

# Comparative Evaluation of Awareness among Armed Forces Personnel in Respect of Special Provisions and Benefits Applicable to Children with Disabilities

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Mental retardation ranges from the borderline to mild to very severe. Fortunately, the majority (80%) are in the mild range that endows the individual the capacity to lead a simple, yet fruitful life once provided with a means that are conducive to their learning styles. Children with a more severe disorder can achieve remarkably if their unique talents are recognized and nurtured to the fullest.

**Aim:** We conducted a study among armed forces personnel in a large city in Maharashtra. This community has many peculiar and special features. They are from different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and live together as a cohesive unit. The general socioeconomic and educational awareness toward facilities and concessions available for the differently abled children is assumed to be high.

**Materials and methods:** Detailed interaction with 27 parents having special children was conducted and further data were collected. Each parent was individually interviewed. This group was named parents having differently abled children (PHDAC). Group discussions consisting of 15 families in one group that had no special children in the family were conducted. A total of such eight groups (120 families) were, thus, interviewed. This group was named parents having normal children (PHNC). Each family was verbally questioned regarding the facilities available to special children thoroughly and responses were recorded.

**Results and discussion:** Overall, it was found that among the PHDAC, the awareness was much better, but some were circumspect of the facilities provided for their wards by the land of the law. Most of them felt that the benefits coming to them were due to their service with the Army. The PHNC were not aware of most of the provisions. However, during the interactions with the researcher, they evinced interest in the matter and were happy to know that special provisions are existent in various Government sectors for special children.

**Keywords:** Awareness, Differently abled, Special Provision.

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## INTRODUCTION

Intellectual disabilities in humans encompass a broad spectrum that adversely affects the capability to think, reason, memorize, use logic, and to learn from the past as expected for age. World data indicate a prevalence rate of 8 to 10% percent of this condition. In our country, the data are scarce due to low reportage of the cases. In addition, children who are slow in learning comprise another 4 to 5% of the population.<sup>1-3</sup>

Mental retardation ranges from the borderline to mild to very severe. Fortunately, the majority (80%) are in the mild range that endows the individual the capacity to lead a simple, yet fruitful life once provided with a means that are conducive to their learning styles. Children with more severe disorders can achieve remarkably if their unique talents are recognized and nurtured to the fullest.<sup>4-6</sup>

In India, major advancements have been made over the last two decades toward spreading awareness regarding the rights and special status of the differently abled persons through various legislation, ordinances, and statutes. Many legal provisions have been brought in to provide relief and concessions to such persons. The effects of these actions are slowly bearing fruits.<sup>5-8</sup>

However, the general populations, at large, are still unaware of all the provisions of the legal framework. Limited dissemination of information and poor educational standards are partly responsible. Unfortunately, the awareness among educationally poor populations is also combined with higher prevalence of various disabilities in the community.

We conducted a study among armed forces personnel in a large city in Maharashtra. This community has many peculiar and special features. They are from different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds and live together as a cohesive unit. The general socioeconomic and educational awareness toward facilities and concessions

available for the differently abled children is assumed to be high. However, no data are available to ascertain the same.

Most of the families belonging to the armed forces have peculiar problems connected to frequent transfers and uncertainties of life. Therefore, this qualifies as a special community that needs special provisions in all fields including that of disabilities.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- Conduct of a survey in the selected community and collect demographic data.
- To ascertain the awareness toward the different facilities available for persons by the Central and State government agencies.
- To educate and create awareness among the members of the community toward optimal utilization of the available facilities.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Initially, the local army authorities were approached and necessary clearances and permissions were obtained before commencing the study. The study was carried out over a period of 3 months from August 2014 to October 2014. A total of 145 families were recruited for the study. Informed consent was obtained individually before the interview process. A total of 122 families comprised both the parents, while 23 families were represented by a single member.

The demographic data of the community were collected from the local authority and collated accordingly. The detailed data indicating the total number of male heads of the families, total number of families, children, education status, etc., were obtained. The details of the special children as recorded in the office documents were also made available (Table 1). In consultation with the Officer in-charge, the date, time, and place were fixed for group interviews and individual interactions with parents of the special children.

**Table 1:** Demographic data of the selected community

Demographic parameter	Numbers
Men living singly	440
Men living with family	265
Total number of family members	768
Grand total	1208
Total number of differently abled children	27
Educational standards of parents	(a) Class 12th to Graduation: 80% (b) Postgraduation: 20% (c) Added technical qualification: 80%
Monthly income of father	Rs 15,000–30,000

The office records indicated that all the special children were studying in a specific special school. Accordingly, the principal and other teachers of that school were contacted and through detailed interaction various clinico-academic details about these students were obtained. Meanwhile, educational materials, photocopies, and awareness brochures were prepared for distribution, which were downloaded from the official websites. Audio visual aids were arranged to disseminate critical information effectively.

Detailed interaction with 27 parents having special children was conducted and further data were collected. Each parent was individually interviewed. This group was named parents having differently abled children (PHDAC). Group discussions consisting of 15 families in one group that had no special children in the family was conducted. A total of such eight groups (120 families) were, thus, interviewed. This group was named parents having normal children (PHNC). Each family was verbally questioned regarding the facilities available to special children thoroughly and responses were recorded. The level of awareness in each category was ascertained, and they were made aware of all the facilities granted by the Government of India through discussion and distribution of the latest educational pamphlets downloaded from the government websites.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The community selected for the study comprised totally 440 male persons living either singly or with family in the Cantonment area in Maharashtra. All men were employed in the different technical departments in the Army. Out of 440 persons, 184 were living singly and the remaining 256 were staying with family. Apart from the wife, each family comprised 1 to 3 children. The total number of family members excluding the head of the family was 768. Overall, there were a total number of 1,208 members in this community (Table 1).

The families were living in the government accommodation having 3 to 4 storied buildings comprising 1 to 2 BHK apartments that were well provided with civic facilities like water and electricity. There were amenities like parks, grocery stores, recreational facilities, etc., within the complex premises. All the children were studying in schools like Kendriya Vidyalaya, the Army Public School, and other primary schools run by the Army. Free school bus facility was available. Free and comprehensive medical facility was available to each family member including parents and other dependents at the local military hospitals.

The average income of each family ranged between Rs. 15,000 and 30,000 depending upon the rank of the

individual. The average educational qualification of the head of the family ranged from class 12th to graduation or higher. Most of them were technically qualified in the different technical fields. Some were in instructional positions.

The general level of awareness in respect of various government-offered facilities and entitlements is high. The Army authorities frequently interact with the men and their family members to ascertain the existence of difficulties, and through various welfare meets, these issues are addressed. Since the community members are heterogeneous groups from different linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, there is wide exchange of ideas and customs.

The major problems encountered by this community are frequent movements due to transfers that adversely affect the education of children and force the families to change schools and living quarters. School and subsequent

college admissions are a major problem with this community, as they are a floating population and have issues of domicile. Also, most of these families have a rural or semiurban background that leads to added expenditures on movement during leave to their native regions with family.

Families having differently abled children are provided additional facilities as per the Central Government regulations in respect of special transfers to stations with prioritized school admissions including special schools run by Army (ASHA Schools) and other appropriate medical facilities including issue of assistive devices free of cost.

The awareness quotient was both qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed as below (Table 2):

- Overall, both the PHDAC and PHNC were aware that special provisions exist for development of differently abled persons in different fields.

**Table 2:** Awareness of PHDAC and PHNC toward benefits and concessions<sup>4,9,10</sup>

<i>Awareness topics raised by researcher</i>	<i>Awareness in PHDAC (n = 27) (% aware)</i>	<i>Awareness in PHNC (n = 120) (% aware)</i>	<i>Remarks and discussion by researcher</i>
Are you aware that the Central and State Governments of India (GOI) provide special facilities and benefits to children with disabilities?	27/27 100%	120/120 100%	Both PHDAC and PHNC were fully aware. It was explained that facilities are provided under the provisions laid down by the Ministry of Social Empowerment and Justice (MOSJE) through notifications released and updated periodically
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Integrated Education for the Differently abled Children with special reference to (a) Scholarships For The Differently abled and (b) Children's Educational Allowance (CEA)?	15/27 55.5%	45/120 37.5%	The PHDAC were fully aware of the CEA, but partially aware of other scholarship programs, Nearly 64% PHNCs were unaware of the provisions. It was explained that there are GOI- sponsored schemes granting economic aid toward tuition fees, transportation, uniform, and hostel charges. Special scholarships are granted from class IX onward for technical and professional courses.
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Railway Travel Concession and the details?	21/27 78%	62/120 51.7%	The PHDAC were in receipt of special railway concessions applicable for military persons and family, but 78% were aware of the special provisions too. Only 51.7% of PHNC were aware. Details were unknown to both groups. It was explained that the Indian railways has special provisions and concessions for differently abled persons and also for attendants
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Air Travel Concession in Air India?	21/27 78%	43/120 36%	Both PHDAC and PHNC were in receipt of 50% concession in Air India. The PHNC had low awareness in case of special children. It was explained that the Air India offers 50% special concessions for differently abled persons and also for attendants
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Reservation of Jobs; job categories, procedures and eligibility?	16/27 59%	38/120 31.6% 30%	The PHDAC were vaguely aware of the provisions, but detailed categories of job reservations were not known. The PHNC were generally unaware of any such provisions. It was explained that both Central and State governments have job reservations, age limit exemptions, and other benefits for various disability states
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Income Tax Concessions, other concessions?	5/27 18.5%	12/120 10%	Both the groups were unaware of the IT provisions. It was explained that under the IT Act, there were special IT concessions under sections 80D, 80DD, 80V, and 80U and various other sections

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Awareness topics raised by researcher	Awareness in PHDAC (n = 27) (% aware)	Awareness in PHNC (n = 120) (% aware)	Remarks and discussion by researcher
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Professional Tax Exemption?	0/27 0%	0/120 0%	Both groups were fully unaware. It was explained that under the IT Act, there were special IT concessions under various other sections and exemption from professional tax
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Award of Dealerships/ Agencies by Oil Companies?	3/27 11.1%	0/120 0%	Both groups showed very poor awareness. It was explained that under the IT Act, there were provisions for grant of licenses for gas agencies and grant of loans at special interest rates
Are you aware that special provisions exist as the Scheme of Economic Assistance?	3/27 11.1%	0/120 0%	Both groups showed very poor awareness. It was explained that public sector banks offer loans at special rates and different terms and conditions
Are you aware that special provisions in customs and excise duties exist for import of various assistive devices? Name a few devices that you can import under this provision.	20/27 74%	10/120 8.3%	The PHDAC group had a general idea, but were unaware of details. The PHNC were completely unaware. It was explained that special provisions in customs and excise duties exist for import of various assistive devices
Are you aware that to avail the benefits discussed, there is an initial requirement of obtaining a disability certificate from a competent authority, especially applicable for persons with mental retardation (MR)?	27/27 100%	9/120 7.5%	The PHDAC were fully aware, but afraid of the complicated procedures and red tape. The PHNC were unaware. The matter of appropriate certification was discussed in detail. Each aspect of the certificate including the application, examination, IQ tests, categorization, and severity of the MR state was discussed. A copy proforma of the certificate and the competent signatories was provided to the parents having special children
Are you aware that special and stringent rules and provisions exist for safeguarding girls with disabilities? Are you aware of the penalties imposed, if such rules are violated?	6/27 22.2%	7/120 5.8%	Both the groups had very .....(something has to be written in the vacant place) awareness of this important aspect. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2011, presented by Committee appointed by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment Government of India 30 June 2011 was discussed in detail.

IT: Income tax

- The PHNC were unaware of the details of the existing categories of the provisions.
- The PHDAC had varied ideas about the different provisions, they were aware of the monetary grants like children education allowance (CEA), etc., as they were in receipt of the same. However, they were unaware of the other provisions primarily because these concessions had already been taken care of through the Army benefits and CEA. The same was applicable for concessions during travel by air or railways as these were available for all military persons.
- Both the categories were unaware of the exact provisions for exemptions in higher education, professional training, scholarships available for these trainings, and the procedure to avail such benefits.
- Both the categories were unaware of the income tax benefits applicable for differently abled persons.
- Both the categories were unaware of the exact provisions for benefits like out-of-turn grant of oil and gas dealerships and the procedures involved and economic assistance available from public sector banks at special interest rates.
- The PHDAC was only partially aware that for availing the benefits and concessions by the Central and State governments, adequate and appropriate certification was a mandatory requirement. They were also not aware of who was the competent authority to issue such certificates, and this was compounded by the fact that many of the immediate concessions and benefits entitled to the special children were made available as overall Army benefits applicable to military personnel and their families. Also, the Armed forces have ensured that better benefits reached the Army soldiers through quick implementation of the programs automatically. Lastly, all of them felt that it was very difficult to get the certificate because of the red tape involved in the procedures at the issuing offices.
- All were unaware of the new "The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2011, Presented by Committee appointed by Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment Government of India, 30 June 2011". This bill deals in detail with all the aspects of a differently abled person, with special provisions for girls with disabilities.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, it was found that among the PHDAC the awareness was much better, but some were circumspect of the facilities provided for their wards by the land of the law. Most of them felt that the benefits coming to them were due to their service with the Army. The PHNC were not aware of most of the provisions. However, during the interactions with the researcher, they evinced interest in the matter and were happy to know that special provisions are existent in various government sectors for special children.

Worldwide, there has been a strong awareness drive for attainment of better facilities for persons with disabilities and the World Health Organization in conjunction with various other arms of the United Nations are charting out a road map for the future. In India, administrative and policy actions are being taken in consonance with the world view. However, different social customs, traditions, and prejudices among the population are proving to be an impediment toward fulfillment of all the targets.

Actions are needed to be taken at multiple levels to improve the process of implementation. Some of them are as under:

#### Local Level

- To Augment existing practice of interactions between the men and authorities with special reference to differently abled children in the community.
- Offer official support toward obtaining necessary certifications, so that concessions and facilities can be availed.
- Employ counselors to constantly monitor the awareness status of the parents, the community, and recommend necessary, corrective actions to the authorities.
- Ensure that dissemination of any information is swift and actions necessary are followed up.

#### School Level

- Conduct parent-teacher meetings at monthly intervals and educate the parents.
- Arrange necessary administrative support for issue of certificates.

- Arrange guest lecturers to educate the parents and the authorities in respect of national policies etc.

#### National/State Level

- The government must ensure that the implementation of the policies is done quickly and that the benefits reach the needy.
- Government must take steps to reduce the complicated procedures and the red tape that exists for issue of certificates. Severe punitive actions should be taken against authorities who are found to harass the parents of differently abled children.
- Government must also ensure that dissemination of information is actually taking place through door-to-door campaigning.

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