AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO INCLUSION: A CASE STUDY OF THE TATA INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Providing a completely inclusive educational environment has been a prime concern of members of the education sector for a very long time. Efforts have been put up by educators around the world for ushering in the new hope of implementing cent per cent inclusion of all the sections of learners irrespective of their backgrounds and issues.

This paper deals with the innovative strategies adopted at Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) for implementing inclusion. It outlines the initiatives taken by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in this direction, wherein the students with disability are provided with a wide spectrum of opportunities irrespective of their disabilities. The approaches adopted by TISS that promote social cohesion and an inclusive culture have been documented in this paper.

Key words: *accessibility, inclusion, PwD learners, disability, IARM, TISS*

INTRODUCTION

This world is full of diversity and individual differences, here no one is identical.

UNESCO has rightly commented on the plight of societies as it has said, "Exclusion from meaningful participation in the economic, social, political and cultural life of communities is one of the greatest problems facing individuals in our society today. Such societies are neither efficient nor desirable." (UNESCO, 2009).Even the United Nations has laid stress on inclusive

education in its Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4 or Global Goal 4) which says, "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO, 2015).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has talked about a paradigm shift regarding Disability where it says, "Policy has now shifted towards community and educational inclusion, and medically-focussed solutions have given way to more interactive approaches recognizing that people are disabled by environmental factors as well as by their bodies." (WHO, 2011)

As per Indian law, any person with a minimum of 40% of some specified disability which is certified by a government medical authority falls into the category of Person with Disability (PwD), which turns out to be both regressive and restrictive to all PwD who fall under the category of 40% of disability as they are not only neglected in terms of benefits but also do not fall with their counterparts who are considered be normal beings. Also, perceptions of 'dis'-ability create barriers to true inclusion. Therefore, educational institutions need to promote inclusive values, acceptance of individual and cultural differences by including such issues in all curricula, not solely within the domain of 'Special Education' (Lapidus, 2014).

India as a society cannot achieve success in eradicating disabilities just by launching "Polio Vaccination Drive" or some other nation-wide campaign. It is not sufficient as there is a wide array of disabilities about which most of the general public in unaware about, what required is the awareness and acceptance of these disabilities and the people suffering from them. The society members need to keep it in mind that each and every individual irrespective of the individual differences deserves to start one's life and education with a slate clean of preconceived notions. Even if done unintentionally but labelling is harmful. So, no one has a right to label them and make them feel like outcasts of the society.

The Rights of PWD Act, 2016 by the Government of India makes it evident that the government is desirous to do great advancements in implementing overall inclusion of all learners irrespective of the disability they suffer from. This Act clearly lays emphasis on the following points to ensure the successful inclusion of PwD (Government of India, 2016):

- Empowerment of PwD by facilitating them with individual autonomy, equality of opportunity, accessibility;

- Provision of educating them without any discrimination, maximizing their academic and social development and detecting specific learning disability along with appropriate pedagogical support;

- Monitoring and ensuring their active participation as well as course completion;

- Providing adequate number of trained staff to facilitate the needs of PWD and resource centres; and

- Ensuring adequate supply of books, learning materials and assistive devices.

Thus, the need of the hour is to ensure active and maximum participation of PwD so that they are the mainstream society members. This mainstreaming starts from the very childhood and lets them avail their basic right of education. The practice of Inclusive education has become quite realistic and approachable in Primary and Secondary Education but when it comes to Higher Education, the scene becomes entirely different. It has long been recognized that the provision of specialized services is vital to the success of students with special learning needs in overcoming barriers to achieving a postsecondary education (Lovacchini, 1983; Schulker, 1973). In Higher Education Institutions the entire process of teaching-learning takes a different course where the learner is not as dependent on the teacher as in the School Education System. This fact gives rise to another serious issue that of learners with disabilities to meet the expected learning outcomes independently. PwD might face a difficulty in completion of the program, which could be due to lack of access to variety of facilities required or other issues hampering their studies.

 In this context the initiatives taken by the Tata Institute of Social sciences (TISS) are worth examining as learners coming to HEIs should not develop any negative perspective of this world as they are also going to be one of them on entering the world of work. Here, at TISS not only the way towards academic excellence is paved for these PwD learners but also, they are carved into worthy citizens of tomorrow.

A CASE STUDY OF THE TATA INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

The Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), is a multi-campus public research University which is also regarded to be one of Asia's oldest institutes for professional Social Work education. TISS was founded in 1936 by JRD Tata under the name Sir Dorabji Tata Graduate School of Social Work by the Sir Dorabji Trust and was renamed as TISS in 1944. TISS got its recognition as a deemed university in 1964 under Section-3 of UGC Act, 1956 with a motto 'Reimaging Futures' and focus on-field action including responding to disasters such as India's partition, Bhopal Gas Tragedy, etc. TISS has not only worked with Indian universities but also with numerous prime universities across the world, like, the University of Chicago, University of Utah, London School of Economics, University of Hertfordshire, University of Sydney, York University, among others.

IARM has presented a new definition of PwD in front of the world The TISS has brought a positive change in the world of education by bringing in IARM which has revolutionized the entire system and brought a ray of sunshine and hope to the entire fraternity of the educators and students.

WHAT IS IARM?

IARM technically works using the bottoms-up approach giving its existence a real value. Here, every PwD learner is identified keeping in mind every learner's individual need by a consistent yet careful data mapping. Due to the implementation of IARM, Higher Education stakeholders at TISS can identify every learner's individual needs which not only cater to their educational development but also initiate social inclusion resulting in greater participation, cooperation and ultimately fostering a sense of confidence among the learners and the educators. With the introduction of IARM, no student is either marginalised or segregated on the basis of any disability. This mission turns out to be productive as well as unique in its way as not only it promotes equity but also equality without bringing discrimination into view. Here not only every individual's educational development is catered but also social inclusion is initiated

resulting in enthusiastic participation and cooperation which leads to the development of mutual confidence among the learners and the educators. The entire framework of IARM has been designed and developed in strict compliance with the provisions of UNCRPD and UGC guidelines prescribed in the report of the expert committee constituted by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. The process has aided in simplifying admission procedures, promoting on-campus mobility by providing standard infrastructural accessibility, developing learning material in accessible formats, providing assistance during field and research work and sensitizing both teachers and peer group towards PwD learners.

CHARACTERISTICS OF IARM:

IARM has been a great success as it works on key issues of accessibility as given in Article 9 of UNCPRD which ultimately lays stress on "identifying and eliminating obstacles and barriers to accessibility."

Along with it, IARM has shifted its focus from the 'medical model' to the 'social model' which has eventually led to the evolution of more active and equally participating PwD learners in every walk of life due to enhanced inclusion and acceptability. This was attained by:

- facilitating best themes of inclusion and accessibility at the campus;
- listing best practices and experiences of PwD learners;
- conducting frequent training/orientation programs; and
- focussing on structural accessibility, use of advanced assistive technologies, and multi-modal learning resources.

KEY OBJECTIVES OF IARM:

To achieve cent per cent inclusion, IARM has focussed on identifying various accessibility issues present at the University level which when found led to the development of a framework to be implemented in accordance with national and international level protocols, such as:

- To identify and map of students and teachers with disabilities so that a comprehensive action plan concerning their needs to be fulfilled, understanding various issues and challenges faced by them can be addressed.

- To bring inclusion, various awareness and sensitization programs are carried out using multiple art forms and media.

- To ensure the universal design, accessibility and inclusion is promoted by developing necessary guidelines for the development of academic material and curriculum for teachers and peers.

- To find out the existing social and physical barriers towards complete inclusion in the institution and its architecture for which 'Inclusion Audits' are carried out regularly.

HOW DOES IARM WORK?

IARM is actually a 'mission in mind' which started as a noble idea of bringing on-campus inclusion not only in terms of infrastructural accessibility and provision of assistive learning material but also it dealt with the existing social dogmas and promoted equal opportunities for all and also initiated the much- sought social acceptance of the PwD learners. It was started as an initiative of the Centre for Disability Studies and Action (CDSA) at TISS. The entire framework has been designed and developed in strict compliance with the provisions of UNCRPD and the UGC guidelines prescribed in the report of the expert committee constituted by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. To promote social cohesion and inclusive culture in the entire campus, some key issues dealt with in this framework are as follows:

i.   Simplification of admission procedures;
ii.   On-campus mobility i.e., the provision of infrastructural accessibility;
iii.   Development of learning material in accessible formats;
iv.   Provision of assistance during field and research work; and
v.   Sensitization of both the teachers and peer group towards PwD learners.

IARM began its efforts through small yet significant steps which gradually led to a broad spectrum of issues which if implemented in each and every university can bring miraculous changes and fulfil the objective of 100% inclusion of all. Some of the initiatives of IARM are discussed in detail below:

i.   Reservation Policy for Staff and Students with Disability:

TISS provides 3% reservation to both its employees and students with disabilities in strict compliance with PWD Act, 1995 which allows 1% reservation each to those who have physical, visual, and hearing disabilities.

ii.   Courses offered for PwD in TISS:

Following the mandate of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), TISS offers a Master's degree program in Disability Studies & Action. This program has been designed in such a way that it initiates the development of professional social workers with the competency of empowering people with disabilities and all stakeholders.

iii.   Placement Services for PwD learners:

The School of Social Work at TISS has an independent and autonomous body known as the Career Guidance and Placement Cell (CGPC) which facilitates the entire process of placement and also provides career guidance to its students. The key feature of this department is that it is run by student representatives themselves. Along with it, TISS also has its centralized placement cell which is all open to make changes in its policy as per the need of students with disabilities in terms of:

a. Equal opportunities to all including PwD as no company can deny interviewing any candidate based on any disability;

b. There is a provision of equal employment opportunity to all in terms of similar and equivalent salary to all irrespective of any disability;

c. If any student with a disability is selected for any job, one has all rights to get a clear job and placement description in an accessible format. Along with it, the candidate is provided with equal opportunity at the job place after receiving appropriate training for the same; and

d. Any student with a disability is provided with the freedom to mention the basic accessibility requirements beforehand in his/ her Curriculum Vitae (CV).

e. In order to facilitate PwD with appropriate placement, IARM regularly coordinates with various MNCs so that the students do not face any issues afterwards

iv. Courses offered in Accessible formats:

TISS has set an example in front of fellow universities with the establishment of M K Tata Library which facilitates students with Visual Impairment. The library has installed Jaws Software and Kurzweil Software in 20 computer systems to make learning material accessible for VI students. Along with it, new academic developments facilitating PwDs are traced well and implemented by Sir Dorabji Tata Memorial Library (SDTML) to promote research and provide teaching support to various courses offered at TISS.

v. Centre for Disability Studies & Action (CDSA):

CDSA was started in 2006 to provide an affirmative approach towards appropriate accommodation for inclusion and accessibility for all PwD learners. To fulfil this mission of providing ultimate accessibility in all forms, CDSA has conducted various training programs and workshops in collaboration with eminent organizations.

vi. Need Assessment of PwD learners:

A 'Need-Based Assessment' is done to find out the problems faced by PwD and this regular intervention facilitates a completely 'accessible environment' for all the learners at TISS.

vii. Conduct of Awareness programmes:

Various seminars and workshops are conducted regularly inside the campus to create more awareness among all about the existing needs of PwD, making short films on the same also adds to it.

viii. Sensitization of Stakeholders towards PwD:

Sensitization of various stakeholders (like Bank employees regarding provisions available for PwD, Public conveyance providers regarding accessible transportation facilities, teachers and peers regarding the issues and concerns of PwD, etc) is carried at regular intervals for smooth and accessible functioning of the institute.

ix. Use of ICT

Various collaborations are done to get access to the latest technological advancements in the field of ICT to facilitate the PwD learners in their learning endeavour.

x. Celebration of Disability- related Events:

'International Day of Persons with Disabilities, I Access 'Mehfil', 'Challenging Challenges' (IARM, 2015) and 'Disability Week' are observed at TISS on an annual basis to promote equality, equity, and complete inclusion.

xi. Scholarships for Marginalized Sections:

To ensure effective implementation of all the supportive mechanisms discussed above not only for PwD but also for SC, ST, OBC, Minorities, Kashmiri migrants, and family members of Armed forces, TISS has also established The Social Protection Office (SPO) which facilitates students by:

a. Providing Post Matric Scholarships funded by GoI (GoI-PMS) to four students with disabilities.

b. Facilitating other students who do not fall under the criteria of GoI-PMS with various scholarships like Scholarship for Persons with Disabilities funded by NHFDC and Rajiv Gandhi National Scholarship.

c. Assisting Admission Steering Committee so that all reservation policies are implemented and appropriate facilities are provided to the deserving candidates.

xii. Providing Counselling to PwD:

IARM in equal collaboration with CDSA and SPO provides services to the Equal Opportunity Cells (EOC) in form of appropriate assistance in (Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016) counselling in the area of academics, society, finance, etc. as demanded by the PwD learners.

xiii. Adoption of Flexible Multimodal Academic Environment:

To provide a completely accessible environment, TISS aims to adopt a 'Flexible Multimodal Academic Environment' by:

providing multimodal / pictorial lectures with sign language, experiential learning with simulations, flexible assessment and assignment patterns, suitable Pre-Scribe orientation and Scribe guidelines, promoting independent exam patterns using various software, implementation of suitable barrier-reduction strategies, maximum utilisation of Data Base of lectures, redesigning course work and evaluation using various ICTs, accessible transportation facilities, website accessibility, smoothening admission process for all PwD learners, using best possible technological advancements to promote Research work and enhance educational experiences, providing financial accessibility (by means of low-interest loan schemes), engaging everyone (i.e. learners as well as teachers) in eliminating all stereotypes and encouraging a complete accessibility, be it educational, environmental, social or financial, preparing annual reports and reviewing all major obstacles to ensure a completely accessible environment for all.

xiv. Special Tutoring Services for PwD learners:

An informal system of tutoring PwD learners is carried out with the help of I-Access buddies, where the students prepare themselves for various competitive exams, like SET and NET.

xv. Conduct of Internal Access Audits:

The existing physical barriers towards complete inclusion in the institution and its architecture are periodically evaluated through conduct of Internal Access Audits, to bring about the desired changes for ensuring access to PwD.

CONCLUSION:

It is a well-known fact for all that government and educational institutions both have made plenty of efforts to accomplish the far-fetched dream of utmost inclusion of all in our educational setup so that all learners whether PwD or not facilitate the best possible educational opportunities and emerge out as worthy citizens of India. But still, there is a lot left to be done for the PwD learners in our educational set-up so that they neither feel marginalized nor the 'odd one out of this set-up. This fact can be completely denied on seeing the innovative effort of IARM by TISS where inclusion is not an effort but a regular practice that is followed without any deliberate efforts from students, teachers, or the institution itself. This idea of IARM, if implemented by other contemporary universities can bring out a revolutionizing yet practical change in the field of education and bring an ease of access for all, where all learners would emerge out as equal learners with equal challenges and opportunities available in front of them.

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