

Research Article

Impact of Covid-19 on the Differently Abled - A Study of Urban India Residents

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Date of Submission: 19/12/2020; Date of Acceptance: 05/02/2021

ABSTRACT

A crisis exposes and intensifies the sufferings of the underprivileged sections of the society. COVID-19 was such an event which unveiled the structural inadequacies for the welfare of the weak and disempowered. One such disempowered group is Persons with Disabilities (PwD). The report by National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP) points out how the pandemic has had an uneven impact on people with disabilities. One of the major reasons for the invisibility of the pain and suffering of the disabled is due to lack of representation in the state machinery. Within the disabled peoples, the economically lower class is placed at a further disadvantageous position.

Keywords: Class perspective, Covid-19, Differently abled, Government aid, Representation

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent law enforcement as deterrence mechanisms against the spread of the disease have had an unequivocally disproportionate impact on the people with disabilities. In this paper we are going to particularly focus on people with physical disabilities/ differently abled. Due to the contagious nature of the Covid-19 virus, governments across the globe brought about measures of 'social distancing' (to maintain a minimum physical distance in person to person interactions). Other measures like 'lock downs', restricted the movement of people across the globe,

between states, between cities as well as between urban and rural and in the initial days when the lock down rules were dire, movement within one's close locale was also prohibited.

Of course these measures were undertaken by respective governments to contain the spread of the disease. But the underprivileged in the society had to face a disproportionate brunt of the pandemic's attack and cases across the globe point towards disproportionate victimisation of the disempowered sections in the society. From migrant workers in India, to women worldwide, the impact of the pandemic has been uneven on the populace.

One such 'disadvantaged people' are the differently abled people. The pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented increase in load to their already existing sufferings and hardships. This paper attempts to understand the impact of the pandemic on the physically disabled population residing in the urban areas in India.

OBJECTIVES

1. First, to understand the impact of Covid-19 on differently abled people in urban areas.
2. Second, in relation to the first objective, the second objective is to understand the economic class undertones which are affecting the lives of the differently abled.
3. Third, this paper will touch upon government aid and the question of representation for people with disabilities.

METHODOLOGY

The research work started with preliminary informal conversations with a variety of differently abled people residing in Guwahati, Delhi, Thiruvananthapuram, Aligarh-people with Parkinson's, osteoporosis and visually impaired. Also data was gathered from various secondary sources which include online webinars which deal with the given subject as well as published reports. The researchers attempted to know about the participants' personal history with the disease, his/her socio economic position and how they managed their lives during the lockdown period. The information and data so collected will be complemented with a few secondary sources/ newspaper reports which have reported issues on similar lines during the ongoing pandemic crisis.

CASE STUDY

In the primary data/ information collection step, the researchers have interacted with eleven people residing in urban areas in the age group of 25 to 75 years. Four of the

participants are female while seven are male. Six participants are from Guwahati, three from New Delhi, one from Thiruvananthapuram (who later moved to his hometown ‘Patna’ few days prior to the lockdown) and one from Aligarh. In the age category, four of the participants are in their 20s, two are in their 50s, four are in their 60s and one at the age of 75. All the participants are residing in urban areas and belong to the middle to upper-middle class economic spectrum. In this research we have handpicked people who are economically better off and compared their experiences with the reports (secondary data) which covered the experiences of those not so well off sections within the differently abled populace.

Among the eleven participants, five are suffering from Parkinson’s and one each suffering from Osteoporosis and Movement Disability, four are visually impaired. Among the four visually impaired, three suffer from partial blindness while one suffers from complete blindness. The following table gives us the information of the participants:

Participants	Disability Type	Gender	Duration of Disability	Age	Family Type	Urban Residence
Participant 1	Parkinson’s	Male	6 Years	67	Nuclear	Guwahati
Participant 2	Parkinson’s	Male	13 Years	57	Joint	Guwahati
Participant 3	Parkinson’s	Male	5 Years	55	Nuclear	Guwahati
Participant 4	Parkinson’s	Male	10 Years	75	Joint	Guwahati
Participant 5	Osteoporosis	Female	Since Birth	65	Sole Member	Guwahati
Participant 6	Visual Impairment	Male	15 Years	26	Hostel	Delhi
Participant 7	Movement Disability: Orthopedically Handicapped	Male	Since Birth	27	Hostel	Thiruvananthapuram
Participant 8	Parkinson’s	Female	6 Years	65	Nuclear	Guwahati
Participant 9	Visual Impairment	Female	Since Birth	26	Nuclear	Delhi
Participant 10	Visually Impairment	Male	Since Birth	60+	Nuclear	Delhi
Participant 11	Visual Impairment	Female	Since Birth	27	Hostel	Aligarh

What it means to be a disabled amidst the Pandemic?

For the disabled, “living with disabilities has been more of a task post-lockdown because of government negligence, combined with inaccessibility to healthcare and rewarding employment. A large class divide has become increasingly visible in the lockdown” (Suchitra, 2020). According to a report by the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), “over 73% of those interviewed were facing particular challenges on account of the lockdown” (NCPEDP Report, 2020).

Social distancing has left all of us distressed. There are reports of depression and anxiety on the high amidst the lockdown (Sharma, 2020). However, still, social distancing can be afforded by the privileged but the costs are much higher for the differently abled. **Participant 4** is the oldest among the participants (75 Years old) and suffering from Parkinson's. His mobility has been restricted due to the lockdown. Prior to the lockdown he used to attend physiotherapy sessions provided by Parkinson's Disease and Movement Disorder Society (PDMDS), an NGO working for the welfare of people with Parkinson's Disease. After the lockdown was imposed, sessions of PDMDS are being conducted online. He has not been able to regularly follow up with the online physiotherapy sessions, as a result his Parkinson's Disease has become severe. As exercise is the only important medicine against Parkinson's, the recent lockdown has been a serious issue for people with this condition. Moreover, due to the contagious nature of the Covid-19 as well as the strict social distancing norms, they are skeptical to call for a physiotherapist.

Participant 7 (a 26-year-old doing his MA in Economics from Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram), who suffers from movement disability mentioned that the risks of getting infected was higher in his case as he has to use his hands to move around (in case of non-availability of wheel chair). He has to climb on the back of another person or use his hands as fore limbs to move about in the non-availability of a wheel chair. People in general are skeptical of carrying him on their back given the contagious nature of the virus. Thus, revealing how the social distance provisions further handicaps an already disabled person. He talked about his struggle in various institutions where he studied (earlier in Delhi and then in Thiruvananthapuram) to ensure infrastructural and institutional sensibility towards the physically disabled.

Participant 1 suffers from constipation problem which is one of the major issues of people with Parkinson's. With the recent lockdown, he is not being able to go out for morning walks and as a result his constipation problem has aggravated. He is a doctor himself and has been suffering from Parkinson's from the past six years. This lockdown in general has affected his daily routine. Prior to the pandemic, he usually went out for walks on a daily basis and on Sundays he used to go for the physiotherapy sessions (under PDMDS). These activities have been grossly reduced as a result of the lockdown. These days occasionally he goes to the ATM. He said he makes sure he doesn't spend much time outside. The lockdown has affected his mobility, and sometimes it makes him feel completely isolated and lonely. In a house of only two members, his wife who is also aged and himself, he feels out of touch from society. He doesn't even like to talk. He has other issues as well. He is a diabetic and has an eye problem. He has not been able to visit the doctor and doesn't feel positive about it since his section of the population (age wise) are highly vulnerable.

Participant 2 has been suffering from Parkinson's since the past 13 years. He feels this lock down has not impacted him much. He has a family with close bonding which assists him in his daily chores. He is being able to do his physical exercises as he has enough space in his apartment. **Participant 3** is suffering from Parkinson's from the past 5 years. The lockdown has not affected him much as he stays in a closed residential campus. He feels like he has enough space to walk and do his recreational activities.

Participant 6 has been suffering from partial blindness from the age of 11 years old. He feels the nature of the pandemic has impacted him (and other blind people alike) in a big way since the basic precaution to avert the spread of the virus is by maintaining social distancing norms. Thus, the very act of 'touching' which is the basic elemental act for the blind to function and understand the world has been stigmatised due to contagious nature of the virus. Travelling has been a concern for them, because travelling without touching is problematic for them. He described an incident when in one of the public wash rooms washing hands was a problem since he was not being able to recognize the press button of hand wash and pedal of foot operated sanitizer machines.

Participant 6 also mentioned how the airports are not blind friendly. Travelling by air some people had very bad experiences, the air hostesses are not holding their hands to direct them and are simply directing them through voice instructions. The perception of air travel during the pandemic according to **Participant 6** is contradictory to that of **Participant 7** (as we shall see in the next part). This may be because participant 7 used air travel few days before the lockdown while participant 6 is talking about circumstances post lock down when restrictions on air travel were lifted in a phase wise manner but the stigma regarding 'touch' and social intimacy still remained intact.

Participant 8 is a housewife and is suffering from Parkinson's from the past 6 years now. She is 65 years old. Her husband worked in a company and her only child has been married off and is settled in Mumbai. Being a woman and a housewife she has to do all the household activities. She said her body pains a lot. Even the medicines are not working. During this pandemic, her helper is not being able to come to her house every day, as a result she has to do all the household activities. However, she says, the pandemic has been sort of a benefit in disguise for her as she has been able to attend the online exercise sessions (which otherwise happens in offline sessions). The pandemic has not particularly reduced her physical mobility since even on normal days (prior to the pandemic) she didn't go out often as she cannot walk comfortably.

Participant 9 and **Participant 10** are related. The former is the daughter of the latter (father). Both of them suffer from congenital cataracts. The father used to work with

‘Times of India’ newspaper. He took voluntary retirement in 2014 when his vision was almost completely gone. The daughter is doing her M.Phil. in Delhi University. The daughter suffers from partial impairment. Apart from the father and the daughter the researchers also got a chance to interact with the mother as well. She is the Principal of a school in Delhi. Amidst the pandemic the mother is taking care of the family. For buying the essentials the mother of the house goes out as, given the circumstances, she can best do the job. The father and the daughter generally stay indoors as the mother can best take precaution of ‘social-distancing’ while going out, minimising the risks of contracting the virus.

Participant 11 is suffering from Amblyopia. She can partially see through one eye (uses glasses powered at minus 7). She is a PhD student at Aligarh Muslim University. She says during the pandemic the university is trying to force them to leave by various means such as closing up the mess (canteen). Most people have left, but she is skeptical about leaving since the “risks of getting infected as well as costs of treatment are quite high... the campus is under complete lockdown since March 20 and we are not being able to go out to get print out of reading materials also” she says. Prior to AMU, she did her graduation from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) and post-graduation from Pondicherry university. She says that the educational institutions are not disabled friendly (which reiterates what Participant 7 had to say). She says “providing reservations is not enough if you don’t provide with the basic functional amenities”. The infrastructure of the campus- washrooms, staircases, etc. - is not disabled friendly.

Overall on the education front, most of the student participants pointed out that the ‘webinars’ which are being conducted during the pandemic have helped them to keep up with their studies. However, students (like participant 6) who went home (in rural Uttar Pradesh) during the pandemic have complained about high speed internet connectivity problems. This exposes the issues of technological accessibility pertaining to rural urban divide. This can be addressed with the Government’s aim to take broadband connections to all villages of India by 2022 (The Hindu, 2019).

Class Dimension Among the Disabled

“According to professional psychologists, individuals with disability and their families are at a greater risk of poor health and quality of life outcomes because either their social status is affected by their disabilities or their disabilities are made worse by the inaccessibility that comes with social status. Lower income levels have been consistently correlated with poor health and inferior quality of life” (Suchitra, 2020). Even depression is reported to be high amongst the underprivileged sections. The research published in “the special issue on SARS-CoV-2 (covid-19) of Epidemiology International journal,

concluded that depression is high among people and it was significantly more in illiterate, unskilled and skilled workers and those who belong to lower socioeconomic groups” (Sharma, 2020).

As we have seen the disabled have faced the brunt of the lock down in a unique way. However, within the disabled, the economically poor is even worse off. **Participant 7** talked about how he perceived his economically better off position helped him to deal with his disability in general and the pandemic in particular in a better way. He suffers from Movement Disability (Orthopedically Handicapped). At the beginning of the pandemic alert in India, few days before the lockdown, he booked a flight back home. He says that his air travel was not much different from his air travel experiences in normal times (this might be because he took the flight before the lockdown was announced indicating that the risks of the virus was not yet much sensitized). In general, he says, he is really satisfied with air travel experiences considering his disability issue.

Participant 5 is suffering from Osteoporosis. Among the participants interviewed for this research, her socio-economic position was least well off. She gets a pension of around 25,000 rupees per month, which according to her is not enough to suffice the month (prior to her retirement she worked a clerical job at the District and Sessions Court, Guwahati). She is staying alone with a caretaker; she feels vulnerable staying alone with a caretaker. Because of the lockdown, even her relatives are not being able to visit her and as a result she feels depressed and lonely. She feels the government compensation for the disabled is very less- around INR 1000 (the compensation is in addition to her pension amount). She is currently having financial constraints as a result she cannot afford a professional caregiver. She feels she needs a better company. She is paralyzed since her birth. She is bed ridden. However, with little help she can walk, otherwise she is totally dependent on wheelchair.

The differently-abled have to fight for their survival every day. And the struggle is even worse when one has no socio-economic security. Compared to the participants in this research who come from an economically well off background, let us compare examples cited in an article in ‘The Hindu’ about two families with a background of physical disability struggling to make it each day. Both the cases according to the article are based in Wazirabad, New Delhi. Pulinder, 49, is paralysed due to epileptic seizure and his wife has been supporting the family for the last 2 years. She works in a steel line. “Post the lockdown, the families have got absolutely no support from the government or from their employer. She has not received wages from the steel line she works at, and Mr Pulinder has not been able to get access to proper medication for his condition” (Suchitra, 2020). The second case is about a family where the husband, Sajjad, lost the use of his legs in an accident couple of years ago. Naznin,

Sajjad's wife, takes care of the family. Lately it has been impossible for her to manage when she has to manage standing in long queues for ration and simultaneously take care of her husband and three small children back home (Suchitra, 2020).

The economic tragedies add up to the overall tragedy of the disabled and their families. The economically well off are able to fend off the harsher conditions due to their economic privilege while for the economically not so privileged class, the economic miseries add up to their burden of pain they suffer endlessly.

Being poor-disabled is a cyclic process. When one is born to a poor family, one's nutrition intake is affected by the underlining near poverty circumstances of the family, which in turn affects the lifelong health of individuals. Similarly, mother's health is also important and it is important that a pregnant woman consume nutrient rich food items for her health as well as the health of the upcoming child. Government Schemes like Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana as well as Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan are welcome measures towards ensuring good health of the mother as well as upcoming child.

Government aid

On the third day of the first lockdown (March 26), under Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana, the Finance Minister announced 1000 rupees as a one-time payment in two instalments over 3 months for Persons with Disabilities (for Divyang welfare). Similarly, various state governments have undertaken initiatives to aid to disabled. The central government has come up with the 'comprehensive disability inclusive guidelines' for the states to follow. The central government has asked the state governments to circulate the information related to the pandemic in Braille, audio tapes and video-graphic material. However, many of these announced initiatives have failed to reach the beneficiaries. Also the NCPEDP report shows that with regard to various issues such as communication, information, access to essentials and medical aid, the interests of the disabled have been left out.

Issue of under Representation

One of the major reasons for the suffering of the disabled is because their voice is invisible in the dominant narrative. Thus no surprise that "In the Pandemic, the disabled remain an invisible minority" (Suchitra 2020).

According to **participant 6**, who is doing his Master of Education (M. ED) from Delhi University, there is no practical work on ground reality for the cause of the disabled because the government committees are formed by 'normal people' (term

used by the participant himself), who would probably not understand and probably be difficult to empathize with the severity of everyday lives of the differently abled. There should be more disabled people in the committees so that laws to be framed are inclusive of different types of differently abled people.

Participant 9 says that mere government initiatives wouldn't suffice. She says society needs to change its outlook towards the differently abled and mere laws although well intentioned can prove to be ineffective. Thus policy changes must be accompanied with social awareness programmes that would initiate the process of societal empathy towards the differently abled.

Talking about problems of representation, **Participant 11** says, the problem of representation of differently abled is complex in nature. She gives the example of negligible representation of 'dumb and deaf category' in teaching jobs in the universities. She says "the work of this category of differently abled is restricted to low paid administrative jobs".

Participant 10 says that in the case of visual impairment, there is a general tendency to assume all categories of visual impairment under one umbrella category which he thinks is not correct. The issues faced by a concerned person will be based on the 'degree of blindness' which will not be the same across various categories.

Initially when the Aarogya Setu App was launched for contact tracing and avert the risks of the virus spreading, it wasn't made user friendly for disabled people (Nath, 2020). Preeti Singh a disability rights activist with cerebral palsy attributed the left behind attitude of policy makers towards the cause of the disabled due to no representation of the disabled in the parliament. Singh talks about the need of a consolidated Ministry for the disabled instead of rebranding them as 'Divyang' (Suchitra, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Most of the aged people suffering from Parkinson's are not being able to attend the physiotherapy sessions which is negatively affecting their health. Some old participants are not comfortable with technology and as a result not being able to avail the online services provided by non-governmental organizations like free online physiotherapy sessions. For conditions like osteoporosis, blindness and movement disorders where it is nearly impossible to do without physical 'touch', the 'no- touch' social distance stigma has added to their miseries. However, one's economic conditions determine the direness of the impact of pandemic and the lockdown on the people with disabilities. In order to design proper policies that accrue to the needs of the differently abled,

there needs to be proper representation of different categories of differently abled people in the decision making bodies.

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How to cite this article: Choudhury, T. and Changkakati, C. (2021) 'Impact of Covid-19 on the Differently Abled - A Study of Urban India Residents', *Journal of Exclusion Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, pp. 119-128.