DEMOCRACY, INCLUSION AND PARTICIPATION OF PERSON WITH DISABILITY IN INDIAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

The Constitution of India envisages equal opportunities and rights of participation for all its citizens in the social and political spheres. However, this is not enough to bring the marginalized sections of the society into mainstream politics. Persons with Disabilities (PWD) are a group whose representation in the Indian political system is almost nil till date. According to estimates by the Government of India, approximately 2.21 percent of the Indian population suffers from some form of disability, which equates to 26.8 million people without any representation in the political system. Against this background, the present article provides a rich and detailed account of the constraints of political representation and the measures that can be taken to envision a more inclusive political system.

Keywords: *Democracy, Disability, Inclusion, Political Participation*

Introduction

With a population of over one billion, India is extremely diverse and home to the world's largest democracy. Being a democratic country essentially means that every citizen has an equal right to participate in the government and be elected. In addition, every Indian citizen is also entitled to the fundamental rights of life, education, equality, liberty and constitutional remedies under Part III of the Constitution (Articles 12-35). The Constitution has provided the right to vote to all citizens above the age of 18 years irrespective of their caste, creed, religious affiliation, social or economic status.

However, in a socio-culturally diverse nation like India, merely granting constitutional rights does not ensure equal access and opportunities for participation to all. Opportunities for many social groups are limited by prevailing socio-economic inequalities, prejudices, regionalism and marginalisation. Historically, such groups have mainly included religious minorities, women, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, backward castes and persons with disabilities (PwD).

Since independence, governments have continuously tried to address such inequalities through social reforms, awareness and constitutional provisions, however,

social change always takes longer time, and people find it difficult to change their attitudes, perception and social beliefs overnight. As a result, certain sections of the society face systematic deprivation and discrimination which ultimately pushes them to the fringes of the social system.

Persons with Disabilities (PwD) are a group that has been kept out of the mainstream political system of India. If we consider the global trends of disability, which consider that persons with disabilities constitute 2-3% of the population, then the population of Persons with Disabilities (PWD) in India alone can be estimated to be more than 3 billion. This is more than the population of many countries around the world. However, despite being a large and heterogeneous group, persons with disabilities face many barriers and challenges in accessing their rights and opportunities, especially in the political sphere.

Current Status: Political Participation & Representation

The right to participate in political and public life is a fundamental rule of international human rights law and applies equally to persons with disabilities. For a healthy and sustainable democracy, participating in the electoral process is a legal right as well as a moral duty for every citizen. Their political involvement may be divided into two categories: representation and participation. Political representation refers to the presence and voice of people with disabilities in elected governments and positions of decision-making, whereas political participation refers to people with disabilities' involvement and active participation in election processes and civic activities.

Persons with disabilities are underrepresented in Indian politics in terms of representation. According to a study by Voice of Youth, there have been only four differently-abled MPs and six differently-abled members in state assemblies since independence. Some prominent examples are Jaipal Reddy, who played a key role in the Andhra Pradesh separation movement and held various ministerial positions; Ram Nath Kovind, who became the 14th President of India; and Shakuntala Dole Gamlin, who became the first woman Chief Secretary of Arunachal Pradesh. However, these are the exception rather than the rule, as most Divyangjans face many barriers to entering and succeeding in politics.

At the level of participation, persons with disabilities face various challenges in exercising their right to vote and express their opinion. According to a report by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), only 23.4% of PWDs voted in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, compared to 67.4% of the general population. Some of the reasons for this low turnout are lack of access, awareness, support and accommodation at polling stations; lack of voter education and information; lack of access and inclusion of political parties; And there is a lack of faith and trust in the political system.

Issues and challenges in Political Engagement of PwD

The inhospitable environment and infrastructural constraints deter (willing) candidates with disabilities from participating in the programs at all stages of the recruitment process. Such barriers limit their access to voter outreach, enrolment, campaigning, legal remedies, written materials, participation in events, and transportation. Voting itself is a major hurdle due to lack of awareness and access. Such infrastructural constraints also limit their access to education and employment. Furthermore, persons with disabilities (PWDs) especially women living in rural parts of the country are more prone to sexual violence, discrimination and marginalization.

Another important reason for political exclusion is lack of money. Many persons with disabilities are financially dependent on other family members for their livelihood. There is a high rate of unemployment among persons with disabilities. In India alone, barely 10% of the 30 million people with disabilities are employed by organizations or are self-employed. Therefore, they had fewer economic opportunities and higher rates of poverty. Struggling even with basic needs, they can never arrange extra money to participate in elections. Even political parties are not ready to spend extra money on assistive devices and sign language interpreters, which they may require during election campaign.

People with disabilities continued to be seen as unable to participate in the political arena due to social prejudices and attitude barriers. There are instances of disqualification of their candidature on the basis of nature of disability in India. The common belief that political candidates must be able-bodied and able-bodied leaves no scope for a person with a disability to consider themselves fit for the current political culture. As a result, even though they are the world's largest minority, they depend on others for their political representation.

While most political parties appeal to disadvantaged sections or certain groups of the community to secure their vote bank and others, the disabled community has been largely left out of the preview. Not a single political party considers the disabled community as a vote bank because of its widely spread population. No political party in India has a special cell for members with disabilities; In fact, they are the least concerned about it. People in society tend to blame people with disabilities for the existence of their disability instead of considering their own shortcomings.

In addition, persons with disabilities also face difficulties in accessing other forms of political participation, such as joining political parties, participating in rallies and meetings, forming associations and movements, and expressing their views on social media. Considering the Indian democracy, the process of garnering the support of lakhs of people to get elected to the Parliament or Legislative Assembly for the marginalized

sections due to social attitudes, prejudice, awareness and empowerment is never an easy task. Furthermore, the strong party struggle and weak resources at the end of the marginalized sections left them with little chance of successfully electing their people to parliament or assembly.

On May 30, 2007, India became a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), pledging to provide equal rights for people with disabilities in all aspects of public and political life. The government approved the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act of 1995, over five decades after independence, in response to pressure from the civil rights movement and disability advocates. Unfortunately, the Act did not place a high priority on measures that empowered people with disabilities (PWDs), instead focusing on medical disability prevention through early identification and treatment.

More than two decades after the Persons with Disabilities (PWD) Act of 1995, another Act, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act of 2016, was also approved, with the goal of making society more accessible through enhanced reservation in government and educational positions. and to create an inclusive society, but it also failed to recognize the political empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (PWD). Without a doubt, the government lacks a legal and policy framework.

For formulating any policy, it is essential to have accurate data about the number of people with disabilities; However, there is complete disagreement on this issue among the various agencies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), persons with disabilities may make up to 10–15% of the total population. This could be a significant number considering India's billion-plus population. Additionally, the World Bank estimates that the total number of persons with disabilities in India is 40 to 80 million. However, the Government of India reports that approximately 2.21 percent of the Indian population suffers from some form of disability, which is 26.8 million of the total population. This is an underestimation of the facts.

As a part of affirmative action, some disadvantaged groups have been provided reservation in state legislatures as well as in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha since independence. However, no such provision has so far been introduced to ensure equal representation of a person with a disability in Parliament, State Legislatures or even Panchayats. This exclusion by the government is discriminatory in itself. Despite these challenges, there is some potential for increasing the political participation of persons with disabilities in India. Some of them are discussed as follows.

Future Prospects

- Increasing awareness and advocacy: There is a need to raise awareness and advocacy among people with disabilities as well as other stakeholders such as political parties,

the media, civil society groups, and government agencies. Voter education campaigns, disability rights movements, media attention, social media platforms, litigation, and lobbying are all ways to do this. The goal is to generate demand and pressure for PwD political inclusion and representation, as well as to challenge current conventions and attitudes that exclude them.

- Improving accessibility and accommodation: There is a need to increase PwDs' accessibility and inclusion in political processes and civic activities. This can be accomplished by following the Election Commission of India's (ECI) guidelines, such as providing ramps, wheelchairs, Braille ballots, sign language interpreters, assistance booths, and postal ballots at polling stations; ensuring accessible voter registration and identification; and conducting accessible voter awareness programs. Furthermore, additional kinds of political engagement, including as joining political parties, attending demonstrations and meetings, organizing groups and movements, and expressing opinions on social media, must be made more accessible and inclusive for people with disabilities.
- Promoting representation and empowerment: There is a need to encourage the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities in elected bodies and decision-making positions. This can be accomplished by instituting PwD reservations or quotas in parliament, state legislatures, and municipal governments, as well as government positions and committees. This can also be accomplished by encouraging and assisting PwDs to run for office, join political parties, develop their own parties or platforms, and assume leadership responsibilities. The goal is to improve PwDs' political voice and visibility, as well as to guarantee that their concerns and interests are addressed and prioritized.

Conclusion

The issues of marginalization and disability continue to be discussed today as they are part of our society. The need of the hour is to bring inclusion, acceptance and equality in the political arena so that their voices and concerns reach the Parliament. Unfortunately, due to sparse population, a separate election for representation of the disabled community is not possible in contemporary times. However, the Government of India may make provision for an accessible polling station and reservation of certain seats for the community with disabilities, which may help ensure their full and effective participation in political and public life. By doing so, India can not only fulfill its obligations under UNCRPD but also enhance its democracy, diversity and development.

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