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EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DIFFERENTLY ABLED PERSONS IN INDIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

C.Subramanian

Political Science and Public Administration Wing- DDE, Annamalai University

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ABSTRACT

Persons with disabilities are entitled to exercise their civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights on an equal basis with others. People may be disabled by physical, intellectual or sensory impairment, medical conditions or mental illness. Such impairments, conditions or illnesses may be permanent or transitory in nature. People with disabilities are vulnerable to social devaluation and negative identities. To truly effect a change in this we need to enhance their capabilities since social value is usually accorded to people who are perceived to be competent and skilled. Every little effort can make an enormous difference, hope can overcome cynicism and tenacity can prevail over material if citizens of a society can harness the most powerful energy in the world -- human talent -- to the task of adapting to the demands of the 21st century. In this context, this paper makes an attempt to study the issues and challenges before the persons with disabilities in getting employment opportunities and suggest some ways and means to enhance their economic independence. Persons with disabilities suffer from discrimination based on society's prejudice and ignorance. In addition, they often do not enjoy the same opportunities as other people because of the lack of access to essential services. This paper makes an attempt to study the various issues and challenges faced by the Differently Abled Persons in getting employment opportunities in India.

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International trends in employment opportunities for the disabled persons

Work is regarded as the basic human rights of people with disabilities. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) adopted in 1983, international standards, ILO Convention 159 and Recommendation 168, concerning vocational rehabilitation and employment of the disabled persons. The Convention stresses that "the government policy should aim at ensuring that appropriate to all categories of the disabled persons, and at promoting employment opportunities for disabled persons in the open labour market". The ILO Recommendation also states that "disabled persons should enjoy equality of opportunity and treatment in respect of access to, retention of and advancement in employment which, wherever possible, corresponds to their own choice and takes account of their individual suitability for such employment"¹(UN General Assembly Resolution).

People with disabilities have the same rights, hopes and aspirations as everyone else. This fundamental principle, however, is not yet appreciated universally as evidenced by the fact that no country in the world has yet solved the problem of integrating all its disabled citizens into active social and economic life. Economic and social

problems have seriously limited the employment opportunities for disabled people. Even if jobs are available, many disabled people are working below the level of their potential.

In many developing countries the situation is even worse and job prospects for them in the open labour market are minimal or non-existent² (Vasoo.S). For instance, in Japan, the Law for Employment Promotion for Disabled Persons, etc. introduced a system for promoting employment opportunities of disabled workers in the open labour market. This system, broadly speaking, consists of two major components: firstly, an employment quota system which obligates employers to employ disabled workers by a quota or a certain percentage of their workforce. Secondly, a grant system which provides financial subsidies for those employers who have employed many disabled workers to compensate their financial burdens. The current quota for private-sector employers is 1.6 percent, while the quota for national and local government agencies is 1.9 or 2.0 percent depending on the type of work activities. An employer who fails to meet the legally set quota must pay a "levy" based upon the difference between the number of disabled workers he

* Corresponding author: +9 9443339194

E-mail address: drcsubramaniann@yahoo .com

is mandated to employ and the actual number of disabled workers employed.

Whilst the quota system for the employment of disabled persons seeks to establish "equalisation as the result", a recently introduced "supported employment scheme", in the United States, Canada, Australia and some European countries, emphasises "equalisation in the process or at the starting point". Supported employment is defined as competitive work in an integrated setting for individuals who, because of their disabilities, need on-going support services to perform that work. Supported employment begins when the work of an individual with a disability is marketed to an employer. The services to the workers and/or the employer are not time-limited but continue throughout the working life of that person or as long as necessary. The scheme is limited to individuals with severe disabilities for whom competitive employment does not traditionally occur. Each employment opportunity is developed to include all aspects of a positive work environment, e.g. income, integration, benefits, working conditions, etc.. Other types of support include a service provider or a job coach to work alongside the new employee for several days offering training or feedback, to monitor performance via weekly or monthly visits, and to solve any problems periodically as necessary³.(Vasoo.S)

One model of supported employment is called "enclave" which is defined as a group of severely disabled persons working together under special supervision in an otherwise ordinary working environment. In the United Kingdom, the "enclave" approach to providing employment for severely disabled workers is developed in the mainstream placement services.

It is perhaps in the field of sheltered employment that the greatest possibility still exists for the employment of disabled persons particularly in developing countries. The concept of sheltered employment was originally based on the need to provide occupational activities for severely disabled people who could not compete on equal terms with other workers in the open labour market. Such sheltered workshops often required heavy subsidies from the public funds to meet costs of maintenance and operational losses. However, this old concept of providing heavily subsidised work for specific groups of disabled people is gradually being replaced by so-called "production workshop" schemes. The essential difference between production workshops and traditional sheltered workshops is that the emphasis is placed on the production of saleable articles of much wider variety and its operation is carried out on commercial lines, and the employees generally include many categories of disabled people and sometime able-bodied workers as well.

In China, at present, more than 70 percent of disabled persons with working abilities are employed in large and medium-sized cities and the average employment rate of disabled people in urban areas is about 60 percent. In rural areas, training and employment opportunities of disabled people are primarily in farm work. Along with the current economic development in the country, special

"welfare factories" for disabled people have gained a rapid growth in recent years. It is reported that there are about 40,000 special welfare factories employing some 700,000 disabled workers. Some 1,500 varieties of the factory products are for export earning US\$ 240 million. Apart from the welfare factories, ordinary enterprises also employ about one million disabled workers. The annual average growth of disabled workers is about 60,000. The reason for this rapid development is due to the preferential policy of the government. For enterprises with more than 35 percent of the employees as disabled workers, their income taxes are exempted; those below 35 percent and above ten percent with disabled employees, their income taxes are reduced by 50 percent⁴. Those enterprises with more than a half of their employees filled by disabled workers, all their taxes are exempted.

For some disabled persons who live in an area where open and/or sheltered employment opportunities are limited, or for those who have difficulties in travelling to a workplace, self-employment may be the only practical option. In economic terms, self-employment may be the most cost-effective way of creating jobs. The capital requirements are usually very small. Perhaps, the commonest form of self-employment is the market vendor whose capital may no more than a basket or a sheet of plastic on which to display whatever is sold, and sales worth no more than a day. Such enterprises are often performed on roadsides or open ground without using any costly infrastructure.

Current status of employment of disabled people in india

In India, even though disabled people constitute a significant 6 percent of our population, yet their basic needs for social security, individual dignity and meaningful employment remain unmet, their lives mired in vicious patterns of helpless cynicism, political inertia and poor social innovations that are no antidote to any long term solutions.

The Government of India enacted the Persons with Disability Act in the year 1995. The Persons with Disability Act 1995 provides for 3 percent reservation in all categories of jobs in the government sector. This Act reserves 3% of all categories of jobs in the public sector industries for disabled persons, and incentives for public and private sector companies, that have at least 5% of their workforce comprising of disabled persons⁵ (The Govt. of India).

The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 mandates that: "The appropriate Governments and the local authorities shall, within the limits of their economic capacity and development, provide incentives to employers both in public and private sectors to ensure that at least five per cent of their work force is composed of persons with disabilities."⁶(Ibid.)

The Persons with Disability Act clearly states that every appropriate Government shall appoint in every establishment such percentage of vacancies not less than 3 per cent for persons or class of persons with disability of

which 1 per cent each shall be reserved for persons suffering from:

- Blindness or low vision;
- Hearing impairment;
- Locomotor disability or cerebral palsy, in the posts identified for each disability.

Even though disabled people constitute a significant 5 to 6 percentage of the population of India, their needs for meaningful employment remain unmet, in spite of the implementation of the 'The People with Disabilities' Act which reserves 3% of all categories of jobs in the government sector for disabled persons, of the approximately 70 million people with disabilities in India, only about 0.1 million have succeeded in getting employment in the industries till now. The industries can however, play a more emphatic role because of their vast employment generating potential and the financial power.

With the increased number of industries in India, the role of the corporate sector in generating job opportunities is increasing. Employment in the government and the public sector seem to be shrinking constantly. For many years now and especially after the passage of the Persons with Disabilities Act (1995), there has been a continuous campaign for sensitising the corporate sector to take on active responsibility in recognising the abilities of disabled people and giving them equal opportunities in the job market.

Problems faced by the disabled in getting employment

Generally many people including potential employers are still prejudiced against the disabled who are often stereotyped as incapable and have no abilities to manage work. Such an orthodox perception is still prevalent. Disabled are seen as an economic liability and have no potential. The community tries to evaluate the disabled in terms of the capabilities of the normal population⁷.

Another common phenomenon is social stigmatization. Many disabled who are stigmatized are seen as not normal. People exercise a lot of discrimination and rationalize a number of ways for not giving appropriate treatment to the disabled.

The transportation problem is one of the major issues facing the disabled. Without a customised transportation system, many disabled who will otherwise be able to join workforce will be confined to their homes. Although some attempts have been made to deal with the transportation needs of the disabled, the problem has remained complex but not insolvable.

Besides human barriers, the disabled do continue to face problems of access to public facilities and buildings. Generally work places have not been fully accessible and therefore a deterrence to employment of the disabled. However, it is encouraging to note that more enlightened employers have taken active steps to make their workplaces barrier-free.

Suggestions

First and foremost fact is that the disabled must be adequately trained with a vocational skill and then placed

in suitable employment⁸. Other realistic solutions to make them employable should also be pursued.

Public Education

A comprehensive public relation exercise to publicize successful disabled in various occupations could be undertaken. These successful human interest portrayals will increase public awareness of the potentials of the disabled. When more people become enlightened about the potentials of the disabled, the employment opportunities of the disabled could improve. Public education should steer clear from dwelling in pity and sympathy for the disabled. The positive aspects of their human potentials must be emphasized.

Changing Employer Attitude

Employers who have hired disabled and those who have prospects to employ the disabled should be identified and formed into a task force to promote employment of the disabled. It is through the publicity of successful cases of disabled that more positive attitude among employers could be developed. Agencies dealing with disabled should reach out to more potential employers who can be enlisted to become friends of the organisations.

The government has employed some disabled persons. She can take the lead to employing more of them in information and counter services. Through government endorsement in employing the disabled, private sectors will also become more open to employ them.

Perhaps more tax incentives can be given to employers who are disabled friendly. This can change the attitude of employers and can be more effective than legislating the employment of the disabled.

Reducing Physical Barriers

Physical barriers in work settings in which the employers are interested in employing the disabled have to be reduced and better incentives to modify buildings should be considered. The present relief of up to a maximum of \$100,000 accorded to owners of buildings is a small sum and should be increased. Besides, the relief should cover the purchase of special equipment to assist the disabled to be productive. Where possible the housing estate environment should be further modified for easy commutation of the disabled to work places.

Customised Transportation

In order to meet point to point transportation to work for the disabled, it is necessary to expand the present customised transport service. The fleet of vehicles managed by Handicaps Welfare Association and Society for Aid to Paralysed could be centralized to meet economy of scale. The fleet of vehicles could be increased with the support of additional grants from the Transport Authority to operate the transport system more efficiently. To make it viable, the fleet of vehicles should be allowed to pick up passengers when they are not used by the disabled.

Proactive Management

The service delivery system of some agencies must be reviewed to make it more cost effective. Agencies serving a small declining number of the disabled should join force with needy disabled agencies to serve a bigger pool of other disabled. Better use of space and facilities for vocational training could result with the pooling of agencies and their resources. Where possible, control by interested parties and groups in the management of agencies should be prevented. This will reduce parochial interest in the management and better strategies for the employability of the disabled could be implemented without delay.

Co-operative Workshops and Enterprises

The prospects for setting up co-operative workshops and enterprises to take on contract work such as packaging, horticultural, environmental, cleansing and building maintenance have not been fully explored. Viable co-operative enterprises through share ownership by the disabled and his family members, interested individuals, trade unions, and business could be established. These certainly generate more gainful employment for the disabled.

CONCLUSION

It must be realized that despite all these programmes and the legislation, administration, technical assistance and funds devoted to them, large numbers of people with disabilities have not yet found working opportunities that meet their basic social and economic needs.

While employer attitudes are without doubt an important factor in many cases and there is much room for improvement in this area, other considerations are also decisive to many disabled individuals. Among those problems frequently observed are - insufficient or

inappropriate education and training or experience, transportation problems in reaching the place of work, demands or constraints imposed by family members, unrealistic job aspirations, social and cultural problems, and personality complications. In short, people with disabilities are liable to all of the problems that affect everyone.

We will not solve the problems of employment for disabled people in an acceptable fashion, unless and until we find ways to create significantly large numbers of work opportunities that are accessible to them and that are socially and economically viable.

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