

International Journal of Policy Sciences and Law

Volume 1, Issue 4

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Visually
Impaired People with Public Media
Alliance and Accessibility to Persons with
Disability in India

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Abstract

It was only last year when Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid out National Disaster Management Guidelines on Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DIDRR) and earlier this year in March, the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities issued comprehensive disability-inclusive guidelines to States/UTs for protection and safety of persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) in light of COVID-19 Pandemic. The steps undertaken were upright in ensuring thorough inclusivity of persons with disabilities but sadly when it came down to the implementation of the guidelines issued earlier, both the Centre and the State machinery failed people with disabilities bringing their life to a halt.

“The only thing worse than living in a world of darkness is not being able to touch it.” The visually impaired persons in India faced unique and critical challenges during the lockdown and with subsequent relaxations. The directive and guidelines of ‘social distancing’, refraining from touching the surroundings or wearing gloves came in as a two-edged sword for them. Where infected surfaces are a continuous threat, wearing gloves reduced the sense of touch and perception of people living with disabilities. For those who relied heavily on touch and tactile perception to navigate through life, the guidelines, to say the least, were not inclusive. The inclusivity towards people with disabilities has always been a challenge and the pandemic has further exacerbated it.

Keywords: *Disability, Covid-19 pandemic, visually impaired, mental health, media*

1.0 Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic threatens all members of society, persons with disabilities¹ are disproportionately impacted due to attitudinal, environmental and institutional barriers that are reproduced in the COVID-19 response.² India has around 8.8 million persons with visual impairment, according to a 2015 study by Lancet, forming around 25 per cent of the total number of persons with visual impairments globally.

A person’s experience of vision impairment varies depending upon many different factors. This includes, for example, the availability of prevention and treatment interventions, access

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¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 1, paragraph 2: “Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”

² OHCHR. “Covid-19 And The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities.” Accessed December 25, 2020. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Disability/COVID19_and_The_Rights_of_Persons_with_Disabilities.pdf

to vision rehabilitation (including assistive products such as glasses or white canes) and whether the person experiences problems with inaccessible buildings, transport and information.³ Given such large statistics, when it comes to accessibility of education, healthcare and employment, the visually impaired are cut off. In a survey conducted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT),⁴ only 29.16 per cent of the blind in India are part of the education system. Besides education, access to communication and its tools, healthcare facilities, employment and social security has also been difficult and sparse for the visually impaired in India. Poverty is also found to be an exacerbating reason for the prevalence of blindness among Indians.⁵

The Andhra Pradesh Eye Disease Study showed that those in the lowest socioeconomic bracket have a rate of blindness that is nine times greater than the highest socio-economic bracket.⁶ As a result, they have limited access to high cost investing healthcare. Like many disabilities, blindness leads to unemployment which affects poverty rates adversely, leaving the visually impaired with a loss of income and low standards of living. This also leads to early mortality for blind people.

The already grim situation confronting visually impaired people will get exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and it is important to understand the impact. There is a need to understand their disability-specific requirements, daily living activities and take appropriate and timely measures to ensure their protection and safety during situations of risk. People with visual impairment being already immunocompromised may be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Impediments in implementing basic hygiene measures, such as enacting social distancing and commuting because of additional support needs, facing difficulty in accessing public health information or through disruption of services on which they rely.

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³ World Health Organisation. "Blindness and Vision Impairment." Accessed December 15, 2020.

<https://www.who.int/news-room/events/detail/2020/10/08/default-calendar/world-sight-day-2020>

⁴ David, Shantanu. "Sight-impaired in India are more affected by COVID-19 pandemic: RN Mohanty." *The New Indian Express*, May 7, 2020.

<https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/may/07/interview--sight-impaired-in-india-are-more-affected-by-covid-19-pandemic-rn-mohanty-2140206>

⁵ Rohit Khanna, Usha Raman, and Gullapalli N Rao. "Blindness and poverty in India: the way forward." *Optometry* 90, no. 6 (November 2007): 399-491. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1444-0938.2007.00199.x>

⁶L Dandona, R Dandona, M Srinivas, P Giridhar, K Vilas, M N Prasad, R K John, C A McCarty, and G N Rao. "Blindness in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh." *Invest Ophthalmol Visc Sci* 42 no. 5 (April 2001): 908-916.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11274066/>

Advocacy and coverage of the plight of disabled people during the crisis, relative to other groups, has been low. Media alliance with the disabled is crucial for their development as it will bring their challenges and stories to light which will not only create sensitivity but would also open new avenues of an inclusive society. The research paper is an attempt to bring to light the issues confronting visually impaired people during the COVID–19 crisis. Following are the objectives that the paper aims to achieve-

- To highlight the critical issues faced by people with visual impairment during the COVID-19 crisis in India.
- To highlight the challenges faced in accessing information by the visually impaired.
- To highlight critical issues faced in accessing essentials like food, clothing, assistance, etc, by the visually impaired.
- To emphasise the issues confronting people with visual impairment in accessing education.
- To highlight the financial challenges faced by the visually impaired.
- To understand the mental health issues developed during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Assessing the role of public media alliance for people living with disabilities in COVID-19 pandemic.

2.0 Research Methodology

The report is based on a combination of primary and secondary research. Information on the condition of people with visual impairment is based on the results and data analysis from the interviews conducted with them. For secondary data and inputs, several media reports have also been relied on to report on ground realities.

The research paper is primarily based on the interview method of research in which seven visually impaired respondents from Delhi have been interviewed for understanding the challenges and hardships faced by them during the COVID-19 crisis. A BBC Broadcast Journalist has also been interviewed to understand the public media alliance that can be extended to people living with disabilities and what are the problems the media industry and officials face while advocating for their rights.

3.0 Research Findings

3.1 Access to Information and Communication

Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, accessible information can be understood as information provided in formats that allow every user to access content on an equal basis with others. In cases of disaster warnings and messaging, like the COVID-19 pandemic health information and update, the vitality of conveying these in accessible formats becomes inevitable. However, visually impaired people faced difficulty in understanding some of the guidelines. “The advertisements and guidelines shown on television for maintaining social distancing and washing of hands in the right manner were not verbally descriptive enough for visually impaired people to understand how to follow the guidelines,” said Ms Manjula Rath. Announcements, press releases, news reports, and all other information regarding the pandemic have not been available in accessible formats. Respondents reported that many websites and apps do not follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines which make digital spaces inaccessible for the visually impaired.

One of the respondents said that to apply online for any products, the websites are not accessible. If the websites are not accessible then one cannot operate on them independently. Another respondent reported that one of the problems that the blind faced online was accessing websites with picture captcha codes. Even to date, most websites have not made themselves inclusive enough to have audio captcha codes for the ease of accessibility for the blind. At times the audio is not accessible clearly.

Subhash Chandra Vashishth, the director of Svayam - Global Centre for Inclusive Environments said, “Such captchas are prohibiting the visually impaired people access to information needed during COVID-19 pandemic,” he said. “During lockdown or post lockdown, this has been a big problem for them.”⁷

The Aarogya Setu App was tested by 11 persons with visual impairment who are associated with the NGO, Samarthyam, on both iOS and Android phones and each one of them found it

⁷ Pandey, Akhilesh. “COVID-19 exposes failure of the government’s Accessible India Campaign.” *The Caravan*, October 2, 2020.
<https://caravanmagazine.in/health/covid-19-exposes-failure-of-the-governments-accessible-india-campaign>

inaccessible, which is a clear violation of the RPwD Act, 2016.⁸ There were helplines brought in for the service of the disabled or for enquiry purposes but the visually impaired students stated that they were of no benefit to them. One of the respondents called on a helpline to ask for registration on either bus or train to travel to his hometown Bihar but the official on the other side refused him service when they came to know that he is a visually impaired person. The official asked him to call his parents to pick him up from Delhi as they cannot arrange for anyone to help him throughout the journey. The respondent said if only his parents could arrange for the registration why would he call the helpline for assistance. Without further engagement, the call got hung up too. Few respondents did not know that there were government-run helplines brought to use for the disabled. This again shows the lack of accessibility to important information during the COVID-19 crisis.

3.2 Access to Assistance and Essentials (Food Supplies, Medical Care, Conveyance, etc)

Access to food and groceries has become particularly difficult for persons with visual impairment. What compounds the problem is that communication barriers made the difficult situation worse. Access to essentials often requires the physical presence of the person with visual impairment and commuting has been made extremely difficult during the pandemic for them.

A respondent reported that before the pandemic, any person would help him cross the road or board the bus but now even after repeatedly asking the people around, no one would come up to help. He said that he kept saying, 'Excuse me, excuse me' but most of the time people around would either turn deaf ears to him or would move away from the place. Even questions to enquire if the bus would be passing through a particular route were left unanswered by many. If at all they would get a reaction or reply, it was, "There is Corona, I cannot help you." He said that he has even heard some people saying, "He is blind, any bus will pick him up. Let us not tell him about the arrival of the bus."

The Delhi metro provides an attendant or an escort which could be risky for the visually impaired as well as the attendant in this coronavirus pandemic. Many visually impaired persons have stopped using the metro for fear of infection. However, if the tactile

⁸ Rahman, Saba. "Aarogya Setu remains inaccessible for disabled despite push from activists." *The Indian Express*, May 27, 2020.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/aarogya-setu-app-aarogya-setu-app-disabled-inaccessible-coronavirus-contact-tracing-6416094/>

paths were perfect, they could have used the metro services without any contact.⁹ Metro escorts have also reported that after the services resumed, the movement of visually impaired people had gone drastically. Only students or working employees have been using the metro during this time. Where earlier 25-30 people could be easily spotted commuting through the metro daily, the number has now gone to 5-10.

In an effort to mitigate the risk for the visually impaired persons, Uber India decided to facilitate safe and convenient rides for the blind and multi-disabled persons, their caregivers and teachers.¹⁰ Another respondent reported that marketing and buying essential goods like vegetables and other household materials were difficult as no one around was ready to help. No one helped in navigating the route and while picking up the vegetables. No access to doorstep delivery of essentials for the blind was a big problem faced by them. At times vendors came to deliver couriers but did not hand it over for fear of contracting the disease. A visually impaired person cannot navigate as to where he would have kept the package.

The lockdown has imposed further challenges in accessing other non-COVID necessities such as medicines, menstrual hygiene products, and assistive devices. People who had other underlying health issues were not entertained by the hospital and its staff. This added burden as people around was also not willing to help. No escort and social support made it difficult to access help during the lockdown. Another respondent, who is a teacher, reported that when visually impaired girls went back to their homes in rural areas during the lockdown, they faced problems in accessing sanitary napkins. If there is no female member in the house, there was no one to whom the girls could open up to for help in a rural setup, which in turn made the situation dire.

3.3 Access to Education

Due to the lack of necessary resources like mobile phones, laptops, computers and internet access, many visually impaired students face hindrances in accessing online education. Some students have practically experienced a halt due to online learning. In rural

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⁹ Pandey, Akhilesh. "COVID-19 exposes failure of the government's Accessible India Campaign." *The Caravan*, October 2, 2020.

<https://caravanmagazine.in/health/covid-19-exposes-failure-of-the-governments-accessible-india-campaign>

¹⁰ Uber. "Uber Partners with National Association for the Blind to support the blind and people with disabilities." Accessed on December 25, 2020.

<https://www.uber.com/en-IN/newsroom/uber-partners-with-national-association-for-the-blind/>

areas, accessing a stable internet connection is a challenge too.

Earlier students used to record lectures or take help from classmates but due to the lockdown and isolation, lectures were not accessed to some who had no resources for online education. One of the respondents requested a family member for his phone for one hour per day to access online classes but he outrightly refused. He was told that he would damage the phone while trying to operate it as he was blind.

Despite having an Android phone, another respondent faced hardship in practising his course. He is a student of stenography and while he can access theory lectures, he was unable to carry out practical courses as he had no resources back at home during the lockdown and the colleges have still not reopened. He also feared his typing speed might have been significantly reduced and that he might not be able to fare well in the coming exams because of lack of practice. He says he is now ashamed to think how he will perform on the computer when the college reopens. Another respondent who is a teacher reported that she did not face many hardships with online learning. She would often send audio notes to her students. With the help of technology, she would also get to know who all were attending the classes regularly. However, one has to have the training to understand how to use a particular platform.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the respondents used to invite readers who would help us go through chapters and books, but due to the pandemic readers have stopped coming for lessons and it has impacted our education a lot. During admission into a post-graduation course at Delhi University, a respondent faced difficulty in accessing cut-off lists. Whenever he asked any official or went to the college to enquire about the same, he was asked to check it online. He says if only he had the facility to check it online, why would he go to the college to enquire about it. However, no sufficient help was provided.

One of the respondents was worried if he would be able to attend the next semester examinations. He could not sit for the previous exams as no mobile phone was available for him to attend online lectures. People at his village and house told him he would not be able to use a mobile phone since he was blind. One of the problems faced in villages was that people are not aware of the capabilities of the blind with the technology.

The existing gender and digital divide have been a problem and when girls left their study material at their hostels and went back to their homes during the lockdown, access to education was a problem. They were either refused a mobile phone or there was just one mobile phone. A PIL, filed by the National Association for Blind, said that the e-Pathshala and Diksha platforms which were introduced by the government for teaching during the lockdown, offering e-textbooks and other teaching-learning materials were not “in conformity with the provisions of the RPWD Act¹¹.” In a recent finding, children with disabilities run a huge risk of dropping out of school because of not being able to cope with the switch to online/digital medium of instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic which has led to the closure of schools.¹²

3.4 Financial challenges

At many places women faced non-payment of salaries despite their service; this also adversely showed the relationships between family members. Financial challenges also affected additional expenses of healthcare as visually impaired. Access to education depends highly on the financial capabilities of the respondents. While one of the respondents was a government employee who was given his salary throughout the course of the lockdown and did not face many hardships in the face of job security and financial crunch, students who had moved from rural villages into blind schools were finding it difficult to keep up with the digital shift of education. No laptops, computers, mobile phone availability showed heavily on their continuance of online lectures. This had an adverse impact on their access to education. Job losses also made it difficult to run the house without affording necessary health and medical care became a problem for some of the visually impaired people.

3.5 Problems Faced by Women

Women with visual impairment are more vulnerable due to the existing intersectionality and the placement they have in the societal setup. The pandemic has only widened these inequalities; increasing difficulties in accessing and resulting in a lack of

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¹¹ Thomas, Rosamma. “Bombay HC to Hear PIL on Visually Impaired Students’ Access to Education.” News Click, October 5, 2020.

<https://www.newsclick.in/Bombay-HC-Hear-PIL-Visually-Impaired-Students-Access-Education>

¹² India Today. “Disabled students at risk of dropping out as they are unable to cope with online learning: Report.” Accessed by December 10, 2020.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/latest-studies/story/disabled-students-at-risk-of-dropping-out-as-they-are-unable-to-cope-with-online-learning-report-1701761-2020-07-18>

social, physical and emotional support at a time that has been particularly turbulent.

Weak are soft targets and the visually impaired were more vulnerable to face a job loss during the pandemic. Those visually impaired who were self-employed faced a plethora of problems, especially in the private sector. It was rare to find women escorts at metro stations even prior to the pandemic with access to transportation being a major problem faced by the women. Since domestic servants were not allowed and women being responsible for the household faced baggage of extra work. Moreover, if they also tested positive for COVID-19, the entire management of the house came to a halt.

3.6 Mental Health Issues

COVID-19 pandemic confronts humanity with essential dilemmas about the right to life, access to health and exceptional restrictions on the freedom of persons' movement. Persons with various disabilities experience the same feelings as the rest of the population. They have additional uncertainties, especially confronted with what is called the "last bed dilemma" or "the last mechanical respirator dilemma," where persons with disabilities could be left behind, due to prejudice, stereotypes and even discrimination based on disability. Respondents felt left out as one of them said that before lockdown people used to help them, but after lockdown, they ask to use a stick and walk. Today no one wants to help a blind. Lack of inclusivity was felt by some. The COVID-19 guidelines were itself a problem for the blind. Although they had taken full precautions, it had an impact on their navigation, for instance, wearing gloves reduced their sensitivity to touch. Fear of touching infected places was always there but there were no options for the blind otherwise. A respondent also reported that the girls she taught have felt anxiety and longed to return to normal life. Some of the children cannot interact with their parents and they suffer from mental health issues as they are all alone away from their peers.¹³

4.0 Media Alliance, COVID-19 and People with Disabilities

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, coverage of people with disabilities by the media in India has been sparse, however, the role played by the public media in providing accessible information about the pandemic for people living with disabilities has been limited and non-inclusive. A report by the United Nations mentioned the disproportionate impact of

¹³ Choudhary, Pritha Roy. "Coronavirus: Why online learning is even harder for the disabled." *Careers 360*, April 20, 2020. <https://news.careers360.com/coronavirus-why-online-learning-even-harder-for-disabled-0>

the virus outbreak on persons with disabilities and yet “they have often been excluded from health information and mainstream health provision.”¹⁴ Where providing accessible, quality and fact-checked information is vital to help curb the spread of the virus, India saw another pandemic of unverified, fake news unfolding. Misinformation around the origin of the virus, its subsequent spread and possible remedies were floated on social media. News targeting a particular community as potential carriers and spreaders of the virus was also dominant during the Tablighi Jamaat incident in Delhi¹⁵. At a time when fact-checked news with credible sources should only be printed, broadcasted or published, several mainstream news media have also been complicit in spreading misinformation highlighting low ethical editorial standards¹⁶. People living with disabilities are not competent with the privilege of fact-checking news and thus, bear the menace of getting adversely affected by it.

During the lockdown, the government and broadcasters have been critiqued for the lack of accessible important information and updates on coronavirus and its safety guidelines to people with disabilities. Interviews with visually impaired people revealed that they found difficulty in understanding the right way to wash hands with no significant verbally descriptive guidelines broadcasted for them. For the Prime Minister’s speech on May 12, 2020, public broadcaster Doordarshan had chosen an interpreter so that information is accessible to the deaf too. However, what seemed like a successful effort towards inclusivity and relief for the deaf, concluded in despair as the National Association of the Deaf reported that no one could comprehend the signs made by the interpreter¹⁷. In such times, independent organisations and companies have taken a foot forward in helping the disabled navigate through the pandemic. Khabri, India’s first digital audio content platform, rolled out a helpline portal to give assistance to the blind across India. They had planned podcasts

¹⁴ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. “Global Forum on the COVID-19 crisis and persons with disabilities.” Accessed on December 15, 2020.

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/news/news/global-forum-covid-19.html>

¹⁵ Menon, Shruti. “Coronavirus: The human cost of fake news in India.” BBC, June 30, 2020.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53165436>

¹⁶ Akbar, S., Kukreti, D., Sagarika, S., Pal, J. “Temporal Patterns in COVID-19 misinformation in India.” Joyojeet Pal, University of Michigan(2020).

<http://joyojeet.people.si.umich.edu/temporal-patterns-in-covid-19-misinformation-in-india/>

¹⁷ Chandani, Alim. “How can Deaf Indians call up Covid-19 helplines? Modi govt must take these steps immediately.” The Print, July 2, 2020.

<https://theprint.in/opinion/deaf-indians-covid-19-modi-govt-must-take-these-steps/393514/>

inviting expert inputs from domains including medical, psychological, social and financial¹⁸. COVID-19 coverage has also exposed other underlying inequalities, namely representation as little space was given to the representation of people with disabilities. Relative to other areas and groups, the advocacy and coverage of the plight of disabled people during the crisis has been comparatively sparse.

Following are the insights from an interview with Ms Sindhuvasini, Broadcast Journalist at BBC News Hindi, who has been reporting on the disabled community, which revealed the challenges and the shortfalls of the public media in creating and adapting their content and services to meet the needs and interests of everyone in society and in providing inclusivity and accessibility mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic to people living with disabilities.

4.1 Public Media and its role in Disseminating Accessible Information

An ideal media is responsible for serving the underserved audience and the marginalised to its best capacity. An idea that should be in practice but is evidently not. People living with disabilities fall under the underserved, vulnerable and marginalised section of society and therefore, the media should focus on them, especially in a pandemic in which first hand and reliable information are needed the most. In Journalism theories and models, we have studied the term ‘gatekeeping’ where information is filtered and passed through various stages of communication before dissemination, in which the rich and powerful get hold of any information first which is then filtered and transferred to others in the social ecosystem. Hence there is no unanimous and even distribution of information in the system and people with disabilities being underprivileged receive information relatively late.

If one considers the case of public broadcasters like All India Radio, Doordarshan or government-run social media handles during the pandemic, Prime Minister’s speech was broadcasted live along with other important updates with either no sign language interpreter used during the broadcast or if used, it was again delayed. Although there is no comparison between Indian and New Zealand, if we consider the press conferences held by Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand’s Prime Minister, we see that whenever as she speaks there is an interpreter conveying information through signs, ensuring inclusivity for the deaf community

¹⁸ India Tv Tech Desk. “Khabri podcasts app introduces COVID-19 helpline for the visually-impaired.” India TV, April 20, 2020. <https://www.indiatvnews.com/technology/news-khabri-podcasts-app-introduces-covid-19-helpline-for-the-visually-impaired-612550bri>

in receiving timely information. Hence, people living with disabilities are not secondary receivers of any important information. If at the government level there is a lack of seriousness of inclusivity of the disabled then media would also not take it into consideration.

4.2 Representation Matters

The lack of accessible information in the media also emerges from the fact that the industry itself does not give employment to people living with disabilities. At the organisation level, the media itself does not exercise diversity and inclusion. Just as gender reporting will be best done by a woman, LGBTQ reporting will be better done by someone from that community or for that matter, casteism will be reported best by a Dalit reporter. Similarly, able people cannot comprehend and present the plights of the disabled as they themselves can. Hence it is important to consider the representation of people with disabilities in the newsroom, which is, unfortunately, almost zero. Therefore, what is not shown in the coverage is implicitly derived from the lack of discussion around it in the newsroom. One will find little accessibility in the entire social system of education, infrastructure or healthcare and media being a part of the same social system suffers from the same problem.

To address the criticism of lack of reportage on the disabled during the pandemic, one must understand that even before the pandemic, no significant space or representation was provided to the disabled and to cover their stories just around World Disability Day is not considered good reporting. The duty of reporting on them should be undertaken for the entire year and not on a particular day. It is important to understand that disability rights are human rights also.

4.3 Priority towards news that sells

It is difficult to create a space for sensitive reporting. The sensational and contentious news around hard-core politics. Significant labour goes while pitching sensitive or inclusive stories to the editor who will then determine the space that it should be given. There are chances that the news will be dropped if it cannot be capitalised on by the media organisations. It is for the same reason caste-based stories and here specifically, stories on the disabled are covered less. During the pandemic, a lot of new media platforms were rife with

misinformation and fake news. The impact of fake news is relatively more on people with disabilities than any abled person. Firstly, they do not have the necessary resources to fact check any piece of news as most of the population of disabled lives in rural areas of India. Secondly, the literacy rate among the disabled community is relatively low and therefore, they have higher chances to get scammed into believing fake news.

4.4 Lack of health information and mainstream health provision available online

There was a good deal of struggle while accessing the information on government-run websites while covering stories. The Twitter handle of the Accessible India Campaign that was launched in 2015 had no update on COVID-19, even the public institutes for the disabled were not working as actively as they should have been in a pandemic. During this time, NGOs and other independent organisations were working for the disabled community relatively more. However, with time such organisations have reported financial challenges with the National Association for the Blind (NAB) in Delhi reporting a financial crunch. The director at NAB said that it became difficult for him to provide his employees with a salary.

A specific kind of media reported on the plights of the disabled, the niche media like The Wire or The BBC that in turn has a specific niche audience, so it is useless to assume that the disabled community is consuming the niche media that did a report on them. It should rather have been covered relentlessly by All India Radio, Doordarshan and mainstream news channels like Aaj Tak or ABP. A news portal, Newz Hook¹⁹, has been covering stories of people living with disabilities. However, making ghettos is not advisable as they are not long-term solutions but when it comes to giving a community their due representation in coverage, these news portals have done a brilliant job.

Talks on how the country will adapt to the post-pandemic world have also not gained ground, neither at the government level nor at the level of the media. People with disabilities have been eager to get information on how society will adapt to the post-pandemic world and when and how they will be vaccinated. The media should make sure that discussion and interest are developed around it to ensure better inclusion and social cohesion.

¹⁹ Newz Hook. "Changing Attitude towards Disability." Accessed on December 15, 2020. <https://newzhook.com>

5.0 Conclusion

Given the plethora of challenges and hardships faced by people with visual impairment, the Central, as well as the State governments, should work in cohesion to ensure greater inclusivity at all levels and places in the society. The guidelines issued by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities should have been implemented since the beginning of the lockdown. The State governments should have incorporated these guidelines and made sure that they are implemented. The blatant violation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 should be taken into strict and urgent cognizance by the authorities concerned. The Government should revive the Accessible India Campaign, 2015 and make sure that inclusive and accessible infrastructures and facilities are brought in practice as they impact the experiences of a visually impaired person manifold.

India is going towards a digital world and digital access is going to be a challenge. Even as institutions embark on digital platforms to cope with the disruption of traditional pedagogical methods amid the coronavirus crisis, the absence of the disabled community from conversations on education raises questions over the sustainability of the online academic practice. The potential of the platform should be harnessed provided the government puts forth efforts to build the pervasive digital divide in the country and also to supply essential devices and facilities to ensure education for all.

The role of public media is crucial in providing accessible information to people living with disabilities. Media as an industry should also make space for jobs for visually impaired people and people with other disabilities. Advocacy and coverage of the plight of the disabled community are possible only when the media sets an example on leveraging their positions in society.

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