



# Barriers to Employment for Persons with Disabilities in India: A Sociological and Economic Review

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## Abstract

Despite the laws aimed at inclusion of people with disabilities in India, individuals with disabilities still face many barriers for their involvement in the labour market. This review explores the sociological and economic barriers for unemployment and underemployment of people with disabilities in India. It focuses on the issues of stigma, education inequality, inaccessible infrastructure, workplace discrimination and ineffective implementation of policies. It also identifies many gender, caste, class, and rural and urban disparities. Over 40 academic and institutional articles ranging from 1990 to 2026 were critically reviewed. This paper uses the framework of Social Model of Disability, Goffman's Stigma Theory and Human Capital Theory to explore how economic exclusion occurs due to the interaction between the social attitudes and socio-economic situation of people with disabilities. The results reveal that disability-related unemployment does not occur because of personal limitations, but discriminatory social attitudes, inaccessible transportation and workplaces, poor education and ineffectiveness of laws prevent the employment of people with disabilities. Moreover, exclusion has economic costs because of loss of productivity and earning power. There is a need for enforcement of the Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) Rights Act, inclusionary employment policies, disability sensitization, education access, and increased awareness about invisible disabilities. Further studies are needed to investigate intersectional disparities and the efficacy of legislation and business inclusion efforts.

**Keywords:** Disability; Human Capital Theory; Stigma Theory; Barriers To Employment

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Establishing the Global and Indian Context

An estimated 1.3 billion, or 16% of the world's population lives with a disability (WHO, 2023). Globally, these populations face severe socioeconomic problems, such as higher poverty rates, poor education, lack of healthcare and structural employment barriers (*Disability Inclusion | World Bank Group*, 2026). The Global Partnership for Education (2016) estimates that 90% of children with disabilities in low and lower-middle income countries do not go to school. Furthermore, many children who do attend school often have to deal with bullying and unsuitable learning materials (Ravassard, 2016). Consequently, people with disabilities are more likely to experience unemployment, as well as long-term economic insecurity. According to the International Labour Organization, discrimination, inaccessible workplaces, and social exclusion continue to restrict labour market participation for disabled individuals worldwide. At the same time, poverty itself can worsen disability through malnutrition, unsafe living conditions and delayed treatments. This further leads to increased healthcare costs in an already existing landscape with inadequate healthcare facilities. As noted by Mahal et. al. (2024), there is a "major earnings handicap and cost of living disadvantage that people with disability face in India" - it leaves households in a vicious socioeconomic cycle where they struggle to access quality education, making it more difficult to achieve employment and attain good healthcare.

As per the WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), disability is an umbrella term for impairments, activity limitation, and participation restrictions resulting from the interaction between a person's health condition and environmental factors (i.e., physical, social and attitudinal barriers). There are a number of types of disabilities classified. A physical disability is one that impacts mobility or functions and can be related to locomotor disorders, cerebral palsy and muscular dystrophy. A sensory disability relates to

problems with sight or hearing including blindness, low vision, and deafness. An intellectual disability is characterized by limitations of cognitive functions and adaptive behavior. A psychosocial or psychiatric disability includes problems like schizophrenia and bipolar disorder that impact a person's mental and social functioning. Neurodevelopmental disabilities represent a category recognized increasingly in Indian legislation, and include Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), specific learning difficulties like dyslexia and dyscalculia, and intellectual disability acquired during the developmental period. The RPwD Act, 2016 in India includes almost all of these categories, widening the scope of recognition from 7 to 21 disorders.

According to the 2011 Indian Census and the National Sample Surveys, India has a population of 26.8 million which makes up 2.21% out of the 1.2 billion people living in the country. However, this statistic is widely disputed and organizations like WHO estimates 15% of the population lives with a disability (World Health Organization, 2023). These statistics could be underestimated due to limitations in how disability is identified and measured. The underestimation of this statistic leads to disproportionately low funding toward better and more accessible welfare support.

## 1.2 Social Model vs Medical Model

There are two major theories on disability: medical and social. According to the Medical Model, disability is the problem of the individual, which requires curing, rehabilitation, and social security. In the past, the Indian disability policy was largely based on the Medical Model (Reddy, 2017) and (Alyafi 2025). However the Social Model which was developed by disability theorists like Michael Oliver in 1990 posits in his book *The Politics of Disablement: A Sociological Approach* that disability occurs due to the failure of society to accommodate those who have disabilities. Discriminatory policies regarding hiring, absence of assistive healthcare, inaccessible infrastructure and institutions contribute to making one disabled.

India supports the social model of disability. According to a World Bank report in 2009, exclusion from education and work could be attributed to exclusionary settings more than to impairments. The National Centre of Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) has reported that even with the provisions made in the RPWD Act, inaccessible working environments, public transport, and hiring practices have continued to exclude people from the labour market. The Social Model offers a more compelling understanding of employment discrimination because it places emphasis on the barriers rather than the disability of the individual.

## 1.3 The Perception Problem

Though there has been an increasing amount of awareness about disability rights, disabled people in India still face various types of social stigma: they are often discriminated against or seen as subjects of pity, rather than individuals with equal rights. Research has shown that these stigmas faced by disabled individuals are further magnified by broader social structures, like class, caste and gender. The interviews highlighted the lack of family support and educational opportunities available in the country (Raghavan et. al., 2022). Thus, people with disabilities are frequently marginalised and characterized by their limitations over their aspirations and potential.

Such perspectives lead to serious issues with employment and participation in the economy. They are often negatively stereotyped as unproductive or less capable. These harmful stereotypes can influence employers' hiring decisions, which results in lower employment rates among persons with disabilities despite existing policies like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 which mandates inclusivity practices and promotes equal employment. According to various studies, social prejudices are a key reason for unemployment among disabled individuals. Narahariseti & Castro (2016) claim that limited access to education and social inclusion are factors that contribute significantly to the employment barriers faced by people with disabilities.

## 1.4 The Employment Gap and Its Economic Cost

In India, disability is often recognized through a disability certificate which acts as a prerequisite to acquire government benefits. The Indian government has implemented several welfare policies to support its disabled population. Primarily, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, passed in 2016, mandates individuals with certified disabilities to acquire certain welfare schemes and reservations. It increased reservations to 5% in educational institutions and 4% in public sector jobs. However, policies for disability inclusion in the private sector are still weak and are mostly dependent on the employers' willingness to implement them (Raj et al., 2022). Up to 72% of persons with intellectual disabilities and over 68% of disabled women remain entirely outside the active workforce, severely stifling household income potential (Thakur, 2025).

Hence, despite these existing laws, people with disabilities remain severely disadvantaged in the labor market. According to Narahariseti and Castro (2016), "the majority were located in rural areas (75%) and most unemployed (65.6%)," illustrating the continued marginalization of disabled individuals in the economy.

Furthermore, A study by Khatoon (2026) utilizes the data from the National Sample Survey in 2018 and notes that the employment rate of people with disabilities was about 22.8%, which is much lower than that of the general population. Similarly, another study which was conducted by Rajasulochna and Khan in 2024 estimated that the labor force participation rate of disabled people was 29%. These statistics can be attributed to factors, such as lack of access to education, infrastructure and employer bias against individuals with disability.

These economic repercussions of the exclusion of such a huge population from the work force results in a considerable loss at the national level. S. Buckup estimates that countries lose up to 7% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) because of the underemployment or unemployment of disabled people (International Labour Organization, 2009). Moreover, this unemployment means that people with disabilities become more reliant on family incomes or welfare schemes, and have fewer prospects for upward social mobility. Thus, the issue of disability inclusion is essential both from the point of view of social equality and human rights, and economic sustainability.

#### **1.4 The gap and scope of this paper**

Research about disability in India mainly focuses on the issues of stigma, lack of educational and healthcare opportunities and discrimination at the workplace. It has consistently documented lower employment rates. The intersectionality of caste, gender and class also remains much less explored in this discussion.

This review aims to critically analyse existing literature. It aims to identify key barriers that continue to limit labour market participation despite legislative protections.

The main focus of this review will be to examine how social perceptions and socioeconomic inequalities influence the employment levels of disabled people in India. This study relies on a comprehensive analysis of literature from socio-economic policy and the social domains to shed light on the factors that impede disabled people from employment.

The scope of this review is limited to the Indian context. Although, it takes into account issues of disability faced globally, the emphasis of discussion will be on the societal attitudes, socioeconomic inequalities and employment opportunities for people with disabilities in India.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Goffman's Stigma Theory**

Goffman's sociological construct of stigma, discussed in his book titled *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), can be effectively used to analyze discrimination faced by disabled people. Goffman suggests that some qualities of a person become "discrediting" and the individual becomes a stereotype. The status of disability also belongs to the list of such discrediting attributes.

Disability stigma has been shown to have an effect on education, social integration, marriage, and employment through studies conducted in India. For instance, in a qualitative study conducted by Johnstone et. al. (2018), through interviews among people living with disabilities in India, participants expressed their frequent experiences of exclusion, paternalism, and incompetence. The family and employers would often consider a person with disability as a burden rather than a resource.

Gudlavalleti et al. (2014) conducted a similar study among disabled individuals in Andhra Pradesh, India and found that social discrimination and unfavourable attitudes of the community played an important role in limiting educational and economic participation.

### **2.2 Human Capital Theory (employment angle)**

The Human Capital Theory, proposed by Gary Becker in 1993 states that education, training, health, and skills improve a person's productivity. When the theory of disability is applied to the issue, the connection between lack of education and limited job prospects in the future. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report published by UNESCO in 2020, disabled children have lower rates of enrollment and completion of elementary and secondary school compared to other students.

Mitra and Sambamoorthi (2006) used the Indian National Sample Survey data, stating that education is one of the major factors influencing the employment or unemployment of disabled people. However, the Human Capital Theory cannot adequately account for unemployment of disabled people because of hiring and promoting discrimination against them. Therefore, their employment situation depends on human capital differences and employers' discrimination as well. This inability forces researchers to merge Human Capital Theory with the stigma theory.



**Figure 1** shows economic exclusion of disabled people in employment spaces in India.

This review will be presented according to a conceptual framework wherein social perception acts as the underlying factor of economic exclusion. The negative societal perception regarding disability is internalised as stigma (Goffman, 1963). This stigma influences the employers and leads to discriminatory employment policies that could either be due to direct discrimination or through the inaccessibility of the recruitment process or the high cost of accommodation. The resultant exclusion from the labour market described comes at a significant economic cost.

### 3. Perceptions of Disability Across Socio-Economic Groups in India

#### 3.1 Urban vs. rural differences

The understanding and perspectives toward disabled people differ in India depending on whether they live in urban or rural areas. This is because of varying levels of education, development, healthcare facilities and availability of awareness about disabilities in each environment. The NSS in 2018 indicates that disabled people in the villages and other rural areas have less access to education and work opportunities than those who live in cities (Press Information Bureau, 2019). This phenomenon is connected to the lack of rehabilitation support, assistive technology and special education opportunities.

Gudlavalleti et al. (2014) claim that disabled people living in the rural parts of Andhra Pradesh often face discriminatory behavior and unfavourable attitudes toward them that prevent them from accessing education or participating in the labour market. Similarly, Narahariseti and Castro (2016) state that employment opportunities for disabled people strongly depend on the local socioeconomic circumstances and are so limited in rural areas.

Although urban areas have a better availability of services and information, there still persists stigma around people with disabilities. Johnstone et. al. (2018) state that discrimination, paternalism, and the notion of incompetence are some of the issues that people with disabilities face in urban environments. Hence, even though urban populations are more aware about their situations, there is a lack of opportunities for disabled people because of societal perceptions. While the disability stigma occurs in both urban and rural areas as well, it is more pronounced in rural areas.

These findings suggest that geographical location plays a role in employment and disability in two different ways- structural and social. On one hand, there are less services related to education, rehabilitation, and employment in rural areas, while on the other, discrimination in urban areas still exists (Gudlavalleti et al., 2014; Johnstone et al., 2018; Narahariseti & Castro, 2016).

#### 3.2 Caste, class, and religion as moderating variables

The phenomenon of disability in India cannot be analysed in isolation from societal structures like caste, class, and religion. The intersectionality theory implies that people who are part of more than one marginalized group are subjected to various forms of discrimination. For example, disabled people coming from poorer families usually have more difficulties accessing education and health care services than richer counterparts (Pal, 2011).

The findings from analysing the data from NSS and NFHS show that issues related to disability are more prevalent among poorer families (Rashmi et. al, 2024). Low education and wealth among the disabled had an effect on limiting the job prospects of such individuals. Therefore, poverty increases vulnerability towards being excluded due to disability but at the same time denies people opportunities to engage economically and socially (Mitra and Sambamoorthi, 2006).

The caste system also plays a role in shaping the experiences of people with disabilities through its impact on education, employment and social standing. It has been noted by experts that the issue of disability is linked to the problem of caste-based discrimination and this creates various obstacles for their inclusion into society (Pal, 2011).

Beliefs regarding religion and culture could also influence perceptions towards disability. It has been documented that beliefs linking disability to fate, karma or divine will can contribute to the isolation and marginalization of disabled people. These perceptions often reinforce dependency narrative rather than understanding the needs of the disabled people.

These observations suggest that exclusion of people with disabilities in the workforce is not just about disability, but is a product of intersections of socioeconomic inequalities. This means that poverty, lack of education and being marginalized in terms of caste can further create challenges for people who already face discrimination (Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2006; Pal, 2011; Rashmi et al., 2024).

### **3.3 Attitudes toward specific conditions (ASD, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities)**

While attitudes toward physical disability in India have shifted meaningfully with growing accessibility infrastructure, awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) remains comparatively low, even as diagnosis rates rise (Srivastava et al., 2023). Because ASD produces no visible physical marker, it is frequently misunderstood, misattributed to poor parenting or behavioural indiscipline, and diagnosed late (Daley, 2004). Srivastava et al. (2023) found that low public awareness and high stigmatization compound the difficulties faced by autistic individuals and their families, who must navigate not only the condition itself but the judgment and exclusion that follow from others' ignorance of it.

This has direct employment consequences. Unnithan and Janardhanan (2025) note that while autistic individuals often possess distinct hard and soft skills relevant to employment, employer bias, low awareness, and gaps in workplace accommodation policy prevent these skills from translating into jobs. The employment discrimination faced by people with autism does not arise from their lack of capability but rather from the employer's lack of knowledge of autism. In India specifically, certification structures compound the problem: disability certification for autism has historically been available only when bundled with a diagnosis of intellectual disability, meaning many autistic individuals without intellectual disability fall outside the certification system altogether and are excluded from the very reservations meant to support them.

This pattern mirrors the broader argument of this review: exclusion is driven less by the condition itself than by a social and institutional environment unequipped to recognise and accommodate it. Compared to intellectual and physical disabilities, ASD illustrates a particularly acute case of the Social Model's central claim- that disabling barriers, not impairment, determine economic exclusion.

Public attitudes towards people with disabilities differ depending on the kind of disability as well. It has been noted that many people with intellectual disabilities face higher rates of stigmatization compared to those with physical disabilities (Scrior K., 2011). People with physical disabilities are often thought to be competent enough to attend school and work when obstacles in their environment are overcome, but the same cannot be said about people with intellectual disabilities.

Mehrota and Vaidya (2008) found that social perceptions of intellectual disability in India revolve around concepts of productivity, competence and familial responsibilities. Such perceptions usually lead to lower academic and professional expectations.

The level of awareness about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in India is still fairly low even with growing numbers of diagnosis. It has been reported in research that the misunderstanding related to autism can cause late diagnosis and social exclusion from regular schools (Daley et. al, 2004).

The role of education and media exposure is crucial in dispelling these misconceptions. More contact with people who have disabilities at school, work and even through media platforms has shown to bring about positive perceptions toward them. UNESCO (2020) claims that inclusive learning settings make considerable contributions towards minimizing prejudice and fostering experience.

### 3.4 Role of education and media exposure

Both educational attainment and media exposure have an important influence on the perception of disability and social inclusion of people with disabilities. The educated population tends to be better aware of disability rights and more accepting of inclusion (WHO, 2011; Singal 2016). Being exposed to information about disability and rights associated with disability in the course of educational achievement may encourage people to abandon their outdated and stereotypical beliefs about the nature of disability. People tend to see disability as neither personal tragedy nor punishment but rather a condition, thus supporting inclusive practices such as better education, healthcare and employment opportunities (Singal, 2016).

The importance of education cannot be overstated in determining the attitude of society towards disability and employment prospects of people with disabilities. Human capital theory posits that education makes one productive and employable, thus increasing chances of finding decent employment. Indeed, empirical research in India supports this connection. According to Mitra and Sambamoorthi (2006), an analysis of data collected by the National Sample Survey (NSS) shows that education plays an important role in increasing the labor force participation of people with disabilities, although the extent of this influence differs between disability types and socioeconomic classes. Moreover, according to Narahariseti and Castro (2016), the analysis of data obtained from the Census reveals a strong correlation between illiteracy and low employment among disabled people, especially in urban areas where jobs in the formal sector usually require education. Education impacts employment by means of human capital and social theories (Mitra & Sambamoorthi, 2006). In the case of autistic persons, education might impact employment in a different way since, apart from developing necessary skills, education is needed to change people's perceptions about autism and foster acceptance of diversity (Srivastava et al., 2023; Daley, 2004).

However, despite its importance, education continues to be an inaccessible resource to disabled people in India. Various studies reveal that people with disabilities have lower school enrollments. It poses a greater barrier to participate in the labour market. Singal et al. (2016) argue that inclusion in education has several positive effects like boosting social confidence, more social integration and economic independence for people with disabilities. Studies like the NSS 2018 data reveal that level of education is one of the greatest determinants of employment opportunities for people with disabilities. However, these general results do not really take into account the challenges that individuals who suffer from autism spectrum disorder face, because education exclusion in this case can be based on lack of awareness and misunderstanding of their skills (Singal et al., 2016). It appears that increasing access to education is not enough without overcoming these challenges as well (Unnithan & Janardhanan, 2025).

Media exposure also enhances education as far as it is concerned with creating perceptions about disability and creating awareness on disability rights, welfare and employment opportunities. The World Health Organization in 2011 claimed that mass media has the potential to change people's perception and overcome stigma associated with disability. Newspaper, television, radio and other types of media expose one to information that emphasizes the ability of people with disabilities. In India, the disability advocacy movements and awareness campaigns have created better perceptions of disability issues and made society more accepting of the disabled regarding education and work (Benshoff et al., 2014).

Furthermore, media exposure also plays an important role in making people aware of their rights and government benefits for people with disabilities. It increases knowledge about the policies specific to people with disabilities like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and reservation in government jobs for disabled people. According to Meekosha and Soldatic (2011), media portrayal of people with disabilities can have a great effect on shaping the perceptions of disability in society because of norms and expectations. Positive rights-based portrayal of people with disabilities can help break negative stereotypes associated with disabled people. Thus, better and accurate media exposure helps people with disabilities get better employment opportunities (WHO 2011; Meekosha et. Soldatic, 2011).

## 4. Stigma, Myths, and Awareness Gaps

### 4.1 Common misconceptions in Indian cultural context

Although there is an increasing amount of awareness about disability rights in India over the years, several stereotypes and perceptions about it still exist. It influences social attitudes and employment prospects. Some communities still view disability as an unfortunate event in life or something related to karma or a burden to the family. These perceptions result in stereotyping and social exclusion, thus limiting access to education and employment opportunities (Gudlavalleti et. al, 2014). According to Kayama et al. (2019), disability stigma in India

is influenced by the cultural beliefs and social norms along with pre-existing discrimination based on gender, caste and socio-economic status.

A widely held misconception is that people with disabilities are not as productive or cannot function effectively at work. Employers might think that people with disabilities need to be constantly monitored or have expensive modifications made, even though these modifications can be made quite easily and inexpensively. These misconceptions prevent qualified individuals from getting an opportunity to be hired (Joshi et. al, 2020). Furthermore, invisible disabilities like intellectual or learning disabilities are misinterpreted which also add to the discrimination faced by people with disabilities.

#### **4.2 Family and community-level stigma**

Family attitudes towards those with disabilities can significantly shape the chances of a disabled person to get education and employment. In many Indian families there is a prevailing trend among family members of having lower expectations from the abilities of people with disabilities. Even though these attitudes usually arise from love or protective motives, it can end up limiting one's freedom and confidence. There are families who deny access to education and job opportunities to their loved ones with disabilities because of fear of discrimination or humiliation. Kayama et al. (2019) found that family support plays a crucial role in shaping the life experiences of persons with disabilities, and limited encouragement often reinforces dependency and social exclusion.

The impact of stigma at the community level on employment is significant. People who have disabilities might be socially isolated, prejudiced against and thus, less engaged in community life. All these factors are particularly evident in rural areas, since there is usually lower awareness of people's rights related to disabilities. Social isolation limits people's access to their professional networks. According to Narahariseti and Castro (2016) environmental and social barriers often make work in combination with disability and make employment difficult even if the person has the appropriate skills.

Moreover, society often views people who have disabilities as being cared for rather than as agents of economic growth. These views influence the way in which their abilities are perceived by members of society. Therefore, stigma within the family unit and society can produce negative effects on the individual's future employment and financial freedom.

#### **4.3 Institutional stigma (healthcare, education, workplace)**

Institutional stigmatization transcends personal bias and is ingrained in the structures that influence access to healthcare, education and employment. Even in places where there are policies that encourage the inclusion of individuals with disabilities, certain institutional practices that marginalize disabled people still exist. For instance, in health care issues such as inadequate assistance or medical attention. Shakespeare, Lezzoni and Grace (2009) claim that most of these inequalities are not caused by the disabilities themselves but structural issues. Gudlavalleti et al. (2014) found that there were serious problems faced by people with disabilities in Andhra Pradesh due to infrastructure issues and transport problems.

Although India has implemented policies regarding inclusive education, their execution initiatives are irregular. Singal (2016) states that many educational facilities still lack properly trained staff, relevant teaching and inadequate infrastructure which hinder the process of integration of people with special needs into the general system of education. Thus, many disabled people do not receive a proper education. This is associated with their low participation in the labour market. Subsequently, Mitra and Sambamoorthi (2006) claim that educational achievements of the disabled people are one of the most powerful factors of employment in India.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act passed in 2016 ensures that persons with disabilities are not discriminated against. However, there have been problems with its enforcement in the private sector. Studies show that even when there is ample evidence that people with disabilities are productive employees, many employers still tend to believe otherwise. Johnstone et al. (2018) revealed in a study that many people felt that they were evaluated more based on their disabilities rather than their credentials. Similarly, Bonaccio et al. (2018) also stated that one of the biggest obstacles for people with disabilities in getting hired was employers' misconception about them.

#### **4.4 Comparison with global literature**

Issues of disability in India mirror similar trends in other parts of the world. Literature published in developed and developing nations alike consistently indicates that stigma, lack of accessibility to education and employment discrimination represent common important obstacles while achieving employment. As highlighted in the World Report on Disability (WHO & World Bank, 2011), lack of accessibility in addition to discriminatory labor markets continue to prevent disabled individuals from participating in the economy.

Evidently enough, these issues in India are exacerbated due to the prevailing socio-economic conditions in India. Factors such as poverty, caste, gender and rural areas often intensify the discrimination faced by disabled individuals. It is different from the studies conducted in developed nations. Pal (2011) argues that disability in India overlaps with broader patterns of social exclusion. For instance, poverty and disability both limit the individual's access to a proper education. Subsequently, Mitra and Sambamoorthi (2006), found that socioeconomic status has a significant influence on the employment of persons with disabilities in India.

Furthermore, many developed nations have a stronger implementation of their policies and thus, more established workplace accommodation practices. While India has passed progressive legislation like Rights of the Persons with Disabilities Act in 2016, several studies reveal that its implementation has remained inconsistent (Sreelogna et al., 2026; Raj et. al., 2022). Therefore, many people continue to face barriers despite existing legal protections.

## **5. Employment Landscape for Differently-Abled Individuals in India**

### **5.1 Legislative framework:**

#### **5.1.1 RPwD Act 2016**

The Persons with Disabilities Act in 1995 took more of a welfare approach and only recognized seven disabilities. The seven disabilities recognised under the 1995 Act were blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, locomotor disability, mental retardation, and mental illness. Furthermore, it provided only 3% reservation in jobs and had weak penal provisions. The new RPwD in 2016 was enacted in place of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995. It marked the change of disability policy in India from welfare-based to rights-based. Disability protection has become more inclusive as 21 disabilities are now legalized under the act. Moreover, it strengthened employment and educational opportunities for persons with benchmark disabilities by reserving 4% of government jobs, including 1% specifically for individuals with autism, intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, and mental illnesses, and 5% of seats in higher educational institutions. The act also mandates inclusive education and accessibility standards for public buildings, transportation, and information and communication technology (Parliament, 2016).

These 21 disabilities as per the RPwD Act, 2016 can be categorized into five main categories, which include: physical disabilities (locomotor disability, leprosy cured, cerebral palsy, dwarfism, acid attack survivors and muscular dystrophy), sensory disabilities (blindness, low vision, deaf & hard of hearing), intellectual disabilities (intellectual disabilities and specific learning disabilities), mental illness (schizophrenia, bipolar disorder), neurological/blood disorders (autism spectrum disorder, parkinsonism, multiple sclerosis, chronic neurological conditions, and haemophilia/thalassemia/sickle cell disease), and finally multiple disabilities. This demonstrates the larger move from the narrow physical/sensory perspective of the 1995 Act to the recognition of psychosocial and neuro-developmental conditions.

However, critics argue that merging different disabilities into a single 1% employment quota is an ineffective approach to meeting the needs of persons with mental illnesses. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the Act is limited by the lack of community-based healthcare and rehabilitation for mentally ill persons, as well as by overlapping implementation procedures with the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017.

#### **5.1.2 UNCRPD ratification**

India ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007. The Convention recognises employment as a fundamental human right. It represents the advancement of the trend in moving away from seeing people with disabilities as "objects" of charity, medicine, and social protection towards seeing people with disabilities as "subjects" with rights. It views them as being active members of society. The Convention is meant to be a human rights-based document, which explicitly contains elements of a social development paradigm. It employs broad classifications of disability and confirms that persons with all kinds of disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms (UN, 2006).

India's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007 and later the passing of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 were important steps in protecting the rights of the disabled. As per Article 33 of the UNCRPD, the RPwD Act mandates the formation of various institutions like Central/State Advisory Board, State Commissioners, District Committees, and Special Courts that would take care of the monitoring and enforcement of disability rights. Despite the laws being in place, most of these institutions have not been formed even years after the implementation of the act, making the enforcement very weak. Other nations like Ireland appointed an independent monitoring authority soon after their

ratification of the convention, showing the delayed implementations of achieving the objectives of these laws in India (Johari, 2024).

In the case of implementation of Article 9 of the UNCRPD which addresses issues of accessibility, India has also had problems because the act gave the government the authority to develop accessibility standards but the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017 that are supplementary to the Act mainly consist of voluntary guidelines without any mandatory minimum standards. Therefore, accessibility goals have not been achieved in practice thus restricting equal access to work and other areas (Johari, 2024).

## 5.2 Employment statistics and sectoral gaps

Only 22.8% of persons with disabilities are employed according to analysis of the NSS 76th Round with a significant gender disparity: 34.5% for men compared with just 7.4% for women. Approximately 36% of working-age persons with disabilities reported being unable to work because of their disability (Khatoon, 2026). The employment chances also decrease significantly with aging, which indicates that elderly disabled people encounter more barriers to be active in the labour market.

Educational level and household income also play an important role in employment, though their impacts are inconsistent for different demographic groups. The majority of employed people with disabilities have lower educational levels and occupy low-qualified jobs. Though a higher level of education increases the chances of getting a job for men with disabilities, no such pattern is found for women with disabilities, indicating the persistence of narrow-minded social beliefs in addition to discrimination based on disabilities (Khatoon, 2026).

According to the International Labour Organization, there are also immense discrepancies regarding the quality and nature of employment. As per statistics, around 60% of the population with disabilities is reported to be self-employed. In addition to that, it has also been reported that a large number of people with disabilities work on a casual basis rather than working for salary-based employment. Moreover, 48.4% of such individuals are working in agriculture and forestry industries while only a small number of individuals are engaged in skilled occupations such as finance, manufacturing, and professional sectors. Additionally, the type of employment varies according to the type of disabilities in which people with hearing, intellectual, speech or psychiatric disabilities work in the primary sector.

It is clear that the problems faced by people with disabilities in terms of employment in India are not just about the issue of unemployment but also include issues of underemployment and discrimination.

## 5.3 Barriers: attitudinal, structural, informational

### 5.3.1 Attitudinal barriers

Negative attitudes in society and discrimination by potential employers are among the most critical barriers preventing the employment of people with disabilities in India. There are many employers who believe that people with disabilities are less productive and less able to perform their job duties or even more likely to be absent due to health-related issues (International Labour Organization, 2026). Employers also think that it will take them too much money to provide accommodation like ramps to people with disabilities. Such stereotypes make organizations unwilling to hire disabled applicants who have similar skills and qualifications to other job seekers (Joshi and Thomas, 2020).

persons with psychosocial disabilities face a distinct set of attitudinal barriers rooted in the invisibility of their condition. Because psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression carry no physical marker, employers frequently rely on assumptions about unpredictability, unreliability, or risk rather than direct evidence of capability (Sharma & Levav, 2022). A cross-sectional study of employers in Tamil Nadu found persistently limited awareness and hesitancy around hiring persons with mental illness, despite employer-reported willingness to accommodate other forms of disability (Bonaccio, 2026). This creates a disclosure dilemma: individuals with psychosocial disabilities must weigh the benefits of requesting accommodation against the risk that disclosing their condition will trigger the very discrimination they are trying to avoid (Loganathan & Murthy, 2011). Consequently, psychosocial disability is frequently under-reported in employment settings, likely understating its true contribution to the broader unemployment figures discussed in Section 5.2.

### 5.3.2 Structural Barriers

Despite the availability of provisions for accessibility made under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, many places of work still lack necessary infrastructures such as ramps, lifts, accessible toilet facilities, tactile signs, and assistive devices. Moreover, public transportation services continue to remain inaccessible in many parts of the country, thus preventing many disabled people from accessing work opportunities because of difficulties in travelling. Additionally, digital platforms for recruitment, online application processes,

and competition in recruitment exams are often inaccessible to visually impaired, deaf, or physically disabled persons (Joshi and Thomas, 2020).

Many structural issues keep many qualified candidates out of the labour market. As a result, the high levels of unemployment observed among persons with disabilities cannot be blamed on the lack of necessary qualifications since these barriers prevent disabled people from working.

### 5.3.3 Informational Barriers

Limited access to information further contributes to the employment gap experienced by persons with disabilities in India. Numerous people do not know about the governmental schemes related to the employment of people with disabilities, reservation policies, vocational training, disability certificates, and job vacancies. The very process of acquiring disability certificates, which is essential for obtaining reservation and welfare benefits, can prove to be a difficult task especially in rural areas where there is poor availability of administration services and informational campaigns. Thus, many eligible individuals are unable to benefit from policies specifically designed to improve their employment prospects (Joshi and Thomas, 2020).

### 5.4 Employer perspectives and HR practices

The employer's attitude and organizational practices play an important role in the employment of people with disabilities. While it is well recognized that there are diverse needs of different individuals within any organization, the attitudes of many organizations still consider disability from a purely medical or charity perspective instead of considering it from a right-based or diversity perspective. In this view, people with disabilities are considered welfare or charity recipients rather than being able to contribute to the performance of an organization. This leads to hiring policies and promotions of the disabled workers that reflect this attitude (International Bar Association, 2023 and Sinha et. al., 2025).

The adoption of inclusive human resources practices is very beneficial for creating good employment prospects for persons with disabilities. Some of these practices include conducting accessible hiring practices, disability training, flexible work arrangements, assistive technology provision, and inclusive performance appraisal systems to help people with disabilities be productive and advance within the companies. According to research conducted by the International Labour Organisation in 2025, such accommodation measures at the workplace do not cost much and ensure that employees retain their jobs and become more productive and satisfied. Thus, disability inclusion should not be considered just as an obligation under the RPwD Act but as a smart human resources practice ((International Bar Association, 2023).

## 6. Linking Perception to Economic Productivity

### 6.1 Cost of exclusion to GDP

The case for disability inclusion based on economics is just as strong as the case based on human rights. Buckup (2009) in an ILO working paper on the macroeconomic implications of excluding people with disabilities from the labour force in ten low and middle income countries in Asia and Africa estimated the cost of exclusion of people with disabilities at 3 to 7% of a nation's GDP each year. Since this estimate has been cited in recent Indian policy literature as well, where it is again argued that exclusion of people with disabilities is not just an issue of social justice but one that impacts national productivity at 7%, Buckup's argument can be summarized as being that the loss of productivity is not due to any disability in itself but rather because people with disabilities have become less productive due to the disabling environments - inaccessible workplaces, transportation, and hiring systems -echoing the Social Model of disability discussed earlier in this review.

Further localized studies also depict this trend beyond the borders of India. According to the findings by Morgon Banks and Polack (2014), exclusion of people with disabilities in Bangladesh leads to a total economic loss of USD 891 million per year, while another USD 234 million is lost due to lower income for family caregivers providing unpaid services. Similar estimates were obtained by researchers in Morocco, where yearly losses amounted to about USD 1.1 billion per year (Morgon Banks & Polack, 2014). This shows that the economic cost of exclusion occurs on both fronts: lost wages of disabled people and decreased involvement of their family members, mostly females, into the labor market.

Particularly within India, this is added to an already precarious situation within welfare systems. Since under- and unemployment of people with disabilities leads to more reliance by the household on the income of the family and welfare from the government, the loss of production for the household is identical to the loss of production for the country.

## 6.2 Evidence from inclusive employment models (India and global)

Nevertheless, there are a number of pieces of evidence suggesting that inclusive employment practices are not only feasible but can also bring profits to organizations. According to UNDP (2024), although less than 25 percent of organizations in India offer their employees accessible facilities like ramps or any other equipment, organizations making an investment in accessibility claim higher retention and productivity rates among disabled employees. Likewise, the International Labour Organisation suggests that workplace adjustments for disabled employees are relatively cheap, and these adjustments have a direct relationship with job retention and employee satisfaction (International Labour Organization, cited in International Bar Association, 2023).

This is in line with what has been observed in other parts of the world. According to the Job Accommodation Network based in the United States, the majority of accommodations made in organizations for the sake of the disabled workers come without any cost to the employers whatsoever, and most other accommodations involve very small costs (Owonikoko, 2025). This serves to contradict the perception held by employers that it is too expensive to accommodate the disabled workers in organizations.

## 6.3 Case studies: successful inclusion programs

Two Indian case studies illustrate how inclusive hiring can be operationalised as a core business strategy rather than a corporate social responsibility exercise.

Mphasis, an IT service company, has been ranked amongst the top companies in India as corporate recruiters of disabled individuals and has been bestowed the Shell Helen Keller Award for its work in this area. Along with its own policies of recruitment, Mphasis co-sponsors the NCPEDP-Mphasis Universal Design Awards, awarded to individuals and organizations who help in building inclusive designs in India (NCPEDP, n.d.). While disability inclusion can be viewed as a distinct hiring policy, Mphasis has made it an integral part of the whole inclusive design and universal design approach.

An additional case study would be Lemon Tree Hotels. The hotel chain started employing "Opportunity Deprived Indians" (ODIs)- a term which includes individuals with disabilities as well- back in 2007, beginning with only two employees who were deaf. Now, this number has increased to around 1,000 individuals, which amounts to 20% out of 5,000 employees of the organisation (Wernick & Weinstein, 2019; STAAH, 2026). The company has even set its goal to reach a 45% employment rate of individuals with disabilities by 2025. Most importantly, the management of the company has always been presenting the strategy as a business model, rather than a charitable deed. Individuals with disabilities get the same 80 hours of training as all other workers in the organisation, and all the employees must learn basic sign language skills (STAAH, 2026). During the coronavirus pandemic, the senior management and high earners accepted salary reductions in order not to lay off this specific group of employees (Amazing Workplaces, n.d.).

In contrast, an example of an organisation facing difficulties in implementing inclusive hiring is Café Coffee Day. According to Parab (2024), the disability inclusive hiring practices of the organisation presented certain benefits to the staff and the business, however, the researcher was able to uncover the challenges linked to inclusive hiring in the retail industry. Thus, merely the adoption of the inclusive recruitment process by an organisation does not ensure inclusiveness in the work environment.

These cases point to the fact that inclusion is not about individual hiring quotas but rather about redesigning training, infrastructure, and organizational culture for accessibility, which is exactly what is implied by the shift from the charity and medical models to the rights model.

## 7. Conclusion

The employment issue for people with disabilities in India cannot be attributed to any one cause and cannot be solved through any one intervention. It can be seen from this review that unemployment and underemployment of the disabled in India result from a series of interconnected reasons: social stigma caused by the cultural perspective on disability, structural problems in education, health care, transportation, and employment processes, and the legislative system that, although it shows some improvement after the introduction of the RPwD Act of 2016 and India's acceptance of the UNCRPD, is not fully enforced, especially in the private sector. The connection between disability and castes, class position, gender, and rural background adds to the barriers, thus showing that even the average picture of exclusion of the disabled that appears from the national statistics covers large disparities between various categories of Indian disabled people. The picture revealed by the literature review is not about personal incompetence but about the exclusion experienced by people with disabilities, which reflects the essence of the Social Model of disability and Goffman's theory of stigma as socially constructed.

The importance of the topic goes beyond the immediate stakeholder group affected by the phenomenon. As demonstrated in Section 6, there are both quantifiable costs associated with the discrimination against people with disabilities in terms of 3-7% of GDP in similar economies and more abstract losses through diminished incomes, loss of the labour force engaged in care work, as well as the missed opportunity for innovation on account of an underused part of the workforce. At the same time, examples of Mphasis and Lemon Tree Hotels show that disability inclusion can be seen as not only a legal requirement, but also a valid business model if implemented with serious institutional commitment, rather than just going through the motions. Further study should focus on the intersectionality aspect of disability discrimination in India, particularly the additional burden on the shoulders of women with disabilities and people with disabilities living in rural and low-caste communities as well as monitoring the progress in employment resulting from recently enacted legislative and corporate initiatives. The change in the way society perceives people with disabilities, seeing them not as beneficiaries of charity, but as economic agents, is necessary for legislative changes to close the existing employment gap.

## 8. Future Recommendations

From the policy perspective, the solution to the employment gap lies in better implementation of existing laws rather than in passing more laws. The monitoring mechanisms created by the RPwD Act in accordance with article 33 of the UNCRPD in the form of the Central and State Advisory Boards, District Committees, and Special Courts have been non-operational for several years after the Act has come into effect, and this problem needs to be resolved first. Likewise, the accessibility guidelines that are voluntary in nature under the RPwD Rules, 2017 must be made mandatory and enforced with the help of minimum standards for infrastructure and transportation. Additionally, the government may offer tax cuts or subsidies for wages of those private businesses that surpass the minimum quota of disabled workers.

The organizational approach must be guided by examples such as those from Lemon Tree Hotels and Mphasis, whereby disability inclusion is seen as an integral business function and not just another CSR activity. In particular, disability sensitization training for hiring personnel and current employees, job carving and flexible roles in which task allocation is done in accordance to the capabilities of the employee rather than making disabled employees fit into already set roles in the organization, and accessibility auditing of infrastructure both physical and digital must be taken into account. Since it is clear from the findings in Section 6 that most accommodations cost nothing, the biggest barrier at this level is attitudinal and not monetary.

From the perspective of the community level, overcoming the barriers identified within the review needs measures that will be undertaken earlier on in life and extend beyond workplace policies. Incorporating disability education in school curriculum at an early age will play an important role in eliminating stigmatization at its root cause, whereas community-based awareness programs are particularly needed in rural communities where information barriers in terms of obtaining disability certificates and welfare services are still the highest. Finally, the encouragement of media representation that portrays disabilities in a more appropriate way could contribute to a greater change in people's views on this matter.

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