

EDUCATIONAL ACCESS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN INCLUSION STUDY OF DISABILITY IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION.

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Abstract

Inclusive higher education is a pivotal point to equitable and sustainable development in India. Although the legislative frameworks like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and the National Education Policy 2020 focus on inclusive access, the access among persons with disabilities (PWD's) in higher education is still very disproportionate. The research takes a mixed-method design that combines secondary data analysis based on national data and primary surveys data obtained with students with disabilities in some of the sampled institutions of higher learning.

The study looks at the trends in enrolment, the distribution of disability, barriers to accessibility, the preparedness of the institution, and the associations of sustainable development. Results show that there occur great gaps between the policy intention and realities of implementation. Primary data indicate evidence of infrastructural gaps, lack of assistive technologies and faculty sensitization. The paper has concluded that inclusive higher education is not only a welfare measure but a developmental investment that is in tandem with sustainable development goals 4 and 10. The recommendation of policies highlights the adoption of universal designs, enhanced surveillance, institutional responsibility, and accessibility structures supported by technology.

Keywords: inclusive education, sustainable development, disability, higher education, mixed method, RPWD act 2016, SDGs, accessibility, India.

1. Introduction

University education is the driving force behind socio-economic mobility, innovation, and democratization. Employment opportunities and social inclusion opportunities are much greater in the case of persons with disabilities (PWD's) who have access to higher education. Nevertheless, even with advance legislation, there is still very little inclusive participation in India.

Producing sustainable development requires fair access to quality education. Thus, inclusion of disability in higher education is a decisive factor in terms of long term national development.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the distribution of types of disability in India.
2. To investigate the patterns of students with disabilities enrolment in higher education.
3. To measure institutional access to support mechanisms.

4. To assess the obstacles to students with disabilities.
5. In order to present inclusive policy interventions that is sustainable.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design followed in this study is a mixed-method research design and combines:

- Secondary Data Analysis
- Primary Survey Data

3.2 Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data was gathered by means of:

- Census of India
- All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE)
- Ministry of Education reports.
- National Education Policy (2020)
- Undocumented rights of abled persons Act (2016).

3.3 Primary Data Collection

A questionnaire in form was used to administer to:

- 120 students with disabilities
- 25 faculty members
- 10 administrative personnel in 5 higher education institutions.

Sampling technique: Purposive sampling.

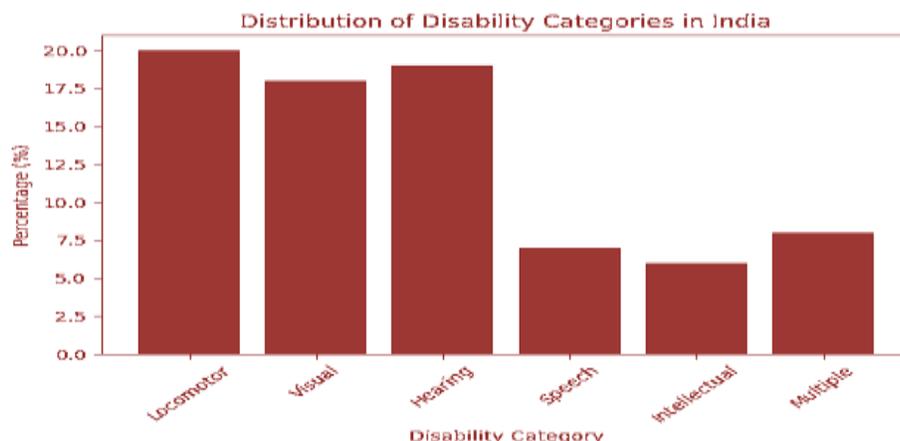
Analysis Tools: Percentage analysis, comparative analysis, Descriptive statistics.

4. Secondary Data Analysis

4.1 Distribution of Disability Categories

Sr. No	Disability Category	Percentage (%)
1	Loco motor	20%
2	Visual	18%
3	Hearing	19%
4	Speech	7%
5	Intellectual	6%
6	Multiple	8%

Interpretation: Physical and sensory disabilities constitute the majority share, emphasizing the need for mobility access and sensory accommodations.



Interpretation

Table 4.1 shows the percentage of the significant disability groups in India. The largest proportion (20%) is that of loco motor disability, with the next highest being hearing (19%), and the third one is visual disability (18%). The competence of speech (7%) and intellectual disability (6%) constitute relatively minor proportions, whereas multiple disabilities are also 8%.

The statistics show that the majority of the disability groups are comprised of physical and sensory impairment. This distribution has significant implications to institutions of higher learning. The fact that loco motor disability is now on the forefront emphasizes the fact that the barrier-free campus infrastructure such as ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and classroom mobility facilities are needed. Equally, the large proportion of the visual and hearing disabilities indicates the need to have assistive technologies like screen readers, Braille-enabled documents, sign-language-based interpreters, and captioning systems in real-time.

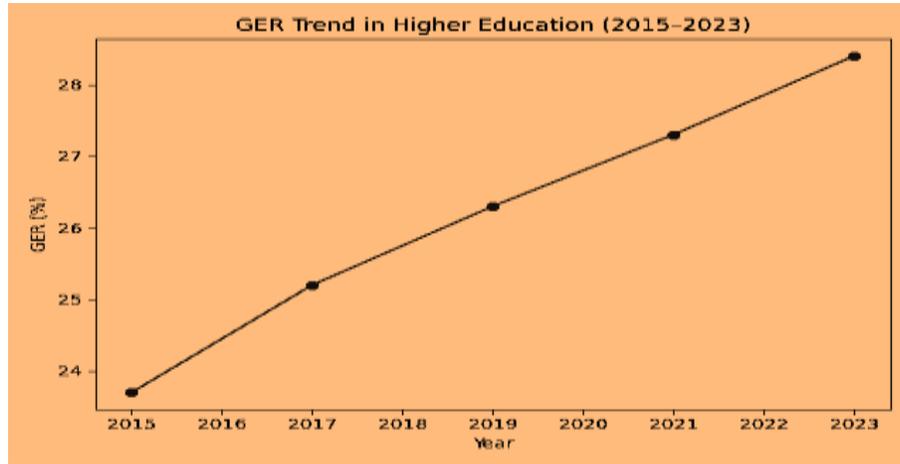
The comparatively low prevalence of intellectual and multiple disabilities might not be a true prevalence as it could be under-identified systematically and out of formal education routes. Hence, the inclusive policy design should go beyond the numerical representation and be fully inclusive to all the disability types.

4.2 GER Trend in Higher Education

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) Trend in Higher Education (2015–2023)

Year	GER (%)
2015	23.7
2017	25.2
2019	26.3
2021	27.3
2023	28.4

Interpretation: While overall GER has steadily increased, inclusive participation has not proportionately improved.



Interpretation

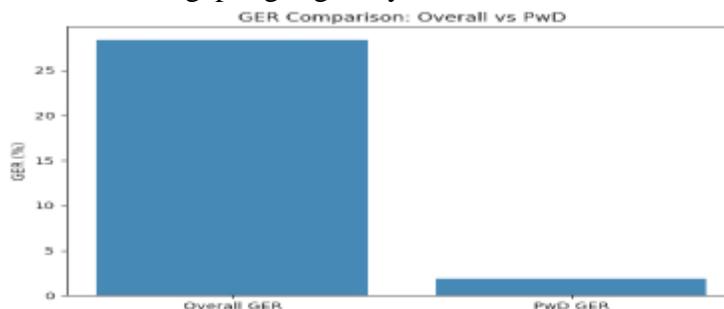
Table 4.2 shows an upward trend on Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Indian higher education 2015-23. GER rose continuously, by 23.7 per cent in 2015, to 28.4 per cent in 2023, due to increased access and policy action in the context of national education reforms. The steady growth trend is a sign of structural growth in the higher education capacity, institutional diversification and enhanced outreach mechanisms. Nonetheless, when the GER growth is considered on the whole, the scale of its expansion is quantitative though not necessarily equitable inclusion.

As it is interpreted in combination with disability-specific GER data (Figure 3), one can see that inclusive participation has not been corresponding to overall growth. Therefore, it is possible to observe that although India is on the right track to achieving SDG 4 goals in aggregate levels, the inclusivity aspect is not fully realized.

4.3 GER Comparison

Category	GER (%)
Overall GER	28.4
PwD GER	1.9

Interpretation: The enrolment gap highlights systemic exclusion.



Interpretation

Table 4.3 indicates that there is a drastic difference between the enrolment of students with disabilities (1.9) and the total student population (28.4). The difference of almost 26.5 percent points also means structural exclusion and not marginal fluctuation.

This shortage in enrolment can be credited to several factors such as:

- Inaccessible Infrastructure.
- Financial barriers
- Poor assistive technology.
- Social stigma
- Poor early educational care.

In terms of sustainable development, this gap signifies a low usage of the human capital. The denial of access to higher education by persons with disabilities lowers the labor participation, diversity in innovation, and socio-economic mobility.

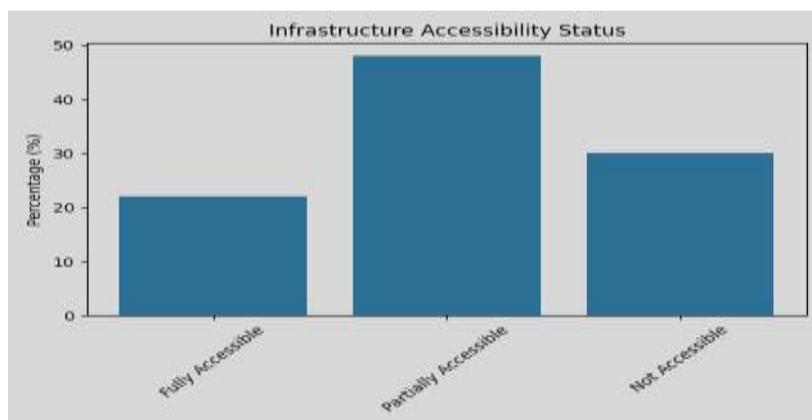
It is also not only a social welfare concern but an economic and developmental necessity to close this enrolment gap.

5. Primary Data Analysis

5.1 Accessibility of Infrastructure

Response Category	Percentage (%)
Fully Accessible	22%
Partially Accessible	48%
Not Accessible	30%

Interpretation: Nearly 78% of respondents report inadequate infrastructure.



Interpretation

As it can be seen in Table 5.1, only 22 percent of the respondents indicate the full availability of infrastructure, 48 percent indicate that campuses are partially available, and 30 percent indicate that they are not accessible.

These results that 78 percent of institutions do not fully meet accessibility suggest institutional lapses in the enforcement of accessibility requirements. Partial access is in many cases an indication of the haphazard planning of infrastructure, having ramps where the accessible classes or hostels are not accessible.

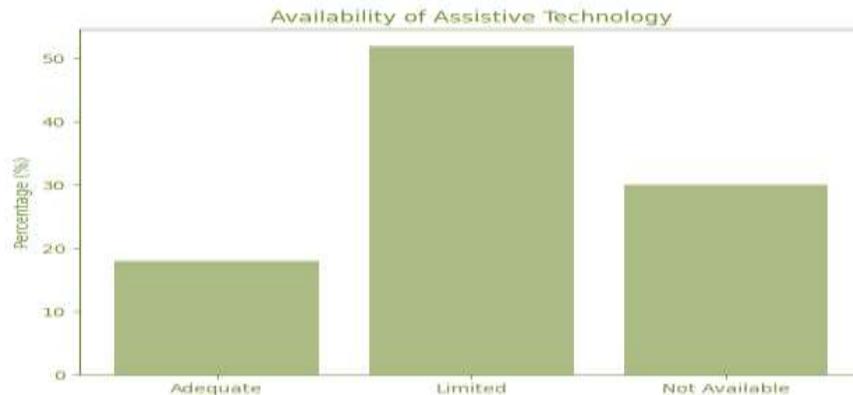
Poor physical access directly affects the attendance, participation and academic performance. Moreover, inaccessible campuses also deter the enrolment during application phase, which is part of the poor GER among students with disabilities.

Universal design integration and mandatory accessibility audits hence play an important role as institutional reform.

5.2 Availability of Assistive Technology

Availability	Percentage (%)
Adequate	18%
Limited	52%
Not Available	30%

Interpretation: Majority of institutions lack adequate assistive support.



Interpretation

According to Table 5.2, only one out of five institutions offers sufficient assistive technology, 52 do it to some extent, and 30 do not do it at all.

The inclusive pedagogy is based on assistive technologies where the students with disabilities in their senses are concerned. The difficulties of academic participation are largely confined in the limited access to screen readers, adaptive software, captioning systems, and accessible digital learning platforms.

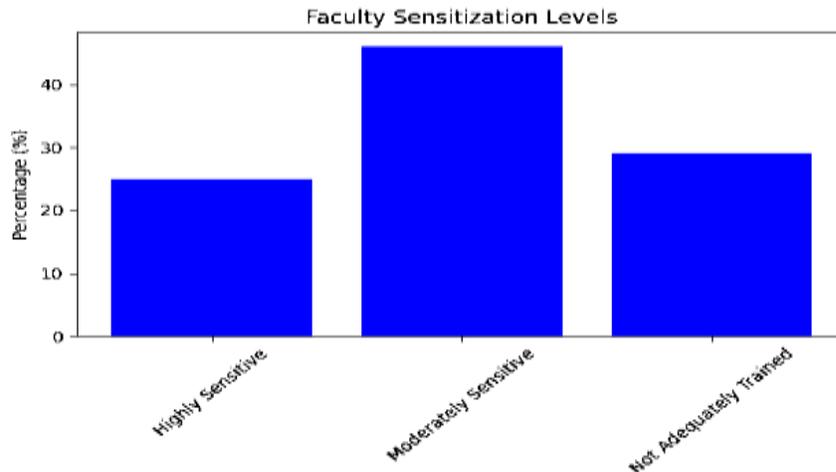
The large percentage of institutions that reported the limited or the absence of the assistive technology underscores the gaps in funding and priorities. In order to avoid the intensification of educational inequalities, digital transformation should be supported by universal technology access strategies.

Higher education modernization requires investment in scalable, technology-focused solutions to accessibility, which will help match higher education modernization with inclusive development objectives.

5.3 Faculty Sensitization

Faculty Preparedness	Percentage (%)
Highly Sensitive	25%
Moderately Sensitive	46%
Not Adequately Trained	29%

Interpretation: Faculty training gaps significantly affect inclusive pedagogy



Interpretation

Table 5.3 indicates that, a quarter of the respondents believe that faculty is very sensitive to needs of people with disability, 46% are moderately sensitive, and 29% are believed to be ill-trained.

Although moderate awareness can be observed, almost a third of the respondents has a sense of inadequate training. The process of inclusive education needs the adaptation of pedagogy, differentiated instruction, flexible assessment and knowledge of assistive devices.

Faculty readiness has a direct impact on the classroom inclusion and academic performance. Exclusivity learning environments can be sustained even with the availability of infrastructure without trained educators.

Reforms that are necessary include structured programmes of faculty development, sensitization workshops which are compulsory and inclusion modules in teacher training.

5.4 Major Problems that have been highlighted (Several answers)

- Inaccessible buildings – 65%
- Lack of learning materials – 58%
- Financial constraints – 49%
- Social stigma – 42%
- Limited career guidance – 37%

6. Discussion

The results prove that there is a definite disconnect between the promises of legislation and the realities of institutions. Policies are mandatory in accessibility, but there is still inequality in implementation. Structural exclusion is demonstrated in the enrolment difference between the general student and PWD students.

It is established by primary data that infrastructure, assistive technology, and trained faculty are insufficient in most institutions.

Inclusive higher education facilitates directly:

- Human capital formation
- Employment generation
- Poverty reduction
- Social equality
- Environmentally friendly economic development.

Therefore, the inclusion of disability enhances sustainable development.

7. Policy Implications

7.1 Institutional Level

- Periodic accessibility audits that is required.
- Special disability resource centers.
- Flexible policies on examinations.

7.2 Government Level

- Close observation of 5 percent reservation policy.
- Improved mechanisms of funding.
- AISHE real time disability data.
- National accessibility ranking system.

7.3 Technological Innovations

- AI-based screen readers
- Real-time captioning tools
- Systems of compliance in digital accessibility.
- Learning resources in the open access.

8. Sustainable Development Connections.

Inclusive higher education plays a role in:

- SDG 4: Quality education that is inclusive.
- SDG 10: Reduced inequalities
- SDG 10: Decent work and economic growth.
- SDG 5: Gender equality (when using disability as an example).

Inclusive education has long term economic payoffs and enhances the social cohesion.

9. Conclusion

Inclusion of persons with disabilities in higher education is not only a requirement in the constitution, but it is also a developmental requirement. Even with progressive legislation, there exist gaps in implementation in the infrastructure, pedagogy and access to technology.

It needs a rights-based, data-driven, and sustainability-oriented strategy to change institutions of higher education into inclusive ecosystems. The bridging of the participation gap will facilitate empowerment of millions of persons with disabilities, as well as, boosting the human capital and resilience of India to economic shocks.

Higher education should be inclusive, and yet, it is a strategic pillar of sustainable national development.

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