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Systemic Barriers in the Indian Higher Educational Institutes: An Autoethnographic Study of a Disabled Student

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the systemic barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from equal access to higher education in the higher educational institutions in India. This analysis is based on an autoethnographic study, interwoven with relevant examples, data, and arguments from existing literature. The key question this study asks is what barriers do students with disabilities face in Indian higher educational institutions, and how do such barriers undermine the sanctity of the international convention? This study argues that after two decades of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), Indian higher education institutions have failed to realise its objectives.

Keywords: inclusive education, UNCRPD, Indian higher education, persons with disabilities, systemic barriers

Introduction

According to India's 2011 census, about 2.21% of the population has some form of disability. The enrolment of persons with disabilities in primary education, according to media reports, is about 0.1%, shrinking to 0.01% at the secondary level (Bansal, 2019). UNESCO, in its 2019 report, found that 25% of children with disabilities do not go to school, and this percentage keeps rising as they get older (UNESCO, 2019). No concrete data are available on the enrolment of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions. However, the All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) for the year 2021-22 reported about 88,750 persons with disabilities enrolled in higher educational institutions in India, which is 0.004% of the total population of such persons per the 2011 census. Singal (2005) argues that there are disparities in the data about the total population of persons with disabilities and their enrolment in educational institutions. These disparities result in inconsistencies in proper assessment and policy implementation. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, in its concluding remarks on the initial Indian report, expressed similar concerns about

the lack of comprehensive data. The Committee further argued that statistics collected by India are based on the medical model of disability, leaving no space for self-identification (CRPD, 2019).

The low enrolment results are primarily due to physical and attitudinal barriers on campuses. In a study among 250 persons with disabilities in four states and one union territory of India, the National Centre for the Promotion of Employment of Disabled People (NCPEDP) found that physical inaccessibility of the campuses, inaccessible course content, non-availability of accessible toilets, and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities were the main concerns among such individuals (NCPEDP, 2024). The author's autoethnography deeply explores these and other issues faced by persons with disabilities, which contribute to the low enrolment and high dropout numbers in higher education institutions in India. The contributions of this autoethnography are significant for this study and for further research, as I studied at two higher education institutions in India and have first-hand experience of the physical barriers and attitudinal discrimination I faced.

What is Autoethnography?

According to Poulos (2021), autoethnography is a biographic genre in academic research and writing in which an author sketches, analyses, and interprets their lived experience. These lived experiences are linked with "self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" (Poulos, 2021). Scholars like Adams et al. (2015) argue that autoethnography as a qualitative research method performs six main functions, including to utilise the researcher's lived experience to: 1) describe; and 2) critically analyse cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences. It recognises and appreciates the researcher's connection with others. It employs thorough and thoughtful self-examination, often termed "reflexivity," to identify and explore the intersections between the individual and society, the specific and the universal, the personal and the political. It depicts individuals navigating the process of determining what actions to take and how to live, and of understanding the significance of their challenges. It balances intellectual and methodological rigour, emotional depth, and creative expression. It aims to promote social justice and improve the quality of life (Poulos, 2021).

Autoethnography as a research method promises to include the researcher's lived experience in academic research. It is a critical source of data that facilitates an intersectional exploration of self and societal structures, and supports advocacy, serving as a tool for social change (Adams et al., 2011, 2014, 2017, 2018).

Robert McRuer has extensively used autoethnographic research methods to explore different cultural practices in the context of disability studies (2006; 2010; 2018). He argues that personal lived experiences are an essential research tool to challenge the ableist structures and assumptions in society. Similarly, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, through her various accounts, contends that to have a nuanced understanding of the issues faced by persons with disabilities and how different cultural practices affect them, narrative and autoethnographic research facilitate challenging the dominant narratives (2009; 2014; 2017). In this context, this paper utilises the autoethnographic research method to build a case for the significant challenges faced by persons with disabilities in Indian higher education institutions regarding inclusion and accessibility.

Positionality

The author's autoethnography is directly linked with this study's research questions. The author is a person with visual disability from birth. I have studied in two higher educational institutions in India. Therefore, my experience directly aligns with the research questions of this study, which examines issues of inclusion and accessibility in Indian higher education institutions. The autoethnographic research method requires me to reveal my positionality, including my identity, privilege, and biases.

For this purpose, I am a male in the age group of 25-30 with a vision disability. I come from a middle-class family with a farming background. My middle-class background comes with no privileges. At the outset, I acknowledge that because of my disability, I might sometimes take an extra step in critiquing the cultural beliefs and practices and the lack of support from the institutions. However, to minimise biases and maximise the potential of this study, and to address concerns related to over-identification, lack of objectivity, and difficulties in generalising findings (Poerwandari, 2021), the author enhances inter-subjectivity by incorporating multiple perspectives and citing similar experiences of persons with disabilities from the literature. The study further balances personal and social insight by connecting personal experience with broader cultural, social, and theoretical contexts.

Legal and ethical dimensions

This study is located within the legal and ethical frameworks governing disability studies, inclusive education, and qualitative research ethics. The legal grounds for this study are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) 2006 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act 2016. The study explicitly utilises Article 24 of the CRPD, which guarantees the right to inclusive education at all levels. In the Indian context, the RPWD Act (2016) operationalises these obligations, requiring all educational institutions to ensure reasonable accommodations, barrier-free access, and non-discrimination in education.

Ethically, this study follows the principles of reflexivity, integrity, and respect outlined in the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines 2018. The study anonymises all individuals and institutions to uphold confidentiality and to prevent potential harm (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001).

Higher educational institutions in India and the inclusion of persons with disabilities

This paper will first discuss the principles enshrined in Article 24 of the CRPD. It will be followed by a discussion of accessibility issues across the physical and digital infrastructure of Indian higher education institutions. Along with the author's autoethnography, relevant literature is included in each section to connect the experience to the broader discourse in this field.

Article 24 of the CRPD

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) emerged from decades of global advocacy to protect the rights of people with disabilities. Its roots can be traced back to the post-World War II era, when international human rights instruments were created but largely ignored disability-specific issues (Dhanda, 2006). In the 1980s and 1990s, the global disability rights movement gained momentum, with organisations such as Disabled Peoples' International advocating for change. Key milestones, including the 1993 UN Standard Rules on Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, and the Salamanca Statement (1994), highlighted the need for inclusion in education. The CRPD, proposed by Mexico in 2001, was developed through the UN's Ad Hoc Committee, involving active participation from disabled persons' organisations. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2006 through Resolution 61/106, signifying a shift from viewing disability through a medical lens - which regards disability as an inherited impairment and ignores the social and environmental barriers perpetuating discrimination (Shakespeare, 2017; Oliver, 2013; Goodley, 2001; 2014), which perpetuates stigma - to recognising disability rights as human rights, as based on the social model of disability which, according to Oliver (2013), recognises the role of society in creating physical and social barriers leading to disabilities.

Article 24 of the Convention obligates state parties to recognise education as a right of persons with disabilities. To realise this right, signatories must provide an inclusive education system. The parties are also expected to promote lifelong learning opportunities for persons with disabilities (CRPD, 2006, Art. 24). The lifelong learning should be directed to the full development of human potential,

a sense of dignity and self-worth, and respect for human rights and diversity. Lifelong learning and education should also promote the personality of persons with disabilities, their physical and mental abilities, and ensure their free participation in society.

Article 24 places several obligations on the state parties for the promotion of the educational rights of persons with disabilities, such as ensuring that:

1. Persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system, or from free primary and secondary education, because of their disability.
2. Access to education for persons with disabilities should be inclusive and should be ensured in the communities where they live.
3. Reasonable accommodations should be provided in accordance with the individual's needs. These accommodations should conform to Article 9 of the CRPD, which addresses the different accessibility needs.
4. Effective education for persons with disabilities in the general education system is realised by providing the necessary support.
5. The maximisation of academic and social development through the provision of individualised support is consistent with full inclusion.
6. Full participation of persons with disabilities in education and society is facilitated by state parties who should enable them to learn life and social development skills. For this purpose, state parties should ensure the learning of Braille and alternative scripts, provide alternative means of communication, and provide mobility and orientation skills.
7. State parties employ special teachers trained in Braille and other alternative communication methods.

However, as general comment No. 4 and the Commonwealth guide by Rieser (2008) both contend, these provisions are progressive in nature, though some require immediate attention. Provisions such as making physical and digital infrastructure accessible, teacher training, and shifting financial resources from special schools to inclusive ones should be realised over time, while provisions for making reasonable accommodations and providing individual support should be realised immediately.

Autoethnography

I began my higher education journey at a college affiliated with the University of Kashmir, about 12 kilometres from my home, with no options for overnight accommodation. From 2015 to 2019, I pursued a Bachelor of Arts degree there. Alongside me, I knew of two other students with disabilities enrolled in the same program. At the time, I had little awareness of the concept of "inclusion" as it related to disability. This narrative reflects on my experience of exclusion from the mainstream during my college years. Later, I moved to Delhi to pursue my Master's degree in one of India's most prestigious institutions, from 2020 to 2022. At this university, inclusion was much more evident, with around 200 students with disabilities studying and living on campus. I will use three factors to determine how persons with disabilities experience inclusion in higher education institutions: curriculum and pedagogical inclusivity, attitudinal barriers, and social inclusion and campus life.

Curriculum and pedagogical inclusivity

Article 24, sections 2) (C) and 3(C) obligate the states to ensure that persons with disabilities are provided with every support for their effective learning. This includes making reasonable accommodations and providing education through alternative communication methods. In practice, it means that educational institutions should reform their curricula to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities. In this context, the college in Kashmir either lacked awareness about the necessary provisions for persons with disabilities or was uninterested in making accommodations. During my

four years there, I was never offered any support. I was not provided with the descriptions of slides used during the lectures, nor was I given any other alternative means to help me understand the material being taught. Exams were always a source of anxiety, as I had to constantly seek permission from the examination office to use a scribe or writer, and no alternative assessment methods or additional time were ever granted. To pass exams, I had to rely on teachers' notes sold outside the campus, as no accessible formats of reading materials were made available to me.

In contrast, a university in Delhi recognised the need for alternative reading formats and provided alternative assessments for students with visual impairments. However, the teaching methods remained similar to those at the college in Kashmir. In both institutions, I experienced that teachers were not trained to communicate with students with disabilities effectively. Slides, data, gestures, and other essential visual elements were never explained in a way that accommodated students with disabilities. More than 40 persons with disabilities voiced similar concerns in a study by Ruchi Palan (2021). In this research, persons with disabilities argued that they were unable to choose their desired course primarily because of the inaccessible curriculum and the lack of training of teachers on effectively communicating with such individuals. Palan (2021) argues that the inaccessible curriculum and lack of teacher training have led to high dropouts among persons with disabilities in higher education institutions. In a similar study of 24 persons with disabilities enrolled in Indian higher education institutions, Mir and Waheed (2022) found that the majority of participants were concerned about the lack of teacher training and were dissatisfied with the curriculum design and pedagogy. They further argue that this is one of the key reasons for dropout and failure among such individuals (Mir & Waheed, 2022). The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities was concerned about the lack of training among teachers and other staff and recommended that India take necessary steps to combat this challenge (CRPD, 2019). The studies, as well as the committee's observations, highlight the systemic prevalence of this issue.

The inclusivity of curriculum content often reflects a troubling bias. Emphasising this, Emily Martin's essay on the portrayal of the egg and sperm in biology textbooks (Martin, 1991) highlights stereotypical male-female roles, underscoring a broader issue seen in various educational texts. Many of these texts use terms like "blind," "dumb," and "deaf" negatively, fostering exclusion for people with disabilities. I recall instances in college where teachers, reprimanding students, would say phrases like "Are you blind or deaf?" as though these disabilities were curses. Although there may be political considerations, it is essential to redesign curricula to promote inclusivity in language and accessibility.

Attitudinal barriers

The integration or inclusion of any marginalised person or group into the mainstream is directly proportional to the majority's attitude towards them. In this context, the inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions largely depends on how fellow students, teachers, and other staff behave towards them.

During my college years, I experienced a consistently negative attitude across various settings, including the classroom, campus, and administrative offices. Fellow students often displayed scepticism toward me and my disability, which made them hesitant to engage with me socially or academically. Conversations were rare, and I felt excluded from the peer interactions that many students enjoy. Teachers, too, largely ignored me inside and outside the classroom. Their indifference to my education and well-being was apparent, and it became clear that they had little interest in ensuring my academic success. Even the administration was mostly unaware of my presence on campus. Whenever I had to engage with them, they seemed surprised that I could access higher education at all. This negative attitude from the entire college community created an isolating experience for me, and, as a result, I was unable to form a single friendship during my time there.

When I moved to Delhi, I observed some positive changes in attitudes. Fellow students, compared to those at my previous institution, were generally more aware of the rights and needs of people with disabilities. Many of them were more supportive of the issues we faced. I was able to get involved with student groups and political organisations, but despite this inclusion, it often felt superficial. My participation was sometimes seen as a way for these groups to appear inclusive rather than a genuine effort to address the challenges faced by people with disabilities. Although I was involved, my opinions on disability issues were frequently ignored, and I remained excluded from meaningful discussions. While a few teachers at university were supportive, encouraging my academic endeavours and helping me navigate university life, the majority were indifferent, much like in my previous college. The university administration also mirrored the attitudes I had encountered previously, displaying a dismissive, often negative approach. I frequently faced scolding, impatience, and complaints when trying to address my needs. Despite some improvements in student awareness, the overall environment remained challenging for me and others with disabilities, with the same barriers persisting in different forms.

Impatience and scolding became routine experiences for me while dealing with both my college and the university administration. After completing my college course, I attempted to attain essential documents; however, delays and misplaced records led to repeated instances of blame and reprimand. A similar incident occurred when I needed my final results to apply to a university in the United Kingdom. The results were delayed by about five months, and each enquiry about the status was met with irritation and dismissive behaviour.

Similar to my experience, a focus group study by Kunnath and Mathew (2019) identified some related experiences of persons with disabilities across six major cities in India. They write that many students received a positive attitude from fellow students; however, the teachers and administration often demotivated such individuals. Narrating the story, Kunnath and Mathew (2019) argue that whenever a person with a disability asked for clarification on certain points, the teacher would get angry. They further argue that teachers and administrators never believed that such persons were even capable of becoming educated. This attitudinal barrier exists not only on the ground but also on paper. As Jameel (2011) argues, the official documents of various colleges of the University of Delhi contain different terminology for such students, ranging from 'physically challenged' to 'handicapped' to 'persons with disability', reflecting different attitudes towards them. Notably, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his 2015 radio address to the nation, asked that the term "Divyaang" be used for such persons, which literally translates to 'one who possesses divinity', reflecting the societal attitude towards persons with disabilities.

Social inclusion and campus life

Most of the literature about the inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions in India examines and explores it through the themes of curriculum, pedagogy, attitude, and other barriers (Palan, 2021; Banerjee, 2014; Saldanha & Ranha, 2022; Setia, 2024; Peter & John, 2023). However, one of the major barriers I witnessed at college and university was social exclusion and exclusion from campus life.

In an attempt to define social exclusion, the United Nations provides reasons and grounds for its occurrence. It considers a situation in which a person is unable to participate in society's social, political, economic, and cultural activities to be exclusionary (United Nations, 2016). Furthermore, if a person cannot exercise their voice or if their interactions are limited, it leads to social exclusion. Over time, race, sex, disability, age, religion, place of birth, and other factors have been the grounds for social exclusion (United Nations, 2016).

During my time in college, my experience was shaped by a sense of isolation due to my disability. My interactions with students, faculty, and administration were limited, and I found myself excluded

from many key aspects of campus life. Cultural events, collaborative lab projects, and even the playground—spaces that should foster connection—were out of reach. There were no sports or activities designed with inclusivity in mind, leaving me on the sidelines.

Things were not much different at the university. While I could engage in academic events, social gatherings, and sports were still largely exclusionary. Despite the prestigious setting, efforts to create an inclusive environment for persons with disabilities were nearly nonexistent. The playgrounds were inaccessible, and the gym lacked adaptive equipment or signage, making them unusable for students like me. Unfortunately, there was little distinction between my experience at college and the university; both left me feeling marginalised and disconnected from the vibrant campus life others enjoyed.

This attitudinal behaviour towards persons with disabilities and their social exclusion highlights deeply held stereotypes about their abilities. Society, in general, believes that persons with disabilities are incapable of being educated. Similar remarks were made to me during my college days; it was not an isolated incident. The CRPD Committee highlighted similar concerns, arguing that the prevalence of prejudices and stigmas underpins the isolation and segregation of persons with disabilities (CRPD, 2019).

Accessibility and Indian higher education institutions

Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), in its entirety and in every provision, argues for the accessibility of the physical and digital infrastructure in education. For example, Article 24, Section 1(c), argues for free participation in society, which requires education, which in turn requires accessibility. Article 24, Section 2 (c)(d), talks about reasonable accommodations and support needed by such individuals. Reasonable accommodations are further emphasised in Section 5, which argues that states must ensure that the accommodations required by persons with disabilities are provided at all levels of education. Therefore, accessibility is the prerequisite of education for persons with disabilities.

My college was one of the most inaccessible places imaginable. I was expected to attend four classes a day, but each class was held in a different building, scattered across campus, with no thought given to accessibility. To make matters worse, the schedule left no time to transition between classes; if one class ended at 10:40 AM, the next began immediately, leaving me scrambling to navigate the distance. There were no footpaths and certainly no tactile paving to guide me.

Being excluded from social spaces also meant I had no friends to help me find my way. I was often forced to skip classes simply because getting from one building to another was impossible. Over time, this frustration built, leading to prolonged absences from college.

For those using wheelchairs, the situation was even more heartbreaking. There were no ramps; students had to rely on friends to physically carry them into the buildings. The library was another inaccessible space, with no alternative formats for books or reading materials, making it unusable for many. My experience with accessibility at college was not just challenging, it was demoralising and profoundly isolating.

The university campus was not much better. While there were tactile paths on the roads, many were broken and unreliable. The campus seemed to have considered accessibility only to the extent of adding ramps. However, once inside the buildings, there were no tactile indicators or signs to guide visually impaired students. No directional symbols were provided, leaving classrooms, offices, and social spaces largely out of reach.

The library, though it had a designated space for students with disabilities, could only accommodate 20 people at a time, which was far from sufficient. To make matters worse, the campus's popular

eateries, beloved by the student community and where they say most of the personality development takes place, as they are the spaces for discussions on India's economy, politics, social issues, and international affairs, were completely inaccessible for individuals with vision or mobility disabilities. The roads leading to these areas were damaged, making it impossible to navigate with a wheelchair or white cane. Inaccessibility of these spaces meant that persons with disabilities were unable to participate in the discussions, which further fostered exclusion. This also left less space for people like me to discuss our issues. Overall, accessibility in Indian higher education has largely neglected the promises of Article 24 of the CRPD, leaving students like me feeling excluded and overlooked.

Most of the literature written on the issues of persons with disabilities in the educational institutions of India echoes these sentiments. For example, less than 20% of the campuses examined had installed ramps, and only 4% had lifts provided (Setia, 2024), which leads to the low enrolment rate of persons with disabilities in higher education institutions. Furthermore, universally designed or accessible toilets were either absent or insufficient, contributing to the inaccessibility of campuses (Setia, 2024). Out of the 722 universities in India, not a single one was completely disability-friendly (Sarkar, 2016), thus making higher education nearly impossible for persons with disabilities. Along with issues of inclusion, the non-availability of study material, lack of trained staff, inaccessibility of physical spaces, and curriculum design are the most significant factors hindering access to education for persons with disabilities (Sarkar, 2016). Similarly, in a study of six students with disabilities, Gaurav et al. (2023) found that two-thirds of them faced physical barriers in accessing higher education. Notably, architectural design was the main source of such impediments.

Conclusion

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is approaching its 20th anniversary since its adoption, marking a critical juncture for evaluating its impact. Similarly, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act (2016) will celebrate a decade of existence in 2026. However, as my autoethnography and the existing literature highlight, the challenges that existed before the adoption of the CRPD and the RPWD Act persist largely unchanged. Physical accessibility remains a significant issue, with most of the educational institutions still not designed to accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities. Attitudinal barriers, such as negative stereotypes and discriminatory behaviours, continue to marginalise individuals, further limiting their inclusion in mainstream education. Curriculum design also remains inaccessible, failing to address the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities. These persistent barriers have severe consequences, as they contribute to the high dropout rates of students with disabilities, a reality that I and others have personally experienced, as detailed in this paper.

Principles enshrined in Article 24 of the CRPD possess transformative capabilities. However, it is safe to conclude that Indian higher education institutions have yet to realise the significance of these principles. Shifting from a medical to a social model of disability, introducing a disability awareness module at the early stages of education, and using accessibility to rank educational institutions may help transform educational institutions in India. The principle of progressive realisation is a hope of persons with disabilities in India that someday, education in India will be inclusive. Till then, it is a constant battle between aspirations and availability.

Acknowledgements

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