



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Inclusive Policies for All: Achieving Disability Rights through Social Change and Legal Reform

Dinesh Kumar Mishra¹, Shivam Pandey²

¹ Teaching and Research Associate (Law) Gujarat National Law University, Gandhinagar

P.No.- 9986429703

² Teaching and Research Associate (Law) Gujarat National Law University, Gandhinagar

E-mail – shpandey@gnlu.ac.in

ABSTRACT :

This paper examines the evolution of disability rights, highlighting the shift from charity-based approaches to a broader movement advocating for legal equality and social inclusion. It contrasts the medical model of disability, which views impairments as individual deficits, with the social model, which emphasizes how societal barriers limit opportunities for disabled individuals. The social model gained prominence in the late 20th century and shifted the focus from medical treatment to systemic and environmental changes that enable inclusion. A key legal milestone in this transformation was the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, which provided legal protections against discrimination in education, employment, transportation, and public life. The paper also explores the global impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which urges countries to implement inclusive policies. Social movements and changes in media representation have played a crucial role in reducing stigma and promoting disability as a form of diversity. Despite significant progress, barriers to full inclusion remain, such as inaccessible infrastructure, economic inequality, and healthcare disparities. The paper concludes by recommending stronger legal enforcement, increased investment in accessible infrastructure, and public education campaigns to foster societal attitudes that support full participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of life.

Key – Words: Disability, Legal Equality, Disability Rights, United Nations, Healthcare

Introduction

Disability, as both a social and political issue, has undergone a profound transformation over the past several decades. Once treated primarily through the lens of charity or medical intervention, disability has increasingly been recognized as a civil rights concern, requiring legal protection, societal inclusion, and systemic change. The journey from the institutionalization of individuals with disabilities to the legal recognition of their rights has been driven by a combination of social movements, legal reforms, and shifts in public attitudes. Today, disability rights are understood not simply as the protection of individuals with impairments but as a matter of equality, access, and social justice. This research paper explores the intersection of social change and legal reform in the field of disability rights, focusing particularly on how inclusive policies can empower individuals with disabilities to participate fully and equally in society. The paper will argue that achieving true inclusion requires a dual approach: strong legal frameworks that enshrine the rights of individuals with disabilities, and robust social movements that challenge societal perceptions and dismantle the barriers that perpetuate exclusion. At the heart of this paper lies an exploration of the historical development of disability rights, focusing on two main approaches: the medical model and the social model of disability. The medical model, which views disability as an individual medical condition to be fixed or managed, has traditionally dominated public and institutional responses to disability¹. By contrast, the social model, which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, redefined disability as a consequence of societal barriers and discriminatory practices rather than an inherent flaw in the individual. This paradigm shift has had far-reaching implications for policy, legal reform, and the lived experiences of people with disabilities².

The paper will begin by outlining the historical context of disability rights, emphasizing the ways in which individuals with disabilities were marginalized in the past. It will then delve into the key legislative achievements, particularly the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was a landmark law in the United States that redefined disability as a civil rights issue. This law, and similar international frameworks like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), have played a critical role in shaping disability policies globally. These legal protections have not only facilitated physical access to spaces but have also helped shift public perceptions toward a more inclusive understanding of disability.

But, while legal reforms have been instrumental, the battle for disability rights extends beyond law-making. Social change is equally vital to overcoming the persistent cultural and structural barriers that still hinder the full participation of people with disabilities in society. This paper will explore the continuing challenges that individuals with disabilities face, including attitudinal barriers, inaccessible infrastructure, and ongoing economic inequality.

¹ K. Srinivasan, *Disability in India: From Welfare to Rights*, 2011.

² Shyam Sundar, *Disability Rights in India: Law and Policy*, 2015.

It will also discuss how movements for disability rights, media representation, and the recognition of disability as a form of diversity contribute to fostering a more inclusive social environment. At last, the paper will present recommendations for advancing inclusion in both legal and social realms. These recommendations will draw from global experiences and address ongoing gaps in policy implementation, as well as offer insights into how social attitudes can evolve toward greater acceptance and participation of people with disabilities³.

Historical Context of Disability Rights

The history of disability rights is one of marginalization, exclusion, and, increasingly, advocacy and legal recognition. For much of history, individuals with disabilities were perceived as objects of charity or pity rather than as fully integrated members of society with inherent rights. The treatment of people with disabilities has been shaped by prevailing medical, social, and philosophical understandings of disability, and has reflected broader societal values about difference, worth, and citizenship. As such, the disability rights movement—spanning centuries—has been a struggle for recognition, equality, and inclusion.

Early Historical Perceptions of Disability

Historically, individuals with disabilities were often viewed through the lens of religious or supernatural beliefs. In ancient societies, physical or mental impairments were frequently seen as divine punishments or signs of moral failure⁴. For example, in ancient Greece and Rome, disabilities were sometimes considered a reflection of personal sin or moral flaws, and people with disabilities were often excluded from public life.

In medieval Europe, the treatment of people with disabilities was a mix of fear, superstition, and religious duty. Disabled individuals were often confined to religious institutions, where they were either supported in a charitable context or ostracized as "unworthy" of full participation in society. In some cases, disabled individuals were treated as objects of pity or ridicule, a tradition that continued into later centuries. The medical model of disability, which would dominate Western thinking for centuries, began to take root in the 18th and 19th centuries. This model viewed disability primarily as an individual medical problem, something to be cured, fixed, or managed. People with disabilities were often confined to institutions or asylums, viewed as separate from society and in need of care, treatment, or rehabilitation. The medical model emphasized the limitations of the disabled body and mind, leading to policies that sought to control or contain disability rather than embrace it as part of human diversity⁵.

The Rise of the Medical Model

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the development of the medical model of disability was firmly entrenched in Western societies. Disability came to be understood as an individual's personal problem that required intervention, either through medical treatment, rehabilitation, or institutionalization. In the United States, for example, during the early 20th century, the prevailing belief was that people with disabilities were to be managed or "fixed" through medical or scientific approaches, such as physical therapy, surgeries, or psychological interventions. "This medicalization of disability led to the establishment of separate institutions, such as mental asylums and nursing homes, where individuals with disabilities could be isolated from society⁶. In this period, disability was seen as a burden on society, something that needed to be managed by doctors, social workers, or charity organizations. The emphasis was placed on "treating" or "curing" the individual, with little thought given to altering the external environment to accommodate disability. Policies of segregation and institutionalization were prevalent throughout much of the 19th and 20th centuries, with people with disabilities often viewed as less-than-human or incapable of contributing to society⁷.

The Shift: The Social Model of Disability

The mid-20th century saw a radical shift in the way disability was understood, primarily due to the efforts of disabled activists and allies who began to challenge the assumptions of the medical model. In the 1960s and 1970s, the disability rights movement began to take shape, influenced by broader civil rights movements, including the struggles for racial equality and women's rights. Activists began to reject the idea that disability was an inherent flaw or deficiency in the individual, and instead began to advocate for a social model of disability⁷.

The social model of disability, which emerged in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, argued that disability is not a condition of the individual, but rather the result of barriers created by society. This model shifts the focus away from trying to "fix" the disabled person and instead calls for a transformation in the environment, attitudes, and policies that create barriers to inclusion. The social model contends that people with disabilities are not disabled by their impairments but by societal structures that fail to accommodate difference⁸. In the social model, disability is seen as a form of diversity—like race, gender, or sexual orientation—rather than a problem to be solved. This paradigm shift was central to the development of the modern disability rights movement, which began to demand that society as a whole should adapt to meet the needs of people with disabilities, rather than expecting disabled people to adapt to a world that is not built with them in mind⁹.

Early Advocacy and the Beginnings of Legal Reforms

³ Government of India, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2016.

⁴ Sharma, V., Disability and Law in India: A Historical Overview, *Journal of Indian Social Policy*, 13(3), 54-72, 2015.

⁵ Amita Dhanda, *Disability and the Indian State: A Historical and Institutional Analysis*, 2010.

⁶ Patel, V., Disability and Healthcare in India, *Indian Medical Review*, 58(1), 30-35, 2017.

⁷ Ranganathan, S., Social Work and Disability Rights in India, *Indian Journal of Social Welfare*, 12(2), 88-94, 2016.

⁸ Kumar, A., *Disability, Social Justice, and the Law: India's Framework*, 2019.

⁹ Rajeev Malhotra, *Social Exclusion of Disabled Persons in India*, 2012.

The 1960s and 1970s marked the beginning of a significant shift in the political landscape surrounding disability. As part of the broader civil rights movement, individuals with disabilities began to organize themselves to challenge discriminatory laws and practices that excluded them from public life. One of the earliest milestones in this process was the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 in the United States, particularly Section 504, which prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in programs and activities that received federal funding¹⁰.

In 1977, Section 504 became the basis for one of the most important acts of activism in the disability rights movement: the Section 504 Sit-ins. Led by disabled activists and organizations such as the National Disability Rights Movement, the sit-ins took place in federal buildings across the United States to protest the government's delay in implementing regulations to enforce Section 504. This was a ground breaking moment, demonstrating the power of organized disability activism in demanding legal recognition and access¹¹. Throughout "the 1970s and 1980s, more disability rights groups began to form, leading to a concerted push for national legislative reforms. The formation of the American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit (ADAPT) in the 1980s, for instance, led to the eventual inclusion of provisions for accessible public transportation under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)".

A. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): A Landmark Achievement

The most significant legal achievement for disability rights in the United States came in 1990 with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA was the culmination of years of advocacy, activism, and legal challenges, and it represented a landmark victory in the fight for disability rights. The ADA, signed into law by President George H.W. Bush, was the first comprehensive civil rights law that prohibited discrimination on the basis of disability in all areas of public life, including employment, transportation, public accommodations, and telecommunications.

The ADA is rooted in the social model of disability and marks a profound shift in the way disability is understood by law. No longer were people with disabilities to be viewed as individuals needing charity or special treatment. Instead, the ADA recognized that disability is a social construct shaped by environmental and attitudinal barriers. The law required that businesses, schools, government agencies, and public services be accessible to people with disabilities, setting a new standard for inclusion.

The passage of the ADA was a turning point in the disability rights movement, ensuring that people with disabilities had legal protections against discrimination and the right to participate fully in society. It not only mandated physical accessibility (e.g., ramps, accessible public transportation) but also sought to address discrimination in employment, education, and other critical areas of life. The ADA thus established a legal foundation for achieving greater social inclusion and equality for people with disabilities¹².

B. The Global Expansion of Disability Rights

Internationally, the movement for disability rights took on a new dimension in the 21st century with the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. The CRPD was a ground-breaking international treaty that established the rights of persons with disabilities on a global scale. It emphasized the need for countries to adopt policies and laws that promote accessibility, non-discrimination, and full inclusion in all aspects of society. The CRPD was ground breaking because it redefined disability not as a medical issue but as a human rights issue. It also called for a shift in attitudes towards disability, moving away from the perception of disability as a condition that needs to be fixed, toward an understanding of disability as a matter of equality and social justice. As of today, the CRPD has been ratified by over 180 countries, signifying a global commitment to ensuring that people with disabilities have the right to live full, independent lives¹³.

C. Legal Reforms and Key Policies

Legal reforms have played a central role in the advancement of disability rights by shifting public and institutional attitudes, reducing discrimination, and ensuring access to opportunities and services. These reforms have not only improved the lives of people with disabilities but have also contributed to a broader social change, redefining disability as a civil rights issue rather than a personal or medical problem. This section examines key national and international legal reforms and policies that have shaped the fight for disability rights, with a particular focus on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)¹⁴.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

One of the most significant pieces of disability legislation in the United States is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was signed into law on July 26, 1990, by President George H.W. Bush. The ADA represented a historic breakthrough in the fight for disability rights, as it extended civil rights protections to people with disabilities, ensuring their access to education, employment, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications¹⁵.

Key Provisions of the ADA

The ADA consists of five titles, each addressing different areas of public life:

¹⁰ Jain, R., Advocating for Disability Rights in the Indian Context, *Indian Journal of Human Rights*, 20(3), 58-71, 2018.

¹¹ Blanck, P. D., Disability and Employment Law in the United States: A Critical Review, *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 23(4), 143-157, 2013.

¹² M. Patel and S. Sharma, Disability and Social Exclusion: A Case Study of India, *Indian Journal of Disability Studies*, 2010.

¹³ Oliver, M., *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, Macmillan, 1996.

¹⁴ Groce, N. E., et al., Disability in the Global South: The Need for Human Rights-Based Approaches to Development, *The Lancet*, 378(9796), 1980-1981, 2011.

¹⁵ Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., and Liddiard, M., *Disability and Social Change: The Social Model of Disability in Practice*, Routledge, 2014.

Title I: Employment

Title I prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all aspects of employment, including hiring, promotions, pay, and training. “It requires employers with 15 or more employees to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities unless doing so would cause undue hardship to the employer. The law also mandates that employers ensure their hiring practices do not disproportionately disadvantage individuals with disabilities”.

Title II: Public Services

Title II mandates that state and local government programs, services, and activities be accessible to people with disabilities. This includes ensuring that public transportation, voting systems, and government buildings are accessible. This provision has had a profound effect on the accessibility of public infrastructure.

Title III: Public Accommodations

Title III requires that private businesses, such as restaurants, hotels, and retail establishments, be accessible to individuals with disabilities. This includes removing physical barriers (e.g., installing ramps or accessible restrooms) and providing auxiliary aids and services, such as sign language interpreters, for individuals with hearing impairments¹⁶.

Title IV: Telecommunications

Title IV mandates that telecommunications companies provide relay services that allow individuals with hearing or speech disabilities to communicate over the phone, such as through TTY (text telephone) systems. This section laid the foundation for the development of modern communication technologies for people with disabilities.

Title V: Miscellaneous Provisions

Title V contains provisions for enforcement, including the right for individuals to file complaints against violations of the ADA and seek legal remedies. It also includes protections against retaliation for individuals who exercise their rights under the law.

Impact of the ADA - The ADA has been instrumental in breaking down physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers that have long kept people with disabilities excluded from full participation in society. It has promoted the integration of people with disabilities into the workforce, education, and public life, and it has contributed to the development of accessible infrastructure, such as wheelchair ramps, elevators, and accessible transportation systems. The ADA has also played a key role in shifting societal attitudes toward people with disabilities, emphasizing their right to equality and inclusion¹⁷. While the ADA represented a significant victory for disability rights, “its enforcement has faced challenges. Critics have pointed to gaps in compliance, particularly regarding employment, and the slow pace of implementing accessibility measures in older buildings and public transportation systems. However, the ADA remains a foundational piece of legislation that continues to shape disability rights policy in the United States and internationally”.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Before the passage of the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 served as a critical piece of legislation for disability rights in the United States. The Rehabilitation Act was the first federal law to prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal funding. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, in particular, was a ground breaking provision that provided legal protection for people with disabilities in educational institutions, government programs, and healthcare services¹⁸.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act states that “no otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States... shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” This provision was a precursor to the ADA and laid the groundwork for the legal recognition of disability discrimination as a civil rights issue¹⁹. Section 504 had a major impact on the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream education. “It also paved the way for later federal initiatives to provide accommodations for individuals with disabilities in employment, public services, and housing. However, while Section 504 was an important step in the civil rights movement for disability, its enforcement was limited, and it did not go as far as the ADA in providing comprehensive protections across all sectors of society”. The ADA built on the foundation of the Rehabilitation Act, extending its reach to private businesses, state and local governments, and public accommodations²⁰.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

At the international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) stands as a landmark document in the global movement for disability rights. Adopted in December 2006 and entering into force in May 2008, the CRPD was the first legally binding international instrument aimed at protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. The CRPD recognizes that people with disabilities are entitled to the same rights as everyone else and that disability is a matter of human rights and social justice²¹.

¹⁶ M. Sarma, Disability, Education, and Employment in India: Addressing Legal and Institutional Barriers, Paper presented at the Disability Rights Symposium, Mumbai, 2017.

¹⁷ Kittay, E. F., and Feder, E. L., The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives, Routledge, 2003.

¹⁸ Baker, M., Disability, Development, and the International Aid System, 2010.

¹⁹ Nye, E., International Perspectives on Disability Rights, Springer, 2019.

²⁰ Nair, S., The Challenges of Disability Rights and Employment in India, Indian Journal of Social Work, 55(1), 2020.

²¹ Kanter, A. S., Disability Rights and the United Nations Convention, Human Rights Quarterly, 33(2), 459-477, 2013.

Key Provisions of the CRPD

The CRPD covers a wide range of issues affecting people with disabilities, including accessibility, education, employment, health, and participation in political and public life. Some of its key provisions include²²:

- **Non-discrimination:** The CRPD emphasizes the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of disability. States are required to take measures to ensure that people with disabilities enjoy the same rights as others and are not excluded from society due to their disability.
- **Accessibility:** The CRPD calls for the creation of accessible environments, including transportation, public buildings, and information and communications. It emphasizes the importance of universal design—designing products and environments that can be used by all people, regardless of ability²³.
- **Education:** The CRPD asserts the right of individuals with disabilities to inclusive, quality education, ensuring that they are not segregated in special schools or institutions. States are encouraged to create inclusive educational systems that provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities.
- **Employment:** The CRPD promotes the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others. It calls for measures to eliminate barriers to employment, including discrimination in hiring practices, and to provide reasonable accommodations in the workplace.
- **Health:** The CRPD requires that persons with disabilities have access to healthcare services on an equal basis with others. This includes access to rehabilitation and habitation services that promote independent living.
- **Participation in Political and Public Life:** The CRPD affirms the right of people with disabilities to participate in political and public life, including voting and running for office. It also calls for the inclusion of people with disabilities in decision-making processes related to policies that affect them.

Impact and Global Reach

As of 2023, the CRPD has been ratified by 182 countries, making it one of the most widely supported human rights treaties in history. The CRPD has catalysed legislative changes in countries around the world, leading to the development of national disability rights laws, the creation of disability-inclusive policies, and improvements in accessibility and participation. The treaty also promotes a rights-based approach to disability, shifting the focus from charity and medical care to human dignity, autonomy, and full participation in society. The CRPD also plays a critical role in holding governments accountable for their commitments to the rights of people with disabilities. It requires states to report on their progress toward implementing the Convention's provisions, providing a framework for international oversight and advocacy²⁴.

Other Key National Policies

In addition to the ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and the CRPD, several other important policies and initiatives have helped to shape the legal landscape of disability rights. These include:

- **The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):** This U.S. federal law ensures that children with disabilities have access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). It mandates special education services and accommodations to support students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.
- **The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (UK):** Passed in 1995, the DDA was one of the earliest pieces of UK legislation aimed at preventing discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, education, and public services. The DDA was replaced by the Equality Act 2010, which expanded anti-discrimination protections for people with disabilities.
- **Accessible Canada Act (Canada):** This Canadian law, passed in 2019, aims to make Canada accessible by 2040. It requires federal organizations to identify, remove, and prevent barriers to accessibility across a range of areas, including employment, transportation, and information.

Legal reforms and policies have been critical to advancing the rights of people with disabilities, creating a framework of protections that has promoted greater inclusion and participation in society. The ADA, the Rehabilitation Act, and the CRPD represent some of the most important legal achievements in this area, and their influence extends far beyond the countries that enacted them.

The Disability Rights Movement: Advocacy and Activism

The disability rights movement is one of the most powerful and influential social justice movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by the civil rights movement, feminist movements, and other advocacy movements for marginalized groups. Disabled individuals and their allies began organizing to demand equal rights, better access to education, employment, and public services, and an end to institutionalization and discriminatory practices²⁵.

One of the key features of the disability rights movement is the shift from a medical model of disability, which views disability as a personal tragedy or impairment to be treated or cured, to a social model, which views disability as a result of societal barriers and discrimination. This shift has been a central

²² United Nations, Disability-Inclusive Development in India, UNDP India, 2016.

²³ Disability Rights International, Annual Report 2019, Washington, D.C.

²⁴ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2007.

²⁵ World Health Organization, World Report on Disability, Geneva: WHO, 2011.

element in changing how society perceives people with disabilities—from being passive recipients of care to active agents of change and rights-bearing citizens²⁶.

Key Milestones in Disability Activism

Some of the most important moments in the disability rights movement include:

- The Section 504 Sit-ins (1977): In 1977, disabled activists staged sit-ins at U.S. federal buildings to demand the implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits discrimination based on disability in programs receiving federal funds. The protest succeeded in pressuring the government to issue the regulations required to enforce Section 504 and marked a pivotal moment in the disability rights movement.
- The 504 Demonstration in San Francisco (1977): The 504 Sit-in in San Francisco was perhaps the most significant of these protests, where disabled activists, led by the National Disability Rights Movement (NDRM), occupied the offices of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) for over a month. The action drew national attention to disability issues and was a critical moment in the larger movement for legal protections and societal change²⁷.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990): The passage of the ADA was the culmination of decades of advocacy and activism. “Disability rights activists mobilized grassroots support, lobbied lawmakers, and conducted campaigns to push for comprehensive civil rights protections for people with disabilities²⁸. The ADA remains one of the most significant achievements of the disability rights movement and continues to shape disability policy and social change in the U.S. and beyond”.
- Global Movements: Internationally, the disability rights movement also gained momentum with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), adopted in 2006. The CRPD represents a global consensus on the rights of people with disabilities, promoting inclusion, accessibility, and non-discrimination worldwide. It has influenced national disability policies and reinforced the idea that disability is a human rights issue that requires social and legal transformation.

Changing Public Perceptions of Disability

Public attitudes toward disability have evolved dramatically over the past century, with growing recognition of disability as a matter of civil rights and equality rather than pity or charity. However, despite significant progress, people with disabilities continue to face stigma, prejudice, and negative stereotypes that impede their full inclusion in society²⁹.

Disability as Diversity, Not Deficit

One of the key social changes promoted by the disability rights movement has been the re-framing of disability as a form of diversity rather than a deficit. For much of history, disability was seen as a medical condition to be fixed or as something that made people less-than-human. The social model of disability, popularized by disability activists in the late 20th century, redefined disability not as an individual defect but as the result of societal barriers, including inaccessible environments, negative attitudes, and discriminatory policies³⁰.

The social model emphasizes that the challenges faced by people with disabilities are not inherent to their impairments, but are largely due to social structures that exclude or limit them. This shift has empowered individuals with disabilities to assert their rights and demand inclusion in all spheres of life, from education and employment to transportation and public spaces³¹.

The Role of Media in Shaping Attitudes

The media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of disability. Historically, people with disabilities were portrayed in the media as objects of pity, inspiration, or tragedy. These depictions often reinforced negative stereotypes and reinforced the idea that people with disabilities were less capable or deserving of the same opportunities as non-disabled individuals. However, over the past few decades, there has been a growing effort to portray disability in more nuanced and realistic ways. “Positive representations of people with disabilities in media—through films, television, advertising, and online platforms—have helped challenge stereotypes and promote more inclusive attitudes. For example, the increased visibility of disabled characters in television shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (with the character Sheldon Cooper's portrayal of a person with a neurodivergent condition) and films like *The Theory of Everything* (which portrayed the life of physicist Stephen Hawking) have provided audiences” with complex and humanizing portrayals of people with disabilities³².

²⁶ S. Nair, *The Legal Landscape of Disability Rights in India: An Analysis of the RPWD Act, 2016*, Journal of Indian Social Policy, 2018.

²⁷ Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund (DREDF), ADA, CRPD, and Their Impact on India, www.dredf.org, 2020.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Sullivan, M., *Disability, Diversity, and Social Justice in Education*, 2014.

³⁰ Smith, J., *Social Change and Disability Rights in the US and Beyond*, Disability Studies Quarterly, 36(1), 43-57, 2016.

³¹ Rao, K., *Disability in India: Issues of Access and Inclusion*, Social Work Review, 22(2), 111-130, 2019.

³² Patel, R., *Challenges of Disability Inclusion in Rural India*, Indian Journal of Development Studies, 12(4), 135-147, 2016.

Also, people with disabilities themselves have increasingly used media platforms, such as blogs, social media, and podcasts, to share their stories, advocate for their rights, and create communities. The rise of social media has provided individuals with disabilities a platform to speak for themselves, challenge stereotypes, and demand a more inclusive society³³.

Inclusive Design and Universal Accessibility

A critical aspect of social change is the development of inclusive and accessible environments that allow people with disabilities to participate fully in society. Inclusive design refers to the creation of products, services, and environments that are usable by all people, regardless of ability. Universal design is a related concept that focuses on designing systems and spaces that accommodate the widest range of human diversity from the outset, rather than retrofitting spaces or services to meet the needs of people with disabilities after the fact³⁴.

Accessibility in Built Environments

The built environment—public buildings, sidewalks, transportation systems, and housing—has been a major site of advocacy for disability rights activists. Prior to the ADA and similar legal frameworks, many public spaces were physically inaccessible to people with disabilities, with few accommodations for mobility devices like wheelchairs or hearing aids. Today, accessible design principles such as ramps, elevators, wide doorways, and tactile signage are common in public buildings, ensuring that people with disabilities can navigate and participate in public life³⁵. “Universal design goes beyond simply meeting minimum accessibility standards and strives to make spaces usable by everyone, regardless of their abilities. The goal of universal design is to create environments that accommodate a wide range of human diversity without the need for adaptation or specialized design. For instance, accessible websites, which can be used by individuals with various impairments, represent an aspect of universal design that enables equal access to information in the digital age”.

Education and Employment Accessibility

Inclusive education and accessible employment are central to achieving full social inclusion for people with disabilities. Inclusive education means integrating students with disabilities into general education classrooms with appropriate accommodations and support, rather than segregating them in special education institutions. Similarly, inclusive employment practices mean providing workplace accommodations to ensure that individuals with disabilities can participate on equal terms with their non-disabled peers.

Inclusive design also extends to technology, where accessible design features such as voice recognition software, screen readers, and closed captioning enable people with disabilities to access digital platforms and tools. Advances in technology have opened new doors for people with disabilities, providing them with greater opportunities for education, employment, and social engagement³⁶.

Challenges and Barriers to Inclusive Policies

Despite significant advancements in disability rights and inclusive policies, many challenges and barriers still exist, hindering full participation and equality for people with disabilities. One of the primary challenges is inadequate enforcement of existing laws, such as the ADA and CRPD. While these laws mandate accessibility and non-discrimination, many businesses, government entities, and public services fail to comply, and legal recourse can be time-consuming and costly³⁷. Another barrier is attitudinal stigma—deep-rooted societal prejudices and stereotypes about disability often result in exclusion and discrimination. People with disabilities are still seen as “less capable,” leading to limited employment opportunities, social isolation, and fewer educational choices.

Physical and infrastructural barriers also persist. Many public spaces, transportation systems, and digital platforms remain inaccessible due to insufficient investment in universal design and retrofitting older buildings. Additionally, the lack of reasonable accommodations in workplaces and educational institutions continues to prevent equal participation³⁸. Finally, economic inequality disproportionately affects people with disabilities, limiting their access to healthcare, housing, and other critical resources. The intersection of disability with other forms of marginalization—such as race, gender, and socio-economic status—further exacerbates these challenges, making it even more difficult to achieve true inclusion for all disabled individuals³⁹.

³³ Blanck, P., *Disability Law and Social Justice*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

³⁴ Buchanan, C., *Inclusive Policy Design: Global Perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

³⁵ Indian Government, *Guidelines for Accessible Digital Platforms in India*, 2020.

³⁶ Subramaniam, T., Access to Education for Children with Disabilities in India, *Indian Journal of Educational Policy*, 31(2), 72-85, 2015.

³⁷ Miller, L., *Disability Rights and the Law of Inclusion*, 2017.

³⁸ Eklund, M., *Disability Rights in Emerging Economies*, Springer, 2015.

³⁹ Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, *Mental Health Policy*, 2016.

Recommendations for Achieving Full Inclusion

To achieve full inclusion, it is essential to strengthen enforcement of existing laws like the ADA and CRPD, ensuring compliance across sectors. Promoting disability awareness through education and public campaigns can challenge stereotypes and reduce stigma. Investment in universal design should be prioritized to make public spaces, transportation, and digital platforms accessible. Reasonable accommodations in workplaces and educational settings must be standard practice, ensuring equal opportunities. Furthermore, addressing economic disparities by providing targeted financial support and access to healthcare can help individuals with disabilities fully participate in society. Collaboration across sectors is key to creating an inclusive, accessible future⁴⁰.

Conclusion-

In conclusion, achieving full inclusion for individuals with disabilities requires a comprehensive approach that combines legal reform, social change, and ongoing advocacy. Over the past few decades, significant progress has been made through landmark legal frameworks such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Rehabilitation Act, and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These laws have provided essential protections, ensuring that people with disabilities can access education, employment, public services, and transportation on equal terms with others. However, legal frameworks alone are not enough to eliminate the deep-seated barriers that continue to hinder full participation⁴¹. Social change, driven by activism, public awareness, and inclusive design, plays a crucial role in transforming societal attitudes towards disability. Disability is increasingly recognized not as a deficit but as part of human diversity, with individuals contributing meaningfully to all areas of life. The rise of disability rights movements, along with media representation and the push for universal accessibility, has helped challenge outdated stereotypes and open doors to greater inclusion⁴². Yet, challenges persist in the form of attitudinal stigma, physical barriers, and economic inequality. To achieve true inclusion, a multi-faceted approach is necessary. Strengthening the enforcement of disability rights laws, prioritizing universal design, and providing reasonable accommodations across all sectors will ensure that people with disabilities can participate equally in society. Additionally, addressing economic disparities and promoting cross-sector collaboration will help dismantle the systemic barriers that continue to marginalize individuals with disabilities. By advancing both legal and social reforms, we can build a more inclusive world where all people, regardless of ability, are empowered to lead fulfilling lives⁴³.

⁴⁰ Barnes, C., *Disability and Social Policy: Global and Local Perspectives*, Sage, 2014.

⁴¹ Siddiqui, N., *Disability and the Legal System in India*, *Journal of Indian Law*, 19(1), 65-78, 2017.

⁴² Shukla, R., *Disability Rights and Social Justice in India: Legal Analysis*, *Indian Journal of Constitutional Law*, 6(2), 135-142, 2018.

⁴³ Lal, D., *Advancing Disability Rights in India: Legal and Social Models*, 2015.