



Institutional Framework for the Rehabilitation of Differently Abled Persons in India

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Abstract

The Government of India has established various institutions for the development and rehabilitation of differently-abled persons in the country. As per the Disability Census 2011, differently abled persons constitute around 26.8 million, representing one of the largest minority groups in India (Census of India, 2011). Without adequate support and rehabilitation, a large portion of this human resource remains untapped. Transitioning from a charity-based approach to a rights-based approach, India has developed a comprehensive legal and institutional framework under the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), which functions under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (DEPwD, n.d.). Key legislative measures like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (Government of India, 2016), and the establishment of institutions such as the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI, n.d.) and the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC, n.d.), reflect strong initiatives for their development. Along with this, financial schemes such as the Divyangjan Swavalamban Yojana and the Vishesh Microfinance Yojana aim to economically empower PwDs (DEPwD, n.d.). This paper explores these frameworks, highlights existing challenges, and offers policy recommendations to ensure that every differently abled individual in India gets the opportunity to live with dignity, independence, and aim.

Key Words

PwD, physically disabled, differently abled, rehabilitation, financial independence, legal framework, institutional framework

Introduction

In a country like India, with its vast and diverse nature, ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens remains a significant challenge specifically for individuals facing physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory disabilities. According to the Census of India (2011), more than 26.8 million individuals in the country are classified as persons with disabilities (PwDs), making them one of India's largest minority populations. Despite this, many of them continue to face systemic exclusion from mainstream education, employment, healthcare, and community life, resulting in a substantial loss of human potential and economic productivity (Census of India, 2011). Rehabilitation and empowerment of PwDs, therefore, is not only a moral and constitutional duty but also a strategic imperative for inclusive development.

Recognising this, India has gradually transitioned from a welfare-oriented approach to a rights-based framework for disability inclusion. This shift is marked by the replacement of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. The 2016 Act aligns India's domestic policies with global standards, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of



Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which India ratified in 2007 (United Nations, 2006; Government of India, 2016).

The apex agency for the institutional framework in India is the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), functioning under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. This department plays an important role in the formulation and implementation of policies, legislation, and national programs aimed at promoting inclusion and equal rights for PwDs (DEPwD, n.d.). Supporting the functions of this department are various institutions, such as the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), which regulates and standardizes training for rehabilitation professionals, and the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC), which provides financial assistance and promotes entrepreneurship among PwDs (RCI, n.d. NHFDC, n.d.). In addition to institutional support, financial schemes like the Vishesh Microfinance Yojana and Divyangjan Swavalamban Yojana have been introduced to foster economic empowerment and rehabilitation among PwDs (DEPwD, n.d.).

Review of Literature

Over the years, there were many studies that has focused on disability rights, legal reforms, and institutional mechanisms in India. There was a shift from welfare-based to a rights-based approach, after the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, which is in par with global standards like the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (Mehrotra, 2017). This Act broadened the definition of disability, increased reservation quotas, and suggested for a more inclusive approach in education, employment, and public life. The present Act is a landmark in the history of legislation in India but its implementation is still a question mark (Ghosh & Banerjee, 2020). The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), which is the nodal agency for policy formulation and program implementation and has been praised for its strategic plans and schemes such as the National Action Plan for Skill Development of Persons with Disabilities and the ADIP scheme, which have improved access to training and assistive devices (Kumar, 2019).

The National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC) is primarily concentrated on providing financial assistance, especially through schemes like the Vishesh Microfinance Yojana and Divyangjan Swavalamban Yojana, which are designed to support self-employment and entrepreneurship among persons with disabilities (Singh & Sharma, 2021). However, literature suggests that many potential beneficiaries are unaware of these schemes or find the application process too complex, limiting the effectiveness of the programs. Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), took efforts in regulating the quality of professional training and maintaining the Central Rehabilitation Register (CRR). It also plays a significant role in promoting Continuing Rehabilitation Education (CRE) and supporting community-based initiatives like CBID and Divyang Mitra (Desai, 2020). In spite of this, the study points out that there is a shortage of trained professionals in many parts of the country, and the existing training institutions are not equally distributed, making access difficult for marginalised populations.

Objectives of the Study

- To have an understanding about the legislative framework of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016.
- To examine the role, importance, and functions of key institutions involved in the rehabilitation of differently-abled persons in India.
- To create awareness about the existing institutional mechanisms available for the empowerment and inclusion of persons with disabilities.

Research Methodology

The present study is entirely based on secondary data, collected from published sources such as books, websites, government reports, legislation, and official documents. It examines the



current laws and policies and explores how various institutions are working to support differently-abled persons in India.

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 is comprehensive legislation enacted by the Government of India for the upliftment of differently-abled persons in the country. The Act is in alignment with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which India ratified in 2007 (United Nations, n.d.). The Act emphasizes non-discrimination, accessibility, inclusion in education and employment, and equal protection under the existing laws in the country. It mandates a 4% reservation in government jobs and a 5% reservation in higher education for persons with disabilities, while also ensuring access to healthcare, social security, and rehabilitation services (Government of India, 2016).

Institutional mechanisms such as Central and State Advisory Boards, Chief and State Commissioners, and district-level committees are established to monitor implementation and redress grievances. The Act also introduces provisions for physical and digital accessibility, awareness campaigns, and the creation of special courts for speedy justice. With proper funding mechanisms at national and state levels, the RPwD Act aims to empower persons with disabilities and promote their full participation in society.

I. Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD)

The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) works under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment and plays an important role in supporting and rehabilitating people with disabilities (PwDs) in India. The department's goal is to build a society where people with disabilities can live with dignity, independence, and be active members of the community. To achieve this, the DEPwD functions in accordance with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, (DEPwD, n.d.). It lays the foundation for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities and ensuring they get proper care, support, and opportunities to live a fulfilling life (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities [DEPwD], n.d.).

I.1. Institutional Support and Rehabilitation Services

DEPwD through its network of National Institutes and Composite Regional Centres (CRCs), offers specialised rehabilitation services to persons with different types of disabilities. These centres provide:

- Medical rehabilitation which includes physiotherapy and occupational therapy.
- Psychological counselling
- Vocational training
- Skill development programs
- Assistive devices and technologies

The DEPwD also runs Cross-Disability Early Intervention Centres within these institutions. These centres focus on early identification and intervention for children showing signs of developmental delay or disability. Early intervention is important in reducing the impact of disability and helping children grow with better skills and confidence (DEPwD, n.d.)

I.2. Educational and Economic Empowerment

The DEPwD provides various targeted schemes to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to quality education and economic independence. Some key initiatives include:

- Scholarship programs at the pre-matric, post-matric, and higher education levels to support students with disabilities.
- The National Action Plan (NAP) for Skill Development of Persons with Disabilities, which is linked to the Skill India Mission, provides free vocational training and helps PwDs find suitable employment or start their own businesses.



- The Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances (ADIP) Scheme, which provides free or subsidised assistive devices such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, crutches, and prosthetics to help people with disabilities to increase their mobility and to become self-reliant.
- Incentive schemes for private sector employers to encourage the recruitment of persons with disabilities and promote inclusive work environment (DEPwD, n.d.).

I.3. Global Commitments and Inclusive Policies

India is committed to protecting the rights of persons with disabilities both within the country and at the global level. In 2007, India ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), showing its commitment to promoting equality and inclusion. The country also supports the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of People with Disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region. These international agreements guide the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) to create policies and programs that are based on human rights and focused on inclusion for all (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], n.d.).

DEPwD provides National Awards for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities every year. These awards were provided for excellence in:

- Disability advocacy
- Innovation in accessibility and assistive technology
- Service delivery in education, health, and rehabilitation
- Employment and skill development of persons with disabilities

This initiative encourages public and private participation in disability welfare and also helps to raise awareness and inspire more inclusive practices across society (DEPwD, n.d.).

II. National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC)

The National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC) was established in 1997 under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. It plays a significant role in India's institutional framework for empowering persons with disabilities (PwDs) by providing financial assistance, vocational training, and entrepreneurial opportunities (National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation [NHFDC], n.d.). The corporation's main aim is to enhance the economic and social status of PwDs by promoting self-employment and inclusive development.

II.1. Objectives of NHFDC

- Entrepreneurship Development: NHFDC conducts Entrepreneurship Development Programs (EDPs) and training to enable PwDs to undertake business ventures.
- Self-Employment Promotion: The corporation supports economically viable self-employment projects by providing financial assistance tailored to the abilities and interests of persons with disabilities.
- Educational Support: It offers educational loans for professional and technical studies, enabling PwDs to gain skills and qualifications for better employment opportunities.
- Marketing Support: NHFDC facilitates marketing platforms and support for products and services created by PwDs to boost their income and business sustainability.
- Access to Credit: The corporation in partnership with banks, microfinance institutions, and State Channelising Agencies (SCAs) to provide credit facilities and financial services, enabling PwDs to access to capital for their ventures (NHFDC, n.d.).

II.2. Schemes Provided by NHFDC

NHFDC provides both credit based and non-credit based schemes for the rehabilitation of differently abled persons in the country. The major schemes are listed as below:

Credit-Based Schemes

These schemes include low-interest loans for:

- Starting small businesses



- Agricultural and allied activities
- Service-based work like tailoring and food services
- Educational purposes

These loans are offered at low interest rates having minimum collateral securities and flexible repayment options, thereby making them accessible for economically weaker PwDs (NHFDC, n.d.).

Non-Credit-Based Schemes

These schemes aim to build skills and awareness through various programs such as

- Skill development training
- Provides grants for conducting workshops, exhibitions, and seminars
- Capacity-building programs to boost confidence and thereby promoting entrepreneurship (NHFDC, n.d.)

II.3. Vishesh Microfinance Yojana (VMY)

The Vishesh Microfinance Yojana (VMY) is a specialised microfinance scheme introduced by the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC) to support small-scale business ventures among persons with disabilities (PwDs). The scheme offers loan amounts of up to ₹50,000 at concessional interest rates ranging from 4% to 5%, making it affordable and accessible. It gives special priority to women with disabilities and individuals from rural or economically marginalised communities, thereby promoting inclusive financial growth. With its simplified application and repayment process, VMY encourages PwDs to pursue self-employment, aiming to ensure sustainable livelihoods and foster economic independence (NHFDC, n.d.).

II.4. Divyangjan Swavalamban Yojana

The Divyangjan Swavalamban Yojana is a targeted scheme under the National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC) with the objective of promoting economic and social empowerment of persons with disabilities (PwDs) by offering concessional credit facilities. The scheme supports a wide range of activities including loan facilities for setting up of income-generating ventures, higher education beyond Class 12 (undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional courses), vocational and skill development training, and the purchase or customisation of assistive devices for the rehabilitation of this vulnerable section of the society (Divyangjan Swavalamban Yojana, n.d.). Eligible applicants must be Indian citizens with a minimum of 40% disability and should be above 18 years of age, except in the case of persons with intellectual disabilities, who are eligible from the age of 14. There is no upper age limit for educational loans. Additionally, applicants must have a Unique Disability ID (UDID) or an enrolment number for the same. The interest rates depend upon the loan amount ranging from 5% to 9% for self-employment loans and 4% for educational loans, with a 1% interest rebate available for women with disabilities (excluding orthopedically handicapped) on loans up to ₹50,000. The maximum loan limit is ₹50 lakh with repayment periods of up to 10 years, and prepayment is allowed without penalty. The requirement for loan security is determined by the implementing agency, and in the event of the borrower's death, an interest waiver may be applied from the date of death under specific terms. The scheme plays a critical role in the rehabilitation and financial inclusion of PwDs, enabling them to achieve self-reliance through education, entrepreneurship, and improved mobility (NHFDC, n.d.).

The National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFDC) operates through a collaborative partnership with various agencies including State Channelising Agencies (SCAs), public and private sector banks, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and Microfinance Institutions (MFIs). This multi-tiered approach helps NHFDC effectively reach both rural and urban populations across the country. By diversifying the networks and capacities of these partner organisations, NHFDC ensures that its financial services and support



schemes are accessible to a wider section of persons with disabilities (PwDs) and thereby achieving their rehabilitation. This plays a vital role in promoting financial inclusion and facilitating the socio-economic rehabilitation of PwDs, enabling them to participate more fully in society and the economy (NHFDC, n.d.).

III. Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI)

The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) is a statutory body under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. It was established as a registered society in 1986, the RCI was granted statutory status through the enactment of the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992. The Act which came into force in June 1993 and was subsequently amended in 2000 (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities [DEPwD], n.d.). RCI plays a central role in regulating and standardising the education and training of professionals working in the field of disability rehabilitation and special education.

III.1. Objectives and Functions

The primary function of the RCI is to ensure that only qualified and properly trained professionals deliver rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities (PwDs). Its key objectives include:

- Regulating training policies and programs for rehabilitation professionals.
- Standardising syllabus and enforcing minimum standards for education and certification.
- Recognising training institutions and qualifications in the field of rehabilitation.
- Promoting and supporting research in rehabilitation science and service delivery.
- Maintaining the Central Rehabilitation Register (CRR), a national database of certified rehabilitation professionals.
- Disseminating relevant information and conducting Continuing Rehabilitation Education (CRE) programs to ensure ongoing skill development of professionals (DEPwD, n.d.).

III.2. Institutional Role in Capacity Building and Quality Assurance

The Rehabilitation Council of India is actively involved in curriculum development and revision of training courses in areas such as special education, physiotherapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, clinical psychology, and community-based rehabilitation. These programs are created with the advice of expert committees and aim to ensure that rehabilitation personnel across India meet uniform professional standards.

RCI conducts regular inspections of institutions offering rehabilitation education and training to ensure that quality benchmarks are met. Institutions or courses that meet the prescribed criteria are granted official recognition. Additionally, the National Board of Examination in Rehabilitation (NBER), operating under RCI, conducts examinations for various diploma and certificate-level courses in rehabilitation, ensuring a consistent national standard of assessment. The Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) plays a vital role in extending rehabilitation and educational services to underdeveloped and remote areas through its Outreach Division. A key initiative in this effort is the Community-Based Inclusive Development (CBID) program, which encourages inclusive development in rural communities by training local volunteers under the Divyang Mitra initiative to support persons with disabilities at the grassroots level. To make the professionals in the field competent, RCI also conducts workshops, seminars, and conferences under its Continuing Rehabilitation Education (CRE) program, focusing on the latest trends in rehabilitation, therapy, and inclusive education. The Council maintains transparency and accountability through its efficient administrative practices and financial oversight, ensuring that all recognised institutions comply with ethical and professional standards, thereby maintaining public confidence in the quality of rehabilitation services delivered across India.

Implications of the Study



The present study helps us understand India's institutional mechanism in supporting differently abled population in the country. It will be useful for policy makers, teachers, government officials, NGOs, and others working for disability rights.

Limitations of the Study

- The study is exclusively based on secondary data and does not include any information collected directly from persons with disabilities or individuals involved in disability rights.
- It focuses only on national level institutions and does not look into any state level or region-specific institutions.

Conclusion

India has taken several steps to improve the lives of persons with disabilities by enacting laws to protect their rights and establishing institutions such as DEPwD, NHFDC, and RCI. These organisations support the rehabilitation of differently abled individuals by providing access to education, financial assistance, and employment. With improved implementation, stronger coordination, and increased public awareness, India can ensure that all persons with disabilities live with dignity, independence, and equal opportunity.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this study.

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