

Leadership Vacuum: Why are there Less Leaders with Disabilities in India?

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Abstract

Around the globe, people with disabilities regularly face discrimination and range of disabling barriers to education, health care, employment and other public facilities. Stigmatized attitudes, societal prejudices and negatives stereotypes about individuals with disabilities has profound influence on the integration of such marginalized group into the society. People with disabilities are often underrepresented in leadership positions. Generally, it inspires and empowers people to see faces that look like them in leadership positions. It provides a feeling of being accepted and hope that they too could one day accomplish success like their role model.

In India, people with disabilities have received little attention in leadership positions in different platforms of our society. Since there is very little research conducted concerning the topics of leadership and people with disabilities in Indian context, this provides ample opportunity to investigate, hence may be the best starting point for conducting research in this social realm.

After reviewing the literature, many multi-dimensional observations were reported. This article focuses on the core themes of disability and leadership qualities. Additionally, explores challenges faced by individuals with disabilities from taking space in society as leaders which has been lacking in generations for a long time. This research leads to a better understanding of the complexities of cultural, socioeconomic, and professional barriers that people with disabilities encounter when navigating life and practicing leadership.

This article will offer qualitative information, cases, and suggestions for public organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), social workers, policy makers, academicians, researchers and above all, people in context. It is the belief that this notion of mindset change will become even more advantageous in the years ahead.

Keywords: People with disabilities, leader, inclusion, religion, stereotypes.

Introduction

One billion people, or 15% of the world's population, experience some form of disability, and disability prevalence is higher for developing countries (The World Bank, 2020). As per Census 2011, in India, out of the 1.2 billion population, about 26.8 million individuals are reported to have some kind of disability which is 2.21% of the entire population (MOSPI, 2017). Still, the fact is that people with disabilities are unable to make adequate representation in various positions in the community. By 2050 there will be 9 billion people to feed, clothe, transport, employ and educate in this world economy that helps everyone succeed and prosper while working together (Abelow, 2018). As the age profile of bodily limitations does not change over time, more people with disabilities are likely make their presence felt in coming decades.

India signed, and subsequently ratified, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) on October 1, 2007. According to the UNCRPD, disability arises from the interaction of impairments with attitudinal and environmental barriers that inhibit complete and active participation on an equal basis in society (Math et al., 2019). Article 5 – Equality and non-discrimination of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) of 2006 lays down broad mandates to ensure equality for people with disabilities and to remove all types of discrimination on the grounds of disability (Cera, 2017).

In today's scenario, there is an important question being asked: why some people with disabilities do not emerge as leaders, especially in developing countries? There are various factors that play a role when it comes to absence of people with disabilities in leadership position in the society. There can be many underlying reasons that have more to do with social categorization of World's largest minority than with the people with disabilities themselves. Persons with disabilities are more likely to experience adverse socioeconomic outcomes such as less education, poorer health aftermath, lower levels of employment, and higher poverty rates (The World Bank, 2020). Barling and Weatherhead (2016) hypothesized in their study that exposure to poverty would limit later leadership role occupancy through the indirect effects of the quality of schooling and personal mastery.

Leadership is a motivational instrument for people from marginalized group when the society is diverse and reflected of what the world looks like. People with disabilities in governance or any other corporate position inspire the people to push themselves on self-imposed mission to elevate the professional and personal thrive to succeed in life. This study of literature on diverse phenomena helps to explain that leadership needed not only by certain individuals to succeed, but also by people from underprivileged backgrounds to continue to advance and flourish.

For all research disciplines and all research projects, consideration of prior, applicable literature is important. The author starts by explaining previous studies to map and

analyze the research area while reading an essay, independent of discipline, to inspire the study's purpose and explain the research question and hypotheses (Snyder, 2019). This article is based on Kadi's (2018) Doctor of Education thesis, which was designed to show the benefits the community and individuals are going to get when people with disabilities take their rights and place in the society. In order to address the value of giving people equal opportunities to become their own leaders without judgment or attitude, Kadi's study focuses on the leadership perspective. Authors feel that this study is appropriate for Indian subcontinent as people with disabilities are unable to make their mark on the world as leaders, and society has unofficially labeled them with negative terms such as the retarded, the deaf, and the disabled. How do these challenges create barriers for people with disabilities to advocate their democratic rights, and demonstrate their leadership traits? Building a culture that is sensitive to the needs and rights of people with disabilities and advocates collectively at the political level to strengthen their capacity to support legislation and reform structures (Dowse, 2001). This starts with educating such individuals about their rights from childhood and encouraging the expansion of their representation in the society. However, the issue is that, as children and teenagers, many people with disabilities do not acquire the requisite leadership and advocacy skills because they are not offered the chance and right to pursue these skills (Grenwelge, Zhang and Landmark, 2010). Moreover, experiences from the past also affect the future of individuals with disabilities as they start believing themselves as an outcast in their own surroundings.

Methods

This study is restricted to qualitative methodology, authors have spent significant amount of time in reviewing national and international literature to examine the political, social, economic and psychological challenges faced by face people with disabilities in India. From December 2020 to April 2021, the online database Google Scholar was searched using keywords. Google search engine was additionally utilized because it provided latest and relevant information that may not be available in google scholar databases, for example information pertaining to national and international laws on disability.

While looking for relevant information, same keywords were used for both google scholar database and google search engine: disability, people with disabilities, children with disabilities, individuals with disabilities, religion, gender discrimination, employment, stigma, stereotype, attitudes, Hindu, Muslim, etc. To select articles and data for this review, keywords were combined with Boolean operator "OR" and "AND" to arrive on exclusion and inclusion benchmark.

Given the scarcity of papers on the subject, the search terms were kept deliberately broad in order to find any papers relating to people with disabilities and leadership models. The

included content had to be written in English and addressed the effect of social, cultural, political, and economic factors on the inclusion of people with disabilities.

Results: Social, Cultural, Political and Economic spheres

There is abundant evidence that both societies - western and non-western - show various attitudes to persons with disabilities (Ingstad, 1990). In developing countries, people with disabilities have been constantly evaluated and judged by other people, and such instances from the past are still very evident. Historically, people with disabilities were perceived as unable to make their own choices and take care of their lives; they were viewed as people who either need support or as subjects of sympathy and charity (Coleridge, 1993).

India is a diverse nation in terms of ethnicity, history, faith, and ideology. Though India is home to more than 90% of the world's Hindus, it also has large communities of Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, and followers of folk faiths. Attitudes towards individuals with disabilities from the views of various religious and cultural backgrounds is especially vital within the context of Indian society. An ethnographic study conducted by Gabel (2004) on North Indian Hindu immigrants reported three dominant beliefs about people with intellectual disability (ID). A common belief being that a person acquires or born with a disability as a result of bad deeds (karma) in a previous life. The third belief known was that of a "mundh buddhi", that is commonly utilized in Hindi language to describe individuals with ID. Few examples from Ramayana and Mahabharata scriptures, where manipulative servant, Manthara (with a hunchback) and King Dhritarashtra (blind) were portrayed as evils and scheming (Wilson, 2019). Unlike Hinduism, the Muslim religion emphasizes the various aspects of Islam practice, especially in terms of health care, disability, and rehabilitation. Bazna and Hatab, 2005, as cited in Hasnain, Shaikh, and Shanawani, 2008 analysed the Quran and hadith's views on disability and came to the conclusion that disability is morally neutral; it is neither a punishment nor a blessing from God, and it does not represent any spiritual deformity. Unity and respect are at the forefront of religious life. No religion, culture and beliefs play a role in sustaining discriminatory practices against persons with disabilities. The time has come to hold a more in-depth conversation about the important changes that religion, history, and values have made to disability and people with disabilities.

The 2019 "State of the Education Report for India: Children with Disabilities" was based on the 2011 census, which revealed that India has 7.8 million children with disabilities, accounting for 1.7 percent of the total child population (India Today, 2019). According to a UNESCO study, 75% of children with disabilities in India do not attend school (Agarwal, 2020). With each subsequent stage of education, the number of children enrolled in school decreases dramatically, and there are less girls with disabilities in schools than boys with disabilities in schools (India Today, 2019). It is difficult to measure and explain dropout rates, but there are few evident reasons proposed by many education experts. For

example, accessibility issues, lack of access to schools, peer discrimination, disability pattern and teacher's involvement in class (Navya, 2018a). Interestingly, education is very important for students regardless of type of disability, and they would face significant obstacles in ensuring a secure future if unable to complete formal education. Peer discrimination and children with disabilities have long been a topic of discussion in India. They also face opposition from their extended family as well as the wider population. Discriminatory actions directed at differently abled children in the society have been classified as deprivation of disability, physical restrictions, social boycotts, denial of property rights, reduced marital life chances due to impaired family member, effects on sexuality of persons with disabilities, women with disabilities, disparities in state care systems, and problems with measurement of disabilities (Janardhana, et al., 2015). Many times, specific and untraceable emotional scars from the past, no matter how long ago it was, can be extremely destructive for a person. Such stressful experiences in early childhood leave mental scars which have a significant effect on adult life and individuals with disabilities choose self-imposed exile from different spheres of society.

Physical appearance has many advantages in Indian society and both gender, male or female, are obsessed on how one looks. Historically, our multi-cultural fraternity constantly reminds us that bodily attractiveness is important in every part of our lives. According to facts, society continues to attribute sociability, friendliness, and integrity to those who are aesthetically pleasing (Mahajan, 2007). Jenna Goudreau (2013) in her article, "Why Attractive People Are More Likely to be Leaders" illustrated on leadership skills and aesthetic appearance. She cited findings of many authors supporting the perception that good looking leaders have added advantage in many ways, for example citing work of Stanford law professor Deborah Rhode who discovered that attractive students are thought to be smarter, nice-looking professors receive better reviews, appealing employers earn more money, and good-looking politicians receive more votes. Inadvertently, people contributed to the creation of a false binary between intellect and bodily aesthetics, and thus to a contrived representation of disability. The representation of individuals with disabilities on screen and print media is also questionable. The media's representation of people with disabilities may have a positive or negative impact on the public's view of disability. Like normal people, individuals with disabilities have the same access to mass media and negative portrayal about disability may perpetuate existing public misunderstandings, especially for those millennials who have grown up in a social media-dominated environment (Reinhardt, Pennycott and Fellinghauer, 2013). Disfigured and objectionable portrayal of screen character authored by abled people, portrayed by non-disabled actor, and told from the eyes of abled people. For one, may make people with disabilities feel defeated in relation to exceptional achievements, lowering their self-worth and triggering poor expectations from others. The society conceptualizes image of people through their bodily limitations portrayed on different social platforms and subconsciously view disability as negative and unimportant without even connecting with incredible diversity of disabled people.

Due to cultural, economic and political reasons, women in India are always at the receiving end which had a detrimental effect on their quality of life. Social decisions are influenced by the interaction between gender and disability perceptions. Many international authors have discussed the double dimensions of disability from a perspective of a women; “two handicaps plus” (Hanna and Rogovsky, 1991), “double discrimination” (Habib, 2010), “double disadvantage” (Kavanagh et al., 2015), “a double dose of discrimination” (Shah and Bradbury-Jones, 2018) in their research to bring societal disequilibrium to the public’s attention. While both men and women with disabilities face discrimination as a result of their disabilities, women with disabilities are at a disadvantage due to the mixture of gender bigotry and disability discrimination (Traustadottir, 1997). Similarly, the same paper demonstrates the three main phases in life of women with disabilities, namely the conventional feminine domain of fertility and nurturing; education; and employment and how they fare in these areas as compared to women without disabilities and men with disabilities. In particular, there continues to be a void in the literature discussing the reality of women with disabilities and their leadership perspectives, styles, and growth in an Indian context. The disability and feminine rights movements have often neglected topics that are important to women with disabilities in this male-dominated guild.

In India, only 3.4 million of the approximately 13.4 million people with disabilities are active in labour market (Verma and Venugopalan, 2019). The majority of studies reflect on employers reservations around recruiting people with disabilities at work , for example, being incompetent (Nario-Redmond, 2010) inflexible in terms of multi-tasking profiles (Kaye, Jans and Jones, 2011), dependent personalities (Louvet, 2007), team dynamics issues and relationship between employees with disabilities and other employees (Nario-Redmond, 2010; Louvet, 2007); absenteeism (Kaye, Jans and Jones, 2011; Daruwalla and Darcy (2005), inability to handle job related stress (Bengisu and Balta (2011), and finally, customers related insecurities. (Kaye, Jans and Jones, 2011; Bengisu and Balta, 2011). Contrary, surveys have been conducted that show the advantages of skilled representation of people with disabilities in the labour force: honesty (Nario-Redmond, 2010), low absenteeism (Hernandez et al., 2008), Warm personality (Louvet, 2007), Loyalty (Hernandez et al., 2008), and Employees with disabilities performed as well as or higher than their counterparts without disabilities at work (Unger, 2002). Globally, there has been change of mindset and employers are accepting disability as an instrument to have a diverse and inclusive professional environment.

At many work places across the globe, corporate leaders with disabilities aren't necessarily open about their disabilities, depriving workers with role models that could mentor, encourage and empower them (Henneborn and Jerdee, 2020). In fact, according to this study by Accenture, the majority of workers (76%) and leaders (80%) with disabilities are not entirely honest about it. Empowering individuals will continue to eliminate workplace bias and prejudices because those who have been empowered can become self-reliant as a result of the skills they have learned and will be able to find employment. As a result, these

empowered individuals have unintentionally stepped in to the shoes of becoming a leader and have successfully embarked on a journey to inspire multiple lives.

The government, as social welfare state, should not just provide standard legislations to safeguard the rights of minorities, but should introduce tailor made interventions to comprehend the safety of fellow citizens. Many developing countries such as India have introduced many legislative instruments to improve the lives of people with disabilities, through progressive legislations and/or policies (Kochhar et al., 2018). Despite major reforms in disability laws that foster equality, individuals with disabilities continue to face significant discrimination (Ball, Monaco and Schmelig, 2005). Additionally, in most poor economies, where everybody is struggling for survival, disability is not usually seen as a priority in development, except by disabled people and their families (Coleridge, 2000).

In India, Right of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 replaces the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. One of the salient feature of this new Act is that the types of disabilities has been increased from existing 7 to 21 (No name, 2020). The preamble of this act clearly states that it aims to uphold the dignity of every Person with Disability (PwD) in the society and prevent any form of discrimination (Math et. al., 2019, p. 2). Another highlight of this law is the extension of its applicability to private firms. The revised Act received critiques from the disability advocates as they observed that the legislature could have chosen a path more persuasive than punitive (Kochhar et al, 2018).

In an article by Navya (2018b) highlighted that there have been very few individuals with disabilities who have made their representation at regional and national political level in India. A few individuals with disabilities have contested as independents or as smaller party candidates during the past decade, but not many have won. She also reported that the disabilities sector has been largely left out, although political parties cater to other disadvantaged communities, and routine rights abuses are being faced by this marginalized group.

There are so many inspiring individuals with disabilities who have changed the world with their examples and have accomplished "space" in society through their actions, attitude, determination and commitment (Table 1). When you lead by example, you create a picture of what's possible. People can look at you and say, "Well, if he can do it, I can do it." When you lead by example, you make it easy for others to follow you. (Marinuzzi, 2018). Such revelation help people regardless of gender, age, race, disability to create new personal goals, improving skills, and strengthening their professional development.

Such strong individuals with disabilities use their networks, forums, and NGOs to support other individuals with disabilities. For one, only a few of the ways they benefit are by delivering food, educational opportunities, and contributing to charity. While there were a few influential politicians with disabilities, such as Congressman Jaipal Reddy, he did not take up the cause of the community (Pareek, 2014).

Tab 1: List of Achievers with Disabilities.

Sr. No.	Name of the Achiever	Profession	Type of disability	Remarks
1.	Mr. S. Jaipal Reddy	Politician	Polio	What we will remember about the guy is that his condition (at a very young age, Reddy was stricken with polio) never prevented him from attending any meetings, even though they were held in buildings on the second or third floor that did not have lifts (Pallam Raju, 2019).
2.	Ms. Usha Kiran Naik	Sarpanch, Disability and Sexuality Rights Activist	Polio	General Secretary of the NGO Karnataka Vivkalachethana Sanghatane and President of the Swaraj India Party of Chikballapur District. In Chikballapur in Karnataka, Naik spent many years working with women with disabilities and people with HIV (Walia et al., 2020).
3.	Mr. Javed Abidi	Disability Activist	Spina bifidia	When he turned 15, he was diagnosed with spina bifidia and further complications made him a wheelchair-user. In his life, even this jolt did not deter him from going abroad to complete his schooling and fulfill his aspirations of being a journalist. He has been actively interested with disability issues for years and is the head of the National Center for Job Promotion for People with Disabilities (NCPEDP) (Pareek, 2014), and Director of the National Centre for the Development of Jobs for Disabled Persons (NCPEDP) and also Director of the Global Chair of International Disabled Persons (DPI), the first international body for persons with disabilities with an ECOSOC Advisory Status to the United Nations (United Nations, n. d.). He advocated public services and travel mobility for people with disabilities and his powerful support was instrumental in the passage of the Persons with Disability Act in India in 2016 (United Nations, n. d.).
4.	Ms. Nishtha N. Thaker	Motivational Speaker, Social Activist and Managing Director	Muscular Dystrophy	Nishtha N. Thaker, Motivational Speaker, Social Activist, and MD & Founder Trustee of Spreading Smiles Charitable Trust (Possibilities, 2020). Nishtha is a resolute citizen who motivates and encourages other people who are affected by muscular dystrophy through her untiring efforts (Joshi, 2014).
5.	Ms. Minati Barik	Sarpanch.	Wheelchair-Bound Person	In Odisha (Kantabania Gram Panchayat), the first female wheelchair candidate ever to win an election and who has improved significantly the hygiene and sanitation of her village, Bajapur (Walia et al., 2020).
6.	Ms. H. Boniface Prabhu	Wheelchair tennis player	A Quadriplegic Person	Boniface Prabhu is a player with international renown in wheelchair tennis. In order to promote, train and discover new talent among the physically and mentally disabled population, he created the 'Boniface Prabhu Wheelchair Tennis Academy' (No name, 2014).

Source: Authors own interpretation based on literature review

Most of people are having difficult experiences and are exposed to the horrifying aspects in their formative years. Therefore, they have a hard time understanding that not

everyone is mean or world is not a bad place to live. Past experiences should not have an impact on the future. Everyone understands what leadership is, but only a few people can actually recognize their true potential as a teacher. Creating a cohesive environment within the society is a crucial step to help people to polish their unique talent and maintain a strong leadership focus. People with disabilities can overcome what was and take charge of their own life. It's important to keep things in perspective.

In future, developmental efforts should eliminate barriers resulting from political, societal, religious, cultural, gender bias, or economic loopholes. In the end, this will help oppressed people gain self-confidence, and if that process begins, an individual will be ready to tap and channel their creativity, intellect, and ability positively. People with disabilities, like most people, are required to exhibit leadership skills and be respected as leaders (whether in official roles or not) and how the public perceives their particular style of becoming a figurehead.

Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to look at how social and economic factors affect people with disabilities, as well as to look into why people with disabilities are underrepresented in leadership roles in Indian society. People's attitudes, specifically society's attitudes, which include social and cultural values, stigma, bigotry, and stereotyping, not only shape the definition of disability, but also serve as a focal point for negative emotions.

In conclusion, this study discovered several common trends regarding the lack of representation of people with disabilities in leadership roles. Gender inequality, cultural and religious values, inclusive education concerns, labour market participation, and the stigma that persons with disabilities face in the Indian society are among the most common and consistent topic emerged in this qualitative research.

Women in leadership roles have gained less recognition in India. Across the different states, women with disabilities have witnessed discrimination and stigma which over the course of a person's life, manifests in separate or several generational junctures (childhood, youth, adulthood and older age) (Shah and Bradbury-Jones, 2018). Disability sensitivity programs for children in preschool, kindergarten, and high school are necessary to teach them to be empathetic, tolerate physical distinctions, and be compassionate of their peers.

Given this context, the media's power to affect perceptions and opinions towards disabilities should not be ignored. Increased awareness through different forms of digital platform could help people with disabilities to appreciate their uniqueness, and encourage them to promote their extraordinary accomplishments to the world.

This study could also be extended to the permanent and temporary category of employees at the lower grades, where they could judge the leadership qualities of top and middle management. It could also be extended to other states of India and even globally, since all

people with disabilities have a significant global presence. Furthermore, these unconscious prejudices and stereotypes attached to disability have an effect not only on social and professional relationships, but also on one's quest to seek a place in leadership forefront. People with disabilities at leadership positions can create a more inclusive society and increase awareness not about disability but also about the different type of impairments.

World is full of individuals with disabilities who, by their endeavors, have overcome all the hurdles life has thrown at them and turned the spotlight on themselves. They were made better by these challenges, particularly by not following the conventional survival approaches and succeeded to inspire other people with disabilities to foray into different avenues.

In India, the small number of studies published on the subject limits this study and one of the limitations faced by authors. Our search was restricted to google scholar database and google search engine, it's likely that certain studies were overlooked.

Most importantly, the government will have to find gaps in existing legal framework, provide academic opportunities and access to all kinds of resources needed by individuals with disabilities to appreciate their talent to make a mark in society for not only themselves, but also for others. This is vital point to bear in mind when collaborating on multi-disciplinary studies and inclusive growth initiatives in India.

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