

The Role of Political Parties in India to the Development of Disabled Persons in the 21st Century

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Abstract: *Political parties in India play a crucial role in addressing the needs of various social groups, including persons with disabilities. While political manifestos often highlight issues related to governance, economic policies, and social justice, the representation and welfare of disabled individuals remain a subject of debate. Historically, policy decisions for persons with disabilities have been influenced more by international advocacy and legal frameworks rather than proactive political initiatives. Despite India enacting various disability rights laws and policies, their implementation largely depends on political commitment. This study critically examines the role of Indian political parties in advocating for and implementing policies for persons with disabilities. By analyzing historical trends, election manifestos, legislative measures, and international influences, this research highlights the gaps in political representation and policy execution. The study also underscores the need for inclusive political participation, policy prioritization, and effective governance to ensure the rights and development of persons with disabilities in India.*

Keywords: disability rights, Indian politics, political parties, social inclusion, policy implementation

Political parties in India have greater role to play in terms of bringing all round development by giving voice to the vulnerable sections of the society like persons with disabilities as opposition and by taking as well as implementing enriched public policies consistent with the demands of the populace as ruling political party or parties. But what parties are doing practically is a matter of debate and discussion. This is also relevant for Indian democracy. What is being done in terms of taking care of persons with disabilities in India by Indian political parties is the topic to be pondered in the context of 21st century India. According to Finer, "Representative government is party government."¹ Therefore, the development of any section of a country depends on political parties to a great extent. In India according to 2011 census disabled persons are 2.68 crores in number. Now the number has increased obviously and few are of the opinion that it reaches at 4.52% of the population of India². So, it's high time to critically evaluate the role of political parties of India in terms of providing amenities for all round development of the persons with disabilities.

In different manifestos different political parties in India put forward their preference on various problems and issues related to society, polity, governance and the rest. Keeping close eye on the manifesto of a party, its view point in multiple matters could be scanned as well as diagnosed straightforwardly. It can also be said that manifesto reveals, to some extent, the true intention of a political party about the way it would like to follow to resolve the problems or issues prevailing in a particular society or state. In another word, it could doubtlessly be claimed that party –manifesto is a kind of mirror reflecting the true nature of a political party. In this context, we could discuss the problems of Disabled Persons in India, the solution they need and the contribution of political parties in this aspect.

In India now there are few national political parties like National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party and so no as well as over seven hundred regional political parties like TMC,

CPI, CPIM etc. These political parties have their own ideologies, Visions and missions. Every party has its own history and context responsible for the creation of it. Moreover, to survive and get the power in the democratic structure every political party need to articulate demands and supports of the citizens of the particular province or the country as a whole. At this juncture every vote counts. So every group of people is valuable. Actually, if some people come together for fulfilling the interest of their own community or religion or culture or society etc , political parties jump over the group for capturing the total votes of it. In doing so, political parties are always in search of issues related to vote bank and at the time of election such issues and problems are articulated to the manifesto in a sophisticated way. When a political party wins the election and gets power, tries to implement its vision and mission in a manner so that they could sustain the power in the following elections also. Following the process every political party identifies the groups inclined to the party and estimates its pocket votes. In the similar fashion, political parties identify the groups or people acting against the party. Besides, so many people or groups are there who are acting separately or independently for which party doesn't give emphasis on them. In this context we could discuss the problems and issues related to persons with disability in India. In India now the numbers of disabled Persons are more than four crores which are more than the total number of citizens of many countries like Israel, Denmark etc. Is it possible to ignore these huge numbers of citizens at age of vote-bank politics? If not, then how these numbers should be treated--- this is an important question. To answer the question we have to go deep into the real facts and it deserves a holistic research programme. In such a context, this research paper has been designed with full of significant and relevant data, valuable interviews, consistent comparative analysis, positive as well as life-affirming experiences, mentionable and executable suggestions.

Now we need to take a quick look on the condition of disabled persons in India since independence. Actually, no affirmative step had been taken by the government of India immediate after independence in favour of disabled persons. Interestingly, there was no room for disabled persons in the census of India from 1941 to 71. In 1981 census data in terms of disabled persons had been taken; but in 1991 census once again data collection for disabled persons had been stopped. In the 21st Century new initiatives have been seen to emphasise disabled persons in the census of India. Practically, Nehruvian policy believed in welfarism instead of rights in terms of the development of disabled persons of our country. So from the end of government of India one thing was done for the betterment of disabled persons and that was just to motivate people to make organisations for giving aids and assistance to the disabled persons. Such practices were going on until middle of 1980s. In 1987 for the first time in Indian history an act was passed in the parliament of India in relation with the disabled persons in India and that was the 'Mental health Act 1987'.

Now the question arises here which are responsible for such path breaking step? Let's go deep into it. If political parties should be credited for such legislation, party manifestos must be adorned with the intimation regarding such step. But the manifesto³ of Congress party on eve of 1984 general election used one point for the disabled persons in India and there were no hints of the said legislation. Therefore, it could be undoubtedly uttered that the then ruling party congress was less interested in the matter. But ultimately the legislation was taken. Now the question is why? What was the driving force behind it? To find out the answer we need to expand our sight to the national and international advocacy movements and other related events. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the 1971 Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons followed by the Declaration of the Rights of Disabled Persons on 9 December 1975. 1981 was considered as the International Year of Disabled Persons. The Year was followed by the Decade (1983-1992) of Disabled Persons. A global meeting of experts in 1987 to review progress recommended that the UN General Assembly should draft an international convention on the elimination of discrimination against persons with disabilities. These events created the environment conducive to the act of mental health in India.

Second, in 1992 the Rehabilitation Council of India Act was passed. It is an Act to provide for the constitution of Rehabilitation Council of India for regulating the training of rehabilitation professionals and the maintenance of a Central Rehabilitation Register and for Matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. Now the question is whether manifestos of political parties in the previous elections focused on it? The answer is no. Specifically, the ruling party congress didn't write anything on that particular matter. Then, what is the cause behind the introduction of the said act? Let's see. The Pennsylvania Early Intervention Services System Act-212,1990; Capitol Crawl Protest, March 12, 1990 and Federal Government of the USA made autism a special education category, 1991 are the background behind the aforementioned act.⁴

Third, India enacted the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunity, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act in 1995 to provide recognition to the rights and special needs of disabled people in the country. It also provided for reservations for persons with disabilities in government jobs and higher educational institutions. The act is considered as paradigm shift in respect of the development of disabled persons in India. In 1989 election manifesto of Congress party didn't go for promising any benefit for disabled persons in India. Moreover, in 1991 election manifesto of Congress party shed no tears for the disabled persons in India. In the manifesto of BJP in 1991 it was promised to take care of disabled persons in India. But assurance of encouraging people to set up organisations for the betterment of handicapped was given. Another assurance was that they also would be provided with certain jobs available for them. Therefore, let's take a look on international as well as national events or incidents paving the way for the said legislation. In the context of progress in regional peace, economic dynamism, and a heightened sense of concern for the most vulnerable of disadvantaged social groups, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) at its forty eighth session, held at Beijing in 1992, adopted resolution 48/3 which proclaimed the period 1993-2002 as the Asian and Pacific Decade of Disabled Persons.⁵ The protests were part of a movement to end discrimination against disabled people and pass civil rights legislation. In 1995, the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed in the parliament of UK, making it illegal for employers and service providers to discriminate against disabled people. On the other hand, in 1995 India witnessed a series of protests and petitions for the rights of people with disabilities (PWDs) that also created the environment to the passing of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, or PWD Act. More than 100,000 people took part in the protests in some way, whether handcuffing themselves to buses or joining demonstrations outside Parliament. That particular environment ultimately paved the path of the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 (PWD Act) passed by the Indian Parliament on December 12, 1995 and it was implemented on February 7, 1996.

Fourth, The National Trust Act of 1999 was passed in India on December 30, 1999. The act established a national body to help people with autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and multiple disabilities. The act also includes provisions for guardianship for people with these disabilities. In such a case same conclusion can be made. Because in 1999 election manifesto BJP invest no word for disabled persons in India. In the manifesto of CPIM in 1999 no word was written for the disabled persons in India. That means not the parties, but the national and international advocacy movements or UNOs initiative created the environment.

Fifth, in 2006, India released the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities⁶, which aimed to create an environment that would provide equal opportunities and protection of rights for people with disabilities. The policy also zeroed in on the matter that people with disabilities could fully participate in society. Now let's have a look on the

manifestos of political parties published before taking the policy. In 2004 manifesto of CPIM, Congress and Trinomool Congress no single word was written specifically in favour of disabled persons in India. The manifesto of the Congress party in 2004¹⁵ consists so many things like 'key issue', 'why congress again?'. But no word or sentence has been used for disabled people in India. Moreover, the manifesto revealed the achievements of the Congress party in terms of providing governance in India during last 45 years under the heading of " of 45 Years Achievements. " but there also the manifesto didn't claim any contribution for the disabled people. The manifesto of CPIM in 2004⁷ consists of two major things like anti- BJP campaign and opposition to USA in the one hand and focus vaguely on some stereotype ideals like secularism, federalism, upper hand of public sector, China - Russia -Pakistan friendly foreign policy etc. But the party overlooked the problems of disabled persons. Only BJP gave some assurance through its 2004 manifesto. According to the 2004 election manifesto of BJP⁸ 5% Indians were disabled and they had been neglected for long time. Therefore, focus was given on education and vocational training of the disabled persons in India. Assurance was given on disabled -friendly access to public buildings and transport. It was also promised to give full support to the organisations working for the care of disabled persons in India. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)⁹ was adopted by UN General Assembly on December 13, 2006 and opened for signing by the state parties on March 30, 2007. Adoption of the Convention has really imparted empowerment to persons with disabilities across the world to demand their rights and make State, private and civil society agencies accountable for enjoying their rights. India is one of the few first countries which approved the Convention. Consequent upon signing the Convention on March 30, 2007, India ratified the Convention on 01.10.2007. The Convention has come into force from May 3, 2008. In that context the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006 was adopted.

Sixth, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act)¹⁰ is a law in India that aims to give effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The act was passed by the Indian Parliament in 2016 and came in to effect in June 2017. Now if we watch the act through the lens of party manifesto, what will be the result? In 2009 BJP manifesto¹¹ on the eve of Lok Sabha election the party promised to take care of disabled persons in India through various problem-solving projects. Arrangements of vocational training, disabled friendly premises in the government institutions and transport, establishment of disabled friendly institution in terms of providing training at every district in India, providing more incentive to those adopted disabled children are the assurance declared in the manifesto. Congress manifesto in 2009¹² included the word 'disabled' to ensure comprehensive social security to those at special risk. The CPIM manifesto in 2009 put forward few things like strengthening the persons with disability act, proper utilisation of reservations scheduled for the 'disabled, barrier free access to public building, transport etc. But nothing more has been illustrated regarding this. And interestingly, an assurance was given to the **weaker section** of the society where disabled persons

had not been included. BJP in its 2014 manifesto focused on the problems of Disabled Persons. According to the manifesto, the problems of Disabled are a 'serious neglect'¹³ which must be pondered over. Here is the important thing that BJP in the manifesto the assured of enactment of the 'Right to the Persons with Disability Bill'. Second, it also zeroes in on the initiation of e- learning system for the disabled Persons with minimum cost. Third, it was mentioned that Universal ID for every disabled person would be made for all the applicable government benefits. Fourth, the manifesto claimed to provide disabled friendly government buildings or institutions. Besides, few other facilities like higher tax relief for the family member of disabled person had been announced in this regard. But what is essential to mention is that no reservations for disabled Persons in the parliament or state legislative assembly had been assured or announced in the BJP manifesto in 2014¹⁴. Another party which has shown its potentiality in the 21st Century is Trinomool Congress (TMC). Therefore, its manifesto deserves to be analysed with preference. But it's very pathetic to utter that no word had been used in the manifesto of TMC to concentrate on the disabled persons in India. There were so many things like empowerment of women, minority, disadvantaged groups such as ST, SC, OBC etc. But the problems of disabled persons were totally ignored by the party.

Besides, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Amendment) Act, 2022 was a bill introduced in 2022 to amend the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.¹⁶ The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Amendment) Bill, 2022 proposed to establish the National Commission for Persons with Disabilities and appoint its members and officers. The bill also proposed to provide salaries and allowances for the commission members and chairperson. In the manifesto of BJP in 2019¹⁴ disabled persons got priority. It was promised to start ratings of cities, airports etc in terms of disabled friendly access. In 2019 BJP manifesto also zeroes in on the priority of disabled persons in regard to get benefit from PM Awas Jyोजना. Assurance of giving extra benefits for fixed deposit for disabled persons in India was also given.

As far as 2024 Lok Sabha election is concerned the Congress party manifesto used few sentences with nine commitments for disabled persons in India. One of the mentionable assurances is to implement the 'Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2016'. Most importantly the assurance of reservation for persons with disability in the government bodies has been mentioned. Besides, other assurance like establishment a research centre for the enhancement of education of persons with disability made in the manifesto. But they didn't clarify why disabled persons have been ignored since independence, though Congress government was there for about five decades. Not only that no innovative plans have been announced in the manifesto. BJP listed two key promises for PWDs. These are affordable indigenous assistive devices and affordable housing priority under PM Awas Yोजना. However BJP have made significant efforts to implement their previous promises.¹⁷ In 2024 Lok Sabha manifesto Aam Admi Party (AAP) decided to put forward 10 point agenda. But there was no agenda for disabled persons in India. Another important party Dravida Munnetra

Kazhagam(DMK) made promises in its manifesto before 2024 election, though it was lacking or giving minimal focus on the agenda related to the problems of disabled persons in India. CPI(M) released its manifesto in sign language and out of 44 pages one page is dedicated to PWDs.¹⁸

Now it's required to mention another important role played or should be played by the political parties in favour of disabled persons in India. Still now what we have done is to highlight the role of political parties in India in terms of interest articulation and interest aggregation for the betterment of disabled persons of our country. The report of United Nation Development Programme, 2021 put emphasis on other role of parties in terms of the upliftment of disabled persons. These are like – to support persons with disability to stand as candidate in the elections, to “promote inclusiveness in their membership by reaching out to and involving them in other ways”, to “promote legislative and parliamentary measures” etc.¹⁹ Complying with the report role of political parties except interest articulation and interest aggregation in terms of the development of disabled persons could be analysed in the following manner:

- 1) Membership Distribution--- political parties always intend to increase their member (leaders and cadres). Some time parties have some priority depending on the demography of a particular constituency. So, for the sake of development of disabled persons parties should offer membership on a priority basis. But, the real picture is quite different in case of promoting party leader and cadre having disability. M. Karunanidhi, Sadhan Gupta, Jaipal Reddy, Ismail Hossain Khan, Yamuna Prasad Shastri were too few in number who served Indian politics ignoring their disability. Now Sharad Power and few others are representing the disabled persons in the political arena of India.
- 2) Party union formation--- Each party has its own unions or wings or cells like students' unions, trade unions, minority cell, obc cell etc. in order to bring the people of such community together and make sure the enhancement of vote bank. But it's fact that leading political parties don't have any interest to run union for disabled persons. Few individuals related to political party try to form and run groups of disabled persons. Though these are influenced by political ideologies, to the true sense of the term these are individual attempts. These are not mainstream party unions.
- 3) Representation to Parliament or Assemblies: No political party in India is eager to nominate or elect disabled persons neither in state legislative assembly or the parliament nor in the local bodies like panchayats or municipalities, though there may be exceptional cases.
- 4) Goal setting of the disabled by the disabled: If there is underrepresentation of the disabled persons in all the political parties, the goal for the betterment of the disabled can't be set by themselves.
- 5) Disabled- friendly election process: In every step of election process like propaganda making, canvassing, leaflet publishing etc should be disabled-friendly, though it's almost absence in the Indian political system.

At the end it is supposed that the role of political parties of India in terms of development of disabled persons must be measured preferably by disabled persons themselves.

First, on the eve of 2024 general election the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People published and released “Manifesto for and by Citizens with Disability”. It consists of ten key demands²⁰ Points are as follows:

- 1) Budgetary allocation: 5% budgetary allocation is demanded.
- 2) Health Insurance: Affordable as well as accessible health insurance for all disabled persons is claimed.
- 3) Accessibility and inclusiveness in public as well as private buildings, services, transport and communication system are called for.
- 4) In the name of social security five thousand /month has been urged for every disabled person in India.
- 5) Amendment of Article 15 to include ‘Disability’, 5% reservation at all levels of governance, appointment of disabled persons by the President of India have been demanded.
- 6) Accessibility to work at small, medium scale enterprises has been urged.
- 7) National Mission on climate change for disable persons is called for.
- 8) They also urged to smart phone access for girls with disability.
- 9) Another demand is to provide accessible and inclusive sports infrastructure for disabled athlete.
- 10) Besides, more enrollments of children in the education system are also demanded.

At the introductory part in the manifest it is claimed in an outright manner that “We, The Citizens with Disability in India demand that all Political Parties consider us part of the development agenda.”²¹ According to the manifesto so many steps have already been made in terms of policy making, but now what is essential is to act practically. With their own voice, “We, more than 1 crore voters need affirmative action.”²²

Second, The Joint Action Committee of Persons with Disabilities Against Communal and Hate Politics is of the opinion that “the BJP's manifesto in 2014 had assurances such as working towards a barrier-free environment and a disaggregated data base, which they alleged, have not moved beyond paper.”²³

Third, On the basis of the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994 T. Kavita, a hearing-impaired tailor was turned aside to contest panchayat election in 2011.²⁴

Fourth, according to the Supreme Court's order on the Disabled Rights Group vs. Union of India case (2000) the Election Commission of India took initiatives to make polling booth accessible to disabled persons.²⁵ But disabled person like Priya Srivastava became unable to cast her vote through EVM during a state election due to inaccessible polling booth for the disabled persons.²⁶ Same incident happened during the Karnataka Assembly Election held in 2023. Though Anitha(38) arrived at the polling centre by

travelling 20 km, she became unable to cast her vote due to inaccessible booth for wheelchair user.²⁷

Fifth, in the first conference of the National Platform for the Rights of Disabled (NPRD) It was urged, "Like Gender budgeting, there should be budgeting for the disabled as well."²⁸

Sixth, The Vikalachetanara Rajakeeya Meesalati Horata Samiti is of the opinion that due to lack of interest by the administration majority of the schemes for disabled persons are not being properly implemented. So they demand reservation for persons with disability for their political stability.²⁹

Seventh, Mr. Arman Ali, Executive Director of National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), "The discourse around disability rights in India began with the United Nations declaring 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons and further 1983-1992 was called the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons."³⁰ As far as the opinion of Mr. Ali is concerned two factors are the driving force behind what disabled persons in India have got still now. One is initiatives from the end of UNO and the second is advocacy groups like the Disabled Rights Group (DRG) – India's first platform for a cross-disability advocacy group formed by Late Mr. Javed Abidi. He has added that it is because of DRG Disability Act, 1995; inclusion of disability in the 2001 and 2011 census of India etc saw the sunlight. So, ultimately Mr. Ali indirectly has raised the question to the intension of political parties in terms of taking proper action in favour of disabled persons in India.

Eighth, another point is that persons with disabilities are invisible citizens, because in 2024 Lok Sabha election out of 543 seats not even one is won by disabled person, though they are huge in number.³¹

Ninth, 'Centre for Legal Policy' after analyzing these manifestos of the leading political parties of India put forward three critical issues which are missed out in the manifestos of political parties under the head of "Do the manifestos go far enough?"³² These are- as follows. a) Political; parties should focus on more nuance and ingenuity instead of making general promises. b) They must not be indifferent to the policy shift from 2006 policy to new National Disability Policy (in process) by the central government. c) The Disability commissions are like toothless tigers for they have only recommendatory powers. Parties are supposed to raise the issue.³³

Tenth, one of the members of Helen Keller Smriti Vidyamandir, Swapan Babu ³⁴(A blind person) is of the opinion that if the whole society is suffering from various problems like unemployment, devaluation of humanity etc, disabled persons will not be free from it. Therefore, the all round development of disabled persons can be achieved, when the whole society will be developed squarely. In this regard political parties have immense responsibility as well as accountability. Some are of the opinion that corruption, nepotism are the hindrances in terms of getting government schemes or facilities for the development of disabled persons. In the regard, political parties may show noticeable

role, though it is merely seen practically in India. Recently, another important thing that creates problems for huge number of disabled persons³⁵ that to get reservation in railway 50% disability is the minimum eligibility, though before it was 40%. But no political party has raised question on it.

Besides, budgetary allocations for disabled persons in India have not been enough as considered by the disabled persons themselves. Here also the negligence of political parties is found. In 2018-19 total amount allotted for the development of disabled persons in India was 1070 crores³⁶ but real expenditure was 1017 crores. In 2020-21 and 2022-23 the allotment (revised) was respectively 900 crores and 1015 crores³⁷. In 2023-24 the revised estimate was increased slightly and it was 1225.001 crores.³⁸ But the actual expenditure was 1143.89 crores.³⁹ The statistics clearly shows the need for more allocation for the disabled persons and which can't be possible without the initiative of political parties itself. Not only that there is the gap between budget estimate and revised estimate on the one hand and the revised estimate and actual expenditure on the other. Therefore, along with the increased allocation, it is also necessary to bring symmetry between real expenditure and the allocation. In one word, good intentions must be there from the end of political parties so that every step of government in favour of disabled persons would be taken up and materialise successfully.

In conclusion it could be uttered without hesitation that in India political parties have to shoulder the responsibility of persons with disability with avidity to implement the Sustainable Development Goal aiming for "Leaving no one behind"⁴⁰ by 2030. The vision for India@100⁴¹ should and must incorporate the problems of persons with disability and it could be possible if political parties show true intension in this matter. In real sense, modern democracy is a party-led democracy, not party-less democracy. International pressure, advocacy movements, rules and regulations ---everything may be there; but without intervention from the end of political parties, no rule or regulations or act will be successfully implemented to the true sense of the term.

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