

Inclusive Society for Divyang – my Dream

By - Dhawal Gandhi

Dreams are weird, at least mine are. They never follow the laws of physics and are never questioned with inductive reasoning. Perhaps because they are either marinated as tropes or may be they do not hold much validity in real world, speaking of which, how far fetched the idea, if not dream, of inclusivity or inclusive society resonates to the world's one of the largest conservative population? I talk merely of people as they are also the same, many if not all, which constitute the system that has perpetuated the parochialism, stigma and prejudice against one of the largest minorities in India, "**Divyangjan**" or the "**specially-abled**" people. Whether this particular group of people are truly divine and bear the weight-age of the new semantic which found its way into the already vast pool of redundant lexical siblings in the nomenclature system or is it that we found yet another detour to ignore the ground realities faced by this group whom I shall referred to as **disabled**. Let's find that out and see if dreams can be realized.

United Nations categorically defines "inclusive society" as

"A society for all', in which every individual, each with rights and responsibilities, has an active role to play"

Put this into perspective and re-conjoining context with the disabled, we are talking, in simple language, about equal opportunities for this special class. Meaning they can do what a normal, non disabled person can do in his/her daily life. From school education, to playground, to pursue higher studies, health care and eventually to securing a decent job that makes an individual feel responsible and a proud member of the society and at the same time pinging a strong message to the world about the country's positive economic structure.

With any pilot project involving humans, the genesis is never far from the early schooling, and inclusivity is no different. Like many other tasks taken up for the upliftment of the marginalized, the onus is truly on the majority. Sensitization starts with them. While the assertions I just made are certainly not dogmatic in its first briefing, there lies a crucial yet soft crevice junction that could easily derail the empathy. One being social reconstruction and other, financial. When incorporating the class, that deems privileged, into an inclusive

world, we may be dealing with some reluctance in a way that, in their opinion, seem to be offended by a sense of entitlement. “*Why should we mix with them? We deserve better*”. So why the stigma? Is it because the social constructs tend to be more conservative and suffer from myopia? Or the fallacy stems from something or somewhere else? Of course, with inclusivity, we are talking about shaking an old tree where low hanging fruits are up for the grabs first.

But what does an inclusive society look like in real world?

1. Change in attitude towards the disabled, colossal mutual respect.
2. Accessible infrastructure.
3. Well trained and sensitized leadership at district, state and national levels.
4. Inclusive approach, policies and culture in all public undertakings.
5. Well thought, planning and executive committee, lead by disabled people themselves, at all levels.
6. Trained and sensitized teachers and parents of non disabled in all public schools.
7. Ample availability of respectable jobs for the disabled.

Now that we have a sense of raw canvas needed to paint our inclusive world on, its time to focus on its binding aspect, namely the financial. With the schism roaring beneath the metaphysical world that has potential of new revolution, lets not forget that when all is said and done, we must pull up our magnifying glasses and start rolling pages of our balance sheets for corrections.

Bringing real change requires substantial monetary input. If we apply the principle of first law of thermodynamic *where matter can neither be created nor can it be destroyed*, we rather abjectly confess that we are all dependent on each other in one way shape or form. Hence, with any responsible dependent community, accountability is never considered alien. While altruism has its place in bringing true change in society, lest we forget, point #2 I mentioned is very core to the inclusive principle, possible only with sufficient fiscal input. Like a wise man once said, “*never go to war under prepared and under financed*”, our outlook to inclusivity must as well reflect this attitude without which, the notion is nothing but a bunch of words on processed wood which, unfortunately seems to be the case today.

The outdated census, and no where to be found right numbers (even in 2018), on disability shows the group at 2.1% of India’s population, with the recent

version of 2016 pegging at 2.68% or roughly 30 million people which stands at odd number given India's outstanding contribution to the world poverty at 200 million and its correlation to disability.

So why the fuss? If the actual disabled population is larger than what the census dictates, it could potentially bring some of the nuanced shabby financial practices to light with bigger fonts. Here are some of them:

1. Insufficient funds

2018 budget allocated for Persons with Disabilities (PwD) was little over ₹ 1k crore, out of which only ₹ 300 crore was allocated for the actual implementation also known as Schemes for the Implementation of the Persons with Disabilities Act (SIPDA) which provides monetary assistance towards Persons With Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. In short, this ₹ 300 crore is the TOTAL fund available to make accessibility program throughout India possible, which many experts claim insufficient.

2. No progress report card

To make the matter worse, in a PIL filed by Raturi shows, only portion of the funds are actually utilized towards the plan with no progress report on a sibling so called flag ship program started by the current administration under the name "Accessible India Campaign". (AIC) which aimed at making infrastructure throughout the main cities accessible. Many of such were found to not have implemented properly even with the basic designs mentioned in the blueprints. Airports and railways have also been left out with proper implementation. When dealing with bus stands, AIC garbles out footpaths necessary for entering buses. In fact, NITI Aayog, the entity behind this flagship program has failed to create framework for entitled tax payer with detailed report card.

3. Beneficiaries not able to procure funds

Under Aids and Appliances for the Handicapped(ADIP), the disabled receive assistance in the form of medical aid, appliances to reduce disability. Funds allocated to this scheme has been on rise but the number of beneficiaries is taking a dip.

A research conducted by '*thebetterindia*' project suggests that, while there is a slight increase in fund allocation for the disabled students, the number of beneficiaries have drastically reduced. It gets worse, as the new budget tries to accommodate nearly 30 times more students than it previously did in 2017 for the nearly same allocated funds.

4. Under utilized and missing funds

Funds for scholarship saw a bigger dip with an average of 39% of funds under utilized. According to a session in Lok Sabha in 2017, some states did not even receive allocated funds to materialize SIPDA. Others like Bihar, Goa, Haryana received none.

5. GST on essential assistive technology and aid

Another step towards exclusionary policy is treating bodily essentials as luxury items taxed at much higher rates. Like loco-motor vehicle, orthopedic appliances, crutches, even hearing aid equipment and prosthetic limb were not spared.

Building a successful inclusive world needs substantial financial assistance, by investing in:

- ◆ retrofitting public infrastructure (schools, government buildings, public roads).

- ◆ disable friendly public transport.

- ◆ enacting statutory laws with accountability to punish malfeasance.

- ◆ some of the points I covered few paragraphs ago.

- ◆ building new India with better inclusive proposals.

Taking the ground realities to concern the prospects do not seem optimistic.

You don't have to be an economist to realize the importance of financial assistance in shaping this project/dream. Doing otherwise will surely allow the laws of probability to dictate the catastrophe in very clear terms.

The epidemic of such policy frailty and unwillingness to address the basic tenets of good governance has begged an important question. ***Does the administration or any of its members literally believe that the divine soul of divyangjan can overcome the onslaught brought upon them using their divine power?*** Their policy certainly points in that direction.

Witnessing all this, while our legislatures, underpinning the The Rights of Persons With Disabilities Act (RPwD), which derived legitimacy from the UN convention for person with Disabilities, the execution or approach to such has found to have denied agency for the very people the act revolves around. Regardless of the political party in power, the hitherto policy is characterized by its unsolicited deep rooted bureaucratization rather than scientific formulation.

The government has certainly exhibited political will when conducting demonetization drive, fast tracking of Land Acquisition Act, tightening regulations in oil and natural gas industry, implementation of Aadhar Card etc. Good or bad, the administration is capable, yet when it comes to RPwD, the glory suddenly ceases to a screeching halt.

Many would scathingly pin point to rather exclusionary policies employed by the same faction within the administration who are perpetuating the idea of inclusive society, through their political unwillingness.

It is now more incumbent on the present government to restore faith bestowed upon them to fulfill the promises outlined within what is now a statutory law with meaningful and scintillating efforts to smooth out India's substandard regulatory culture and to regain their lost political trajectory.

However, not everything is on the plunge. There is hope to reconcile our inaccessible dreams. 30 million to be specific. An opportunity for disabled to be part of larger society. What can be done outside the formidable polity?

◆ There is already quite a lot of effort put forth by individuals and NGOs but their efforts largely go unnoticed. For which major news broadcast and broadsheet of consequence must carry their due diligence in providing palpable coverage to such hardworking groups, in an effort in making these issues mainstream.

◆ Like it or not but the Indian film fraternity can flex their muscle in disseminating such issues by casting real life disabled people onscreen, not just behind the scenes, as either semi lead actors or with roles that are engrossing to the masses.

◆ Big tech giants in India could take up efforts to make governance digital and subsequently accountable. These companies have the numbers and means to make good governance a reality. We already have private-public partnership in various undertaking of the public sector, hence this seems to be next viable step. Infact this is a perfect opportunity for these companies to train and eventually hire disabled people to enact good governance directly.

◆ If the disabled are considered valuable consumers, then there could be a whole new market in the industry. Building things that can be used by those who have one or other form of disability. A concrete example is a New Delhi clothing line company named 6 DOTS that manufactures clothes designed with special tactile embroidery and braille tags. While it may seem inappropriate imagining that most people among the disabled are predominantly financially backward, are missing the whole point that such mindset actually helps proliferate inclusive mindset which is badly required at the hour.

◆ Perhaps my dream would be a mega push for qualified disabled people to the top levels of the echelon starting with the post of premiership to the remaining gaggle of ministries and portfolios. May be then, a hope will emerge and dignity and divinity be restored and we could all then proudly use the term divyangjan in its truest sense.