

# Perception, Attitude, and Behavior toward Persons with Disabilities in India

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## ABSTRACT

Disability in India has largely been characterized as a medical problem that majorly focuses on the “abled bodies”. The concept of disability in India is associated with many irrational beliefs and perceptions ingrained in our sociocultural beliefs and ideologies. Only a handful of Indian studies have attempted to review the scant data on perception, attitude, and behavior toward persons with disabilities in India. The current piece of work presents a coherent literature review on people’s perception and attitude toward various types of physical and mental disabilities in India. This article also endeavors to understand disabled person’s own attitudes toward their disability and attempts to delineate how familial and social perception influences their self-esteem and confidence level. The final section of this article also suggests few positive steps that can be taken to improve societal attitude, perception, and behavior toward persons with disabilities in India.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Behavior, Disability, Perception, Society.

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## INTRODUCTION

Disability is a complex phenomenon that not only distresses a particular person’s body and mind but also his or her surroundings. Disability has often been accompanied by sociocultural stigmas that led to the marginalization and exclusion of disabled people. The concept of disability is defined in various terms as there are many cross-cultural differences in its approaches and experiences.

The World Health Organization (2001) defines disability as an umbrella term, incorporating many aspects of body impairments, activity limitations, and participant restrictions. The bio-social model of the World Health Organization’s (WHO 2001) International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), acknowledges disability as the result of negative interactions between an individual’s impairment and the physical–social environment in which he or she lives.<sup>1</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) describes disability as “an evolving concept” that results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. It is clear from these definitions that one should not conceptualize disability only in medical terms rather it should be comprehended as a holistic experience wherein all the aspects, physical, mental, social, and environment are equally significant.

India has a substantial population of persons with disabilities that account for 2.21% (Census, 2011) of its total population. Generally, people in Indian society have an ambivalent attitude toward persons with disabilities. In dealing with someone with a disability, people are caught in an avoid-help kind of a conflicting situation and feel anxious. Various religious ideologies and beliefs often add confusion to the societal perception toward disability in India.<sup>2</sup> For more than a century, disability in India has been associated with philosophies and ideologies that are deeply rooted in our sociocultural values. These philosophies and ideologies are manifested through our beliefs, attitude, and perceptions which largely govern our understanding of disabled people. Persons with disabilities in India are often perceived as people with

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“personal tragedy” or “individual problems” that deserve our pity and sympathy.<sup>3</sup> This narrow approach to disability poses many challenges to the persons with disability and restricts their effective participation in society. The present piece of work aims to discuss the societal attitude, behavior, and perception toward persons with disabilities in India through a thematic analysis of the published literature. The study focuses on the significant literature which mainly highlights the people’s perception and attitude toward persons with physical and mental disabilities in various regions of India. A Scopus and Google Scholar search was conducted to identify the key articles using various search terms like, “Attitude and Behavior towards Disability”, “Perception about Physical and Mental Disability”, and “Beliefs Regarding Disability”. Findings and information gathered from the search were summarized and analyzed for the Indian context. This study also efforts to highlight the underlying cultural bound assumptions of various types of disabilities.

## SOCIETAL DIMENSIONS OF DISABILITY IN INDIA

Initially, disability in India was largely viewed as a medical problem that highlighted an individual’s body impairment or abnormality. The medical model of disability equates the physical or mental impairment from a disease or disorder with the disability that the

person experiences.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1980s, the definition of disability took away from the focus on the impaired body and its medical construction (medical model) to a matter of social oppression where social-structural arrangements and cultural values were seen as creating a disabling environment for persons with physical or mental impairments and socially engendering and undermining their psycho-emotional well-being (social model).<sup>5</sup> Later on, in the 1990s right-based model of disability was introduced in India which builds on the insights of the social model to promote the creation of communities, which accept diversities and differences, and have a non-discriminating environment for persons with disability in terms of inclusion in all aspects of the life of society.<sup>4</sup> In 1995, the Persons with Disability Act (PWD Act) was enacted in India to proclaim the full participation and equality of people with disabilities. This act listed seven types of disabilities, which were blindness, low vision, leprosy cured, hearing impairment, locomotor disability, mental retardation, and mental illness. In 2016, this list of disability was expanded from 7 to 21 categories under the Rights of Persons with Disability Act (RPWD Act) which included cerebral palsy, dwarfism, muscular dystrophy, acid attack victims, hard of hearing, speech and language disability, specific learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, chronic neurological disorders such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease, blood disorders such as hemophilia, thalassemia, and sickle cell anemia, and multiple disabilities. The current study discusses various societal beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes toward persons with physical and mental disabilities by presenting findings of Indian researchers or authors.

### Physical Disability

Persons with physical disabilities are more often perceived as people who should be treated with sympathy and pity. In India, it is generally believed that physical disability is the outcome of a person's past sins or wrong-doings. This belief has been demonstrated in a research study conducted in rural Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu in 2005 wherein respondents perceived disability as a "Curse of God".<sup>4</sup>

Persons with locomotor disabilities often lack various social skills such as leadership, sharing or teamwork, and empathy because of their mobility restrictions. Sometimes peer groups of a child with locomotor disability pass rude and harsh remarks about his or her locomotive limitation whenever they commit any mistake.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of blind persons, it is generally believed that they are endowed with "god-gifted" skill and "sixth-sense". One such assumption is that blind people possess superior musical skills. However, sometimes such people are also assumed to have negative intentions. Indian mythology has also portrayed persons with disabilities as negative characters. A famous example of this effect comes from Mahabharata and Ramayana where Shakuni and Manthara played negative roles.<sup>7</sup>

Kumar and Rao<sup>8</sup> studied the parental attitude toward children with hearing impairment and they found out that parents' first reaction toward their newly diagnosed hearing-impaired children is usually panic, guilt, blame, and despair. Parents strive to understand hearing disability and its implications.

The understanding of leprosy disease which causes disability among people also varies with the geo-cultural zones. People perceive leprosy as a disease of sin and a punishment given by God wherein hands and feet are rotten. It is also believed that leprosy is caused by having fish and milk together.<sup>9</sup>

### Mental Illness

People with mental illness or impairment are considered to be in a more disadvantaged position in terms of stigma, socioeconomic outcomes, and access to services.<sup>4</sup> Mentally ill persons get a worse emotional reaction than persons with a physical disability. Mental illness is perceived as strange, mysterious, and somewhere dangerous.

They are frequently characterized by the term "mad", believing that his or her presence is a threat to society and any kind of interaction should be avoided with them. Children or adolescents with intellectual impairment or repetitive thoughts and behaviors are often bullied by their peers in schools or neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural and religious beliefs perpetuate negative attitudes toward persons with intellectual disabilities. A quantitative study on perceptions about intellectual disability from Vellore, South India mentions that marrying a close relative is the cause of intellectual disability, 75% of the time. Some people pray to God this way "please make my child alright; we will do this... for you". Inspire of this the child does not become alright.<sup>10</sup>

The above findings reflect that whatever the form of impairment, be it physical, mental, or any other, a person with a disability is often considered to be less able to have limited potential or capacity. Many a time, persons with disabilities are assumed to be an "extra burden" on the family perceiving their inefficiency in sustaining the livelihood activities. Studies also demonstrate that the negative and disadvantageous side of disability is constructed socioculturally and exaggerated by our social practices and cultural representations.

### Attitude of Persons with Disability toward their Own Disability

The attitude of a person with a disability toward his or her own disability is one of the determining factors that influence his or her self-esteem and confidence. On the one hand, the feeling of inefficiency and inadequacy among persons with a disability takes the form of depression, introversion, and hostility while on the other hand, those who do not perceive disability as a handicapped condition, surmount the disability-associated barriers, and lead their life like everyone else. Whether or not these negative feelings would develop in a particular person with a disability will majorly depend on the attitude, perception, and behavior of the society toward that person with a disability. Few research studies<sup>11,12</sup> have also been reported in India wherein researchers have highlighted the positive perception and attitude of the society toward persons with disabilities that have helped them to overcome their disability barriers. In addition to society, a family of a person with a disability also plays a very important role in addressing the needs of its disabled member(s), evolving their capacities, and helping them become aware citizens of the society. The attitude of the family toward disability can vary from over-protection to negligence.<sup>13</sup> If the family sees disability as a tragedy and considers disabled members worthless, then this also puts a negative influence on the confidence of the disabled person. Gupta and Singhal<sup>12</sup> reported that families with a child with disabilities can and do have positive perceptions which lead to a better quality of life for the family, and scope for maximizing the child's potential.

The attitude of siblings toward their disabled brother or sister is also greatly influenced by the attitude of their parents. The positive attitude of a disabled child's parent encourages their other non-disabled children to develop higher levels of empathy

and altruism, increased tolerance for differences, increased sense of maturity and responsibility, and pride in their disabled sibling's accomplishments.<sup>6</sup>

A person with a disability who is stigmatized because of the societal attitude and behavior is more likely to have anxiety and frustration than a nonstigmatized person with a disability. With the constant negative attitude, the level of anxiety may reach beyond the coping capacity of the person with a disability and he/she may turn aggressive or violent. Due to the negative societal perception, persons with a disability tend to focus more on their disabilities rather than abilities which consequently makes them feel more vulnerable.

## DISCUSSION

The current study presents societal perceptions and attitudes toward persons with disabilities in India. The findings presented in the study were gathered as part of a thematic literature review and provide insights into the perceptions and beliefs of the society and family toward persons with physical or mental disabilities.

The sociocultural system of India is structured in such a way that an individual's physical and mental ability influences his or her social status and position. Various studies reflect that religious and cultural beliefs have a major impact on the perception, attitude, and behavior of nondisabled people toward people having any kind of disability. The overall development of an individual with a disability is highly dependent on the behavior and treatment of the society and family in which he or she lives and the attitude toward his or her own disability. In India, persons with disabilities are less handicapped by their own disability than by the social attitude meted out to them in every walk of life. Societal attitudes and behavior create more problems for disabled persons than their own disability.<sup>14,15</sup>

The World Report on Disability<sup>16</sup> says that generalizations about disabilities are often misleading. The extent of disability and its disadvantage varies with an individual's personal factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, sexuality, ethnicity, or cultural heritage. Persons with intellectual disabilities may experience more difficulties in leading their lives than persons with a physical disability. According to Wig,<sup>17</sup> ignorance or lack of proper knowledge is the root cause of all stigma related to mental illness. People assume that everyone who has received a particular diagnosis or treatment is identical. Individuals with the same diagnosis or receiving the same treatment may manifest different kinds of symptoms. Even when the symptoms are the same, they may vary widely in their severity.

Disability is often viewed as a kaleidoscope of socioeconomic disparities and social exclusion. Meanings and experiences of disability are also mediated by social variables such as gender, family status, work capacity, social class, and ethnicity.<sup>1</sup> Globally, women with disabilities suffer more discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society than their female counterparts and male without a disability. Also, each individual has his or her own preference and response to disability which is majorly driven by his or her childhood upbringing, education, cultural traits, and values. When parents identify their child as having some disability issue, they find it difficult to accept this fact and their common reactive patterns include denials of reality, self-pity, guilt feeling, shame, depression, rejection of the child. In some of the cases, the stress level of the parents increases to such an extent that they reject their disabled child. On the other hand, parents who are economically stable start overprotecting their children out

of sympathy.<sup>6</sup> The findings of Gellman's study<sup>18</sup> also show that child-rearing practices greatly influence an adult's behavior toward persons with disabilities.

The attitude of the Indian state toward persons with a disability was clearly influenced by the medical, charity, and religious model where persons with a disability were construed as dependents and beneficiaries of state provisions. They were not seen as capable of formal employment and responsibility for them was invested with families and communities. The theory of karma, family ideologies, attitudes of charity, and pity marked the attitudes of society toward the persons with disability and clearly informed state policies toward them.<sup>5</sup>

It is also noteworthy to mention here that the concept of disability has changed slowly from time to time and culture to culture. The level of consciousness among Indian society has increased to this extent that now disability is considered a human right issue as compared to the dark ages when the disabled were eventually killed.<sup>19</sup> Attitude and perception toward persons with disability have changed with time, and this change has also seen in the terminology which was being used for the disabled people, from "crippled" to "handicapped" to "physically challenged" or differently-abled to finally "persons with disability". Additionally, the origin of disability rights movements in India in the early 1990s has identified persons with disabilities not as recipients but as participants in the nation's development process. The emergence of several local and national non-governmental organizations has also contributed to raising awareness toward the sensitive and alarming needs of persons with disabilities. However, despite this positive change, persons with a disability still face a negative attitude of society toward their disabled condition.

## CONCLUSION

In India, a person is more disabled because of societal perceptions and behavior than his or her physical or mental disability. It is the society at large which carves out the stereotypes and negative attitude toward disability and restricts the meaningful participation of the persons with disability from their respective communities. Social discrimination, exclusion, and economic dependency make persons with disabilities more vulnerable and pitiable. Under such circumstances, we need to take some firm steps that will promote social change and will empower disabled people. Healthy communication with persons with disabilities especially with persons having a mental illness should be initiated to eliminate any kind of irrational misconception and uncertainty about their behavior. One of the most crucial steps to develop a positive attitude toward persons with disabilities is to abolish the closet and secretive mentality of society by sensitizing and empathizing with the persons without any kind of disability. The creation of an inclusive environment and culture of concern will nurture the confidence and self-esteem of persons with disabilities. The contextual realities of the persons with disabilities should also be considered while framing effective policies. Lastly, we all should acknowledge that persons with disabilities are also an integral part of human diversity and are equally entitled to get respect from all of us.

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