



INCLUSION OF PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES IN A TRANSFORMING INDIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Abstract:

The inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities represents both a social and developmental imperative in India's ongoing transformation. Despite progressive legislation, policy initiatives, and national programs aimed at empowerment and equality, individuals with intellectual disabilities continue to experience systemic exclusion in education, employment, and social participation. This article critically examines structural and social challenges, persistent barriers, and the gaps in policy implementation, with a particular focus on intellectual disabilities. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of secondary sources, government reports, legislative frameworks and scholarly literature, the study highlights the interplay between individual limitations and societal factors that hinder inclusion. It further explores educational, vocational and technological interventions while analysing state-level initiatives and implementation challenges, with Maharashtra serving as a case study. Finally, the article proposes context-specific strategies for empowerment and inclusion, emphasizing coordinated support systems, attitudinal change, and sustained policy continuity. By situating intellectual disabilities at the centre of India's developmental agenda, the study underscores the need for a rights-based, participatory approach that transforms inclusion from a policy objective into a lived social reality.

Keywords: Intellectual Disabilities, Inclusion, Social Barriers, Policy Implementation, Education, Employment, Empowerment, Rights-Based Approach, India, Disability Policy.

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Introduction:

India's vision of transformation is increasingly expressed through the intertwined ideals of inclusive growth, social justice, and holistic human development which together seek to redefine progress not merely as economic expansion but as shared advancement across all sections of society. National initiatives such as Digital India (Digital India, 2015), Skill India (Skill India, 2015), Aatmanirbhar Bharat (Aatmanirbhar Bharat, 2020), and the National Education Policy (NEP, 2020) have repeatedly emphasized the necessity of empowering every citizen so that participation in the nation's journey of development becomes both meaningful and equitable. While these initiatives signal strong policy intent, their translation into meaningful

inclusion for persons with intellectual disabilities remains limited due to structural, social, and attitudinal barriers.

Despite the presence of progressive legal provisions and policy frameworks, individuals with intellectual disabilities continue to encounter persistent and systemic exclusion from education, employment, and community participation, which restricts their opportunities for self-development and social integration (United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2023). The inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities therefore cannot be viewed merely as a matter of welfare or charity but must be understood as a crucial indicator of the moral and developmental maturity of a society that claims to value dignity, equity, and human

rights. The challenges faced by this group reveal deep-seated structural limitations, and entrenched attitudinal barriers, which continue to influence India's developmental trajectory and demand critical examination within the broader context of the nation's ongoing transformation agenda.

Understanding Disability:

Contemporary understandings of disability have gradually moved away from the traditional medical perspective, which viewed disability primarily as an individual limitation or deficit (Hogan, 2019), and instead embraced a more comprehensive social understanding (Goering, 2015), wherein disability is seen as the result of continuous interaction between individual impairments and the social surrounding (People with Disability Australia, 2025), institutional and environmental conditions (Chen, Lee, Fellinghauer, Cieza, & Chatterji, 2022). Within this framework, disability is not solely an individual attribute but is shaped by inaccessible environments, rigid educational structures, limited employment opportunities, and prevailing social attitudes, all of which collectively erect barriers to full participation and meaningful inclusion.

This conceptual shift is reflected in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD Act, 2016) enacted in the year two thousand sixteen, which adopts a rights-based approach that foregrounds equality, dignity, accessibility, and meaningful participation in social, economic, and educational life. The Act recognizes persons with disabilities as rights-bearing citizens rather than passive recipients of welfare and thus places responsibility upon the State and society to remove structural barriers and ensure inclusive systems.

Intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour, which manifest in difficulties related to conceptual, social, and practical skills, influencing

learning, communication, independent living, and social interaction (WHO, 2011). Unlike several other forms of disability, intellectual disability necessitates sustained, structured, and lifelong support, since challenges associated with cognition and adaptive functioning extend across different stages of life. In this context, the social environment assumes a decisive role, as family attitudes, educational practices, workplace preparedness, and community acceptance collectively shape the quality of life and developmental outcomes of persons with intellectual disabilities far more profoundly than the impairment itself.

Marginalisation and Social Exclusion:

Persons with intellectual disabilities often experience profound and enduring marginalization, rooted not only in individual limitations but more significantly in social attitudes and structural arrangements that deny them equal participation in public life. Social stigma, persistent misconceptions regarding competence (Gosain & Samanta, 2022), and chronically low expectations frequently result in exclusion from mainstream educational settings and meaningful employment opportunities (Bjerregaard & Szulevicz, 2026), thereby limiting personal growth and social recognition. In many instances, decisions affecting their lives are made by others, reinforcing dependency and undermining the development of autonomy, self-determination, and agency.

Families of persons with intellectual disabilities, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, face additional layers of difficulty as they struggle to access appropriate educational services, therapeutic support, and social welfare provisions, which are often fragmented, inadequately resourced, or geographically inaccessible (Zar, Sarpourian, Jalali, & Bahrami, 2025). This experience of marginalization is systematically produced through institutional neglect, inconsistent service delivery, and the absence of coordinated and sustained policy implementation

across sectors. Consequently, persons with intellectual disabilities remain largely invisible within dominant development narratives and policy discourses, despite being among the most vulnerable groups in society, whose inclusion is essential to any meaningful conception of social justice and national progress.

Objectives of the Study:

The present article is guided by a set of interrelated objectives aimed at deepening the understanding of disability inclusion within a transforming Indian context. It seeks to examine the structural and social challenges faced by persons with intellectual disabilities, while analysing the barriers that restrict their inclusion in education, employment, and meaningful social participation. Furthermore, the study reviews existing legal provisions, national schemes, and state-level initiatives related to disability empowerment, identifying gaps in implementation and continuity that limit their effectiveness. Finally, it proposes context-specific strategies to strengthen inclusive practices within India's evolving social and economic landscape.

Methodology:

In alignment with the stated objectives, this article adopts a conceptual and analytical methodology grounded in a critical review of secondary sources and existing scholarly discourse related to disability inclusion in India. A wide range of policy documents (RCI, 1992; The National Trust, 1999; RPWD Act, 2016), legislative frameworks (PIB, 2025), government reports (DEPwD, 2023), and national (NIEPID, 2025) as well as international publications (WHO & UNICEF, 2023) were systematically examined to develop a comprehensive understanding of the structural challenges, social barriers, policy frameworks, and strategies for empowerment. Within this broader disability discourse, particular emphasis was placed on intellectual disability to foreground the unique and often overlooked concerns associated with

this group.

In addition to formal policy and academic sources, practitioner perspectives and field-based observations reported in existing literature were utilized to situate policy intentions within everyday implementation realities. This methodological approach is primarily descriptive and interpretive, aiming to synthesize diverse insights rather than generate primary empirical data. Through such an approach, the study ensures that each objective is addressed and bridges the gap between policy aspirations and the lived experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Review of Related Literature:

Existing scholarship on disability inclusion reveals a gradual yet significant transformation in how disability has been conceptualized and addressed within educational, social, and policy frameworks globally and within the Indian context. Early studies approached disability through a medical and deficit-oriented lens, locating limitations within the individual and focusing interventions on correction, remediation, and care (Chen W. , 2024). Over time, academic discourse has increasingly embraced a social and rights-based perspective, emphasizing that exclusion experienced by persons with disabilities arises not merely from impairment but from inaccessible environments, rigid institutional arrangements, and entrenched social attitudes (Brinkma, et al., 2024). This evolving understanding is reflected in international conventions and national policy frameworks that foreground equality, participation, and dignity as foundational principles of disability inclusion.

A substantial body of literature has examined the educational and social experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities, consistently indicating that this group remains among the most marginalized even within the broader disability discourse (McClimens, 2003). Studies focusing on inclusive education suggest that while policy frameworks advocate mainstreaming

and participation, the translation of intent into practice remains limited. Inadequate teacher preparedness, insufficient curricular flexibility, and the absence of robust support mechanisms within regular educational settings constrain meaningful inclusion (Saenen, Hermans, Rocha, Struyven, & Emmers, 2024). Persistently low expectations and misconceptions regarding learning potential further reinforce cycles of exclusion, dependence, and reduced self-efficacy (Oguntayo, Agberotimi, Oyelke, Olasent, & Ayinde, 2020).

In the sphere of employment and social participation, existing literature points to enduring barriers that restrict opportunities for persons with intellectual disabilities despite affirmative policies and legal safeguards (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022). Scholars have highlighted the absence of structured skill development pathways, limited availability of supported employment models, and widespread employer apprehensions as key factors contributing to poor employment outcomes and continued economic dependence (Tan, et al., 2022; Jacob, Pillay, Adeoye, & Oni, 2022). Research has also underscored the influence of family background, socioeconomic position, and access to support services in shaping life outcomes, indicating that disability-related disadvantage is frequently compounded by broader social inequalities (Qiu, Jiang, Sun, & Du, 2023).

Indian scholarship examining disability policies and welfare schemes has consistently noted the persistent gap between legislative intent and ground-level implementation, including fragmented service delivery, weak intersectoral coordination, and inconsistent monitoring mechanisms (World Bank, 2009). While progressive legislations and national missions have expanded the scope of disability rights, continuity and effective execution remain significant challenges, especially for persons with intellectual disabilities whose needs require sustained, coordinated,

and lifelong support (Global Disability Summit, 2025). Taken together, the literature reveals that although conceptual clarity and policy commitment toward disability inclusion have improved, the realization of these ideals within educational, social, and economic domains remains uneven. Furthermore, there is a relative scarcity of focused analysis on intellectual disability within the context of India's broader transformation agenda, highlighting the need for continued critical inquiry and context-specific strategies aimed at strengthening inclusion, dignity, and empowerment.

Educational and Lifelong Learning Challenges:

Education has long been regarded as the foundation of empowerment and social mobility, yet for persons with intellectual disabilities, participation in the education system continues to be marked by exclusion, discontinuity, and constrained opportunity. National policies and legal frameworks formally endorse inclusive education, but everyday schooling often reveals a shortage of trained special educators (The Statesman, 2025), a limited understanding of diverse learning needs, and the absence of adaptive curricula capable of responding to individual learning profiles. As a result, rigid assessment practices, uniform pedagogical expectations, and inadequate classroom accommodations collectively restrict meaningful engagement, reducing education to a symbolic provision rather than a genuinely transformative experience.

These challenges become even more pronounced during transitions from school to vocational training or higher education, as clearly defined and supportive pathways remain largely unavailable (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2025). In the absence of structured guidance, flexible learning arrangements, and sustained institutional support, many individuals disengage from formal education at an early stage, constraining their prospects for skill development,

employment, and independent living. Educational exclusion thus extends far beyond schooling, evolving into a lifelong learning challenge that continues to shape social participation, autonomy, and quality of life throughout adulthood.

Employment, Livelihoods, and Economic Participation:

Employment occupies a central place in social inclusion, providing economic security, dignity, self-worth, and social recognition, all of which contribute to identity and agency (Chumo, Kabaria, & Mberu, 2023). Despite reservation provisions and policy commitments, workforce participation of persons with intellectual disabilities remains limited, uneven, and fragile (United Nations, 2002). Employer perceptions often regard intellectual disability as a liability rather than a form of human diversity that can be accommodated through reasonable adjustments and inclusive practices (Bonaccio, Connelly, Gellatly, Jetha, & Ginis, 2022).

Experiences from supported employment contexts indicate that alternative approaches are viable and effective. Interventions such as job customization, structured on-site support, and systematic employer sensitization enhance self-confidence, ensure relatively stable income, and promote deeper social integration. However, such initiatives remain restricted in scale and largely rely on non-governmental organizations rather than institutional mainstreaming, leaving the promise of economic participation realized only in isolated contexts while the broader transformation of employment structures remains an unresolved challenge.

Role of Technology and Digital Inclusion:

Technology offers considerable potential for empowerment and participation, particularly where traditional support systems are inadequate or inaccessible. Assistive technologies, digital learning platforms, and alternative communication tools can

enhance learning, independence, and employability by addressing diverse cognitive and communicative needs (Klavina, et al., 2024). Visual-based instructional resources, interactive skill development applications, and adaptive communication devices have demonstrated improved engagement, comprehension, and functional skill acquisition (Therasa, 2023).

Yet, the expansion of digital solutions also highlights a persistent digital divide that limits equitable access. Restricted device availability, limited digital literacy among users and educators, and the absence of localized, disability-responsive content constrain effectiveness. Without inclusive digital design principles and sustained capacity-building efforts, technology risks reproducing existing social inequalities rather than serving as a tool for empowerment and social justice.

Legal and Policy Frameworks for Empowerment:

The legal and policy landscape in India has undergone significant transformation with the enactment of comprehensive legislation affirming dignity, equality, and participation for persons with disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD Act, 2016) of two thousand sixteen represents a landmark, broadening recognized disabilities, mandating reservation in education and employment, ensuring accessibility across public spaces, and advancing supported decision-making. This aligns domestic law with the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006), reinforcing a rights-based approach.

National initiatives supporting educational access, skill development, and rehabilitation reflect strong policy intent. However, evidence from implementation indicates that the impact on persons with intellectual disabilities remains uneven due to variations in outreach, administrative capacity, and contextual adaptation. While policy frameworks provide a foundation for empowerment, transformative potential

relies on effective execution, sustained coordination, and responsiveness to specific individual needs.

State-Level Initiatives: The Case of Maharashtra

Maharashtra has implemented initiatives aimed at disability welfare, including Disha Abhiyan (Disha Abhiyan, 2025) disability pensions (Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme, 2000), promotion of inclusive education (MPRTC, 2017), vocational training centres (MSBKVET, 1956; AYJNISHD(D), 1983), and digital systems for disability certification (UDID, 2016). These efforts have enhanced visibility of disability concerns and expanded formal support structures.

However, disparities between urban and rural contexts persist. Urban centers benefit from better infrastructure and trained personnel, while rural and tribal areas face shortages of specialized human resources, limited institutional capacity, and geographic inaccessibility (Hamid & Faisal, 2025). Poor coordination across administrative departments results in fragmented service delivery and procedural delays. Consequently, despite multiple welfare initiatives, the lived experience of persons with intellectual disabilities remains marked by uneven access and limited realization of intended benefits (Reddy, 2025).

Implementation Challenges and the Need for Continuity:

A key challenge in disability inclusion is inconsistent policy implementation. Fragmentation of initiatives, inadequate funding, and weak monitoring mechanisms undermine effectiveness, compounded by frequent administrative changes. Interventions often remain episodic rather than part of a coherent, sustained strategy (WHO, 2019).

Short-term projects cannot meet the lifelong support requirements of intellectual disability, which demand enduring institutional commitment, organizational memory, and long-term investment in human and infrastructural capacity. Without continuity and

coordination, inclusion risks remaining superficial, failing to translate policy into meaningful improvement in the lived experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities.

Towards Empowerment: Strategies for Inclusive Transformation:

Genuine empowerment requires a shift from care-focused, independency-oriented approaches to capability-based, participatory models. Early identification of developmental needs, strengthening inclusive education, providing life skills training, and creating supported employment opportunities enable individuals to develop functional competencies and confidence (Olsen, 2023).

Empowerment must emerge from a coordinated framework integrating family support, community-based rehabilitation, and responsive institutional systems. Awareness-building and attitudinal change are equally critical, as social barriers rooted in stigma cannot be removed by policy alone. Meaningful inclusion thus depends on sustained engagement with societal perceptions and collective responsibility, transforming empowerment into a shared social commitment rather than a limited administrative objective.

Research Gaps and Future Directions:

Despite significant conceptual advances in the understanding of disability, critical research gaps persist, particularly with respect to intellectual disability in the Indian context. Much of the existing scholarship emphasizes policy formulation, rights-based discourse, and conceptual advocacy, while comparatively limited attention is paid to issues of implementation, measurable outcomes, and the lived experiences of persons with intellectual disabilities. As a result, the voices and perspectives of individuals with intellectual disabilities themselves remain largely underrepresented in academic research and policy evaluation (McClimens, 2003; World Bank, 2009)

Furthermore, there is a noticeable scarcity of focused research that treats intellectual disability as a distinct analytical category rather than subsuming it within broader disability studies. Longitudinal and interdisciplinary investigations examining educational transitions, employment trajectories, and lifelong support systems for persons with intellectual disabilities are particularly limited (Bialik & Mhiri, 2022; Tan, et al., 2022). Existing studies also provide insufficient exploration of how intellectual disability intersects with socioeconomic disadvantage, gender, rural and urban disparities, and marginalized social identities, despite evidence that such intersections significantly shape access to opportunities and support services (Qiu, Jiang, Sun, & Du, 2023)

Future research must therefore adopt context-sensitive, empirically grounded, and interdisciplinary approaches that move beyond policy intent to examine implementation realities and everyday experiences. Aligning such inquiry with India's broader transformation agenda will be essential to ensure that intellectual disability is recognized not as a peripheral welfare concern but as a central indicator of inclusive development, social justice, and human dignity (Global Disability Summit, 2025).

Conclusion:

The inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities represents a defining challenge for a transforming India. Progress is measured not only in economic or technological terms but in the extent to which marginalized groups participate with dignity and agency. Legislative frameworks and policy initiatives provide a foundation, but effectiveness depends on consistent implementation, social acceptance, and long-term commitment.

By integrating strategies for empowerment with evidence-based research and sustained social engagement, India can move beyond symbolic compliance toward a society where dignity, equity, and

agency are tangible realities. Building an inclusive India requires empathy, accountability, and collective responsibility, transforming inclusion from a stated policy objective into a lived social ethic.

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