

Breaking Barriers, Building Inclusion: Disability Welfare Schemes in India and the Road to Rights-Based Development

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Abstract

Disability is a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing physical, sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial impairments that restrict participation in social and economic life. In India, Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) constitute 2.21% of the population, yet continue to face barriers despite progressive legislation such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. This study undertakes a systematic and narrative literature review of government reports, policy documents, and academic sources to critically examine welfare schemes for PwDs. Initiatives such as the Accessible India Campaign, Deendayal Divyangjan Rehabilitation Scheme (DDRS), and Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances (ADIP Scheme) have advanced accessibility, rehabilitation, and empowerment. However, findings reveal persistent challenges, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate funding, regional disparities, and social stigma. While India's legislative alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is notable, implementation remains inconsistent. Strengthening disability inclusion requires multi-sectoral collaboration, participatory policy-making, and robust monitoring mechanisms.

Keywords: Persons with Disabilities, Disability Welfare, Policy Implementation, Accessibility, Social Inclusion.

Introduction

Disability is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses physical, sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial impairments, which collectively restrict individuals' ability to participate fully in social, economic, and cultural life (World Health Organization, 2011). In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act) marked a watershed moment in disability legislation, expanding the definition of disability from seven to twenty-one categories and aligning national law with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by India in 2007 (United Nations, n.d.). According to the 2011 Census, 26.8 million individuals—representing 2.21% of the population—were identified as Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) (Government of India, 2011). More recent estimates suggest that the actual prevalence is higher, given underreporting and evolving definitions of disability (Roshan, David, 2025).

The trajectory of disability policy in India reflects a gradual shift from welfare-oriented, charity-based approaches to rights-based frameworks. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation) Act, 1995 laid the foundation for legal recognition, but its scope was limited. The RPwD Act of 2016 broadened protections, introduced new entitlements, and emphasized accessibility, education, and employment inclusion (Mehta, Ghouse, 2025). This legislative evolution mirrors global trends, where disability rights have increasingly been framed within human rights discourses and sustainable development agendas (Sharma, Gupta, 2025).

India's disability welfare landscape is characterized by multiple schemes and initiatives. Key programs include the Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme (DDRS), which provides financial support to NGOs for rehabilitation projects; the Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan (Accessible India Campaign), which focuses on accessibility in infrastructure and transportation; and the Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances (ADIP Scheme), which provides assistive devices such as prosthetics and hearing aids (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, n.d.; Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, n.d.). Social security measures such as the Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme also aim to provide financial support to PwDs living below the poverty line (Reddy, 2024).

Despite these initiatives, challenges remain. Studies highlight bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate funding, regional disparities, and entrenched social stigma as persistent barriers (Shameer, 2024; Ugendar, Sekher, 2025). For example, the Accessible India Campaign has improved urban accessibility but continues to face infrastructural deficits in rural regions (National Institute of Urban Affairs, 2020; NILERD, 2021). Similarly, while vocational training programs have expanded, PwDs often encounter exclusion in employment markets due to employer bias and lack of workplace accommodations (Pavani Sree, 2025; UNDP, 2025).

Globally, comparative evidence suggests that countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Japan have achieved more equitable outcomes by integrating disability inclusion into mainstream social welfare and employment policies (World Health Organization, 2011). India's progress, while notable, remains uneven and requires stronger monitoring, participatory governance, and interdepartmental coordination (Kumar, Suri, Kurian, 2024).

This study critically examines the welfare schemes for PwDs in India, focusing on their design, implementation, and impact. By conducting a systematic review of government reports, policy documents, and academic literature published between 2020 and 2025, the paper highlights gaps in execution and proposes strategies for strengthening disability inclusion. The analysis contributes to the broader discourse on social change by situating disability welfare within the framework of rights-based development, inclusive governance, and sustainable development goals (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2025).

Literature Review

The welfare of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in India has been the subject of growing scholarly and policy interest, particularly since the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act). This legislation marked a paradigm shift from a charity-based approach to a rights-based framework, expanding recognized categories of disability from seven to twenty-one and aligning national law with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (United Nations, n.d.). Recent literature (2020–2025) highlights both progress and persistent challenges in

implementing welfare schemes, with emphasis on accessibility, rehabilitation, education, employment, healthcare, social security, and stigma.

1. Accessibility and Infrastructure

The Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), launched in 2015, remains a cornerstone of India's accessibility agenda. Evaluations by the National Institute of Urban Affairs (2020) and the National Institute of Labour Economics Research and Development (NILERD, 2021) reveal that while urban areas have seen improvements in public infrastructure and transportation, rural regions continue to face infrastructural deficits. This urban–rural divide underscores the need for targeted investments in rural accessibility. Comparative studies suggest that countries such as Sweden and Norway have achieved more equitable accessibility outcomes by integrating disability inclusion into mainstream urban and rural development policies (World Health Organization, 2011).

2. Rehabilitation and Social Security

The Deendayal Divyangjan Rehabilitation Scheme (DDRS) provides financial assistance to NGOs for rehabilitation projects, including education, vocational training, and medical support. However, bureaucratic inefficiencies and delays in fund disbursement limit its effectiveness (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, n.d.; Shameer, 2024). Similarly, the Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances (ADIP Scheme) has improved access to assistive devices, yet affordability and distribution remain uneven (National Portal of India, n.d.). (Reddy, 2024) evaluates social security measures for PwDs, noting that pension schemes and financial aid programs often fail to reach the most marginalized due to lack of awareness and administrative hurdles. (Ugendar, Sekher, 2025) further highlight the intersection of disability and poverty, arguing that welfare schemes must be integrated with broader poverty alleviation strategies to ensure meaningful inclusion.

3. Education and Employment

Inclusive education initiatives, including scholarships and special education programs, have expanded opportunities for PwDs. However, the shortage of trained teachers and inadequate inclusive infrastructure remain significant barriers (Ojha et al., 2023). (Pavani Sree, 2025) identifies “invisible barriers” in education and employment, noting that PwDs often face exclusion due to attitudinal biases and lack of workplace accommodations. Employment schemes, such as vocational training programs under the National Action Plan for Skill Development of PwDs, have improved employability but face challenges in employer sensitization and workplace inclusion (Verma, Kumar, 2023). UNDP (2025) reports on multi-city workshops aimed at strengthening organizational readiness for workplace inclusion, emphasizing the importance of employer awareness and structural accommodations. Comparative evidence from Japan and South Korea shows that employer incentives and mandatory inclusion quotas can significantly improve employment outcomes for PwDs (Kumar, Suri, Kurian, 2024).

4. Legal and Policy Frameworks

Roshan and David (2025) analyze India's legislative trajectory, noting that while the RPwD Act expanded protections, enforcement remains inconsistent across states. Mehta and Ghouse (2025) argue that disability law in India must be reframed within a human rights perspective, emphasizing participatory governance and alignment with international standards. Sharma and Gupta (2025) highlight the importance of integrating disability inclusion into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), noting that equitable growth cannot be achieved without addressing disability-related barriers. The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment's Annual Report 2023–2024 documents achievements in accessibility and rehabilitation but acknowledges challenges in coordination among stakeholders (Ministry of Social Justice &

Empowerment, 2023). Insights on India (2025) further emphasize the need for state-level innovations, citing Karnataka's draft bill proposing private-sector quotas for PwDs as a potential model for inclusive employment.

5. Social Stigma and Inclusion

Despite legislative progress, PwDs continue to face discrimination and social stigma. Awareness campaigns and community-based rehabilitation programs have shown positive results, but attitudinal barriers persist (Drishti IAS, 2020). Shameer (2024) critiques systemic failures in welfare schemes, arguing that entrenched socio-cultural biases prevent PwDs from fully participating in society. Community engagement and participatory approaches are essential to dismantle stigma. Evidence from Latin America suggests that involving PwDs directly in policy-making processes enhances social acceptance and inclusion (World Health Organization, 2011).

Methodology

This study adopts a systematic and narrative literature review methodology to critically examine welfare schemes for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in India. The approach was chosen to synthesize existing knowledge, identify implementation challenges, and highlight opportunities for policy improvement.

1. Research Design

The research design is qualitative and exploratory, focusing on secondary data sources. A systematic review was conducted to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant literature, while a narrative approach allowed for contextual interpretation of findings within India's socio-political framework (Snyder, 2019).

2. Data Sources

The study relied exclusively on open-access and publicly available sources, including government reports, policy briefs, peer-reviewed journals, and think-tank publications published between 2020 and 2025, ensuring that the analysis reflects the most recent developments in disability welfare.

3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion: Literature published between 2020–2025, focusing on disability welfare schemes, accessibility, education, employment, healthcare, and social inclusion in India.

Exclusion: Studies outside the Indian context, unpublished theses, and sources lacking credibility or peer review.

4. Limitations

Limitations of the study include reliance on secondary data and the uneven availability of state-specific evaluations, which may restrict the generalizability of findings. Nevertheless, the methodology provides a robust foundation for understanding the current landscape of disability welfare in India and for proposing evidence-based recommendations that align with rights-based and inclusive development paradigms.

Findings and Discussion

The review of disability welfare schemes in India reveals both notable progress and persistent challenges. While legislative and policy frameworks provide a strong foundation for inclusion, implementation gaps continue to undermine the effectiveness of welfare programs. The findings are organized into thematic areas: accessibility, rehabilitation, education and employment, healthcare, social stigma, legal rights, technology, and monitoring mechanisms.

1. Accessibility

India's accessibility agenda has made visible progress in urban centers, particularly through the Accessible

India Campaign. Yet the persistence of rural deficits reveals a structural imbalance: accessibility remains an “urban privilege.” This divide suggests that disability inclusion is not yet mainstreamed into rural development planning. Comparative lessons from Scandinavia demonstrate that equitable accessibility requires embedding disability concerns into all tiers of development policy, not treating them as add-ons. For India, this calls for stronger budgetary commitments and interdepartmental coordination to ensure accessibility is not confined to metropolitan spaces.

2. Rehabilitation and Social Security

Rehabilitation schemes such as DDRS and ADIP have expanded opportunities for education, vocational training, and assistive devices. However, recurring bureaucratic delays and uneven distribution expose systemic weaknesses in welfare delivery. Pension schemes, while well-intentioned, often fail to reach the poorest PwDs due to lack of awareness and administrative hurdles. These gaps highlight the need for integration: disability welfare cannot be siloed but must be embedded within broader poverty alleviation and social protection frameworks. Without this convergence, welfare risks reinforcing exclusion rather than dismantling it.

3. Education and Employment

Inclusive education policies have widened formal opportunities, but invisible barriers—attitudinal biases, inadequate infrastructure, and shortage of trained teachers—continue to undermine inclusion. Employment initiatives show similar contradictions: vocational training improves employability, yet workplace readiness and employer sensitization remain weak. The persistence of these barriers underscores that legislative progress alone is insufficient. Comparative evidence from East Asia demonstrates that employer incentives and quotas can shift organizational behavior. India’s emerging state-level innovations, such as Karnataka’s draft bill on private-sector quotas, could serve as catalysts for systemic change if scaled nationally.

4. Healthcare Access

Healthcare provision for PwDs remains fragmented. While medical camps and rehabilitation services expand coverage, rural and remote populations face persistent exclusion. The lack of disability-sensitive medical training compounds this challenge. Emerging solutions such as telemedicine and mobile health units show promise, but require institutional support to scale. Integrating disability-specific healthcare into national health strategies and the SDGs framework would ensure that PwDs are not treated as peripheral beneficiaries but as central stakeholders in public health.

5. Social Stigma and Inclusion

Legislation alone cannot dismantle entrenched socio-cultural biases. Despite awareness campaigns and community-based rehabilitation, stigma continues to restrict PwDs’ participation in education, employment, and public life. Evidence from Latin America suggests that participatory governance—where PwDs directly shape policy—can transform social attitudes. For India, mainstreaming disability inclusion into broader social change agendas is essential. Without tackling stigma, welfare schemes risk being undermined by everyday exclusion.

6. Legal Rights and Enforcement

The RPwD Act provides a robust legal framework, but enforcement remains uneven across states. Many PwDs remain unaware of their entitlements, limiting their ability to seek redress. This gap between law and lived reality highlights the importance of rights literacy and participatory governance. Reframing disability law within a human rights perspective would strengthen accountability and align India more closely with international standards.

7. Technology and Innovation

Assistive technologies have enhanced independence for urban PwDs, yet affordability and limited availability restrict their reach. Public–private partnerships and investment in low-cost innovation could democratize access. Technology must be positioned not as a luxury but as a basic enabler of inclusion, particularly for rural and economically marginalized PwDs.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

Weak monitoring mechanisms undermine the credibility of welfare schemes. Current evaluation systems lack transparency and fail to incorporate beneficiary feedback. Comparative evidence from the European Union shows that independent oversight bodies can strengthen accountability. For India, establishing centralized databases and participatory monitoring frameworks would ensure that welfare programs are not only implemented but also continuously improved.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive review of welfare schemes for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in India, highlighting both achievements and persistent challenges in their implementation. Legislative frameworks such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and initiatives like the Accessible India Campaign, Deendayal Divyangjan Rehabilitation Scheme (DDRS), and Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances (ADIP Scheme) demonstrate India's commitment to disability inclusion. Yet, systemic issues—bureaucratic inefficiencies, inadequate funding, regional disparities, and entrenched social stigma—continue to hinder the effectiveness of these programs (Shameer, 2024; NIUA, 2020; NILERD, 2021).

The findings underscore the importance of adopting a multi-sectoral and rights-based approach to disability welfare. Accessibility must be expanded beyond urban centers to rural regions, requiring targeted infrastructure investments and stronger budgetary allocations (The Hindu, 2025). Rehabilitation programs should be streamlined through digital platforms to reduce bureaucratic delays and ensure transparency (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, n.d.). Social security measures, including pensions and financial aid, must be integrated with broader poverty alleviation strategies to address the disability–poverty nexus (Reddy, 2024; Ugendar, Sekher, 2025).

Education and employment inclusion remain critical. Expanding teacher training, strengthening inclusive infrastructure, and tailoring vocational programs to PwDs' needs can enhance employability (Ojha et al., 2023; Pavani Sree, 2025). Employer sensitization and workplace accommodations are equally vital, as highlighted by UNDP's (2025) multi-city workshops. State-level innovations, such as Karnataka's draft bill proposing private-sector quotas, demonstrate promising pathways for inclusive employment (Insights on India, 2025).

Healthcare access must be strengthened through telemedicine, mobile health units, and disability-sensitive medical training (Alam, Kumari, 2024; Sharma, Gupta, 2025). Social stigma remains a formidable barrier, requiring sustained awareness campaigns, community-based rehabilitation, and participatory governance to dismantle discriminatory attitudes (Drishti IAS, 2020; Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 2025). Legal rights, though robust on paper, demand stronger enforcement and greater awareness among PwDs (Roshan, David, 2025; Mehta, Ghause, 2025).

Future research should prioritize:

1. Empirical studies on rural accessibility and infrastructural deficits.

2. Evaluation of inclusive education and employment programs, including employer incentives and quotas.
3. Healthcare access studies, focusing on telemedicine and disability-sensitive practices.
4. Social stigma analysis, exploring cultural and regional variations.
5. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks, with centralized databases and independent oversight mechanisms.

Ultimately, disability welfare in India must move beyond fragmented schemes toward a holistic, rights-based framework that ensures full participation of PwDs in all spheres of life. Achieving this vision requires not only stronger policies but also a societal commitment to inclusion, dignity, and equity. By addressing structural barriers, fostering participatory governance, and integrating disability inclusion into sustainable development goals, India can create a more inclusive society where PwDs are empowered to thrive (Sharma and Gupta, 2025; TISS, 2025).

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