

Editorial Note

Disability, Society and Education in India

"Part of the problem is that we tend to think that equality is about treating everyone the same, when it's not. It's about fairness. It's about equity of access." – Judith Heumann

Judith Heumann, one of the pioneers in disability rights activism rightly explains why persons with disabilities are not able to fulfil their aspirations the same way the average population can.

Inaccessibility of education, health and employment services affects persons with disabilities in different ways. Merely a sentiment of equality is not enough to bring about a just and equitable society. In education sector, the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) prescribes equitable and inclusive learning for all. Adopting the Goal 4 (SDG14) of the 2030 global Agenda for Sustainable Development, the NEP 2020 seeks to ensure "... inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by the year 2030. It acknowledges

that “education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality” and is the foundation of establishing inclusive community and society. Guidelines and implementation frameworks outline values of high quality of education, inclusion, equity and issues of accessibility adopting a rights-based approach with an acknowledgment of diversity. Unlike previous decades where disability remained a neglected area, the NEP 2020 advocates inclusion of persons with disabilities as per provisions listed in Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016. It has included aspects of disability inclusion throughout the policy, with a special chapter focussing on issues, challenges and recommendations for ensuring equitable and inclusive education by reducing the disparities in access and participation of all learners. This is covered under the policy for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) which is an umbrella term covering gender identities, socio-cultural, socio-economic identities, geographical identities as well as disabilities.

Disabilities impact access to opportunities for education and achievement of a learner’s full potential. The policy advocates a teaching learning environment that is barrier free and all learners regardless of learning styles and abilities/disabilities are able to learn through flexible education system that caters to the individual needs and abilities of children and adults with special needs across all stages of school and higher education. It endorses resourcing education institutions and resource centres, engagement of special educators, capacity building of teachers and special educators, modifications, adaptations, accommodations in curriculum, teaching-learning methods and materials, assessments, examinations and co-curricular activities such as arts, sports and vocational education to equip all learners with twenty first century skills towards building global competencies. Equitable, inclusive and quality education thus aims to achieve success and better learning outcomes for learners with disabilities.

Yet, the NEP 2020 presents a confusing picture. On one hand it promotes the idea of creating an educational system that is designed for all learners, with and without disabilities to study in barrier free classrooms, flexible curriculums and assessments, ensured accessibility, yet, on the other hand there is little critical examination of existing practices that cause exclusions of learners with disabilities, such as rigid curriculums and pedagogies, inaccessible learning resources and classrooms, absence of modified assessments, and attitudinal barriers that limits what the learners with disabilities can achieve. The NEP 2020 seems to 'mitigating' the problem of exclusion of learners with disabilities still trapped in medical models of disability, rehabilitative approaches and paternalistic welfare models where learners with disabilities are primarily viewed as recipients of care, centring disability as an individual problem. Also lacking in emphasizing on the intersectional identities of the learners with disabilities that contribute to the lack of opportunities, the policy needs to re-orient it to uncover and deflate systemic inequalities that cause alienation and under representation of persons with disabilities.

There is an urgent need to recognize disability as an identity and as a form of diversity, rather than as a lack/deficit. Policies of inclusion for persons with disabilities must cease to be 'modified' solutions for the 'problem of disability', rather there must be a critical examination of existing ableist practices, systems and policies that excludes persons with disabilities in the first place. There is a need to rethink the notion of "inclusion" particularly in the context of multiculturalism and pluralism in the Indian context. The tendency to reduce it to assimilation and restoration of normalcy rather than celebration of differences remains a standing challenge as long as state policies remain pegged on the medical notions of normality for categorization of persons with disabilities, the NEP 2020 being an illustration of the same.

This issue addresses some of these concerns while being full conscious that institutions of higher education have a long way to go before some of these values can be realised as ideologies and identity based political positions rather beyond token practices. This issue is a humble attempt to initiate the process of instituting right academic perspectives that can influence policy framing and can go a long way in ensuring a democratic, free, fair, just and equitable society.

OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT ISSUE OF SAMBHASHAN

This issue carries twelve articles, one book review and one movie review that is also a tribute to Dr. Brooke Ellison, an American academician and disability advocate who passed away on February 4th, 2024. The issue is divided into three sections, the first section titled 'Theoretical Perspectives' carries four articles. The first article by Sanjay Jain and Malika Jain presents a scathing critique of legal practices in India that continue to be characterised by the medical models of disability as well as sentiments of compassion. Instead, it prescribes the doctrine of quantum entanglement; an urgent intervention in theoretical perspectives that can significantly alter the Indian constitutional morality towards an ethics of alterity. The referencing style in this article is as per the subject requirement. The second article by Mohammad Shaikh similarly presents a critique of the dominating welfare model and re constructs the notion of freedom that opens possibilities of enacting new forms of moral relations and solidarity. The third article by Wilbur Gonsalves does not question the medical connotations of the practice of rehabilitation, yet it is an important contribution as it emphasizes on community based practices; shifting the responsibility of integration of persons with disabilities from individual to community. The fourth article by Pankaj Singh Kushwaha reviews the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 ratified by India, it occurs

as a pause to not only understand where we stand almost two decades later but also opening conversations to understand the way forward.

The second section on 'Intersectionality' carries articles that address disability and its intersection with gender based discrimination. Post-colonial feminist movements provided important impetus in meaning construction and hence to understand disability based violence embedded in a particular context of gender identities and exclusion during COVID-19 remains relevant. Kalyani Talvelkar and Anjana Parmar article details the ableist foundations of exclusionary societies that impact women with disabilities in the worst way during crisis such as the pandemic. Roding Puii article focuses on the Mizo folk tales mythical character Phungpui, who is commonly described as a horrendous female humanoid creature. The essay investigates the intersection of folklore and disability within the Mizo context through the feminist disability lens. The third section 'Disability and Education', carries six articles all focussing on disability and education systems in India. Prajnee Sahoo's exposition of rights of children with disabilities presents a comprehensive account of the entitlements of children with disabilities as per the RPWD Act 2016 as well as reflections of its enforcement in present times. Bijoy Thomas' article details the nuances of an inclusive curriculum that not only places certain demands of driving systemic changes with empathy and critical thinking but also presents a blue print that educationist and can adopt in the curriculum making practices. Similarly, Apoorva Panshikar's article provides a rigorous discussion on effective intervention strategies for children with specific learning disabilities. This article is significant because it suggests a theoretical framework that proposes shifting the attitude beyond the 'assessment' framework towards removal of barriers thereby shifting the onus of the educators rather than emphasizing learning disability as an individual limitation. Being an "invisible" disability engaging with it

always poses a challenge for the untrained educationists and this article provides an appropriate perspective to engage with the same. P.J.Matthew Martin's article critically analyses the crucial issue of digital inclusion and accessibility, a pre requisite to the inclusive higher education and society. Disability rights advocate Neha Trivedi's article highlights opportunities (missed) and challenges presented in inclusive policies and practices of higher education in India due to assimilative practices of 'belongingness'. It also suggests a way forward in its emphasis on returning to the constitutional and legal guarantees that prescribe rights (not welfare) based approach. Sam Taraporevala and Disha Kapadia's article provides valuable insights into prospects of inclusion, advocacy and activism through the journey of Xavier's Resource Centre for Visually Challenged (XRCVC), St. Xavier's College, Mumbai that has been one of the pioneers in inclusive higher education in the country. Aysha Baig's book review of Emily Ladao's *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say and How to be an Ally* prescribes it as a useful handbook for anyone who wants to engage with the disabled identity yet critiquing it for its seeming universalist claims that seems to miss the Indian context? Biraj Mehta Rathi movie review Christopher Reeves' *The Brook Ellison Story* recommends it as a fitting tribute to Dr Ellison's life. The review also brings into conversation the exploitative ableist practices in media that frames the identity of disabled person in society. The film provides a good example of how the same can be overcome towards better media portrayals that can frame public imagination of identity constructions in appropriate ways.

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