



# Barrier Free Environment for the Learners with Special Needs Reflected in Indian Acts and Policies towards Inclusive Schools

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**Abstract:**The term “Barrier Free Environment” indicates an environment where all users irrespective of their disabilities access the minimal resources which they need. The students with disabilities have to face multiple challenges in the wake of multiple barrier whether architectural, attitudinal or institutional which may include lack of understanding and co-operation from administration, faculty, staff and other students, inaccessibility of buildings, facilities and support barriers. The purpose of this study is to focus the infrastructural facilities for children with special needs in inclusive school that reflected in Indian acts and policies. The researcher had conducted this study on the basis of some secondary sources like books, Journals, Articles and websites have been used to collect the information and followed content analysis method under qualitative research approach. Least restrictive facilities are very relevant in the context of children with special needs because they have variety of needs which need to be addressed. The various Acts and Policies emphasizing on the provision of barrier free environment would also be discussed.

**Keywords:**Barrier Free Environment, Learners with Special Needs, Inclusion, Act and Policies

**Introduction:** Inclusive education can be referred as an opportunity towards building an inclusive society for a diverse group of learners. As per the goals of Education for All (EFA) the process of inclusion requires building the right environment to strengthen the capacities of the learners with special educational needs, regardless of their difficulties or differences (UNESCO, 2010). Barriers to inclusive education and highlighted the value of parental reports for assessing and evaluating inclusive school environments and practices. Based on a services of focus group meetings, 15 students with mobility limitation (9-15 years) and 12 parents identified four categories of barrier at their school: 1) the physical environment (eg. narrow doorways, ramps); 2) intentional attitudinal barriers (eg. isolation, bullying); 3) unintentional attitudinal barriers (eg. lack of knowledge, understanding, or awareness); and 4) physical limitations (eg. difficulty with manual dexterity) Pivik et al (2000). Results revealed that a major barrier identified by many of the students was physically getting in to school, environmental barriers included the following categories; doors, passage ways, elevators, washrooms, stairs and ramps, lockers, water fountain and recreational areas. Along with the environmental and attitudinal barriers they faced on a daily basis, these youths also bear difficulties associated with their condition or disability. (Tripathi & Kiran, 2012). SarvaShikshaAbhiyan has developed several norms for the creating barrier free environment including the railings and ramp, doors, windows, signage's in print and Braille, disable friendly toilets and other architectural facilities following the principles of Universal Design. (Dept. of Education, MHRD, 2000 & SSA, 2009). Currently around 10 per cent of the total world's population, or roughly 650 million people, live with a disability. In India 1.67% of the 0-19 population has a disability. 35.29% of all people living with disabilities are children. Other estimates say that India has 12 million children living with disabilities. Only 1% of children with disabilities have access to school and one third of most disabilities are preventable (Kaur, S. 2015). In order to ensure that children with special needs are able to use effectively all public facilities such as hospitals, railway stations, training centers, recreational places, election voting booths, work places and so on, the Government clearly states that it is mandatory for all such public buildings to be completely barrier-free by providing for ramps in public buildings, adaptation of toilets for wheel chair users, Braille symbols and auditory signals in elevators/lifts, ramps in hospitals and other such adaptations, after taking into account unique barriers faced by people with different disabilities. The adoption of barrier free access is imperative so that the goal of 'Education for All' can be achieved. It serves as the catalyst for smarter practices and broader perspectives and to improve quality of life of children with special needs. (Kaur, S. 2015).

## **Barrier Free Environment Vs Least Restrictive Environment**

### **Barrier Free Environment**

Barrier Free Access refers to universal access for all children and adults within the schools. This is particularly relevant in the context of children with special needs because they have variety of learning needs which need to be addressed as they face many problems in the society. It is a challenge to the family, society, teachers, administrators as well as institutional mechanism working in the field of education for all. The child may not come to school because of various barriers both social and physical. At the school level there are various barriers starting with the attitude of the teacher to the attitudes of the peer group and most importantly the physical barriers. This should not be limited only to buildings and physical infrastructure, but also to curriculum and teaching learning processes. When physical factors pose barriers to learning and participation, simple ramps and internal classroom arrangements can easily help the situation.

### **Least Restrictive Environment**

“To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the general educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (IDEA 2004).

LRE differs for each student with a disability receiving special education and related services. Basically, a student’s LRE is the environment where the student can receive an appropriate education designed to meet his or her special educational needs, while still being educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate. The school must ensure that each students placement is in the LRE where the unique needs of that student can be best met, based upon the students IEP.

### **Various Acts and Policies emphasize on the provision of barrier free environment for Learners with special needs:**

Barrier Free Access is particularly relevant in the context of children with special needs because they have variety of needs which need to be addressed. That is the reason to discuss the Various Acts and Policies emphasize on the provision of barrier free environment for Learners with special needs.

### **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1994)**

“All children learn together, whatever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different styles and rates of learning and ensuing quality education to all through appropriate curricula,

organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities'. Inclusive education promotes child-to-child learning and participation of parents and community in planning and execution of services for children in general and disabled children in particular.

### **The Persons with disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995**

The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 (PWD Act) is the most important piece of legislation enacted by the Parliament in the history of disability movement in India. The passing of this Act gave effect to the Proclamation on the Full Participation and Equality of people with disabilities in the Asian and Pacific Region. The objectives of the Persons with Disabilities Act with reference to barrier free access are:

- To create a barrier- free environment for persons with disabilities.
- To make special provisions for including persons with disabilities in mainstream society.
- To lay down strategies that will ensure comprehensive programmes and services and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Provisions under Chapter V of PWD Act ensure that every child with a disability has access to free education in an appropriate and inclusive environment till he attains the age of eighteen years. It stresses on providing education both through formal education systems as well as through non – formal education systems and makes provisions for services in rural areas using locally available human resources. It also commits to ensure that every child with disability has access to using teaching aids and assistive devices that will support the child to learn better.

### **National Trust Act (1999)**

In 1999, the Indian Parliament passed an Act entitled National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disability Act. This Act seeks to protect and promote the rights of persons who, within the disability sector, have been even more marginalized than others. The objectives, pertaining to barrier free access, of this act are:

- To enable and empower persons with disability to live as independently and as fully as possible within and as close to the community to which they belong.
- To strengthen facilities to provide support to persons with disability.
- To facilitate the realization of equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation of persons with disability.

Though this Act does not directly deal with the education of children with special needs, one of its thrust areas is to promote programmes, which foster inclusion and independence by creating barrier free environment, developing functional skills of the disabled and promoting self-help groups. The Trust provides

services through institutional care or in the homes in case the families and their disabled members are unable to access the services outside the house.

### **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2000)**

The key objective of SSA is Universalization of Elementary Education (UEE). Three important aspects of UEE are access, enrolment and retention of all children in 6-14 years of age. This Amendment has given a new thrust to the education of children with special needs (CWSN), as without their inclusion, the objective of UEE cannot be achieved. In-fact inclusion of one of the groups, which is extremely crucial for UEE, is perhaps that of the CWSN. Hence, education of CWSN is an important component of SSA. Two additional forms of resource support, complimentary to each other, being provided to CWSN are through assistive devices and barrier free access. Both of these aim at enhancement of the functional capacity and mobility of CWSN to promote their easy access to the schools. 7.11 lakh CWSN (76.44% of the CWSN requiring aids and appliances) under SSA have been provided assistive devices through various modes. Schools are being made more disabled friendly by incorporating barrier free features in their designs. 5.02 lakh schools have been made barrier-free and much focused efforts are being made by all the States to cover more schools in a phased manner. Only 47.14% schools have been made barrier-free. This aspect of Inclusive Education in SSA needs more focus. Although States have increased the pace of expenditure, it needs to be further geared up. The reality today indicates that 25% of the world's population cannot read and write. In our country more than 100 million children have no access to schooling.

Keeping all these directives in mind, India is moving towards the objective of Education for All by shifting from the goal of integration to the goal of inclusion. Inclusion is remodeling, reform and enrichment of the general education system, making it more comprehensive, supportive and responsive to the needs of all children. It also addresses the needs of special needs children. In inclusive education children with disabilities are provided quality education in regular school with their age and grade peers with support services provided within the school system. It is about creating inclusive policy, Inclusive Culture and Inclusive Practices at all levels of the system. It cannot go very far without developing the capacity of schools to respond to children's diversity. It is about transformation of traditional approach to new approach of teaching and learning. Inclusive education is seen as a means by which educational development of each child can take place. Thus, it reflects the objective of providing quality education to all children without any distinctions. But there are certain challenges which are being faced in this process which include social attitude towards disability, lack of awareness, scarcity of trained teachers, absence of barrier-free environment and proper learning material.

## **National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2006)**

Barrier-free environment - Barrier-free environment enables people with disabilities to move about safely and freely, and use the facilities within the built environment. The goal of barrier free design is to provide an environment that supports the independent functioning of individuals so that they can participate without assistance, in everyday activities. Therefore, to the maximum extent possible, buildings / places / transportation systems for public use will be made barrier free.

## **United Nations Convention on the rights of the Persons with disabilities (UNCRPD) 2008**

The Convention sets out the human rights of persons with disabilities and the obligations on States to promote, protect and ensure those rights as well as mechanisms to support implementation and monitoring. Article 3 sets out the general principles that apply to the enjoyment of the rights of persons with disabilities. Some of them are accessibility, independence, full and effective participation and inclusion in society.

The UNCRPD takes a more positive approach towards working with disability by embodying the principles of equality and the fulfillment of basic and fundamental human rights and freedoms. It calls for governments to ensure that reasonable accommodations are made for persons with disabilities to carry on their activities on par with others. The Convention also encourages governments to oblige private parties and organizations to ensure that their services are accessible to all. It further recognizes the importance of all round development of disabled individuals and calls for accommodations and accessibility in areas like recreation and sports as well in addition to the general ones like education, employment, etc.

## **Biwako Millennium Framework for Action – Inclusive, Barrier Free and rights Based Society (2003-2012)**

The Asian Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons was extended for another decade, 2003-2012 in order to promote inclusive, barrier-free and rights based society for people with disabilities in the Asian and Pacific region in the 21st century. It is popularly known as Biwako Millennium Framework for Action (BMFA). It has 7 priority areas for action. Access to build environments and public transport and access to information and communications, including information, communication and assistive technologies are among those priority areas.

## RPWD Act (2016):

**Barrier free access:** The objectives of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act with reference to barrier free access are:

- To create a barrier- free environment for persons with disabilities.
- To make special provisions for including persons with disabilities in mainstream society.
- To lay down strategies that will ensure comprehensive programmes and services and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Provisions under Chapter III of RPWD Act ensure that every child with a disability has access to free education in an appropriate and inclusive environment till he attains the age of eighteen years. It stresses on providing education both through formal education systems as well as through non – formal education systems and makes provisions for services in rural areas using locally available human resources. It also commits to ensure that every child with disability has access to using teaching aids and assistive devices that will support the child to learn better.

Barrier Free Access refers to universal access for all children and adults within the schools. This is particularly relevant in the context of children with special needs because they have variety of learning needs which need to be addressed as they face many problems in the society. It is a challenge to the family, society, teachers, administrators as well as institutional mechanism working in the field of education for all. The child may not come to school because of various barriers both social and physical. At the school level there are various barriers starting with the attitude of the teacher to the attitudes of the peer group and most importantly the physical barriers. This should not be limited only to buildings and physical infrastructure, but also to curriculum and teaching learning processes. When physical factors pose barriers to learning and participation, simple ramps and internal classroom arrangements can easily help the situation.

**CONCLUSION:** India is progressing day by day so as its educational system but there is an emergent need to make several changes in the existing educational system so that the Learners with Special Educational Needs get equally benefitted. Our census rarely has disability related questions and most families prefer not to reveal data. It is required to aware and sensitize the education system and society using inclusive practices together with barrier free access. An important step has to be taken at school level to train teachers and support staff, to meet the needs of inclusive education, as good quality education is a basic prerequisite to ensure sustainable rehabilitation and the hope of a better future.

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