ill and accessing necessary medical services.

Persons with disabilities are equally affected by anxiety, sadness and grief, irritability, sleep disturbances and withdrawal as their non-disabled peers. Persons with Disabilities are often apprehensive about their caregiver's health, their financial security and also about their job security. The restrictions and regulations during the pandemic adversely affected the self-esteem of disabled individual, because of their dependence on Caregivers.

3. IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

"Rising Flame" is an organisation working with women with disabilities. Nidhi Goyal, the famous disability activist on social media, is the founder of this organization. She is repeatedly writing about the challenges the disabled women had to face during the pandemic, on various pages on social media. This organization conducted a quick survey and published a report titled "Neglected and Forgotten: Women with Disabilities during the Covid 19 crisis in India". A panel of disabled women activists virtually released the report on the 14th of July. The research highlighted various gendered fault lines around the areas of accessing food, essentials, healthcare and rehabilitation services, education, and employment. The absents of proper social security mechanisms also influenced in the worsening of these barriers.

4. IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON STUDENTS WITH DISABILITY

In March 2020, schools and universities in India closed, shifting from in-person instruction to online learning due to COVID-19. This transition significantly affected students with disabilities, whose participation in distance education was reported to be low. Participation levels varied based on the nature of students' disabilities. It was observed that only children whose parents could assist with schoolwork were able to participate effectively in online learning. Young students, as well as those with autism or Down syndrome, faced particular challenges and were often left behind in the online learning process. The following are some of the important reasons for this oversight,

- There were no adequate recommendations or guidelines to support teachers, regarding the inclusion of students with disability in online classes.

- The teachers were not trained to implement individualized educational plans or to fulfil the individual needs of children with disabilities, through an online platform
- In countries like India most of these students belongs to middle class family. As a result, most of the parents are inexperienced in using technology.
- economic conditions of the families also prevent parents from giving importance to their kid's educational needs.
- lack of technology and Internet access also influenced the disabled student's participation in online learning.

5. IMPACT OF INTERNET USE ON PERSONS WITH DISABILITY.

According to rough estimates and in line with the new Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2016 (RPD), more than 3% of the Indian population is disabled with a large variety of physical, cognitive and psychosocial impairments. The Indian media often forgot to properly represent the Persons with disabilities. the digital divide remained very real, because only, the educated middle class have access to internet facilities. The widespread poverty, locational disadvantages and other structural inequalities, lack of education and unaffordability of smart phones and Wi-Fi connectivity strengthened the digital divide among persons with disability in India.

However, during COVID19 and subsequent lockdown, the nation has witnessed, how technology enabled them to create their own space in the media. during the continued lockdown period, the actions of persons with disabilities on social media became more visible and far reaching. Technology opened new ways to connecting with each other in the absents of physical meetings. The regular contacts and conversations in the virtual platform have enabled the disabled people to develop a pan Indian Identity across the disability community in India. This also resulted in the emergence of a new collective voice among persons with disability. The virtual activism brought significant changes in Disability Rights Movements (DRMs). Some of the activists on social media tried to discuss various issues pertaining to Persons with Disabilities individually and collectively and looked for solutions.

Active engagement on social media facilitated the creation of support networks that increased awareness of new norms and protocols, and shared information to assist Persons with Disabilities in managing the pandemic better. Shilpaa Anand's Google group, "Disability Studies in India," provides a platform for exchanging information and fostering discussions on diverse themes and challenges.

Several Facebook pages and profiles of many disability activists and scholars and Disability rights groups such as the National Platform of Rights of People with Disabilities (NPRD) enabled disabled persons to participate in discussions and Webinars and to voice their experiences with greater clarity. These digital platforms also provide an opportunity to analyse the COVID situation through Disability Studies perspectives. The COVID-19 situation has introduced a new normalcy among the non-disabled people. Consequently, the idea of 'normal' in the disability Studies perspective suddenly became significant. The disability activist has wisely use these conversations about the "new Normal" in order to emphasise the Disability Studies conceptions of ability, disability, stigma and exclusion. In short, the wide use of internet facilities and social media during the pandemic enabled the disabled people to create an awareness about their everyday lives, their thoughts and feelings among the non-disabled population.

6. CONCLUSION

In his preface to India's 2019 National Guidelines for Disability-inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction, Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi emphasized the importance of recognizing and understanding the needs of persons with disabilities as a social responsibility. However, these principles and guidelines were overlooked during the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving persons with disabilities marginalized in our society's response to the crisis. The current health crisis has compelled us to explore new approaches to improve current work, education, and social practices, paving the way for a more inclusive society. It underscores the importance of listening to and integrating the needs of persons with disabilities even during non-pandemic times, which can lead to the development of systems that benefit everyone and are more effective during times of crisis.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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