



NCPEDP - Javed Abidi Fellowship on Disability

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Baseline Report

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**Challenges Faced by People with Disabilities
in Electoral Processes Despite Technological
Advancements**

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1 Executive Summary

This comprehensive report delves into the multifaceted challenges faced by Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in India during electoral processes, highlighting persistent barriers such as inaccessible polling stations, limited assistive technology, and social stigma. The historical evolution of laws and policies, including key milestones like the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016, is explored to provide context. Despite legal advancements, PwDs encounter hurdles in political participation at both local and national levels. The study examines the specific challenges faced by PwDs in Delhi through real-life accounts, emphasising the need for more inclusive approaches, including concerns about transportation and overall accessibility. The National Voters' Day celebration underscores the commitment to 'Accessible Elections,' featuring insights from notable speakers and initiatives by the Election Commission of India (ECI). The research methodology employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, focussing on identifying physical barriers, assessing technological advancements, exploring political attitudes, analysing international best practices, and understanding PwD perceptions. Survey results reveal a nuanced mosaic of participation and challenges, emphasising gender imbalances and unique struggles individuals with specific conditions face. The report concludes with an urgent call for more inclusive initiatives to bridge the gap between political participation and the intricate challenges PwDs face, contributing significantly to the discourse on disability rights and offering valuable recommendations for creating a more inclusive and accessible electoral landscape in India.

2 Background

In India, like in many other countries, people with disabilities have faced significant challenges in exercising their rights during electoral processes. Despite technological advancements, barriers impede the full participation of individuals with disabilities in the electoral system. Some key challenges include inaccessible polling stations, lack of assistive technology, limited information in accessible formats, social stigma and discrimination, inadequate training for election officials, inaccessible transportation, and legal and policy gaps. The data highlights the challenges people with disabilities face during the election process, emphasising the need for inclusive policies. Despite legal advancements, individuals with disabilities continue to encounter barriers, including limited access to education, employment, and healthcare. The section also explores the historical evolution of laws and policies, shedding light on key milestones such as the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016. Through this synthesis, a holistic understanding of the complexities surrounding disability rights in India emerges. In context, the political participation of PwDs is marked by significant challenges, with limited representation at both local and national levels. Despite international conventions and national legislation advocating for the political rights of PwDs, their direct and indirect involvement in decision-making processes remains minimal. The absence of affirmative

policies exacerbates this issue, necessitating urgent attention to address disparities and promote inclusive political processes. Political parties are the first instance of access to political space for an individual. It allows vertical mobility within the political structure. Vertical mobility can culminate in the nomination or election of an individual, on their political party's name, in any tier of the legislature. (Pandey, 2023)

PwDs in Delhi encounter obstacles in exercising their voting rights, from communication challenges to inadequate infrastructure. A S Narayanan, a deaf voter, emphasises the lack of understanding of sign language among polling staff. Neeraj Kumar, a blind voter, shares instances of discrimination during ID card replacement. While the Chief Electoral Officer organised an 'accessible elections' awareness program, disability rights activists expressed scepticism about implementation. The use of an Android PwDs app for registration is promising, but concerns persist about diverse needs, urging a more inclusive approach. As Delhi approaches elections, worries remain about transport and overall accessibility. (Sharma 2019)

The National Voters' Day celebration in Delhi, led by O P Rawat, Chief Election Commissioner, emphasised the ECI's commitment to ensuring 'Accessible Elections' focussing on PwDs. Notable speakers, including Umesh Sinha and Ashok Lavasa, highlighted the importance of international treaties in shaping policies for PwD inclusion. Sessions covered barriers, technology, and the role of organisations. Sinha discussed the ECI's initiatives, like Braille on Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), while international speakers shared strategies from Bhutan, Australia, and Moldova. The conference aimed for knowledge sharing and learning to enhance PwD participation. The Chief Election Commissioner urged a shift from tokenism to tangible outcomes in electoral participation, emphasising the need for continuous improvement. The event sought to consolidate efforts for inclusive elections, aligning with the constitutional mandate of 'No voter to be left behind.'. ("VoICE.NET," n.d.)

In conclusion, this study aims to unravel the challenges and barriers PwDs face during the election process, despite technological advancements. Employing a mixed-methods approach, our study combines qualitative insights through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with quantitative data gathered via survey questionnaires. Thematic analysis will unravel nuanced qualitative patterns, while statistical tools such as SPSS, NVivo, and ATLAS.ti will aid quantitative analysis. The research conducted in Delhi will involve a purposive sample of 10 individuals with disabilities from each district, ensuring diversity in disability type, age, gender, and urban-rural representation. Stakeholders, including PwDs, political party representatives, and relevant experts, will contribute to a holistic understanding. This study's outcomes will shed light on the challenges faced and inform policy recommendations for creating more inclusive and accessible electoral processes.

3 Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the physical barriers that hinder the access of PwDs to polling stations during elections.
2. To assess the role of technological advancements, such as EVMs and remote voting options, in addressing or exacerbating challenges faced by PwDs, within various political parties and decision-making bodies.
3. To investigate the perceptions and attitudes of political party members and leaders towards the inclusion of PwDs and the influence thereof on their involvement in decision-making processes
4. To analyse best practices from other countries that promote the inclusion of PwDs in elections and political parties, and their applicability in different contexts
5. To investigate the perceptions and attitudes of PwDs regarding the electoral process

4 Literature Review

In a democratic society, the right to vote is fundamental, providing citizens with the power to participate in shaping their collective future. However, for individuals with disabilities, exercising this right can be fraught with challenges and barriers that impede their full and equal participation in the electoral process. People with disabilities represent a significant portion of the global population, encompassing a diverse range of impairments and functional limitations. Despite advancements in disability rights and accessibility, many individuals within this community continue to face unique obstacles when it comes to engaging in the electoral process.

This literature review explores and examines the challenges and barriers encountered by people with disabilities during elections. By synthesising existing research, policy documents, and scholarly articles, this review aims to shed light on the multifaceted issues that hinder the political enfranchisement of individuals with disabilities. By understanding these challenges, policymakers, electoral authorities, and disability advocates can work together to develop inclusive strategies and policies that facilitate the full participation of people with disabilities in electoral processes.

- Literature review related to Historical Overview of Laws and Policies for People with Disabilities in India
- Literature review related to Actors and Institutions involved in forming Laws and Policies for People with Disabilities in India
- Literature review related to gaps in legislation, policies
- Literature review related to comparative study with a country with GDP and HDI like India's

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of PwDs (UNCRPD) rather than defining disability, provides a broad description intended to be widely inclusive. Article 1 states that 'PwDs' include *'those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an*

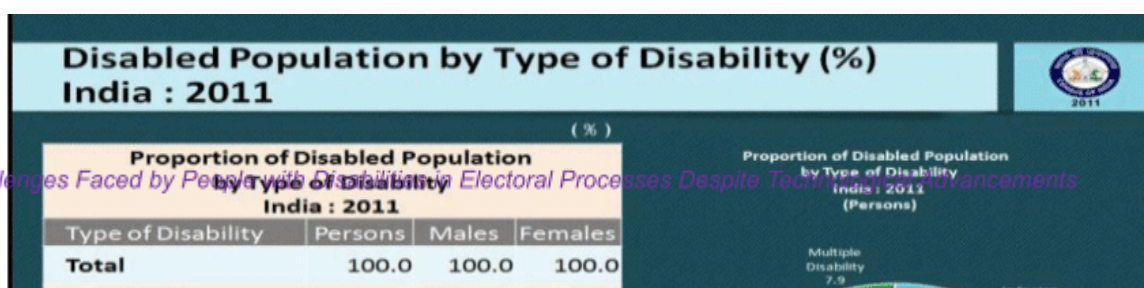
equal basis with others. This description of disability shifts the focus toward the social and environmental barriers that hinder an individual’s participation in society rather than on the individual’s impairments.

This approach to disability is called the “social model” of disability. It recognises that the exclusion of a person with a disability from society is the result of a barrier or hindrance to the individual’s ability to participate fully, rather than the result of the individual’s inherent inability to participate. For example, if a person cannot access a health clinic because of their mobility impairment, the issue is not the inability to walk, but rather, the clinic’s lack of accessibility. The social model of disability, which emerged from disabled people’s activism and was primarily developed by scholar Michael Oliver, holds a central role in ongoing debates within Disability Studies and related viewpoints on inclusive education. However, the article provides a philosophical critique of the social model, highlighting its theoretical shortcomings. The critique argues that by exclusively attributing disability to societal factors, the social model offers a partial and somewhat flawed understanding of the complex interplay between impairment, disability, and society. This limitation underscores the need for further clarification and expansion of the model’s framework, as it hampers the realisation of its primary goal of fostering inclusion. Despite these theoretical limitations, the article suggests that the social model’s value lies in its ability to emphasise the essential nature of inclusion as a moral imperative (Terzi, 2004).

Incapacity impacts a person’s activities and may happen at birth. Sometimes, it could happen in adulthood. People with disabilities are subject to multiple deprivations with limited access to basic services, including education, employment, and rehabilitation facilities. Widespread social stigma plays a major role in hindering their normal social and economic life. To work towards an inclusive, barrier-free society by raising awareness and policy actions, there is a need to have comprehensive reliable statistics on people with disability and their socio-economic conditions.

Data on PwDs Around the World and in India

Over a billion people, about 15% of the world's population have some form of disability. Of this number, 110 million to 190 million people 15 years and older have significant difficulty in functioning and 93 million people less than 15 years of age live with a moderate or severe disability. In India, according to the Census 2011, 2.2% of the population had some form of disability. The prevalence of disability was found to be higher in rural areas (2.24%) as compared to urban areas (2.17%) and more among males (2.4%) than among females (2%). The proportion of different types of disability among people with disability was reported as (i) seeing 18.8%, (ii) hearing 18.9% (iii) speech 7.5% (iv) movement 20.3% (v) mental retardation 7.6% (vi) mental illness 2.7%, (vii) multiple disabilities 7.9% (viii) Any other 18.4%.



Issues related to PwDs

Many disabilities are preventable, including those arising from medical issues during birth, maternal conditions, malnutrition, as well as accidents and injuries. However, the health sector especially in rural India has failed to react proactively to disability. Healthcare facilities and poorly trained health workers in rehabilitation centres are another concern.

Inclusion of children with mild to moderate disabilities in regular schools has remained a major challenge. There are several issues such as the availability of special schools, access to schools, trained teachers, and educational materials for the disabled. Even though many disabled adults are capable of productive work, disabled adults have far lower employment rates than the general population. The situation is worse in the private sector, where fewer disabled are employed. Physical accessibility in buildings, transportation, and access to services remains a major challenge. Poor implementation of policies and schemes hinders the inclusion of PwDs. Though several acts and schemes to empower the disabled exist, their enforcement faces many challenges.

Main Content

Despite being a significant proportion of the total population in India, PwDs live a harsh life. The exclusion of disabled people from the political space is the main cause of the poor condition of disabled persons in India. Despite being given certain concessions and relaxation in different walks of life, they still depend on normal people to represent them politically. Sharing no other commonality, and 70% of them living in rural India are prime reasons for their underrepresentation in the political culture. Far from taking part in decision-making, they are considered dependent and incapable of living by themselves, which is why unemployment in this section is much higher than among normal people.

Studies analyse how society responds to its disabled members and propose strategies for enhancing the social inclusion of PwDs. Additionally, they examine the characteristics of physical disabilities that contribute to the formation of disabling identities, often resulting in negative perceptions and associated stigma. The concept of 'emancipatory research,' which prioritises the involvement of disabled individuals, is introduced as an alternative to traditional positivistic research approaches. The studies also offer insights into shaping social policies through psychological research to foster conditions conducive to the social inclusion of disabled individuals, providing a set of potential guidelines for policy formulation (Pande, 2022).

There are many examples of PwDs in positions of power and authority in Europe, the US, Canada and some Arab and African countries, which is proof that disability cannot keep a person from decision-making and policy-making processes. Political representation of PwDs in India is conspicuously absent. The Indian parliament has reserved seats for SC, ST, and other minority communities, but there is no such provision for PwDs, which is discriminatory. As Hanna Pitkin

writes, *“To represent means to present again, thus political representation is the activity of making the voices of the marginalised heard.”* Political parties in India select candidates based on popularity and do not consider the disabled community on a social responsibility basis.

Ground Reality in India

While political parties appeal to other marginalised groups, the disability sector has been largely left out. The community still faces routine rights violations. Though the disability rights movement has brought some change over the past two decades, it has been painfully slow. In 2011, T Kavita, a hearing-impaired tailor from Villupuram district in Tamil Nadu, was prevented from contesting panchayat elections. This was because being “deafmute” disqualifies a candidate as per the Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act, 1994. Various disability rights organisations protested, supporting Kavita. When the issue was taken to the Madras High Court, the court gave an interim order allowing Kavita to contest, but the last date for filing nomination had passed. Like Kavita’s case, P Saravanan, an employee at the Central Library in Dharmapuri district in Tamil Nadu, was barred from contesting in elections to the Dharmapuri Public Library Employees and Thrift Co-operative Society. The reason here was not the law itself, but its interpretation. As per the Tamil Nadu Cooperative Societies Act, 1983, candidates who cannot read and write Tamil or English would be disqualified. Saravanan who is visually impaired could read and write, but in Braille. It was only in the 2000s, with the Supreme Court’s orders in the Disabled Rights Group (DRG) Vs Union of India case, that the ECI started making voting booths accessible.

Historical Overview of Laws and Policies for People with Disabilities in India

In India, laws and policies for people with disabilities have undergone major historical changes and advancements. Before special legislation on disabilities was adopted, India's legal system was primarily concerned with welfare policies and charity endeavours. The Mental Health Act of 1987, which addressed the rights and treatment of people with mental illnesses, was the first piece of legislation in the nation to address impairments. However, it was not until much later that comprehensive law was introduced with a focus on defending the rights and advancing the welfare of all people with disabilities.

Early Developments and Influential Milestones

The National Policy for PwDs introduced in 1993 was one of the first advances in the legal environment for individuals with disabilities in India. By recognising the rights of people with disabilities and highlighting the significance of equal opportunity, full participation, and protection from discrimination, this policy established the groundwork for later laws. The PwDs (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation) Act of 1995 was made possible by this legislation.

The 1995 PwDs Act (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights, and Full Participation)

An important turning point in India's legal framework for disability rights was the passage of the PwDs Act, 1995. It sought to ensure equal opportunities, the absence of discrimination, and the full involvement of people with disabilities in society. The Act recognised seven categories of disabilities and included provisions for social welfare programmes, employment possibilities, education, and accessibility. Although this Act was a great advancement, it was subsequently superseded in 2016 by more extensive legislation.

The Rights of PwDs Act, 2016

The 1995 Act was replaced with the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016, which brought a more rights-based approach to disability legislation in India. This Act recognised the changing perception of disability as a social construct and broadened the scope of disabilities to include a wider range of conditions. It included several progressive clauses, including the rights to social security, education, work, and healthcare for people with disabilities. The Act also strengthened the responsibilities of the public and commercial sectors in fostering inclusion and eradicating prejudice, established mechanisms for grievance redressal, and established new institutions.

Actors and Institutions involved in forming Laws and Policies for People with Disabilities in India

Actors Involved

People with Disabilities

During the electoral process, people with disabilities are the main actors impacted by the difficulties and obstacles. They include people with physical, sensory, intellectual, and psychosocial impairments. To design inclusive electoral practices, it is essential to comprehend their unique requirements, concerns, and experiences.

Disability Advocacy Groups

Disability advocacy groups are essential to safeguard the interests and rights of those with disabilities. These groups work to make election procedures inclusive, equal, and accessible to people with disabilities. To advance the rights of such people during elections, they frequently take part in awareness campaigns, lobbying initiatives, and legal actions.

Election Management Bodies (EMBs)

EMBs oversee planning and running elections. Examples include electoral commissions and boards. These organisations are vital to ensure that everyone, including those with disabilities, can participate in the election process. EMBs may create guidelines, policies, and training programs to address issues relating to disabilities and provide equitable access to the voting process.

Governments and Policy Makers

National governments and policymakers are crucial players in establishing a supportive legal and political climate that upholds the rights of voters with disabilities. They are accountable for adopting laws, rules, and guidelines that support inclusive and accessible voting procedures. Governmental organisations can also provide cash and resources to create policies that address the difficulties experienced by people with disabilities.

Institutions Involved

Legal and Regulatory Institutions

Legal and regulatory institutions are essential to ensuring that the rights of voters with disabilities are preserved and protected. Human Rights Commissioners, Disability Rights Tribunals, and constitutional bodies are examples of such entities. They interpret and uphold existing laws and norms on non-discrimination, voting accessibility, and disability rights.

Electoral Aid Organisations

International and regional electoral aid organisations such as the International Foundation for Electoral Systems and the United Nations Development Programme support nations in holding inclusive and accessible elections. To address the issues encountered by those with disabilities, they offer technical assistance, capacity building, and guidance to EMBs, governments, and civil society organisations.

Civil Society Groups

Civil society groups, such as disability-specific organisations, NGOs, and neighbourhood advocacy groups, are essential for bringing attention to the difficulties that voters with disabilities experience. These groups frequently work with other actors to advance the rights of people with disabilities, keep an eye on election procedures, and support required reforms and advancements.

Gaps in Legislation and Policies

An essential component of an inclusive democracy is the engagement of people with disabilities in the election process. Despite initiatives to advance accessibility and equal rights, voting is still fraught with difficulties for those with impairments. To ensure that the electoral process is truly inclusive and accessible for individuals with disabilities, this literature review attempts to analyse the current legal and legislative gaps that contribute to these difficulties.

- **The Legal Framework for Disability Rights**

Different nations have different legal systems in place to protect people with disabilities. Laws protecting the rights of people with disabilities, including their right to political participation, have been passed in numerous jurisdictions. However, gaps prevent the full inclusion of people with disabilities in the electoral process due to variations in the implementation and execution of these laws. To address the unique needs of disabled voters, this part analyses the legislative landscape and identifies loopholes.

- **Physical Barriers and Accessibility**

For voters with disabilities, accessibility continues to be a major obstacle. Physical obstacles that prevent people with impairments from independently casting their ballots include inaccessible polling places, inadequate parking, and a lack of assistive technology. This section evaluates the laws and practises that are currently in place regarding accessibility, identifying gaps that continue to support these actual barriers and restrict the voting rights of people with disabilities.

Access to Communication and Information

Access to communication and information is essential for people with disabilities to participate in elections and make informed choices. Communication constraints, such as the lack of information in accessible formats like Braille, sign language interpretation, and Easy Read publications, provide serious difficulties.

- **Support and Assistance for Voting**

It is critical that people with disabilities who might need assistance due to physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments have proper voting aid and support. This section examines voting aid laws and practices, such as the availability of knowledgeable poll workers, accessible voting equipment, and the right to bring a support person of one's choosing. It draws attention to the flaws in the current system that prevent voters with disabilities from receiving proper help and support.

- **Legal Ability and Voting Rights**

The subject of a person's legal ability and voting rights is complicated and much disputed. This section examines the laws and regulations governing disabled people's legal eligibility to vote, their ability to express their political opinions, and limitations placed on those rights. It looks at the legislative voids that could lead to disability discrimination and limit PwDs' ability to participate fully in elections.

- **Policies Adopted by the Departments of the Government of India**

The Indian government has implemented several policies and measures to address the challenges faced by people with disabilities during the voting process. Several departments are involved in formulating and implementing these policies. Here are some key initiatives.

1. Department of Empowerment of PwDs (DEPwD): The DEPwD is the nodal agency responsible for the welfare and empowerment of PwDs in India. It has implemented several policies to ensure equal participation of disabled individuals in the electoral process. These include:
 - a. Accessible Elections: The DEPwD works with the ECI to ensure accessible polling stations and voting procedures for PwDs. It encourages the use of assistive devices and facilities like ramps, Braille signage, accessible voting machines, and transportation assistance.
 - b. Electoral Photo Identity Cards: The DEPwD has made provisions for issuing cards with Braille features for visually impaired individuals.
 - c. Training and Sensitisation: The department conducts training programs and sensitisation campaigns for election officials, polling staff, and volunteers to raise awareness of the needs and rights of disabled voters. No budget has been allocated for this campaign.
2. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment: The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is responsible for the overall welfare and empowerment of marginalised

sections of society, including PwDs. The ministry has taken the following steps to facilitate voting for disabled individuals:

- d. Assistance at Polling Stations: The ministry ensures the provision of wheelchair assistance, volunteers, and sign language interpreters at polling stations to aid PwDs.
 - e. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Accessibility: The ministry promotes the use of accessible ICT tools and technologies, such as screen readers and magnifiers, to facilitate voting for visually impaired individuals.
3. Election Commission of India: The ECI is the constitutional body responsible for conducting elections in India. It has taken several measures to ensure inclusive elections, including:
- f. Accessible Voting Infrastructure: The ECI issues guidelines to make polling stations accessible, including provisions for ramps, accessible toilets, and tactile paths for visually impaired voters.
 - g. Braille Voter Guides: The ECI provides Braille voter guides, enabling visually impaired voters to understand candidate names, party symbols, and voting procedures.
 - h. Mobile App and Helpline: The ECI has introduced a mobile app and helpline services to provide information and support to disabled voters.

Census Data on People with Disabilities

Population of India as per Census 2011 (updated 2016): 1210 m (Male: Female 51:49)

Disabled Population: 26.8 m (2.21% of 1210 m)

Prevalence of Disability: Rural 2.24%, Urban 2.17%, Male: 2.4%, Female: 2%

Male: 15 m (56%), Female: 11.8 m (44%)

Rural: 18.6 m (69%), Urban 8.2 m (31%)

Literacy: Urban 67%, Rural 49%

Urban Literacy: Secondary Level to Below Graduate 20%, Graduate and Above 10%

Rural Literacy: Secondary Level to Below Graduate 10%, Graduate and Above 2%

Graduates among Literates: Urban 15% Rural 5%

Type of Disability: Movement 20.3%, Hearing 18.9%, Seeing 18.8%, Mental Retardation 7.6%, Speech 7.5%, Mental Illness 2.7%, Multiple Disabilities 7.9%, Others 18.4%.

The gender gap, or the difference between female and male voter turnout for people with disabilities has not only closed but reversed to +0.17 percentage points in the 2019 Lok Sabha general elections from -16.71 percentage points in the 1962 general elections, according to Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra. Addressing an ECI-organised international webinar themed 'Enhancing Electoral Participation of Women, PwDs, and

Senior Citizen Voters: Sharing Best Practices and New Initiatives,' Chandra said that after seven decades and 17 general elections, women voter participation at 67.18% finally outshone male participation, which stood at 67.01% in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The webinar, which marked the completion of two years of ECI's chairmanship of the Association of World Election Bodies (A-WEB), was attended by over 100 delegates from 24 countries, 4 international organisations and 20 diplomats.

Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar, while addressing the webinar, revealed that as many as 294 million women had voted in the last parliamentary election, up from 78 million in the first. He added that even in terms of representation, the number of women elected to the lower house of the parliament had increased from 24 in the first general election to 78 in 2019. As the current chairman of A-WEB, the CEC said the ECI had taken many steps to enhance women's participation in polls, which included associating more women as polling booth officials, setting up all-women-managed polling stations, crèche facilities at polling stations and ensuring ease of registration with women block-level officers motivating women in their socio-cultural milieu. Chandra also elaborated on the concept of absentee voter facilitation, introduced by the ECI in 2020 to ensure voting facilities at the doorstep, especially for senior citizens over 80, PwDs and COVID-affected voters. He added that a postal ballot facility had been successfully implemented during assembly elections in Bihar, Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry. This facility had a cumulative elector base of 73.6 million.

Ghana and France: A Comparative Study

Participation of PwDs in Ghanaian Politics

Introduction

The political participation of PwDs in Ghana has been a topic of concern due to its low levels and the lack of affirmative policies to promote their representation in local and national politics. PwDs face several challenges, including accessibility issues for mobility-impaired individuals and communication barriers for those with hearing impairments. Despite the influence PwDs could have on shaping the national development agenda as part of civil society, there is a need to ensure their direct and indirect representation in political processes, in line with international conventions and human rights principles.

The UNCRPD and the National Disability Act support the political rights of PwDs, calling for their effective and equal participation in political and public life. Article 29 of the UNCRPD outlines the measures that state parties, including Ghana, should take to facilitate the political participation of PwDs, such as accessible voting procedures and the use of assistive technologies.

Self-representation is highly valued within the disability rights movement, as reflected in the slogan "Nothing about us without us." This principle advocates for PwDs to be directly involved in decision-making processes that affect their lives. In the past, efforts have been

made to include PwDs in government appointees to district and municipal assemblies through quota systems, but these initiatives were eventually abolished.

Current Status of PwDs' Participation in Ghanaian Politics

Fieldwork conducted in four districts of Ghana (New Juaben, Akuapim North, Sunyani East, and Tano North) revealed a discouragingly low representation of PwDs in assembly memberships. Among the total assembly members, which included elected representatives and government appointees, PwDs accounted for less than 2% of all elected assembly members.

The lack of representation was evident across all districts, with Akuapim North District Assembly having no PwDs among the elected members or government appointees. Tano North District had only one PwD among the 11 government appointees, but no PwDs among the elected members. The findings highlight the significant gap in the political representation of PwDs in Ghana. Despite international commitments and national legislation promoting their inclusion, PwDs continue to face significant barriers to participating in politics.

The absence of affirmative policies to promote PwDs' political participation is a crucial issue that needs urgent attention. Efforts to include PwDs in government appointees in the past showed promise, but their discontinuation signifies the need for more sustainable and inclusive measures. The proposed affirmative action by the Ghana Federation of Disabilities (GFD) to ensure PwDs' representation in parliament and public positions remains pending, and its implementation could potentially address the current disparities.

Conclusion

The participation of PwDs in Ghanaian politics remains significantly low, and there is a lack of affirmative policies to promote their representation. The UNCRPD and the National Disability Act call for the effective and equal political participation of PwDs, but the ground reality does not reflect this vision. To achieve a more inclusive political landscape, Ghana must prioritise the implementation of policies that facilitate the direct and indirect representation of PwDs in decision-making processes. By embracing the principle of "nothing about us without us" and fostering an inclusive political environment, Ghana can harness the potential of PwDs to contribute to the nation's development and ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of a more equitable society.

France's Law Reform on Voting Rights for PwDs

Introduction

On March 23, 2019, France implemented a significant law reform that enfranchised 300,000 French citizens with disabilities, granting them the right to vote. This reform aimed to address the issue of deprivation of voting rights faced by persons with physical or mental disabilities. However, implementing this law raised several concerns and debates,

with some arguing that it could inflate the electorate's size and give an advantage to extremist parties with simplistic political discourse. Additionally, questions were raised about the practicalities of casting ballots for disabled individuals and whether guardians might gain an extra vote.

Review of Concerns and Debates

Adopting the law reform faced criticism from some who expressed concerns over potential adverse effects. Critics argued that expanding the electorate to include PwDs might lead to an inflated voter base, potentially impacting democratic practices. Furthermore, it was suggested that extremist parties with straightforward messages might gain an advantage over parties with more nuanced and sophisticated political stances, as the former might be easier for some disabled individuals to understand.

Another significant concern was related to the practicalities of voting for disabled individuals. The question arose of whether the disabled person would cast the ballot or if their guardian would do it on their behalf. This raised the possibility of guardians potentially gaining an extra vote, as they would be making decisions for the disabled individual.

Addressing Concerns through Global Perspectives

One way to address these concerns is by considering global experiences with similar law reforms. Research shows that almost half of the countries that ratified the UNCRPD have successfully introduced law reforms allowing PwDs to vote. This indicates that such reforms have not undermined democratic practices or ideals. Additionally, the fact that guardians of disabled individuals may have a second vote does not necessarily threaten the integrity of democratic elections. Despite the success of similar reforms in other countries, the real challenge lies in ensuring that PwDs can effectively exercise their voting rights. It requires the cooperation of families, friends, guardians, professionals, and public administrative bodies to support and facilitate the voting process for disabled individuals.

France's International Obligation

The United Nations expert on the rights of PwDs recommended repealing Article 5 of the French Electoral Code. This call aligns with the UN disability rights treaty, which recognises the legal capacity of PwDs and prohibits depriving or limiting them of their rights based on their disability, including placing them under guardianship. As a signatory to the treaty, France is obligated to recognise the legal capacity of PwDs. Despite the legal reform, the use of guardianship remains widespread in France, with approximately 385,000 people under guardianship in 2015. Disturbingly, around 17% of them, or roughly 65,000 people, were deprived of their right to vote. This highlights the need for prompt and effective

implementation of the reform to make universal suffrage universal and uphold the citizenship rights of PwDs.

Conclusion

France's law reform on voting rights for PwDs was a significant step toward promoting inclusivity and upholding human rights. However, concerns and debates surrounding the reform necessitate a closer examination of its potential effects. Drawing from global experiences, it becomes evident that such reforms are feasible and beneficial. The real challenge lies in ensuring that PwDs can fully participate in the electoral process, and France's commitment to implementing the reform promptly will set an example for achieving true universal suffrage for all its citizens.

Budget Discussion

The Significance of Budget Allocation for People with Disabilities

Promoting Inclusion: Budget allocation provides access to essential services and accommodations, such as accessible infrastructure, education, employment opportunities, healthcare, and social protection programs.

Addressing Disparities: Allocated funds aim to reduce financial burdens faced by individuals with disabilities, including increased healthcare expenses, assistive device costs, and limited employment opportunities.

Enhancing Well-being: Allocating funds for people with disabilities supports their overall well-being, enabling independent and fulfilling lives.

Assessing the Utilisation of Budget Allocation

Monitoring Mechanisms: Governments implement monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the utilisation of allocated funds, ensuring transparency and accountability in expenditure.

Transparency and Accountability: Regular audits and public disclosure of budget utilisation promote transparency and enable assessment of how much of the allocated budget is being utilised effectively.

Identification of Gaps: Evaluating utilisation helps identify gaps or inefficiencies, enabling policymakers to take corrective measures and optimise budgetary provisions.

Maximising Utilisation for Effective Support

Targeted Resource Allocation: Prioritising resources based on the diverse needs of people with disabilities, including education, employment, healthcare, and social protection programs.

Capacity Building: Investing in capacity-building programs for stakeholders involved in implementing budgetary provisions to enhance their ability to utilise allocated funds effectively.

Collaboration and Partnerships: Governments foster collaboration with civil society organisations, international agencies, and private entities to maximise the impact of budgetary allocations.

Conclusion

Efficient utilisation of the budget for people with disabilities is essential for achieving the intended goals. Through monitoring mechanisms, transparency, and accountability, governments can optimise the impact of allocated funds. Inclusive development can be promoted by targeting resources, building capacity, and fostering collaboration, improving the lives of people with disabilities. Official government reports, disability-related organisations, and research publications are recommended for specific figures and data.

Budget Allocation and Utilisation

India has been a signatory to the UNCRPD that focusses on the empowerment of PwDs since 2007. To comply with the UNCRPD, the country needs to remove barriers that hinder PwDs from actively participating in society. According to experts, this includes raising awareness, busting stigma and discrimination, and allocating adequate public funds to realise their rights. An inclusive budget entails the government's revenue generation (from tax and non-tax sources) and expenditures involve and benefit all people in their diversity. It includes PwDs among others and pays attention to the impact of the policies and programs on them.

However, experts have pointed out that even though the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for PwDs, adding to the barriers they face, the budget has mostly remained stagnant over the past three years. Allocations for PwDs as a ratio to GDP show a declining trend.

Allocations And Announcements along with Utilisation In Budget 2022-23

Allocations specific to PwDs for 2022-23: Rs 2,172 crore (0.0084% of GDP)

Allocations specific to PwDs for 2021-22: 0.0093% of GDP

Allocations specific to PwDs for 2020-21: Rs 2,180 crore (0.0097% of GDP)

According to the analysis of the Union budget by the Centre for Budget, Governance and Accountability (CBGA), the allocations specific to PwDs are provided majorly under three departments:

- Rs 1,212 crore allocated to the DEPwD under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment which includes a host of schemes and programs for PwDs
- Rs. 670 crore from the Department of Health and Family Welfare under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) which includes the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences
- (NIMHANS), Lokpriya Gopinath Bordoloi Regional Institute of Mental Health and National Mental Health Program
- Rs. 290 crore from the Department of Rural Development under the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) for the Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS)

Budget Allocations and Utilisation Specific to PwDs

The DEPwD, the nodal agency for overseeing the welfare of PwDs, and the implementation of the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016 covers the assistance and rehabilitation needs of all the identified disabilities under the Act:

- Blindness
- Low-vision
- Leprosy-cured Persons
- Hearing Impairment
- Locomotor Disability
- Dwarfism
- Intellectual Disability
- Mental Illness
- Autism Spectrum Disorder
- Cerebral Palsy
- Muscular Dystrophy
- Chronic Neurological Conditions
- Specific Learning Disabilities
- Multiple Sclerosis
- Speech and Language Disability
- Thalassemia
- Haemophilia
- Sickle Cell Disease
- Multiple Disabilities including deaf-blindness, acid-attack victim, Parkinson's disease

1. The DEPwD is also the nodal department for implementing the UNCRPD in India. The budget allocated for the National Program for the Welfare of PwDs (the largest program implemented by DEPwD that includes assistance to disabled persons for

purchase/fitting of aids and appliances, Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme, support of National Trust, Indian Spinal Injury Centre and the scheme for implementation of the Persons with Disability Act) was Rs 635 crore in 2022-23. This is an increment of Rs 172.69 crore over the revised estimate of the 2021-22 allocation of Rs 462.31 crore.

2. Autonomous bodies such as the National University of Rehabilitation Science Disability Studies, Rehabilitation Council of India and Indian Sign Language, Research and Training Centre, Centre for Disability Sports, National Institute for Inclusive and Universal Design, National Institute of Mental Health Rehabilitation and support to national institutes, have been allocated Rs 431 crore for 2022-23. This allocation has increased by Rs 53 crore from the revised estimate of Rs 378 crore for 2021-22.
3. However, there has been a drastic reduction in allocation to the Public Sector Undertakings including Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation of India (ALIMCO) and the National Handicapped Finance and Development. The budget for ALIMCO has been reduced from Rs 60 crore in the revised estimate of 2021-22 to a mere Rs. 0.10 crore in the budget estimate for 2022-23. ALIMCO manufactures and supplies aids and appliances that the government distributes through various schemes and programs. The allocation to the National Handicapped Finance and Development has increased from nil in the revised estimate of 2021-22 to Rs 1 lakh in 2022-23.
4. Scholarships for students with disabilities have been reduced by Rs 5 crore from Rs 110 in the revised estimate of 2021-22 to Rs 105 crore in the budget for 2022-23.

Allocations and Utilisation for Major Schemes and Programs for PwDs

1. There was only one specific announcement in the Union Budget 2022-23 speech about PwDs, to amend 80DD of the Income Tax Act. This allows parents/guardians of persons with a disability an exemption from income tax for an insurance policy (term life insurance) that provides a lump sum amount or an annuity (paid every year) to their children with a disability during their lifetime. Earlier, Section 80DD of the Income Tax Act provided a tax deduction to the parent or guardian only if the lump-sum payment or annuity was available to the PwDs on the death of the subscriber (parent or guardian).
2. According to Meenakshi Balasubramanian, founder of Equals – Centre for Promotion of Social Justice, a Chennai-based organisation that works for the rights of PwDs, this is a positive announcement because there could be situations where differently-abled dependants may need payment of annuity or lump sum amount even during the lifetime of their parents/guardians for medical or any other requirements.

3. Vishwanath added that to comply with the UNCRPD, every department of every ministry needs to dedicate funds for PwDs, be it the Education Department, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs or the Ministry of Jal Shakti and they must specify it in the budget document. Currently, only three departments are doing so; the DEPwD, the Department of Health and Family Welfare and the Rural Development Department.

Because of the absence of data on PwDs and disaggregated data on allocations across various ministries for disability, a clear picture does not emerge. What becomes abundantly clear though is that the disabled continue to be miserably neglected and excluded, says Vishwanath.

Gaps In Implementation Of Programs And Disbursement Of Benefits

According to Nipun Malhotra, co-founder and CEO of Nipman Foundation and founder of Wheels For Life, the budget allocated for PwDs is too little. It covers only a fraction of the population. He asserted that most of the schemes and programs for PwDs are based on cash transfers and identify only those targeted beneficiaries below the poverty line. This excludes a large proportion of the population from the system considering the lack of job opportunities and poverty among the disabled communities. This is extremely problematic because all the PwDs must incur higher living costs than any other person with the same economic background, he said, adding that the standard of living of the families with PwDs will always be lower than others.

Most social protection schemes like assistive devices, cash transfers, skill development, or subsidised loans for self-employment require a disability ID card or certification. The amount of assistance such as the cost covered for assistive devices varies as per the disability assessed and determined. For example, under the Scheme Of Assistance To Disabled Persons For Purchase/Fitting Of Aids/Appliances (ADIP Scheme) the full cost of the aid/appliance will be covered by the government for a person with a disability whose monthly income is less than Rs 6,000 and 50% of the cost will be covered for those who have a monthly income between Rs 6,000 and Rs 10,000.

She added that while many other countries are moving towards the universalisation of social security programs among the disabled, cash transfer welfare schemes in India such as disability pension target only those persons who have a family annual income of below Rs 12,500 (Rs 1,041 per month), which leaves out the bulk of the population.

While talking about the scheme for providing assistive devices such as wheelchairs, crutches, artificial limbs, walking sticks, and hearing aids, Ms Balasubramanian said that the government usually reaches out to eligible PwDs through NGOs. However, she said that even those who get devices free from the government do not benefit because they are mostly one-fit and not customised to the user's needs.

According to the National Sample Survey Organisation Report on Disability 2018, only 23.8% of persons with locomotor disability, 31.5% with visual impairment, and 19.1% with hearing impairment (among those advised to have assistive devices) have accessed one. However, among those who have accessed devices, only 5-9% have done so through government programs.

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) law imposes a tax of 5% on disability assistive devices such as crutches, wheelchairs, walking frames, tricycles, Braille paper, Braille typewriters and watches; orthopaedic appliances including crutches, artificial limbs, and hearing aids are taxed at 12%; adapted cars for physically challenged persons are taxed at 18%.

The IGNDPS under the National Social Assistance Program of the MoRD provides pensions for PwDs below the poverty line and living in rural areas. The allocation towards pension has increased slightly from Rs 284.84 crore (2021-22 revised estimate) to Rs 290 crore (2022-23 budget estimate). The monthly pension per person is Rs 300. According to Mr Vishwanath, PwDs have been demanding an increase in the disability pension for over a decade but the budgets have failed to meet this demand every year. According to him, the disability pension covers only 3.8% of the total disabled population identified by the 2011 census. Even the monthly amount of Rs 1000 per person over and above Rs 300 announced at the beginning of the pandemic is targeted at this population only.

Summary of the Budget Allocation and Utilisation for PwDs During the Election Process of 2022

1. The Department of Empowerment of PwDs (DoEPwD) under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment allocated Rs 1,225 crore in the financial year. This represents a meagre 0.027% of the total budget.
2. The budget estimates for DoEPwD have increased by just 1% over the previous year.
3. The Scheme for the Implementation of PwDs Act (SIPDA) allocated only Rs 150 crore, a decline from the previous year's allocation of Rs 240 crore.
4. Of the allocated Rs 240 crore for SIPDA in the previous year, only Rs 100 crore (42%) was utilised.
5. The DoEPwD's Annual Report indicates that the SIPDA has 15 components, including schemes like the Accessible India Campaign, Skill Development Program for PwDs, Unique Disability ID, Research on Disability-related Technology Products, and Issue Scheme.
6. The DoEPwD was unable to utilise the entire fund for SIPDA, with only Rs 108 crore spent out of Rs 147 crore for 2021-22.
7. The untimely release of allocated funds further exacerbates the lack of availability of funds for disability-related programs.
8. The Accessible India Campaign (AIC), a flagship scheme for the disabled population, did not feature in the list of major Schemes released by the finance ministry.

9. The AIC has three components: infrastructure accessibility, transport accessibility, and ICT accessibility. However, the scheme has continuously missed its targets since its inception in 2015.
10. The DoEPwD has the lowest allocation among all the departments working for marginalised groups such as women, SC/ST, and farmers.

Based on the trends mentioned in the article, the allocation and utilisation of funds for PwDs during the election process appear insufficient and stagnant, indicating significant flaws in the system.

Implications

1. The disability sector awaits the Union Budget 2023-24 and hopes for the government's attention and support. PwDs face numerous challenges, including barriers to healthcare, education, and necessities. However, previous union budgets have not adequately addressed these issues. The approach has been primarily welfare-based, focussing on financial outlays for specific programs rather than considering the long-term investment needed to improve the social and human capital of disabled individuals.
2. Research conducted at the University of Melbourne shows that having a disabled family member increases the income required for a household to achieve the same standard of living by 17%. Ignoring the additional cost of living with a disability pushes households further into poverty. It is essential to take a holistic approach and analyse the cost of living with a disability in India, considering the highly inaccessible infrastructure.
3. The allocation for schemes under the PwDs Act, 1995 has seen only a marginal increase in recent years. Promised increments for budgets related to senior citizens and PwDs have not been met, and the allocations have been reduced or remained insufficient. Disability groups have been advocating for dedicated allocations to effectively implement the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016, but the need for such allocations remains unmet.
4. To minimise the cost of living for disabled individuals, it is suggested that goods like assistive technologies and aids for people with disabilities should be exempted from GST. The tax ceiling for disabled individuals should be set at Rs 5 lakh. Providing exemptions and incentives will contribute to their ease of living by increasing disposable income. Private organisations implementing provisions of the RPWD Act and employing 4% disabled employees should be given tangible incentives. Universal access requires collaboration from all stakeholders to build accessible infrastructure, products, and services. Public-private partnerships and corporate social responsibility initiatives should be encouraged to expand accessible infrastructure nationwide.
5. Harmonisation of acts and alignment with the RPWD Act, 2016 is crucial. The Income Tax Act still refers to an outdated disability act, recognising only seven disabilities, while the RPWD Act recognises 21 disabilities. Simplifying procedures for availing Customs Duty relaxation/ exemption for disabled individuals is necessary. To ensure adequate liquidity, disabled persons should be given a minimum of 0.5% interest benefit, which can increase based on the severity of disability, like the benefits provided to senior citizens.
6. Efforts should be made to provide healthcare coverage to all PwDs, like the model implemented in the Philippines. The government can consider making it mandatory for

private insurance companies to cover disabilities. Aligning medical welfare and insurance is also important. Maintaining a database of taxpayers availing of disability deductions will provide insight into the number of taxpayers affected. Deductions for specific ailments should be increased to cover the actual expenses or at least Rs 200,000.

The disabled community hopes that the government will address these issues and bring about positive changes for the inclusive development of the nation.

Budget Allocations of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Empowerment

	Actual 2020-21	Budget 2021-22	Revised 2021-22	Budget 2022-23
Establishment Expenditure of the Centre Secretariat	23.46	34.06	34.00	40.50
Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances	189.13	220.00	180.00	235.00
Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme	83.18	125.00	105.00	125.00
Support of National Trust	29.80	30.00	30.00	35.00
National Program for the Welfare of PwDs: Total	409.53	584.77	462.31	635.39
Scholarship for Students with Disabilities	97.40	125.00	110.00	105.00
Central Sector Schemes/Projects: Total	506.93	709.77	572.31	740.39
Other Central Sector Expenditure (Autonomous Bodies): Rehabilitation Council of India	5.50	5.50	5.50	6.40

The

Accessible India Campaign

The Accessible India Campaign, also known as Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, is an initiative launched by the Government of India to make public spaces and transportation more accessible to PwDs. The campaign aims to create a barrier-free environment and provide equal opportunities and access to PWD in various aspects of their lives.

The campaign targets three key areas: Built Environment Accessibility, Transportation System Accessibility, and ICT Eco-System Accessibility. For each, targets have been set to make government buildings, airports, railway stations, public transport, and government websites fully accessible.

In the context of the election process, the campaign plays a crucial role in ensuring that PwDs can fully participate in the process. By making public spaces, government buildings, and transportation facilities accessible, PwDs can exercise their right to vote and participate in political events without facing physical barriers.

For instance, making government buildings and polling stations fully accessible means that PwDs can easily enter and move around these spaces to cast their votes. Accessible transportation ensures that they can reach the polling stations conveniently. Providing accessible ICT ensures that election-related information, voting procedures, and other relevant materials are available in formats easily understood and usable by PwDs.

By creating a more inclusive and accessible environment through the campaign, the government enables PwDs to have equal opportunities and actively participate in the electoral process. This helps to uphold the principles of democracy, ensuring that all citizens, including those with disabilities, can exercise their right to vote and have a say in shaping the nation's future.

Targets

1. Built Environment Accessibility
 - Conduct accessibility audits and make 25-50 important government buildings in 50 selected cities fully accessible
 - Make 50% of government buildings in the national capital and all state capitals fully accessible
 - Audit and make 50% of government buildings accessible in 10 important cities/towns of each state (excluding those covered by the above)
2. Transportation System Accessibility
 - Audit and make all international airports fully accessible
 - Audit and make all domestic airports fully accessible
 - Ensure all A1, A, and B category railway stations are fully accessible
 - Make 50% of railway stations in the country fully accessible
 - Make 25% of government-owned public transport carriers fully accessible
3. ICT Eco-System Accessibility

- Conduct accessibility audits of 50% of government websites and make them fully accessible
- Ensure that at least 50% of all public documents issued by Central and State Governments meet accessibility standards

Accessible TV viewing: Accessible content on TV is being enhanced in a phased manner. 15 private news channels are already telecasting partially accessible news bulletins and 190 news bulletins have been telecasting with subtitling/sign-language interpretations. More than 2486 scheduled programs/movies using subtitling have been telecast by general entertainment channels. Web accessibility: 584 State Government and 95 Central Government websites have already been made accessible.

The Budget for PwDs

Rs 134.19 crore was released for the Accessible India Campaign from the SIPDA budget. This accounted for less than Rs 14 per disabled citizen of the country. The pandemic further slowed down the activity under this program. In 2020-21, the actual funds released for the campaign were Rs 54.03 crore. With its emphasis on infrastructure development, Budget 2022-23 could have addressed this situation by allocating a meaningful amount of dedicated funding to this flagship program.

In FY 2023-24, the DEPwD under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) was allocated Rs 1,225 crore, which was 0.027% of the total budget. Only three central ministries have dedicated budgetary allocations for PwDs: the MoRD, the MoHFW, and MSJE. The disability-specific allocations constitute a relatively small portion of the budgets of these ministries.

The allocation for the SIPDA declined from Rs 315 crore in FY 2019-20 to Rs 240 crore in FY 2022-23 and Rs 150 crore in FY 2023-24, despite the increase in the overall allocation for the MSJE. The revised estimates for 2022-23 showed that only Rs 100 crore (42%) was used.

Landmark Judgements Regarding Election Process And Voting Concerning PwDs

- Accessible Elections: In 2018, the Supreme Court of India, in the case of Rajeev Kumar vs. Returning Officer, recognised the importance of accessible elections and issued directions to the ECI to ensure that all polling booths were accessible to PwDs. The court emphasised the need for providing necessary facilities, such as ramps, Braille-enabled voting machines, and other assistive technologies, to ensure that PwDs could exercise their right to vote independently and without hindrance.
- Rights of PwDs Act, 2016: Although not a specific judgment, the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016, has been a crucial piece of legislation in India that aims to protect the rights and ensure the accessibility of PwDs across various domains, including elections. The act mandates that the ECI and other relevant authorities take measures to make the election process inclusive and accessible to all citizens.

- **Vikash Kumar v. Election Commission of India (2020):** The Supreme Court of India directed the ECI to take necessary steps to enable online voting for PwDs who face difficulties in accessing physical polling stations.
- **Nipun Malhotra v. University of Delhi (2017):** The Delhi High Court ruled in favour of the petitioner, a person with disabilities, stating that all educational institutions must provide accessible voting facilities for students with disabilities during student union elections.
- **Pankaj Sinha v. Union of India (2016):** The Supreme Court of India directed the ECI to provide Braille-enabled voter identity cards to visually impaired voters to facilitate identification during the voting process.
- **Chief Electoral Officer v. Jan Chaukidar (2019):** The Madras High Court directed the Election Commission to prioritise the needs of PwDs in the conduct of elections, ensuring their full participation and inclusion.
- **Access Now, Inc. v. ECI (2018):** The Supreme Court of India upheld the right of PwDs to vote privately and independently and directed the ECI to deploy accessible EVMs at all polling stations.
- **DRG v. Union of India (2019):** The Delhi High Court directed the ECI to provide information and educational materials about the voting process in accessible formats for PwDs.
- **Chief Electoral Officer, West Bengal v. Mritunjoy Das (2018):** The Supreme Court ruled that PwDs have the right to vote through postal ballots to ensure their participation in the electoral process.

Infrastructure-Accessibility Related Landmark Judgements

- **Dr Anuj Kumar Gupta v. Union of India (2019):** The Delhi High Court directed the ECI to make all polling stations in the National Capital Territory (NCT) accessible for PwDs.
- **Shiv Kumar Sharma v. Union of India (2020):** The Madhya Pradesh High Court directed the ECI to ensure accessible infrastructure, including ramps and Braille signage, at all polling stations in the state.
- **DRG v. Chief Electoral Officer (2013):** The Delhi High Court directed the ECI and the Government of the NCT of Delhi to provide accessible polling booths with necessary facilities for PwDs.
- **Supreme Court Guidelines on Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) Verification (2019):** The Supreme Court directed the ECI to increase the number of VVPAT verifications to enhance the transparency and credibility of the electoral process for all citizens.

Web-Accessibility Related Landmark Judgements

- **Pratap Singh v. Returning Officer (2014):** The Delhi High Court emphasised the importance of sensitisation and training of polling staff regarding the needs of voters with disabilities to ensure a smooth and accessible voting process.
- **National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled v. Union of India (2018):** This landmark judgment mandated that all official election-related websites and apps must

comply with web accessibility guidelines to ensure PwDs can access electoral information.

- Chief Electoral Officer v. DRG (2018): The court ordered the Election Commission to create educational materials in accessible formats for voters with disabilities.
- Accessible Elections Case (2004): In this landmark judgment, the Delhi High Court issued guidelines to make polling stations accessible to PwDs, including provisions for ramps and other facilities.
- Chief Commissioner, PwDs & Anr. vs. Union of India & Ors. (2018): The Supreme Court clarified that all public authorities must comply with the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016, and make their websites accessible to PwDs.

EMBs

EMBs are institutions responsible for administering and overseeing the electoral process in a country or jurisdiction. Their primary function is to ensure free, fair, and transparent elections by organising and managing the entire electoral process. EMBs play a crucial role in upholding democratic principles and maintaining the integrity of elections. The responsibilities and structure can vary from country to country, but they generally perform the following functions.

Voter Registration: EMBs must maintain an accurate and up-to-date voter register. This involves enrolling eligible voters, verifying their identities, and ensuring that only eligible citizens are included in the voter list.

Delimitation and Constituency Delineation: EMBs may be involved in defining electoral boundaries and constituencies to ensure proportional representation and equal representation for citizens.

Candidate Nomination: EMBs oversee the process by which candidates submit their nominations for the elections. They verify the eligibility and credentials of candidates before their names appear on the ballot.

Ballot Design and Printing: EMBs design and print the official ballots used in the elections. They ensure that ballots are clear, unbiased, and accessible to all voters.

Polling Station Setup and Management: EMBs must establish polling stations across the country or jurisdiction. They ensure polling stations are accessible and equipped with the necessary voting materials.

Voter Education: EMBs conduct voter education campaigns to inform citizens about the electoral process, voting procedures, and their rights and responsibilities as voters.

Security and Order: EMBs work with relevant authorities to maintain security and order during the electoral process and ensure voters can cast their ballots without intimidation or coercion.

Vote Counting and Results Declaration: EMBs oversee the counting of votes and the announcement of election results. They ensure that the process is transparent and accurate.

Electoral Dispute Resolution: EMBs may be involved in resolving electoral disputes, complaints, and challenges related to the election process.

EMBs in India

- The Election Commission of India: The apex election management body responsible for conducting elections at various levels in the country, it oversees elections for the President, Vice President, Parliament, State Legislative Assemblies, and Local Government bodies.
- State Election Commissions: Each Indian state has its state election commission for conducting elections to local government bodies such as Municipal Corporations, Municipalities, and Panchayats within the state.
- Union Territory Election Commissions: Union Territories in India also have election commissions responsible for conducting elections for local bodies in their territories.
- District Election Officers (DEOs): DEOs coordinate and oversee all election-related activities at the district level. They work under the guidance of the ECI.
- Returning Officers: Responsible for managing specific constituencies during elections, they accept nominations from candidates, conduct polls, and count votes.
- Assistant Returning Officers: They assist the Returning Officers in managing specific areas or segments of a constituency during elections.
- Electoral Registration Officers: Responsible for maintaining the electoral roll and voter registration within their respective jurisdictions.
- Presiding Officers: Appointed to manage individual polling stations on polling day, ensure a smooth voting process and handle any issues that may arise.
- Chief Electoral Officers: Appointed at the state level to oversee and coordinate the conduct of elections within their respective states, they work closely with the ECI.
- Central Board of Direct Taxes: While not exclusively an EMB, it plays a significant role during elections by monitoring election expenses of political parties and candidates to ensure compliance with financial regulations.

The Inclusion of PwDs in the Political Sphere is of Importance for Several Reasons

- Representation and Diversity: PwDs represent a significant portion of the population, and their active participation in politics ensures that their voices, concerns, and perspectives are heard and represented in decision-making processes. Inclusion leads to a more diverse and representative political landscape that reflects society.
- Human Rights and Social Justice: Inclusion in politics is a fundamental human right of PwDs. It promotes social justice by ensuring that their rights are protected and upheld. When PwDs are actively involved in shaping policies and laws, it helps create a more equitable society that caters to the needs of all its citizens.
- Policy Making: PwDs have unique experiences and insights into challenges. By participating in the political process, they can contribute to policies and legislation that address disability-related issues. Their input is crucial to designing inclusive and accessible programs that promote their well-being and empowerment.
- Breaking Stereotypes and Stigma: Inclusion in politics helps challenge stereotypes and stigma associated with disabilities. When PwDs hold positions of power and influence, it sends a powerful message that disability is not a barrier to success and leadership. This can shift societal attitudes and perceptions, fostering a more inclusive and accepting culture.
- Empowerment and Participation: Political inclusion empowers PwDs by allowing them to actively participate in shaping their communities and the nation. When involved in

decision-making processes, they feel valued and empowered, leading to increased confidence and self-esteem.

- **Accessible Democracy:** Inclusive political participation requires making political processes, campaigns, and polling stations accessible to PwDs. It creates a more accessible democracy that ensures everyone can exercise their right to vote and engage in political activities.
- **Policy Impact and Implementation:** If policies are designed with input from PwDs, they are more likely to be effective and impactful. Additionally, having representatives with disabilities ensures that these policies are implemented and monitored appropriately, leading to positive changes in the lives of those with disabilities.
- **Intersectionality and Advocacy:** Many PwDs belong to diverse and marginalised communities. Inclusion in politics allows for intersectional advocacy, where issues relating to disability can be interconnected with other social justice causes, fostering a broader coalition for change.
- Overall, including PwDs in the political sphere is not just about diversity and representation; it is about recognising their inherent dignity and ensuring that democratic principles are upheld for all citizens. By embracing inclusivity, societies can progress towards a more equitable and just future for everyone.

The Impact of Excluding PwDs from the Political Sphere

- **Lack of Representation:** Without representation in politics, the voices and perspectives of PwDs may go unheard in decision-making processes. This can lead to policies and legislation that do not adequately address their needs, resulting in a lack of support and services for this population.
- **Ineffective Policies:** Excluding PwDs from political participation can result in the development of policies that fail to consider their unique challenges and experiences. Consequently, these policies may be ineffective in promoting social inclusion and accessibility for PwDs.
- **Social Injustice:** Political exclusion perpetuates social injustice by marginalising PwDs and reinforcing negative stereotypes. It conveys that their rights and interests are less valued, contributing to a cycle of discrimination and inequality.
- **Limited Access to Services:** The absence of PwDs in the political sphere can lead to a lack of funding and resources allocated to disability-related programs and services. As a result, individuals with disabilities may face difficulties in accessing essential support systems and opportunities.
- **Missed Contributions:** PwDs have unique skills, talents, and experiences to offer. By excluding them from politics, society misses out on their valuable contributions to policy development, problem-solving, and community building.
- **Disempowerment and Disengagement:** Political exclusion can lead to feelings of disempowerment and disengagement among PwDs. When individuals feel that their voices are not heard or respected, they may become disillusioned with the political process and withdraw from civic participation altogether.

- Reinforcement of Ableism: The exclusion of PwDs from politics reinforces ableism, which is the belief that able-bodied individuals are superior and that disabilities are inherently negative. This perpetuates harmful attitudes and prejudices within society.
- Weakened Democracy: Inclusive democracies thrive on the participation of all citizens. By excluding PwDs, society weakens its democratic principles and fails to live up to the ideals of equal representation and participation.
- Limited Role Models: Political exclusion means that PwDs may lack role models in positions of power and influence. This can affect aspirations and ambitions, limiting the potential of future generations of individuals with disabilities.
- In conclusion, excluding PwDs from the political sphere denies them their basic rights and opportunities and hinders societal progress. An inclusive political landscape that values and embraces their contributions is essential for fostering a more equitable, just, and compassionate society.

Popular Politicians Who Have Disabilities

- Tamara Vonta (Lithuania): Visually impaired since birth, she served as the Minister of Social Security and Labour in Lithuania from 2017 to 2019.
- David Blunkett (United Kingdom): Blind; he served as a Member of Parliament and held several cabinet positions, including Home Secretary and Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.
- Park Geun-hye (South Korea): Served as the President of South Korea from 2013 to 2017. She has a physical disability in her right arm, the result of an assassination attempt on her father in 1974.
- Te Ururoa Flavell (New Zealand): Visually impaired, he served as leader of the Māori Party and a Member of Parliament.
- Hideto Mitamura (Japan): A former member of the House of Councillors in Japan, he uses a wheelchair.
- Josefa Idem (Italy): Visually impaired, she is also a former athlete who represented her country in several Olympics, winning a gold medal in canoeing.
- Bob Hawke (Australia): Australian Prime Minister from 1983 to 1991, he had a hearing impairment.
- Iván Duque Márquez (Colombia): The President of Colombia in 2018, he has a hearing disability.
- Michael Hengartner (Switzerland): A biologist and politician who is deaf, he served as the President of the University of Zurich and is known for advocating for the rights of PwDs.
- Hubert Humphrey (United States): A prominent American politician with a physical disability, he served as the Vice President of the United States under President Lyndon B. Johnson and was known for his advocacy on civil rights issues.

5 Methodology

The methodological approach employed in this research aimed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the barriers PwDs face in accessing electoral processes. Adopting a qualitative methodology, this study leveraged semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, and survey questionnaires as primary data collection tools. The chosen approach facilitated a deep exploration of perspectives, experiences, and attitudes of stakeholders, including PwDs, political party representatives, and experts in relevant fields. The methodology is delineated, encompassing key sub-topics such as the pilot interview, participant selection, interview guide development, data collection, data analysis, process, sampling frame, and time frame.

I Pilot Interview

The initial phase of the research involved conducting a pilot interview to refine the interview guide and ensure its effectiveness in capturing rich and relevant data. This pilot interview was undertaken with three participants, including representatives from each stakeholder group: PwDs, political party representatives, and experts in relevant fields. The insights gained from the pilot led to necessary adjustments to the interview guide and survey questionnaire, ensuring clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the subsequent focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews.

II Participant Selection

PwDs: Inclusivity in participant selection was maintained by involving a diverse group of persons with different types and degrees of disabilities. Random sampling was utilised to ensure representation from various demographic backgrounds, including age, gender, and socio-economic status.

Political Party Representatives: Representatives from different political parties ensured a balanced representation of various ideologies and party sizes. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants who held key positions within their respective parties, enhancing the depth of insights.

Experts in Relevant Fields: Academics, advocates, and professionals with expertise in disability studies, political science, and related fields were targeted for participation. Snowball sampling was considered to identify additional experts through recommendations from initial participants.

III Interview Guide Development

The semi-structured interview guide was a pivotal tool in extracting comprehensive and relevant information. It was developed based on an extensive literature review, incorporating key themes such as accessibility, attitudes, technology, and international best practices. Sub-topics within the interview guide included Barriers to Access (probing physical, technological, and attitudinal barriers PwDs encountered), the Role of Technology (investigating the impact of electronic voting machines and remote voting options on accessibility and participation), Political Party Perspectives (exploring the views of political

party representatives on inclusivity and measures taken to involve PwDs), and International Best Practices (discussing successful strategies from other countries that promote inclusivity in electoral processes and their potential applicability).

IV Data Collection

Focus-Group Discussions: Three focus group discussions were conducted, each comprising a distinct set of participants (PwDs, political party representatives, and experts).

Open-ended questions encouraged participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and suggestions regarding inclusivity in electoral processes.

In-Depth Interviews: Five in-depth interviews were conducted with individual participants from each stakeholder group to delve deeper into their perspectives and obtain more detailed narratives. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, allowing for accurate data transcription and analysis.

Survey Questionnaire: Utilising a quantitative approach involved gathering data using survey questionnaires administered via a Google Form, enabling a systematic and structured data collection. The survey questionnaire was developed after conducting focus-group discussions and in-depth interviews. Ten participants were randomly selected from each district of Delhi to participate in the survey. Survey questionnaires were structured sets of questions to collect standardised data from many participants. They provided a consistent and efficient way to gather numerical information for statistical analysis. Survey questionnaires offered objectivity, comparability, and the ability to analyse trends, making them valuable tools for quantitative research.

V Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis: Data collected from interviews, focus group discussions and survey questionnaires underwent thematic analysis. Codes were generated to identify recurring patterns, themes, and discrepancies across participant responses.

Cross-Verification: Findings were cross-verified by comparing responses from different stakeholder groups, enhancing the credibility and validity of the results. Triangulation techniques were employed to corroborate data from multiple sources.

VI. Process

Data was collected online and offline in person. Participants were recruited based on the sampling frame.

VII Sampling Frame

1. **National Voter Registration Database:** A list of registered voters from the national or local election commission, including information about disability status or indicators, such as special accommodations requested for voting.
2. **Disability Organisations:** Membership databases of local or national disability organisations to identify potential participants who have disabilities and are interested in participating in the study.
3. **Healthcare Facilities:** Hospitals, clinics, rehabilitation centres, and other healthcare facilities to identify individuals with disabilities who may be interested in participating.

4. Special Schools, Vocational Centres and Institutions: Bodies that serve PwDs to identify potential participants.
5. Social Service Agencies: Government agencies or non-profit organisations that provide social services to PwDs, for databases or contacts to recruit participants.
6. Online Disability Communities: Online forums, social media groups, and platforms specifically designed for PwDs, to recruit participants interested in sharing their experiences.
7. Advocacy Groups and Networks: Those focussing on disability rights and inclusion for connections to individuals willing to participate in the study.
8. Accessible Events: Disability-related events, workshops, seminars, and conferences to meet potential participants and gather information.
9. Word of Mouth: Participants who have already been recruited, for referrals to other potential participants who fit the criteria.
10. Snowball Sampling: Begin with a small number of participants and ask them to recommend others who could participate in the study.

VIII Time Frame

Six months for data collection.

6 Findings and Analysis

- Demographic Findings

Delving into the intricate political landscape for individuals with disabilities in Delhi, the research illuminated a nuanced mosaic of participation and impediments. 66% of the individuals surveyed identified as male, shedding light on a discernible gender imbalance in the prevalence of disabilities. 10% grappled with the challenges of blindness, while 8% confronted obstacles related to locomotion. Most of the participants fell within the 23-39 age group.

85% actively partook in the voting process, closely mirroring the overall turnout of 76.44% for PwDs during the 2020 assembly elections. However, 68% expressed a hesitancy to engage due to their disabilities. This nuanced perspective revealed a complex interplay between political involvement, disability, and the perceived efficacy of government initiatives. The prevailing sentiment underscored an urgent call for more inclusive initiatives to bridge the gap between political participation and the intricate challenges individuals with disabilities face.

Crucial Analysis

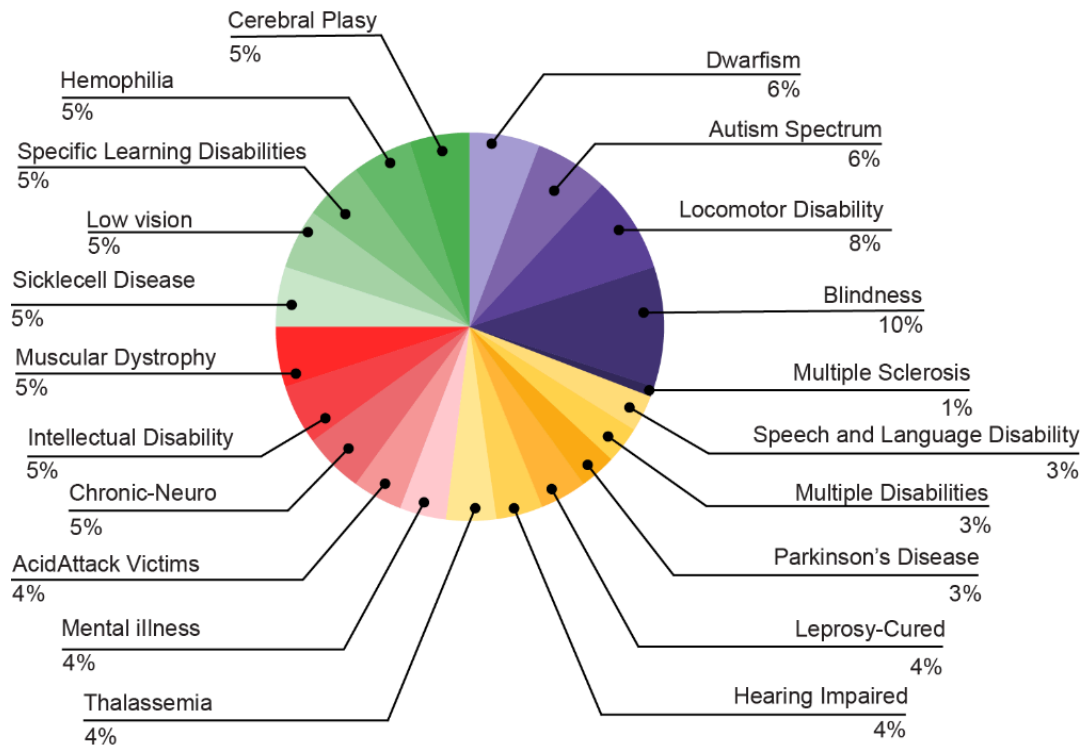
Demographical Analysis

Table 1: Type of Disability

	Frequency	%

Blindness	11	10
Locomotor	9	8
Autism	7	6
Dwarfism	7	6
Cerebral Palsy	6	5
Haemophilia	6	5
Specific Learning Disabilities	6	5
Low Vision	6	5
Sickle Cell Disease	6	5
Muscular Dystrophy	6	5
Intellectual Disability	5	4.5
Chronic Neuro	5	4.5
Acid Attack Victims	4	3.6
Mental Illness	4	3.6
Thalassemia	4	3.6
Hearing Impaired	4	3.6
Leprosy-Cured	4	3.6
Parkinson's Disease	3	2.7
Multiple Disabilities	3	2.7
Speech and Language Disability	3	2.7
Multiple Sclerosis	1	0.9
Total	110	10

Pie Chart for Type of Disability



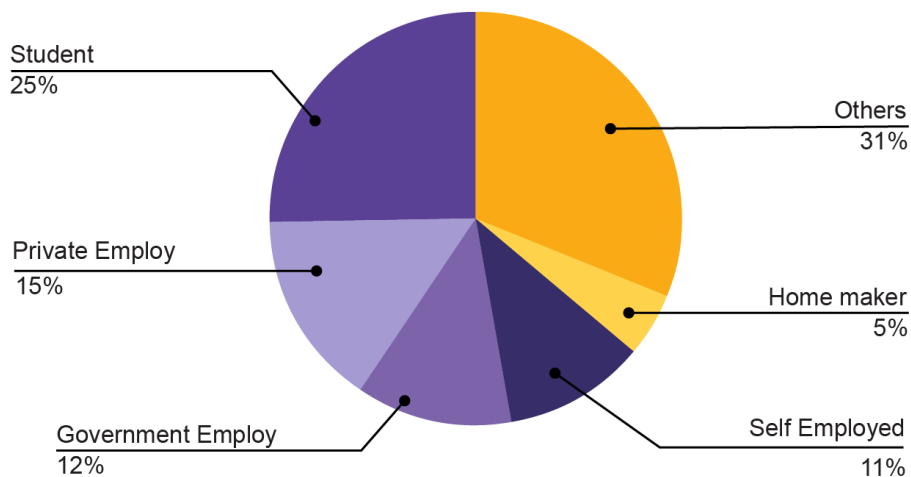
The largest proportion of participants (10%) grappled with blindness, followed by individuals facing locomotor challenges (8%). Autism and Dwarfism tied at 7%. Only 0.9% of the surveyed population contended with Multiple Sclerosis.

Table 2: Occupation

	Frequency	%
Student	28	25
Private Employee	17	15
Government Employee	13	11.

Self Employed	12	10.
Homemaker	6	5
Others	34	30.
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Occupation



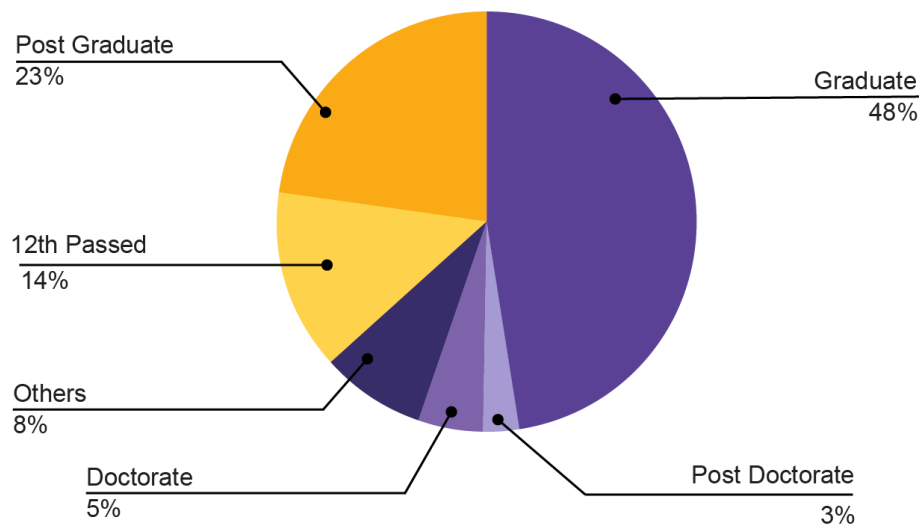
A quarter of the survey participants identify as students, while 15% were engaged in the private sector. Government employment accounted for 12% of the respondents. A substantial 31% fell into the diverse *Others* category, highlighting the varied professional backgrounds within the surveyed population.

Table 3: Highest Education Attainment

	Frequenc y	%
Graduate	53	48
Post Graduate	25	22.

12 th Pass	15	13.
Others	9	8
Doctorate	5	4.5
Post Doctorate	3	2.7
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Highest Educational Attainment



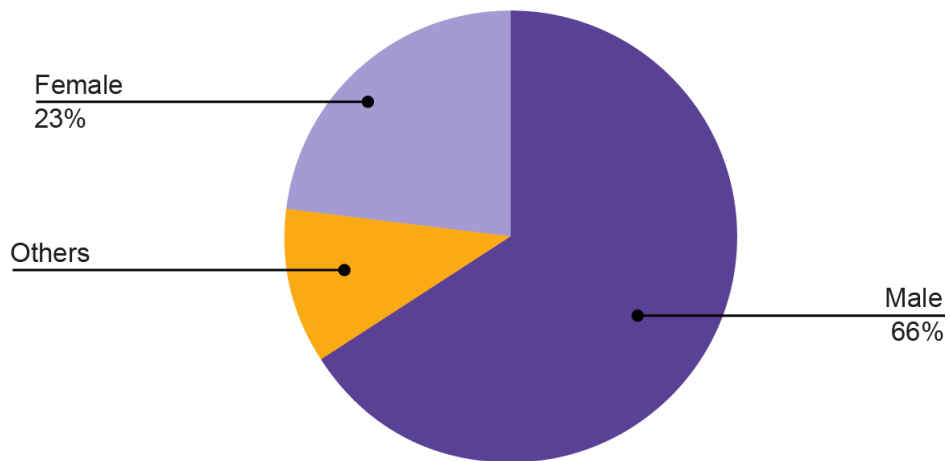
Almost half of the respondents had graduate-level qualifications, followed by post-graduates (23%). closely, 3% of the surveyed individuals held post-doctorate qualifications, signifying a rarefied level of academic accomplishment within the group.

Table 4: Gender

	Frequency	%
Male	73	66
Female	25	22.

Others	12	10.
<i>Total</i>	110	100

Pie chart for Gender



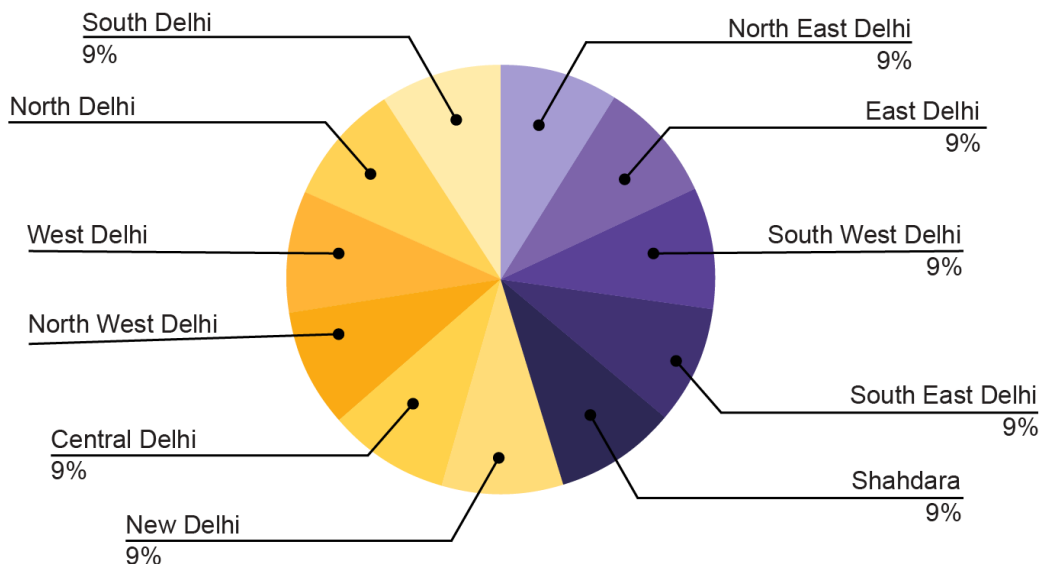
Most of the respondents identified as male. 11% fell into the Others category.

Table 5: District

	Frequency	%
South-West Delhi	10	9.0
East Delhi	10	9.0
North-East Delhi	10	9.0
South Delhi	10	9.0
North Delhi	10	9.0

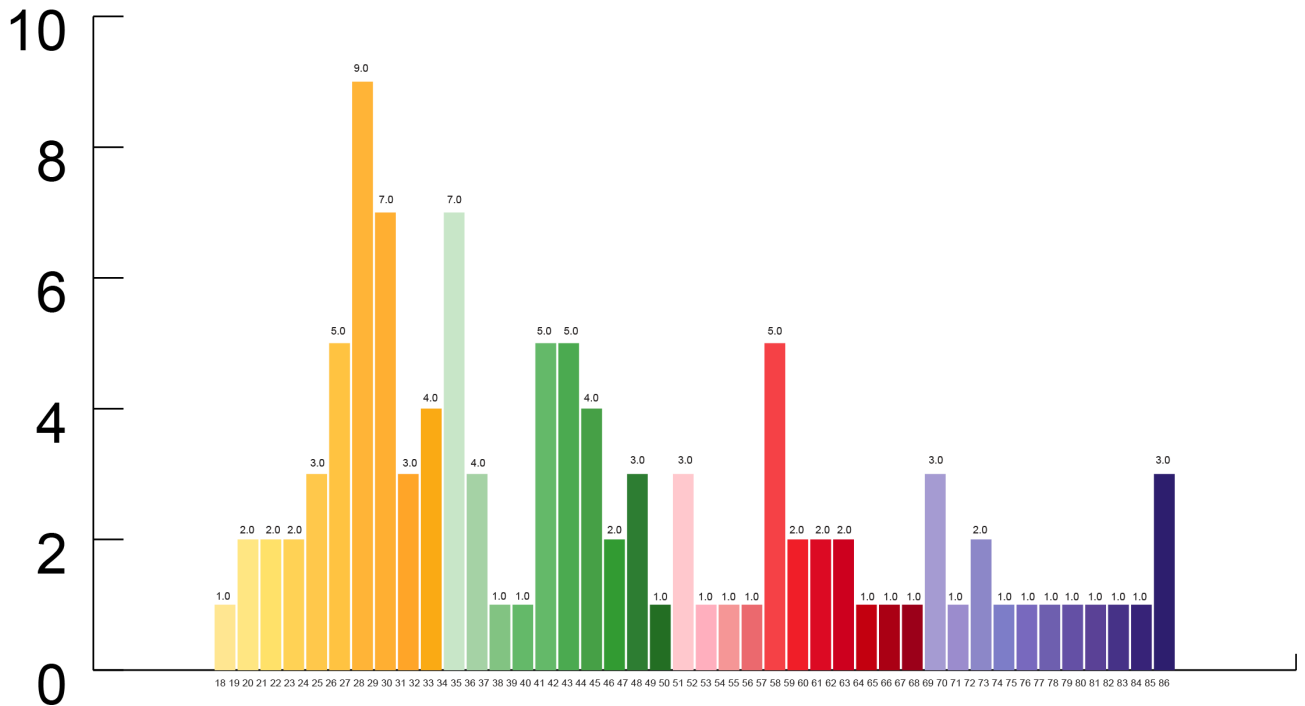
West Delhi	10	9.0
North-West Delhi	10	9.0
Central Delhi	10	9.0
New Delhi	10	9.0
Shahdara	10	9.0
South-East Delhi	10	9.0
Total	110	100

Pie Chart For Address And District



A coincidental pattern emerged with all 11 districts equally represented by 10 respondents each.

Table 6: Age



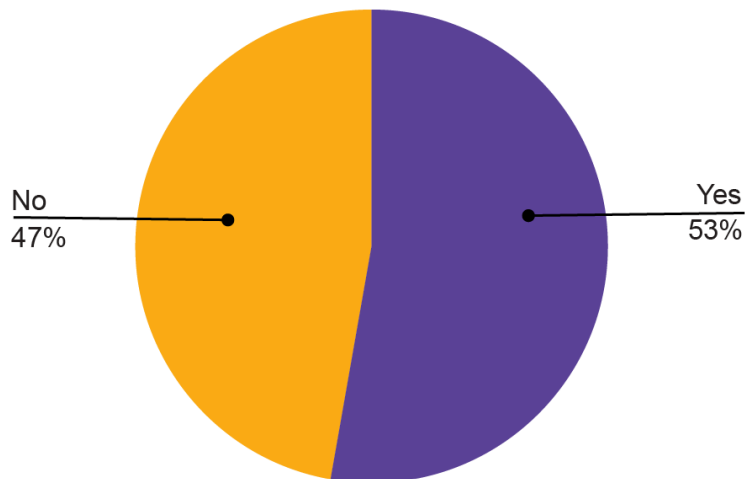
52% of the respondents fell within the 21-35 age range, and 25% belonged to the 36-50 age group.

Questions Analysis

Table 7: Are you aware of voting privileges for PwDs?

	Frequency	%
Yes	58	53
No	52	47
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Aware Of Voting Privileges For PWD



Case Study: Divya Sharma, a 35-year-old professional graphic designer residing in Jaipur, is a determined advocate for the rights of individuals with visual impairments. Born with a congenital visual impairment, Divya has encountered several challenges throughout her life but has consistently demonstrated resilience and a strong commitment to fostering inclusivity.

Divya's passion for civic engagement was ignited during a local community event where she participated in a panel discussion on inclusive policies for individuals with visual impairments. The discussion emphasised the significance of political participation and the need for accessible polling processes. Inspired by this, Divya dedicated herself to advocating for the rights of visually impaired individuals

Her dedication to the cause was further solidified during a local election a few years ago when she encountered significant difficulties at her polling station. Despite guidelines from the ECI aimed at making elections accessible to PwDs, the polling station lacked the necessary provisions for individuals with visual impairments.

She said, "I was excited to cast my vote, but upon reaching the polling station, I faced an unexpected challenge. The voting materials were unavailable in Braille, and the poll workers were unsure how to assist me. It was disheartening to realise that the system was inadequately prepared for voters like me."

The incident at the polling station goes against the spirit of the RPWD Act, which mandates that public buildings and facilities, including polling stations, should be accessible to individuals with disabilities. The absence of Braille materials for voting directly contradicts the provisions for accessible elections outlined by the ECI.

The government has implemented various supportive measures, including registration assistance and the establishment of Matdata Sahayata Kendras. These initiatives aim to enhance the voting privileges of individuals with disabilities and foster inclusivity in the electoral process.

Notably, in the fiscal year 2022-23, the DEPwD witnessed a significant increase in its allocation, amounting to Rs 1212.41 crore. This marked a substantial rise from the Rs

1171.76 crore allotted in the previous year, showcasing the government's commitment to fortifying voting accessibility for the PwD community.

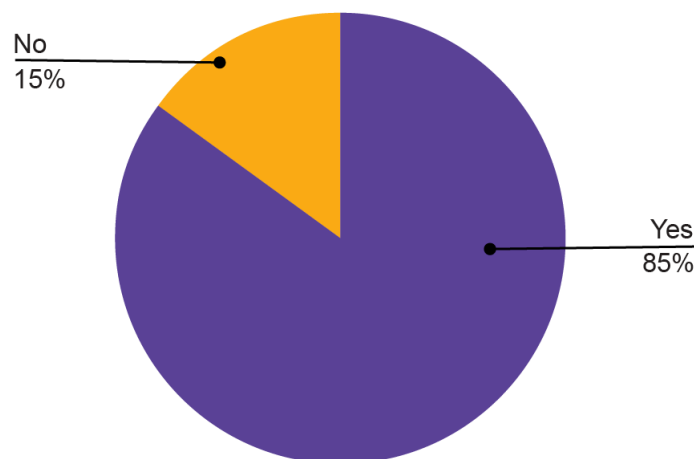
The increased budget underscores a proactive approach to address the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities during elections. It aligns with the principles outlined in the RPWD Act and the guidelines set forth by the ECI. The financial support and the establishment of assistance centres reflect a comprehensive strategy aimed at ensuring that voters with disabilities, such as Divya Sharma, can exercise their right to vote independently and with dignity

Despite the initiatives, a mere 53% of respondents demonstrate awareness of the voting privileges for PwDs, leaving a substantial 47% uninformed about these crucial rights. This disparity underscores the need for comprehensive awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to ensure that a more significant proportion of the population is cognisant of the voting privileges afforded to individuals with disabilities.

Table 8: Do you participate in voting?

	Frequency	%
Yes	94	85
No	16	15
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Participate in Voting



Case Study: Rahul Mehta, a 42-year-old software engineer from Mumbai has emerged as a steadfast advocate for the rights of individuals with locomotor disabilities. Rahul's life took an unexpected turn when he was diagnosed with a rare neurological condition that affected his mobility from a young age. Undeterred by the challenges posed by his disability, Rahul has become a vocal proponent for accessibility and inclusivity in various aspects of life.

Rahul's advocacy journey gained momentum when he attended a technology conference in Bangalore, where he found the physical infrastructure inadequately equipped for individuals with mobility impairments. Determined to address this issue, Rahul began actively participating in discussions on inclusive urban planning and accessibility in public spaces.

His commitment to the cause became even more pronounced during a local municipal election, where he encountered significant hurdles at his designated polling station. Despite guidelines stipulated by the ECI to make polling stations accessible for PwDs, Rahul faced obstacles due to the lack of ramps and appropriate seating arrangements.

He said, *"Voting is a fundamental right, and every citizen should be able to exercise it without hindrance. When I reached the polling station, I was dismayed that there were no ramps for wheelchair access, and the voting booth was not designed with individuals like me in mind. It was a stark reminder that we still have a long way to go in ensuring equal participation for everyone."*

The incident prompted Rahul to intensify his advocacy efforts, focussing on raising awareness about the challenges individuals with locomotor disabilities face in exercising their voting rights. He collaborated with local disability rights organisations and engaged in dialogue with policymakers to emphasise the importance of accessible polling stations.

Enshrined in the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016 is the assurance of voting rights for individuals with disabilities. This legislation places the responsibility on the ECI to guarantee accessibility at every polling station and provide guidelines to ensure the smooth engagement of PwDs in the electoral process. The legal mandate reflects a dedicated commitment to inclusivity, aspiring to dismantle barriers and ensure equitable democratic participation for individuals with disabilities.

In tandem with legislative efforts, the government has implemented a robust identification system for PwDs, registration assistance, and the establishment of Matdata Sahayata Kendras, among other measures, to further and facilitate their engagement in the electoral process. These initiatives aim to address the multifaceted challenges individuals with disabilities face, fostering an environment where they can exercise their right to vote independently and with dignity.

Rahul Mehta's advocacy aligns with the principles outlined in the RPWD Act, emphasising the importance of comprehensive measures to enhance accessibility and inclusivity. His journey underscores the necessity for continued collaboration between the government, the ECI, and advocacy groups to bridge the existing gaps and ensure that individuals with locomotor disabilities can participate fully in the democratic process.

Rahul Mehta's journey mirrors the broader struggle for the rights of individuals with locomotor disabilities, underscoring the imperative for society to prioritise accessibility, equality, and the fundamental right of every citizen to participate fully in the democratic process. His story serves as a call to action for continued advocacy and systemic change to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

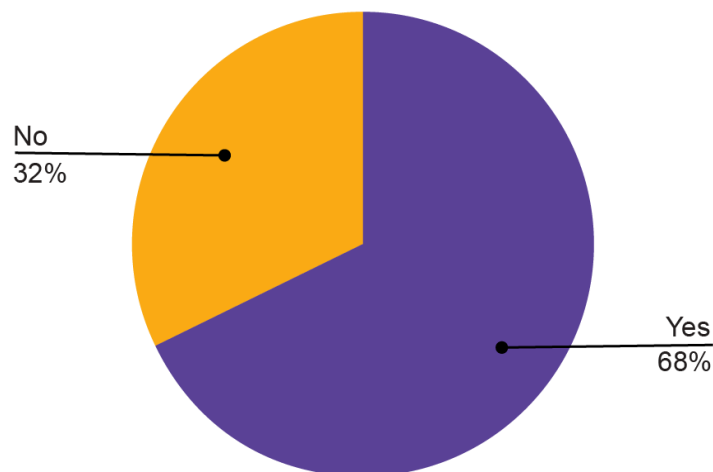
The commitment to inclusivity and accessibility has led to a notable 85% participation rate among individuals with disabilities in the voting process. This positive shift reflects the impact of legal provisions, government initiatives, and advocacy efforts. However, recognising that the remaining 15% face barriers, continued efforts are crucial to dismantling obstacles hindering some from exercising their right to vote. Rahul Mehta's advocacy inspires ongoing collaboration to ensure an accessible and equitable democratic experience.

Table 9: Have you ever felt discouraged or excluded from the electoral process due to disability?

	Frequency	%
Yes	75	68
No	35	32

Total	110	10
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Pie Chart for Felt Discourages to Participate in Electrol Process



Case Study: Aisha Khan, a 36-year-old marketing professional from Coimbatore, has become a dedicated advocate for the rights of individuals with mobility impairments. Aisha's life took an unexpected turn when she was diagnosed with a congenital musculoskeletal condition that significantly impacted her ability to move independently. Despite the challenges posed by her disability, Aisha has emerged as a vocal proponent for accessibility and inclusivity, particularly for the electoral process.

Aisha's advocacy emerged during a regional marketing conference in Chennai, where she encountered difficulties commuting to the venue due to the lack of accessible transportation options. This experience prompted her to delve into discussions on inclusive urban planning and the pressing need for accessible public transportation, particularly for individuals with mobility impairments.

Her commitment to the cause became more evident during the recent state elections when she faced significant challenges reaching her designated polling station far from her residence. Despite the ECI guidelines emphasising accessibility for PwDs, Aisha encountered obstacles due to the distance and the absence of convenient transportation options.

She said, "Exercising our right to vote should not be a journey filled with obstacles. When I reached the polling station, it became evident that the distance and lack of accessible transportation made the process challenging for individuals like me. It highlighted the urgent need for making the electoral process more convenient and inclusive."

This incident propelled Aisha to intensify her advocacy efforts, focussing not only on the physical accessibility of polling stations but also on the broader issue of transportation barriers that individuals with mobility impairments face. Collaborating with local disability rights organisations, she actively engages with policymakers to underscore the significance of convenient and accessible transportation

options to ensure equal participation in the electoral process.

In response to such challenges, the ECI has implemented a range of interventions to enhance the accessibility of elections for PwDs. These initiatives include activities like mapping all polling stations accommodating PwDs, ensuring ground floor placement, implementing PwD-friendly facilities under the Accessible Maternity and Family (AMF) program, organising separate queues for PwDs, offering optional home voting facilities, providing voter EPICS/Slips in Braille, incorporating Braille features on EVMs, supplying wheelchairs and ramps with proper gradients, and offering free transport services with pick and drop facilities.

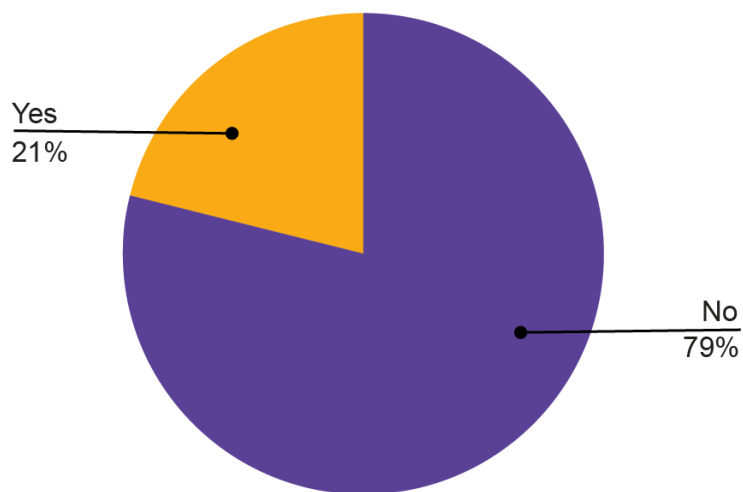
Aisha Khan's journey reflects the broader struggle for the rights of individuals with mobility impairments, emphasising the need for comprehensive solutions that address physical accessibility and transportation challenges.

Despite growing awareness of accessibility initiatives, 68% of the respondents expressed feelings of exclusion from the electoral process, indicating persistent challenges for individuals with disabilities like Aisha Khan. Conversely, 32% do not feel discouraged or excluded, emphasising the positive impact of strides made in enhancing accessibility. These findings underscore the need for continued advocacy to bridge gaps and ensure an inclusive democratic experience for all citizens, irrespective of their mobility status.

Table 10: Do you believe the government is adequately encouraging the political engagement of PwDs?

	Frequency	%
No	87	79
Yes	23	21
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Govt Encouragement to PWD

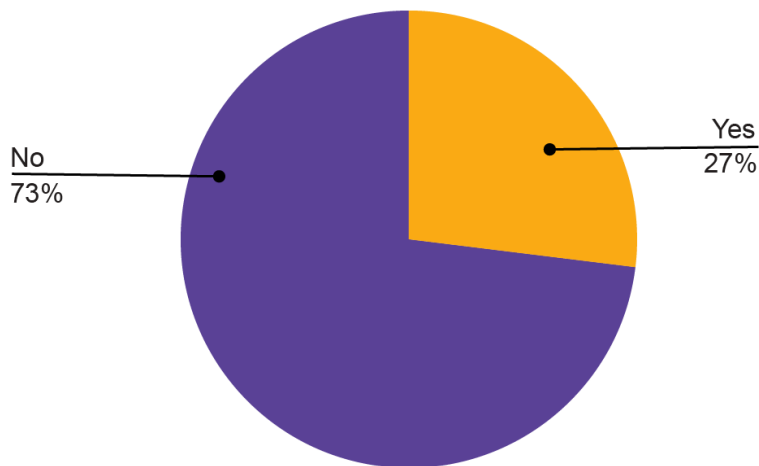


79% of respondents felt that the government fell short in fostering political involvement among PwDs.

Table 11: Have you noticed any positive changes in the incorporation of PwDs in politics in recent times?

	Frequency	%
No	80	73
Yes	30	27
Total	110	10

Pie Chart for Positive Changes for PWD in Politics

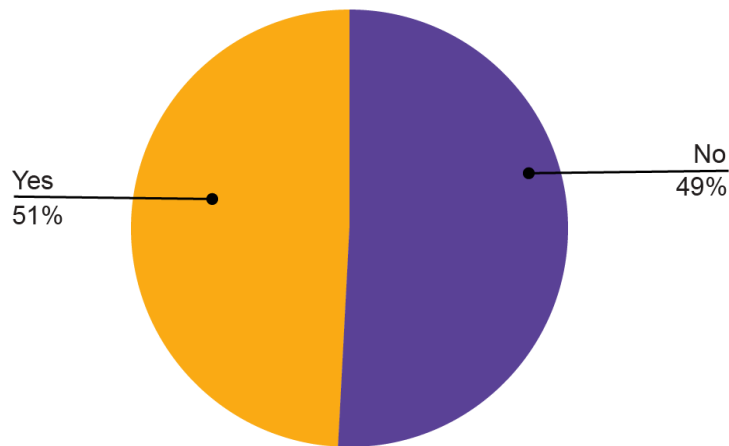


73% of respondents perceived no positive change from the government in including PwDs in the political landscape.

Table 12: Do you know of any specific regulations or policies in India to amplify the political participation of those with disabilities?

	Frequency	%
Yes	56	51
No	54	49
Total	110	10

Pie Chart for Knowledge of Politics



Case Study: Aishwarya Patel is a 32-year-old woman in Mumbai who faced a disheartening dilemma as the upcoming elections approached. With a mobility impairment, she found herself questioning the inclusivity of the democratic process due to the challenges posed by her condition.

One day, her friend Sanket Desai, a 35-year-old software engineer, noticed the waning enthusiasm in Aishwarya's eyes. Concerned about her disenchantment, Sanket resolved to address her concerns and uplift her spirits.

"Sanket, I appreciate your help, but this is an endless maze. How can they make it so complicated for people like me?" Aishwarya sighed in frustration as they stood in a government office, facing a maze of paperwork and unclear procedures. Undeterred by the bureaucratic intricacies, Sanket replied, "I know it seems daunting, but we're not alone in this. We are paving the way for others who might face similar challenges. And remember, your voice matters just as much as anyone else's. Let's navigate this maze together; we'll find the right path."

This exchange highlighted Aishwarya's frustration and underscored Sanket's unwavering commitment to supporting her and championing the cause of inclusivity. Encouraged by Sanket's support, Aishwarya and Sanket faced bureaucratic challenges together, navigating the intricacies of electoral procedures to ensure that Aishwarya's voice would be heard.

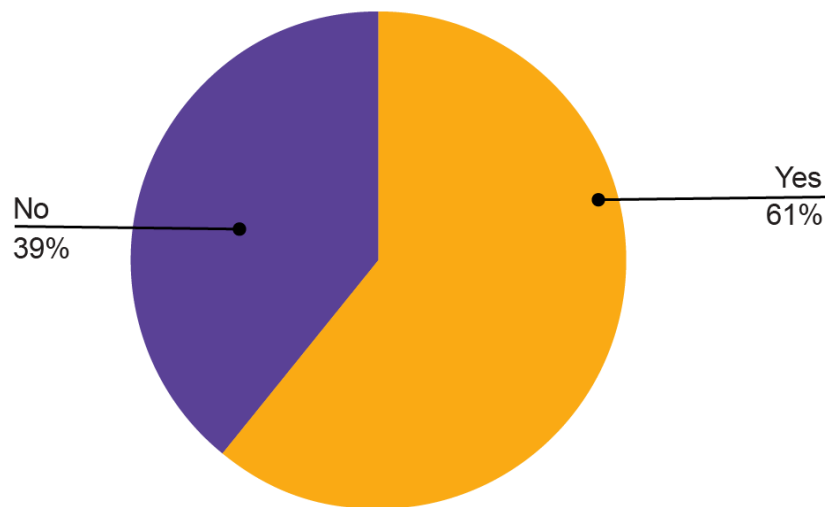
The Badhte Kadam initiative played a significant role. It is a National Trust initiative operating under the National Trust Act, promoting awareness and inclusion for PwDs. It supports registered organisations with up to four events per year, and at least one annual event. Beyond community engagement, the scheme spreads political and voting-related awareness among PwDs, envisioning a society where disabilities are celebrated, and not seen as barriers. Its events foster a culture of acceptance and diversity, setting the stage for a more inclusive and aware society, and empowering individuals to contribute to the democratic

process. The Badhte Kadam initiative has considerably increased awareness of policies for PwDs, as evidenced by a 51% positive response from respondents.

Table 13: Did you encounter difficulties when registering as a voter?

	Frequency	%
Yes	67	61
No	43	39
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Difficulty Registering Voting

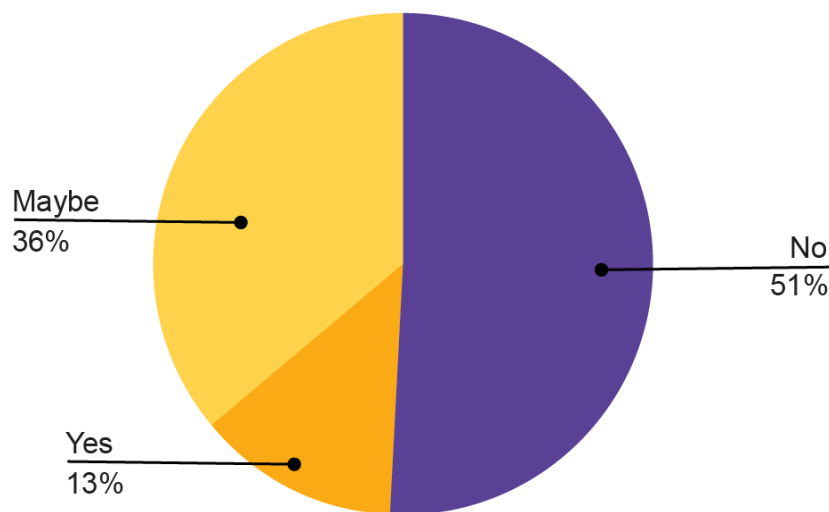


61% of the participants encountered obstacles when attempting to register as voters, underscoring the challenges within the voter registration process.

Table 14: Do you believe that individuals with disabilities have equal access to political information and education?

	Frequency	%
No	56	51
Maybe	40	36
Yes	14	13
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for PWD have equal access to political information



Case Study: Aarav, an 8-year-old boy diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, faced a challenging incident in his third-grade classroom. A group of classmates, unaware of Aarav's condition, made inappropriate comments and jokes about his unique behaviour and communication style, leaving him feeling isolated. However, Aarav's response showcased remarkable resilience. He approached his teacher Mrs Anderson and said with a hint of courage, "Mrs Anderson, they were making fun of me because I talk differently and do things my way. It hurt, and I don't want to feel left out." Mrs Anderson, understanding the importance of addressing the situation, reassured him, "Aarav, I appreciate you sharing your feelings with me. Let's work together to ensure everyone understands and respects our differences."

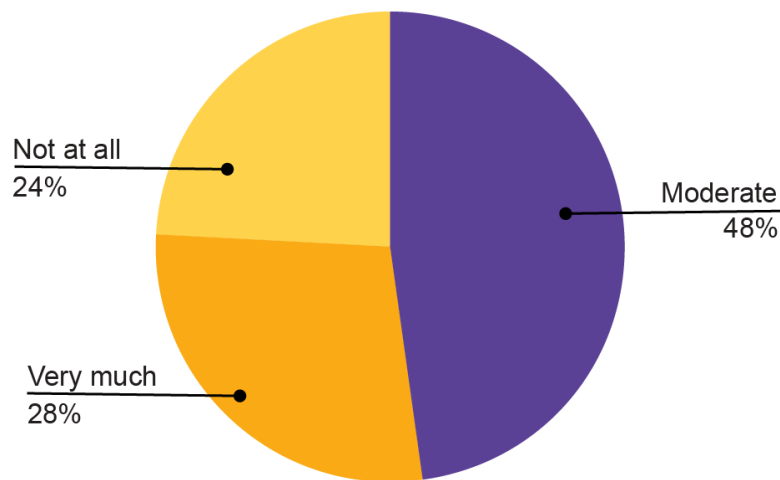
She organised a classroom discussion on empathy, diversity, and understanding differences, using educational resources on autism to sensitise the class. The school's special education team collaborated with Aarav's therapists to create awareness sessions for students and

educators, resulting in a positive transformation of Aarav's classroom environment, with classmates now demonstrating increased empathy and acceptance towards him. Disha, a pioneering scheme under the National Trust Act, is a transformative initiative focussing on early intervention and school readiness for children aged 0-10 with disabilities. This groundbreaking scheme establishes Disha Centres, strategically positioned to offer specialised therapies and training programs to bridge developmental gaps in these young learners. It fosters holistic growth by empowering families with knowledge and support, recognising that the foundation of a child's development extends beyond the classroom. Disha envisions a future where children with disabilities enter schools and thrive in inclusive environments, breaking down barriers to their full potential. Through its comprehensive and individualised approach, the scheme strives to create a society where every child, irrespective of ability, can participate fully in educational opportunities. Despite the commendable efforts of the Disha initiative, there appears to be a prevailing lack of awareness regarding accessibility for PwDs. 51% expressed that political and educational spheres remain challenging for PwDs to access.

Table 15: Did you face challenges in accessing a polling station?

	Frequency	%
Moderate	53	48
Not at all	26	24
Very much	31	28
Total	110	10

Pie Chart for Challenges While Accessing Polling Stations



Case Study: Arjun Singh, a 32-year-old resident of Ludhiana, faces the challenges of navigating life with a physical disability, and relying on a wheelchair for mobility. In March 2023, during the local elections, Arjun encountered a disheartening experience while attempting to vote. The absence of wheelchair-accessible ramps near the voting area posed a significant obstacle, nearly causing his wheelchair to tip over. This alarming incident left Arjun vulnerable and highlighted the need for enhanced accessibility in public spaces.

In the aftermath of this incident, Arjun, determined to transform his negative experience into a catalyst for change, decided to advocate for inclusive infrastructure. He reached out to local authorities, emphasising the need for wheelchair-accessible ramps at polling stations to ensure that individuals with physical disabilities could exercise their democratic rights without facing undue challenges. Simultaneously, Arjun engaged with disability advocacy groups and shared his experience on social media platforms, amplifying the call for more inclusive voting environments.

Arjun's advocacy efforts gained traction, drawing the attention of local authorities who recognised the importance of addressing accessibility issues. There was a collaborative effort to install wheelchair-accessible ramps at the polling stations in Arjun's area. This initiative aimed to address Arjun's concerns and make voting accessible for all individuals facing mobility challenges.

Reflecting on his advocacy journey, Arjun expressed his concerns directly to the local authorities. "I want to be an active participant in the democratic process, but the lack of wheelchair-accessible ramps nearly tipped my wheelchair over during the elections. It was frightening. We must address these issues to ensure that everyone, regardless of physical ability, can exercise their right to vote without feeling vulnerable or excluded."

In discussions with disability advocacy groups, Arjun emphasised the broader importance of inclusive infrastructure. "This is not just about me; it's about creating a more accessible environment for everyone. We need to raise awareness about the challenges individuals with disabilities face and work towards solutions that promote inclusivity."

On social media, Arjun shared his experience, urging for change. "I faced a real scare trying to vote; a simple act that should be accessible to everyone. Let us raise our voices for wheelchair-accessible ramps at polling stations and make sure no one else goes through what I did. It is time for inclusive change!"

Arjun's dialogue reflects his determination to spotlight the challenges individuals with disabilities face, and his commitment to advocating for a more inclusive and accessible society. His words became a powerful catalyst for change, inspiring local authorities and the broader community to address accessibility issues in public spaces.

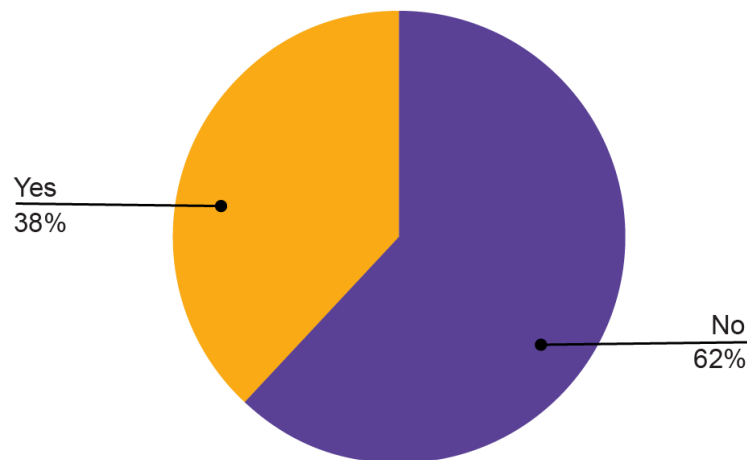
By the Rights of PwDs Act, 2016, the ECI must guarantee the provision of essential facilities such as ramps, tricycles, and audio-video information. To ensure implementation, a meticulous physical verification and certification process must be undertaken. Observers appointed by the Commission for People with Disabilities play a crucial role in certifying that these facilities meet the required standards, thus ensuring that individuals with disabilities encounter no hindrance during their participation in the electoral process.

Despite the strides made by the PwDs Act, 2016, guaranteeing accessibility with provisions such as ramps and tricycles, the survey results reveal a nuanced landscape. 48% of respondents fell into the moderate category when asked about challenges faced while accessing polling stations. 28% stated they faced challenges very much, while 24% contended with not at all.

Table 16: Do you face communication challenges when interacting with election officials or receiving information about the election process?

	Frequency	%
No	68	62
Yes	42	38
Total	110	10

Pie Chart for Communication Challenges With Election Officials



Case Study: Neha Kapoor, a 28-year-old resident of Bangalore, confronts the daily hurdles of living with a physical disability that confines her to a wheelchair. As the local elections approached in April 2023, she looked forward to exercising her right to vote. However, on election day, she encountered a disheartening experience that shed light on the lack of inclusivity in the voting process for individuals with physical disabilities.

Despite her excitement to vote, Neha faced a significant obstacle when she realised there were no provisions for her companion to accompany her into the voting booth. Neha's companion, essential for supporting and assisting, was informed that only voters with disabilities were allowed inside the designated area. This restriction left Neha feeling isolated and raised concerns about the overall accessibility and inclusivity of the voting process.

In the aftermath of this exclusionary incident, Neha decided to channel her frustration into advocacy for a more inclusive voting environment. She reached out to local authorities, emphasising the importance of allowing companions for individuals with physical disabilities to accompany them during the voting process. Neha's primary goal was to address her personal experience and advocate for a broader change that would benefit the entire community of individuals with disabilities.

Simultaneously, Neha connected with disability advocacy groups, sharing her story and garnering support for her cause. Through social media platforms, she amplified her message, using hashtags such as #InclusiveVoting and #EveryVoteMatters. Neha's campaign aimed to draw attention to the barriers faced by individuals with physical disabilities during the voting process and advocated for policy changes to ensure their full participation in the democratic process.

Neha's advocacy efforts began to gain momentum, catching the attention of local authorities and disability rights organisations. Recognising the need for change, a collaborative effort was initiated to review and revise voting policies to allow companions for individuals with physical disabilities, ensuring a more inclusive and accessible voting experience.

Reflecting on her advocacy journey, Neha expressed her determination to make a difference. "I believe in the power of democracy, but true democracy can only exist when everyone, regardless of physical ability, can fully participate. By advocating for the right to have a

companion during the voting process, we are not just making a change for individuals with disabilities but creating a more inclusive society for everyone."

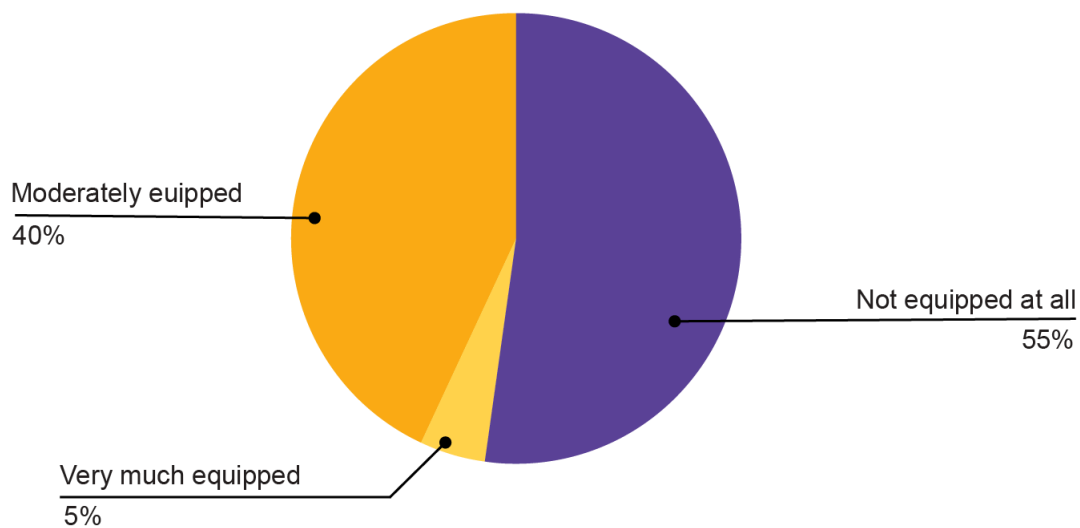
In conversations with disability advocacy groups, Neha emphasised the broader implications of her campaign. "This is about breaking down barriers and fostering a society that values diversity and inclusion. By addressing the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in the voting process, we are paving the way for a more accessible future in all aspects of life." In recent times, election officials have been required to undergo comprehensive training, acquainting them with the stipulations outlined in Rule 49 N of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. This training enlightens personnel on the provisions that allow a companion to accompany a visually impaired or physically infirm elector. The briefing emphasises the significance of implementing these provisions to facilitate a more inclusive and accessible voting experience for individuals with disabilities, ensuring they can exercise their right to vote with the necessary support.

Thanks to these initiatives, 62% of our survey respondents chose option no, indicating they did not encounter communication challenges with the election officials.

Table 17: Are the polling stations in your locality equipped for the convenience of people with disabilities?

	Frequency	%
Very much equipped	6	5
Moderately equipped	44	40
Not equipped at all	60	55
Total	110	10

Pie Chart for Polling Stations Equipped for PWD



Case Study: Rajesh Mehta, a 35-year-old resident of Pune, eagerly awaited the local elections. However, his enthusiasm was swiftly dampened when he discovered a significant barrier to his participation in the electoral process. The EVMs, a crucial element of the democratic process, lacked features to support visually impaired voters like Rajesh. The absence of accessible features on the EVMs left him feeling excluded and frustrated that he could not independently cast his vote. Determined to transform his negative experience into a catalyst for change, Rajesh decided to advocate for inclusive voting technology.

Rajesh reached out to local authorities, emphasising the urgent need for EVMs equipped with audio assistance or tactile interfaces to facilitate an inclusive voting experience for visually impaired voters. Simultaneously, he engaged with advocacy groups for the visually impaired and leveraged social media platforms to share his experience, amplifying the call for accessible voting technology.

Rajesh's advocacy efforts gained traction, drawing the attention of local authorities who recognised the importance of addressing the technological gaps. In response, a collaborative effort was initiated to explore and implement inclusive features on EVMs to ensure that visually impaired voters could participate in the democratic process without facing unnecessary obstacles.

Reflecting on his advocacy journey, Rajesh emphasised the broader significance of inclusive voting technology. "Voting is a fundamental right, and everyone, regardless of visual ability, should have the means to exercise it independently. By advocating for features on EVMs that cater to visually impaired voters, we are not just addressing my concerns but fostering a more inclusive and accessible democratic process for all."

In discussions with advocacy groups, Rajesh underscored the need for awareness and action. "This is a collective effort to ensure that technology evolves to be more inclusive. We

need to raise awareness about the challenges visually impaired individuals face during elections and work towards solutions for equal participation."

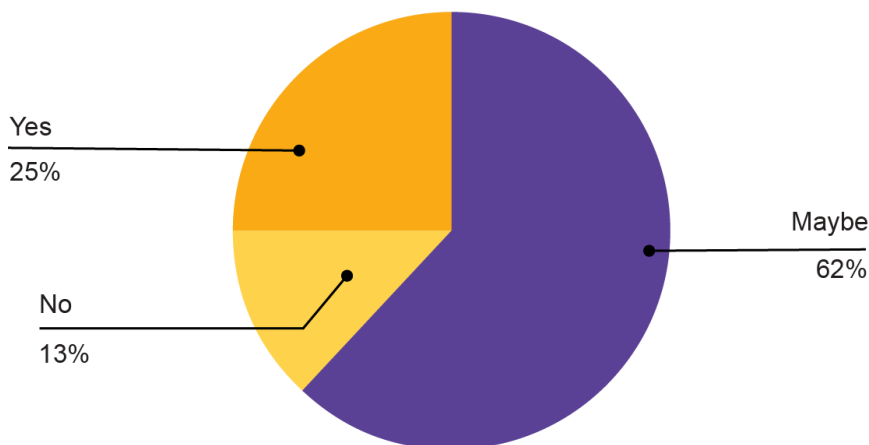
In response to the pressing need for inclusivity, the ECI took swift and decisive action to bridge the accessibility gap for visually impaired voters. Recognising the importance of fostering an inclusive democratic process, the Commission initiated a groundbreaking enhancement: the incorporation of Braille features on EVMs. This innovative move marked a significant leap forward in ensuring that every eligible voter, regardless of their visual abilities, could exercise their right to vote independently and with dignity. The Braille features were incorporated into the EVM interface, providing tactile cues and information for visually impaired individuals.

Despite the earnest efforts of the ECI, the survey results reveal a stark reality – a mere 5% of respondents expressed confidence in categorising the voting process as very much equipped, and a modest 40% chose the moderately equipped option.

Table 18: Can technology help surmount the obstacles individuals with disabilities encounter in political involvement?

	Frequency	%
Maybe	68	62
Yes	28	25
No	14	13
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Technology Help Surmount PWD

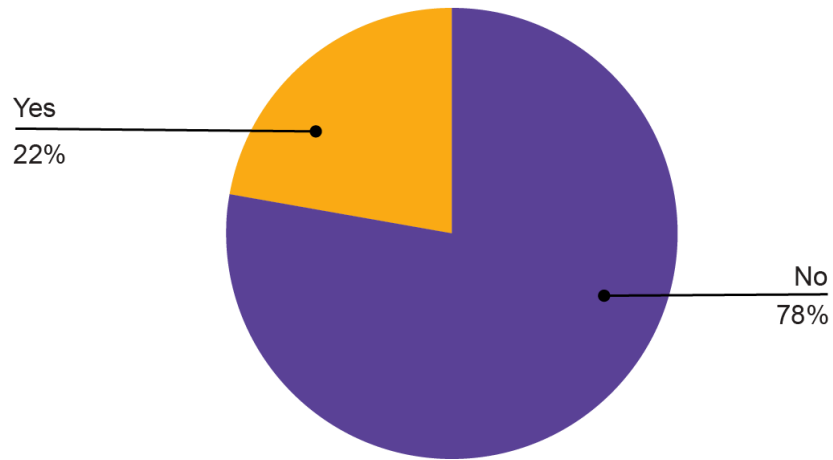


A substantial majority, comprising 62% and 25%, expressed a hopeful outlook by choosing the *maybe* and *yes* categories, affirming their belief that technology holds the potential to overcome existing obstacles.

Table 19: Have you utilised assistive technologies to aid your political participation as an individual with a disability?

	Frequency	%
No	86	78
Yes	24	22
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Tech To Aid Political Participation

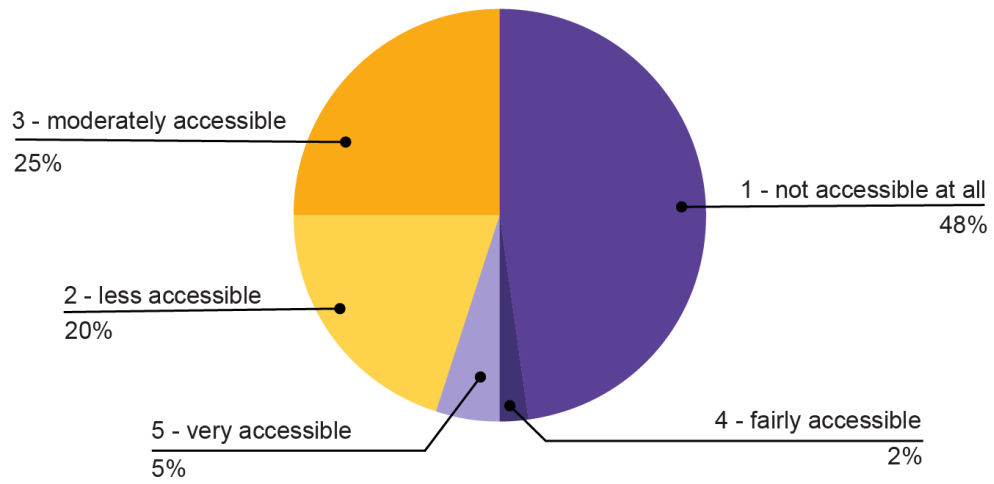


The majority has yet to leverage assistive technology to enhance the political participation of PwDs.

Table 20: On a scale of 1 to 5, how accessible are polling stations?

	Frequency	%
1	53	48
2	22	20
3	27	25
4	2	2
5	6	5
Total	110	10

Pie Chart for Accessibility of Polling Stations (1-5)

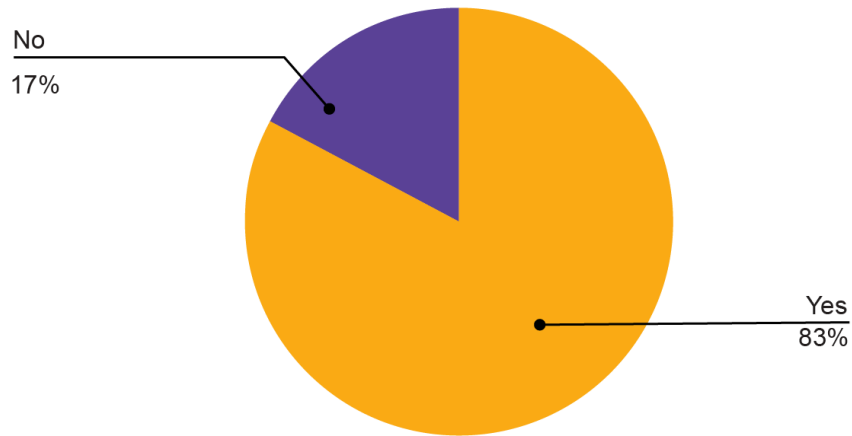


Over 90% consider the accessibility of polling stations less than optimal.

Table 21: Do you believe more comprehensive training is required for polling station personnel to assist voters with disabilities?

	Frequency	%
Yes	91	83
No	19	17
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Training for Election Personnel for PWD

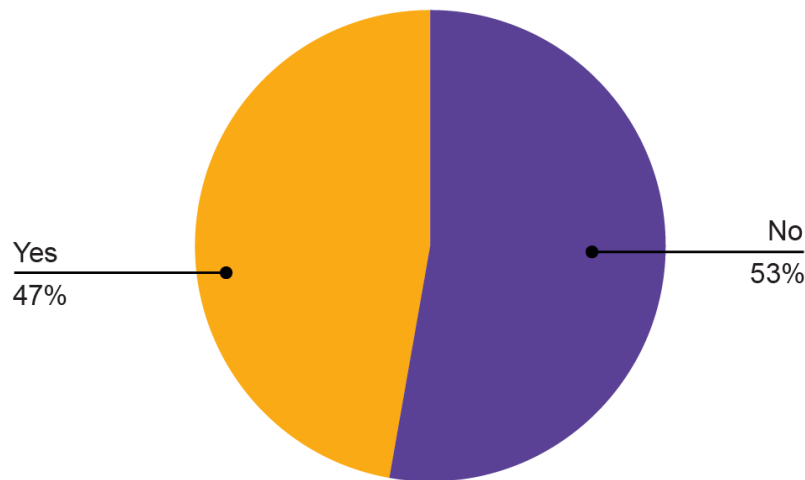


An overwhelming 83% of respondents advocate for comprehensive training for election personnel.

Table 22: Do you feel that the voting materials including ballots and voter guides are provided in formats accessible to you?

	Frequency	%
No	58	53
Yes	52	47
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Voting Material Format Accessible for PWD



Case Study: Maya, a dedicated citizen with visual impairment, faced a nightmarish experience on election day when handed voting guides lacking critical accessibility features. Deprived of Braille, large fonts, and audio instructions, she struggled to navigate and comprehend the information independently. The absence of these essential elements compromised her right to vote confidentially and reflected a broader issue of exclusion in the democratic process.

The challenges were manifold. First, the lack of Braille denied Maya the ability to independently read and understand the voting guide, infringing on her autonomy as a voter. Second, the inadequate font size made it difficult for her to discern the content, violating the principle of equal access for all voters. Lastly, the absence of audio instructions left Maya unable to navigate the document, hindering her overall understanding of the election process.

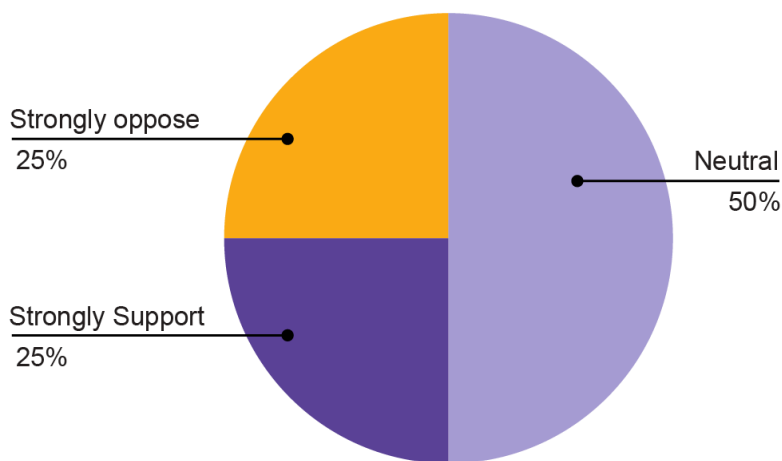
Feeling frustrated, Maya said, "It's disheartening; this voting experience has become a struggle for me to navigate and understand independently." Maya's voting experience, highlights the urgent need for inclusivity in the electoral process, ensuring that citizens with visual impairments can exercise their right to vote independently and confidently. The ECI has implemented several interventions to enhance the accessibility of elections for PwDs. These initiatives include activities like mapping all polling stations accommodating PwDs, ensuring that all polling stations are located on the ground floor, implementing PwD-friendly facilities under the AMF program, organising separate queues for PwDs, offering optional home voting facilities, providing voter EPICS/Slips in Braille, incorporating Braille features on EVMs, supplying wheelchairs and ramps with proper gradients, and offering free transport services with pick and drop facilities.

Despite efforts to enhance accessibility, 53% of respondents doubted the inclusivity of voting materials for PwDs, while only 47% believed that current measures are adequate.

Table 23: Do you support the implementation of remote voting options for PwDs in elections?

	Frequency	%
Neutral	55	50
Strongly Oppose	28	25.4
Strongly Support	27	24.5
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Support Remote Voting

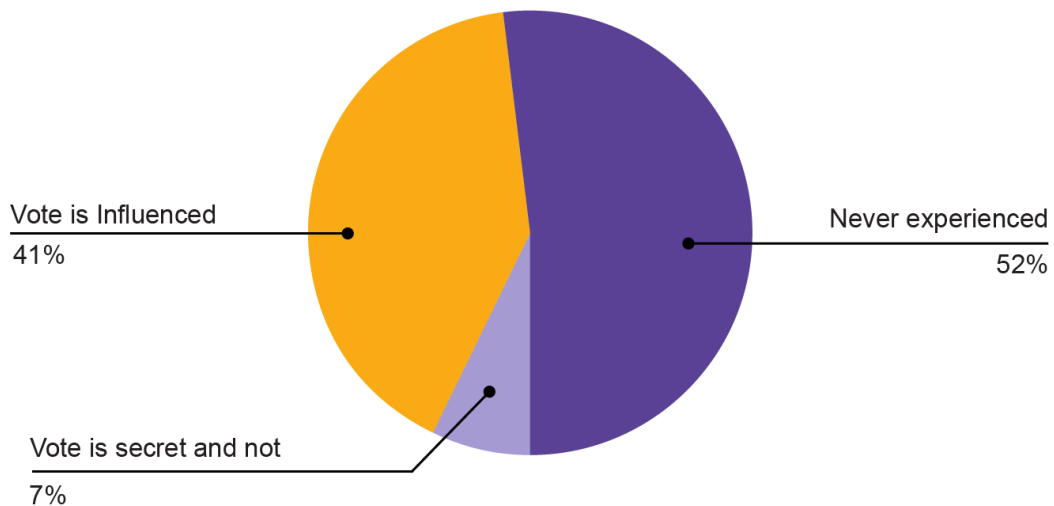


Opinion on remote voting is equally divided between supporters of the move and its opponents.

Table 24: When voting remotely from your home do you as a PwD have a secret franchise or is it influenced by your family members, friends or known people?

	Frequency	%
Never experienced	57	52
Vote is influenced	45	41
Vote is secret and not influenced	8	7
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Have Secret Franchise Vote Influenced by Others

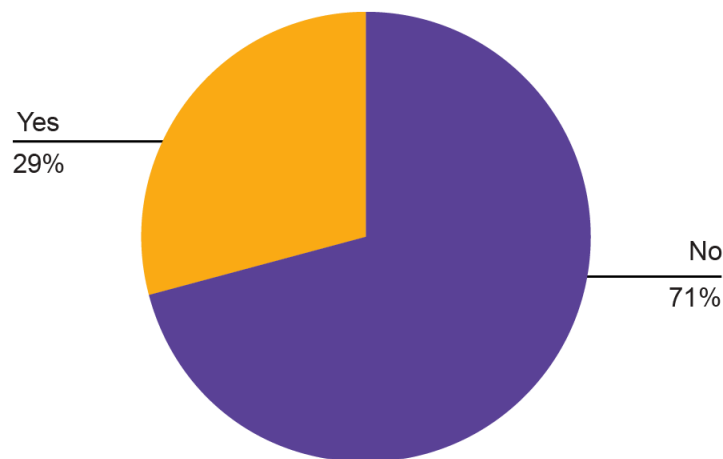


52% of the respondents have never encountered secret franchises and remain uninfluenced by family members during the voting process. However, 41% admitted that their votes have been influenced, highlighting a significant portion of the electorate subject to external pressures.

Table 25: Is the voting process confidential and accessible for individuals with disabilities according to you?

	Frequency	%
No	78	71
Yes	32	29
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for is Voting Process Confidential

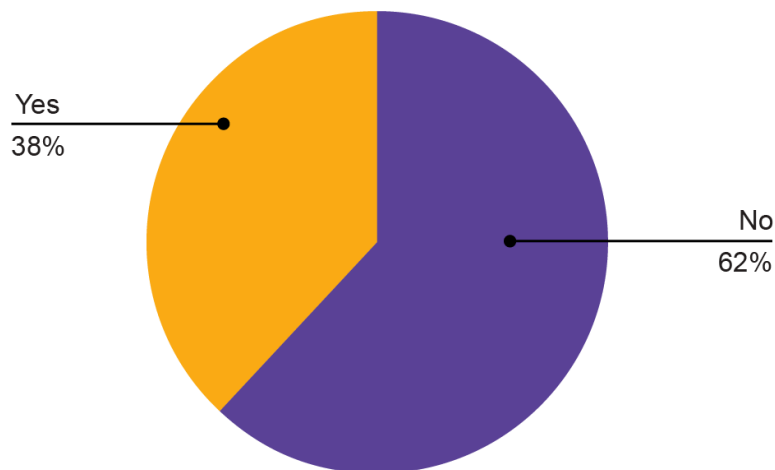


The confidentiality of the voting process appears to be a concern for the majority, with 71% of respondents expressing doubt about the privacy and discretion associated with casting their votes.

Table 26: Do you own a vehicle?

	Frequency	%
No	68	62
Yes	42	38
Total	110	100

Pie Chart for Own Vehicle

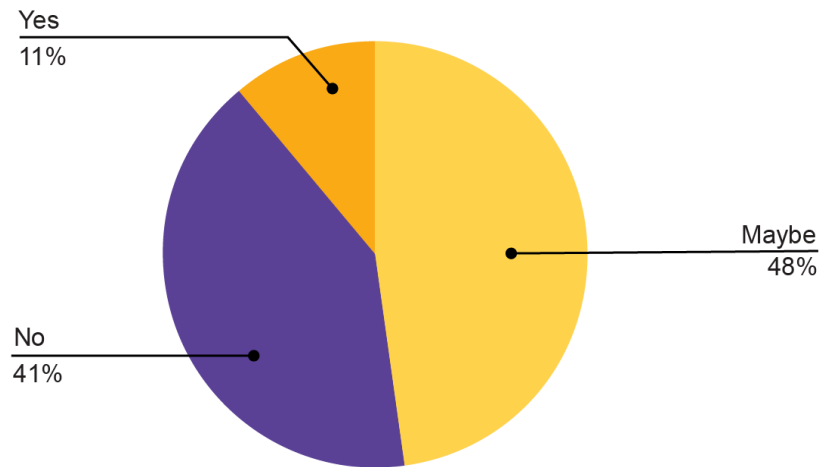


62% of the respondents do not own a vehicle, while 38% do.

Table 27: Have there been improvements in accessible transportation to and from polling stations for individuals with disabilities?

	Frequency	%
Maybe	53	48
No	45	41
Yes	12	11
Total	110	100

Pie Charts for Improvements in Transportation to Polling Stations for PWD



Case Study: Akshay, a 32-year-old with mobility challenges, recently encountered substantial barriers while attempting to vote. The absence of accessible transport compounded by an inadequately equipped polling centre shed light on the pervasive issue of limited accessibility within the voting system. This case study explores Akshay's journey, revealing the profound impact of insufficient infrastructure on the ability of individuals with mobility issues to engage in the fundamental act of voting.

On polling day, Akshay faced an unexpected and disheartening challenge in reaching the polling centre. The lack of accessible transportation left him with limited mobility choices, making the journey to the polling centre a daunting task.

Upon arriving at the polling centre, Akshay confronted yet another set of challenges. The facility lacked the necessary infrastructure to accommodate individuals with mobility issues. The absence of ramps, elevators, or accessible entry points made navigating the premises a formidable task.

To address transportation issues for PwDs, the ECI has initiated measures to guarantee adequate transportation facilities for PwDs and senior citizens at every polling station during election days. The DEO/Returning Officer assumes responsibility for the transportation arrangements for PwDs. A Transport Nodal Officer is appointed for each district to oversee this process. To ensure seamless accessibility, every PwD/senior citizen is systematically tagged according to their respective polling station for a personalised pick-up and drop-off service from their residence, facilitating their voting experience with utmost convenience and inclusivity.

From the survey, 48% and 11% of respondents, fall into the maybe and yes categories, respectively, suggesting that the government has improved transportation facilities for PwDs.

Table 28: Are you aware that PwDs are involved in the counting of votes in elections?

	Frequency	%
No	72	65
Yes	38	35
Total	110	10

Pie Charts for Awareness that PWD are Involved in vote Counting

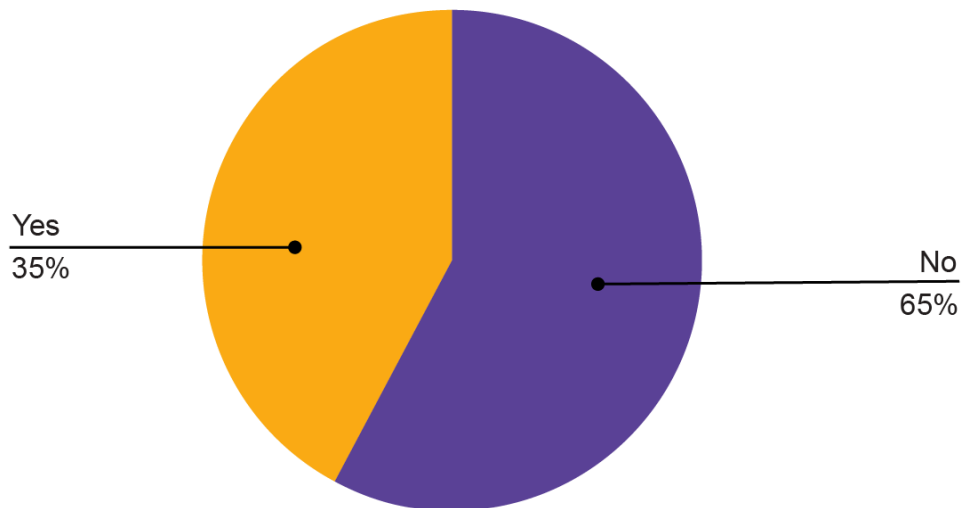
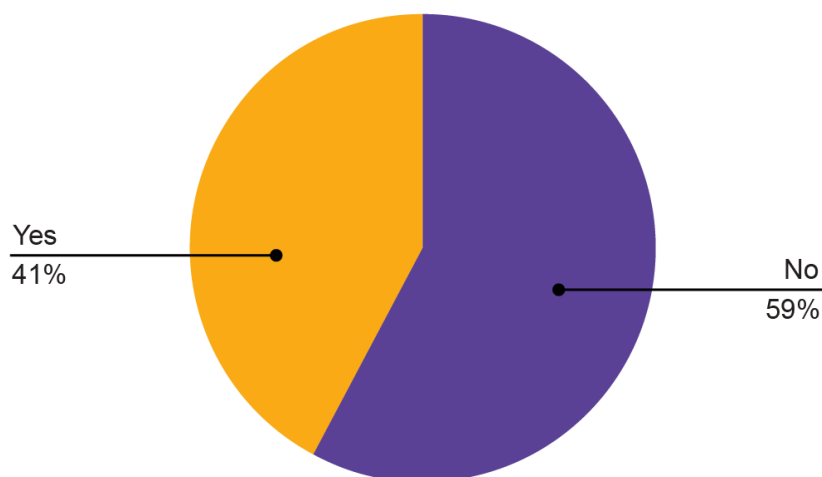


Table 29: Have you ever participated in a political campaign, movement, or activism or been associated with a political party?

	Frequency	%
No	65	59
Yes	45	41

Total	110	10
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Pie Charts for Participated in Political Activity or Campaign

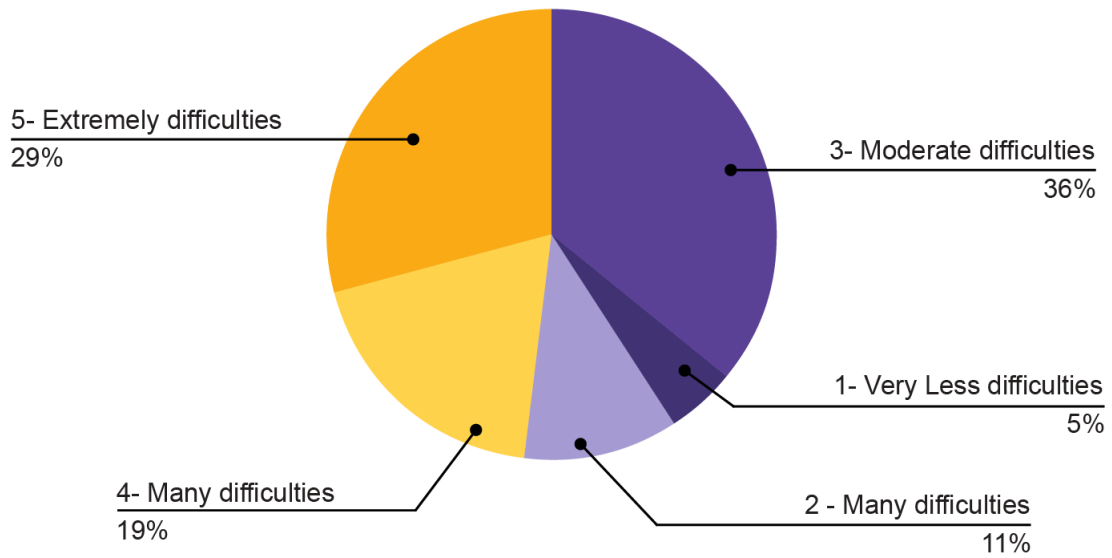


59% have not actively participated in a political campaign, movement, or activism, or been associated with a political party, while the remaining 41% have.

Table 30: How would you rate the difficulties you faced?

	Frequency	%
1	5	5
2	12	11
3	40	36
4	21	19
5	32	29
<i>Tota</i>	110	10

Pie Charts for Difficulties (1-5)

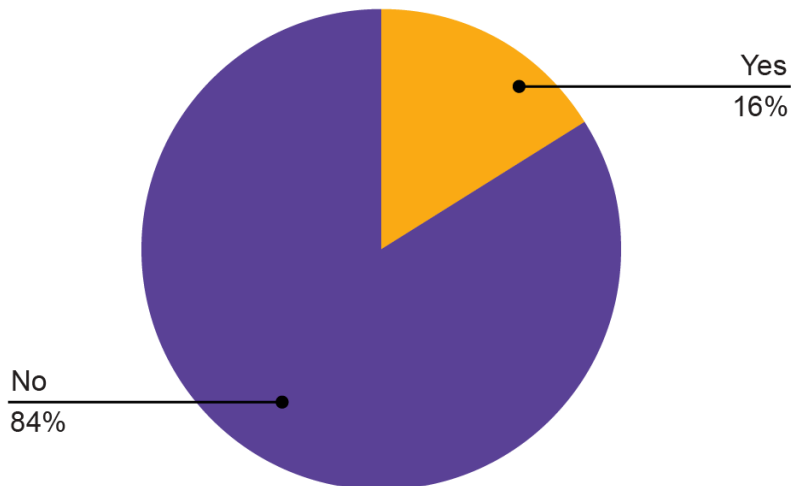


36% reported facing moderate difficulties, 11% and 5% experienced very few and few difficulties, 29% encountered extreme difficulties, and 19% faced many difficulties in the given context.

Table 31: Are political parties in India effectively addressing issues related to disabilities?

	Frequency	%
No	92	84
Yes	18	16
Total	110	10

Pie Charts for Political Parties Addressing PWD Concerns

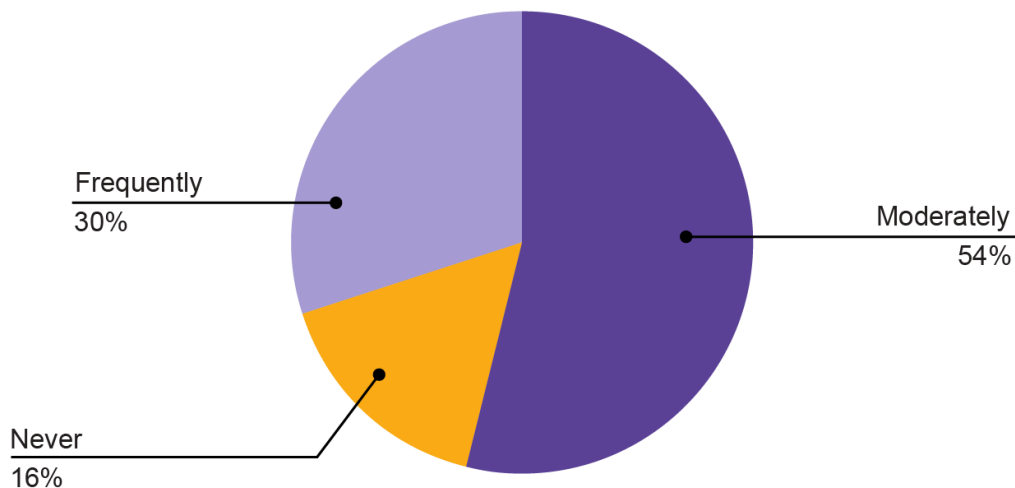


84% believe that political parties in India are not effectively addressing issues related to disabilities.

Table 32: Have you encountered situations where your disability impacted your ability to actively participate in political conversations?

	Frequency	%
Frequently	33	30
Moderately	59	54
Never	18	16
Total	110	100

Pie Charts for Disability Impacted in Political Conversations

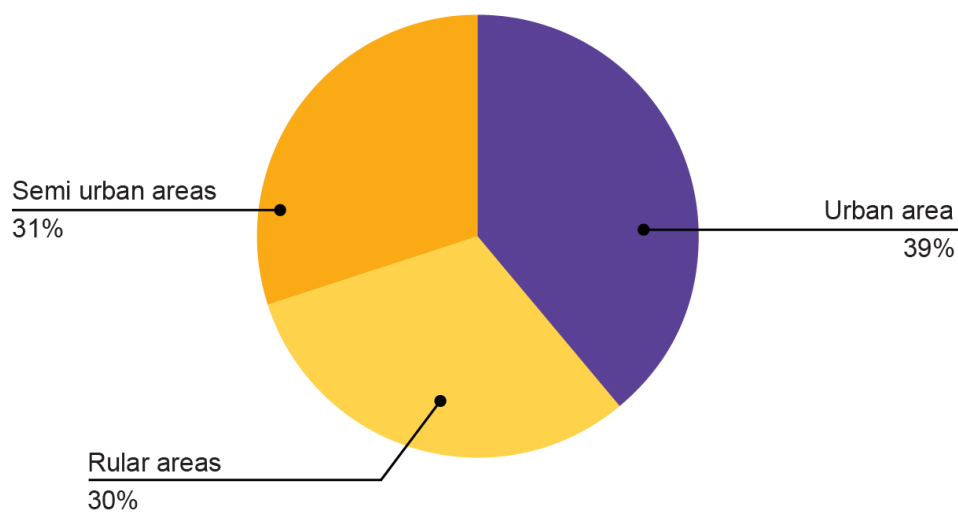


54% have faced situations where their disability affected their ability to actively participate in political conversations moderately. Additionally, 30% frequently encountered such challenges, while 16% did not experience any impact on their participation due to their disability.

Table 33: Where according to you does the political involvement of PwDs stand out?

	Frequency	%
Rural areas	33	30
Semi-Urban areas	34	31
Urban areas	43	39
Total	110	10

Pie Charts for Political Involvement of PWD Standing Out

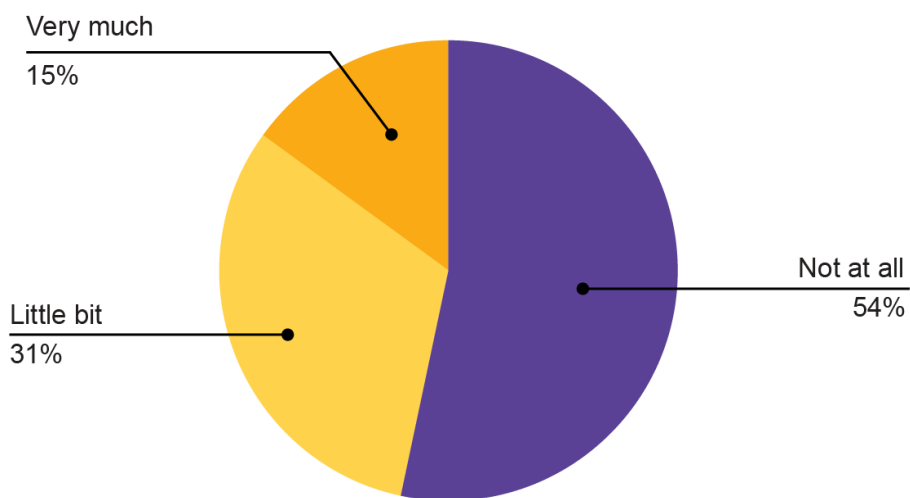


39% of respondents believe that the political involvement of PwDs stands out the most in urban areas, 31% believe it is in semi-urban areas, and 30% believe it is in rural areas.

Table 34: Do you think the voting decisions of individuals with disabilities are influenced by concerns directly related to their disabilities?

	Frequency	%
A little bit	35	32
Not at all	59	54
Very much	16	14
Total	110	100

Pie Charts for Voting Influenced By the Concerns of PWD



54% asserted that their decisions were not influenced by concerns about their disabilities, 32% have admitted to a slight influence, and 14% acknowledge a significant influence on their voting choices.

Table 35: Should political parties prioritise integrating disability-related concerns into their campaign agendas?

	Frequency	%
Agree	86	78
Disagree	22	20
Neutral	2	2
Total	110	100

Pie Charts for PWD Concerns in Campaigns

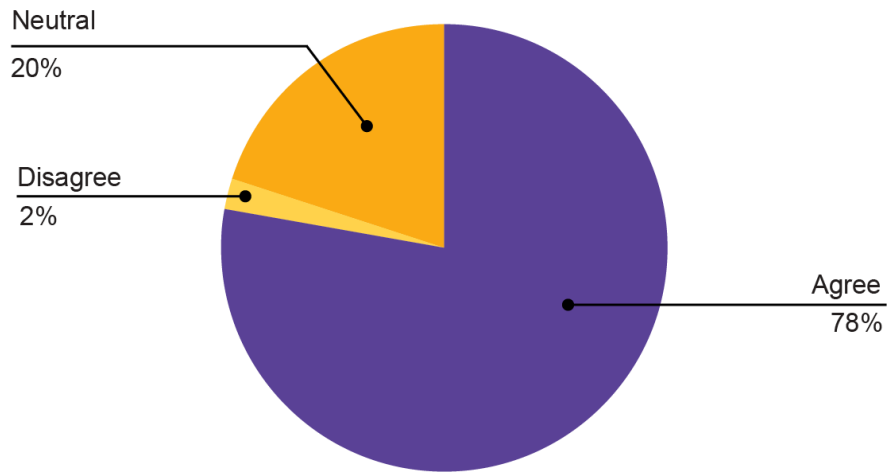
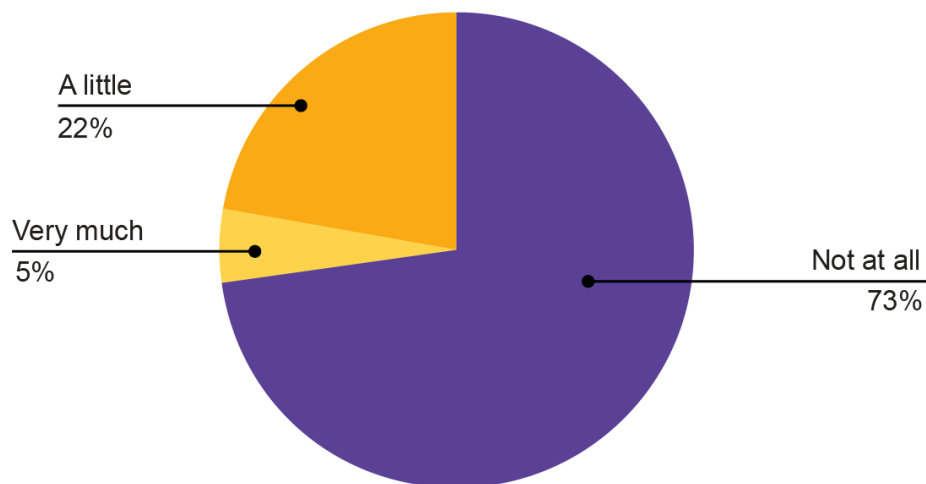


Table 36: Do you think the media adequately represents the viewpoints of PwDs in political contexts?

	Frequency	%
Not at all	80	73
A little	24	22
Very much	6	5
<i>Total</i>	110	10

Pie Charts for Media Represents the View of PWD

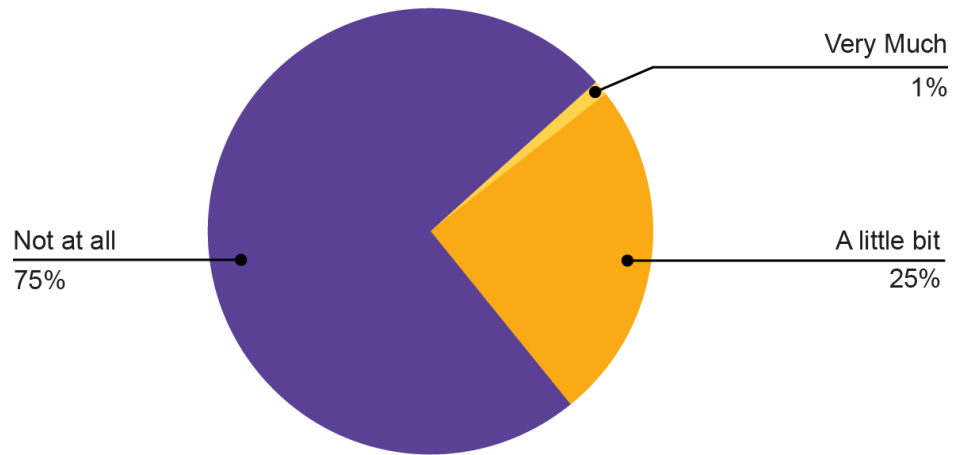


73% believed that the media does not adequately represent the views of PwDs. 22% felt that the media does so to a small extent.

Table 37: Are you content with the representation of PwDs in political roles in India?

	Frequency	%
Not at all	82	74.
A little bit	27	24.
Very much	1	1
Total	110	100

Pie Charts for Content With Role of PWD in Politics

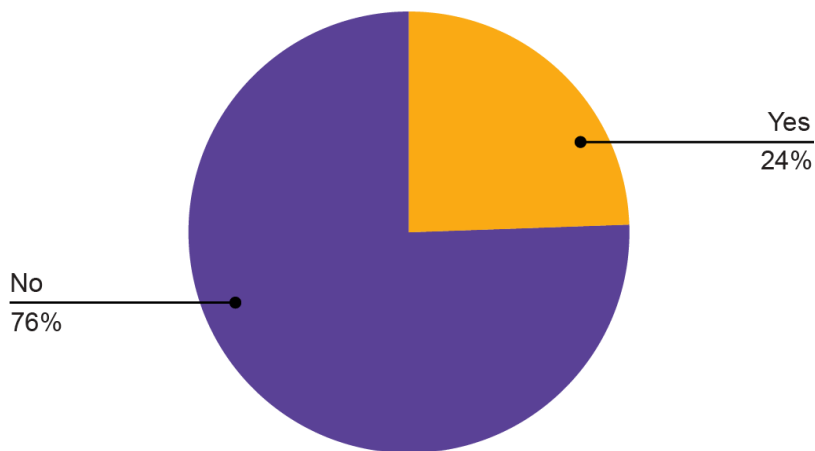


Nearly 75% expressed dissatisfaction with the representation of PwDs in political roles in India, and close to 25% were partly content with the current state of representation.

Table 38: Do you think the representation of the PwDs is increased through positive intervention?

	Frequency	%
No	84	76
Yes	26	24
Total	110	100

Pie Charts for Positive Initiative By Govt

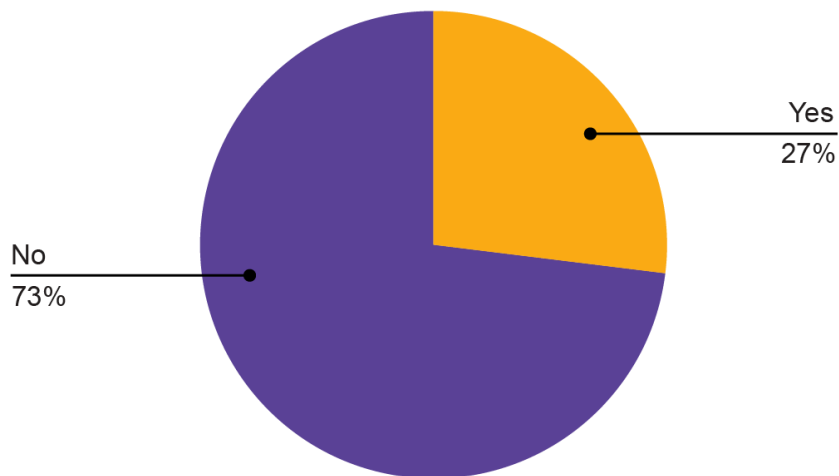


76% believed that the representation of PwDs has not increased through positive intervention, while the remaining 24% perceived an increase due to such interventions.

Table 39: Are there organisations or initiatives in your area that concentrate on improving the political participation of PwDs?

	Frequency	%
No	80	73
Yes	30	27
Total	110	10

Pie Charts for Orgs for PWD Involvement in Politics

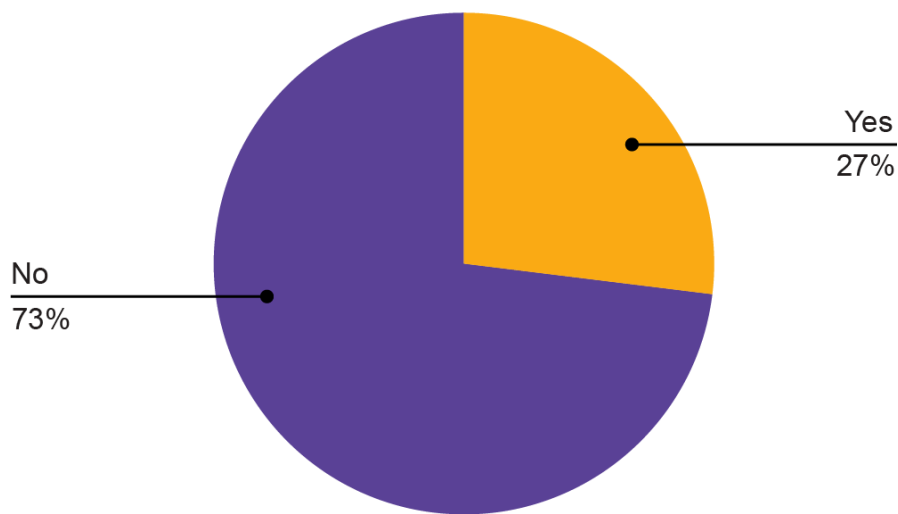


73% assert the absence of organisations or initiatives in their area focussed on improving the political participation of PwDs, while 27% affirmed the existence of such entities.

Table 40: Have you noted any initiatives by political parties to involve PwDs in the decision-making process?

	Frequency	%
No	80	73
Yes	30	27
Total	110	10

Pie Charts for Initiative by Political Parties

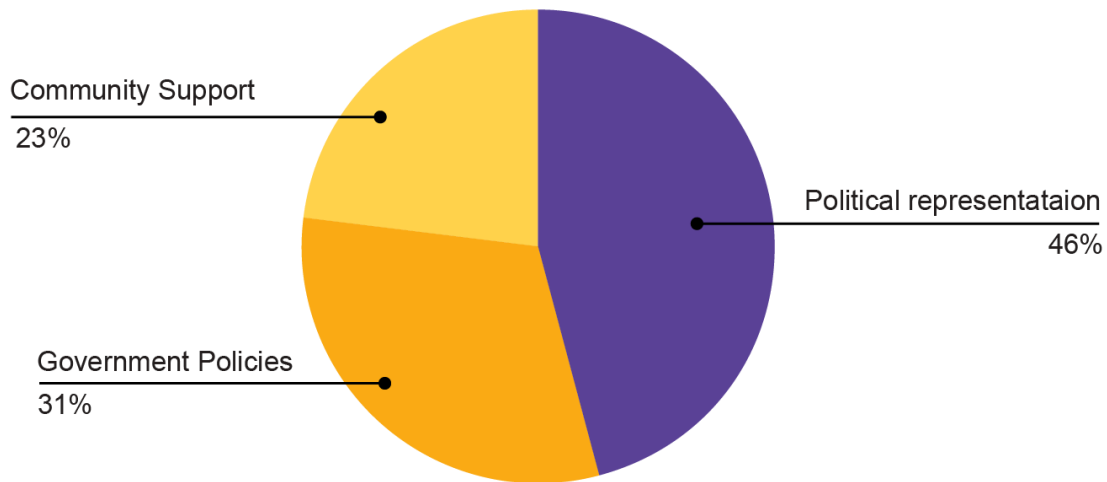


73% had not observed any initiatives by political parties to involve PwDs in the decision-making process, while 27% had noted such efforts.

Table 41: What, in your opinion, would be the most effective approach to stimulate greater political engagement among PwDs in India?

	Frequency	%
Community support	25	23
Government policies	34	31
Political representation	51	46
Total	110	10

Pie Charts for Effective Approach To Involve PWD in Politics



46% believed political representation is the most effective approach to stimulate greater political engagement among PwDs. 31% expressed confidence in the impact of government policies, while 23% placed trust in community support.

7 Factorial Analysis

This study employed factorial analysis to unravel the complexities surrounding the political involvement of individuals with disabilities. Despite being a significant demographic, their participation faces barriers that demand a nuanced examination. Through this research, we aimed to identify key factors influencing their engagement, fostering a deeper understanding of more inclusive political practices.

The survey findings underscore a prevailing sentiment among respondents, with a resounding 79% expressing a shared belief that the government falls short in its efforts to encourage PwDs to participate in politics. Among respondents, blindness, locomotor disability, and autism spectrum disorders were prevalent. Strikingly, 85% of those with these disabilities shared the belief that government efforts to promote PwDs' engagement in politics were insufficient.

In contrast, 21% of respondents, facing challenges such as blindness, autism spectrum disorders, haemophilia, and sickle cell disease, held a more optimistic view, believing that the government was doing enough to support PwDs' involvement in politics.

A significant 51% expressed concern about unequal access to political information, particularly among those with blindness, hearing impairment, muscular dystrophy, and locomotor disabilities. 36% fall into the maybe category, mainly comprising individuals facing challenges such as autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, haemophilia, and low vision.

Interestingly, all acid attack victims unanimously affirmed equal access, highlighting the diverse perspectives within the disability community.

62% of the respondents reported no communication challenges with election officials. Interestingly, those aligning with this viewpoint predominantly faced challenges associated with blindness, dwarfism, and locomotor disabilities. On the flip side, 38% acknowledged encountering communication difficulties with election officials, with a majority within this group grappling with autism spectrum disorders, mental health issues, and speech and language disabilities.

In gauging attitudes toward remote voting, it is apparent that opinions are split, with 50% adopting a neutral stance. Among those leaning towards neutrality, individuals facing challenges such as blindness, haemophilia, and learning disabilities formed the majority. On the affirmative side, 25% strongly supported remote voting, with this endorsement primarily coming from those dealing with autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, and those who had overcome leprosy. A contrasting 25% vehemently reject the idea of remote voting, and notably, a significant proportion of these individuals grapple with intellectual disability, locomotor disability, and blindness.

All the above viewpoints inject a nuanced perspective into the discourse, revealing the intricate tapestry of opinions within the disability community. This diversity serves as a poignant reminder of the multifaceted nature of considerations regarding accessibility in voting processes. These findings also underscore the need for targeted and inclusive initiatives to bridge the gap between existing efforts and the specific challenges PwDs face, ensuring a more comprehensive and accessible political landscape for all.

The stark contrast in attitudes underscores the complexity inherent in navigating the intersection of technology and the varied challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. It accentuates the imperative for adaptable and inclusive voting systems that cater to the diverse needs and preferences of all citizens. Recognising and accommodating these differing perspectives is paramount to fostering a democratic process that encapsulates the richness of experiences within the disability community.

Further findings revealed that 52% of participants reported never encountering clandestine manipulation in their voting decisions or having a secret franchise. Strikingly, this group included individuals facing unique challenges such as autism spectrum, acid attack survivors, and those with visual impairments.

At the other end of the spectrum, a substantial 41% openly admitted to having their voting decisions influenced by external factors. Notably, this demographic was largely comprised of individuals contending with intellectual disabilities, leprosy (cured) and haemophilia. In contrast, for the remaining 7%, voting is a confidential matter unaffected by external pressures. Interestingly, this group is predominantly composed of individuals facing cerebral palsy and locomotor disabilities.

These distinctive patterns in voter susceptibility shed light on the intricate interplay between personal experiences and external influences in shaping electoral choices. The contrasting

dynamics underscore the necessity for a nuanced understanding of the diverse factors influencing voters within different disability subgroups. It emphasises the importance of tailoring electoral processes to respect the privacy of those who prefer an uninfluenced vote while addressing the vulnerabilities of individuals whose choices might be more easily swayed. By doing so, we can work towards creating a democratic landscape that is more inclusive and reflective of the diverse perspectives within the disability community. Digging deeper into the survey findings, a concerning 48% of participants expressed the belief that polling stations are entirely inaccessible for individuals with disabilities. This group primarily included respondents facing challenges related to locomotor disabilities, visual impairments, and mental health issues.

On a more optimistic note, 25% of those surveyed deemed polling stations moderately accessible. Notably, this category was predominantly populated by individuals contending with specific learning disabilities and autism spectrum.

Adding another layer to the accessibility spectrum, 20% of respondents categorised polling stations less accessible. Intriguingly, this group was marked by people grappling with conditions like sickle cell disease and Parkinson's disease. However, a beacon of hope shines through in the 7% who perceived polling stations as very accessible or fairly accessible. Remarkably, this segment is comprised of individuals who faced the challenges of acid attacks, along with those battling thalassemia and muscular dystrophy. These insights shed light on the diverse perspectives within the population regarding the accessibility of polling stations, emphasising the importance of addressing these concerns for a more inclusive democratic process.

In a noteworthy consensus, a resounding 83% of survey participants firmly advocated for comprehensive training for election personnel to effectively cater to the needs of individuals with disabilities. Notably, this majority comprised respondents facing challenges such as cerebral palsy, visual impairments, and locomotor disabilities. Conversely, a smaller but discernible 17% believed that specialised training for election personnel was unnecessary. Intriguingly, this group is predominantly composed of individuals grappling with conditions like sickle cell disease and thalassemia.

These divergent perspectives highlight the varied opinions within the surveyed population regarding the necessity of training election personnel. The call for inclusivity and sensitivity in electoral processes is clear, with a majority emphasising the importance of empowering election personnel with the skills needed to accommodate the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities.

In the survey, a notable 55% of the participants voiced the concern that polling stations were woefully unprepared to cater to the needs of individuals with disabilities. This majority predominantly consisted of respondents grappling with challenges related to blindness, locomotor disabilities, and muscular dystrophy.

Conversely, 40% of those surveyed expressed a more moderate stance, believing that polling stations were reasonably equipped. Intriguingly, this demographic was primarily represented by individuals dealing with conditions like autism spectrum, sickle cell disease, and dwarfism.

Highlighting a smaller yet impactful perspective, those who firmly believe that polling stations are very well equipped constitute 5% of the respondents. This group includes individuals facing the unique challenges of haemophilia and those who have triumphed over acid attacks.

These diverse viewpoints underscore the need for ongoing efforts to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of polling stations, recognising and addressing the varied needs of individuals across a spectrum of disabilities.

In a thought-provoking revelation, 71% of participants expressed concerns about the confidentiality of the voting process. This group predominantly consists of respondents facing challenges related to blindness, locomotor disabilities, and the autism spectrum. On the other hand, a contrasting perspective emerged from the remaining 29%, who confidently asserted that the voting process was confidential for them. This set was primarily represented by individuals contending with conditions such as learning disabilities, speech and language disabilities, and dwarfism.

In a survey segment addressing transportation to and from polling stations, 48% of respondents were uncertain about any discernible improvements. This group, primarily consisting of individuals contending with challenges related to blindness and dwarfism, reflected a hesitancy regarding the current state of transportation accessibility. On a sceptical note, 41% of participants believed no substantial improvements had been made. Interestingly, this majority subgroup is characterised by respondents facing a mix of challenges, including blindness, locomotor disabilities, and cerebral palsy.

In contrast, a hopeful 11% of respondents said that improvements had been made in transportation for PwDs. Notably, this optimistic minority predominantly comprised individuals dealing with hearing impairment and those on the autism spectrum.

Building upon the insights gained from the survey, an additional facet emerges regarding the impact of disabilities on political conversations. A significant 54% of respondents noted a moderate influence of their disabilities on political discussions. This subgroup, predominantly composed of individuals contending with blindness and dwarfism, suggests that while there is a discernible impact, it falls within a moderate range. In contrast, a substantial 30% of respondents revealed that their disabilities have a frequent and notable impact on political conversations. This group, largely represented by individuals dealing with locomotor disabilities, signals a higher frequency of influence in their engagement with political discourse. Dissecting the survey findings, 16% of respondents shared that their disabilities did not significantly impact their political conversations. Notably, this group was primarily

comprised of individuals dealing with hearing impairment and those who had triumphed over acid attacks.

Delving deeper into the perceptions of political involvement, the survey revealed intriguing perspectives. A notable 39% of respondents asserted that the political engagement of PwDs was particularly noticeable in urban areas. This portion was dominated by individuals with blindness and cerebral palsy, suggesting a unique spotlight on urban landscapes. In a contrasting viewpoint, 31% of the participants believe that the political presence of PwDs was more pronounced in semi-urban areas. This subgroup, mainly comprised of individuals facing locomotor disabilities and blindness, highlights a distinctive emphasis on political involvement in the intermediary zones between urban and rural settings.

Adding another layer to the narrative, 30% of respondents expressed that political engagement for PwDs was accentuated in rural areas. Interestingly, this perspective was primarily shared by individuals dealing with autism spectrum challenges and sickle cell disease, pointing towards a recognition of political involvement in the more traditional and agrarian settings.

8 Limitations

The research on challenges faced by PwDs in Indian electoral processes is comprehensive but has notable limitations, especially concerning Objectives 3 and 4. Regrettably, due to constraints in both time and financial resources, Objective 3, which aimed to investigate political party members' attitudes towards PwDs inclusion, remained untouched and unexplored. These limitations prevented us from delving into this crucial aspect of the study. Objective 4, analysing international best practices, faces challenges in applicability to India's diverse context and lacks critical assessment of implementation challenges.

To bolster the solidity of this research, it is imperative to incorporate a participant sample that encompasses political party members, while also tailoring an analysis of international best practices to align with India's distinctive political milieu. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the constraints in both time and financial resources, which are intricately linked to the complexities of electoral processes and the barriers to implementation.

Acknowledging these limitations is paramount for interpreting research findings accurately. Addressing these constraints should be a priority for future research endeavours to offer a more thorough understanding of disability inclusion in India's electoral processes.

9 Conclusion

The amalgamation of diverse studies presented here underscores the persistent challenges PwDs face in India during electoral processes. The identified barriers, from physical inaccessibility to societal discrimination, emphasise the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive policies. Despite legal advancements and international conventions, the political participation of PwDs remains disproportionately low, urging immediate attention to address disparities and promote inclusive political processes. The proposed research methodology,

encompassing both qualitative and quantitative approaches, sought to unravel the complexities surrounding disability rights. Additionally, the survey results shed light on a nuanced tapestry of participation and challenges, revealing gender imbalances and specific struggles faced by individuals with different disabilities. The call for more inclusive initiatives resonates strongly, emphasising the necessity of bridging the gap between political participation and the intricate challenges PwDs face in the electoral arena. This collective body of research contributes significantly to the ongoing discourse on disability rights, providing valuable insights and recommendations for fostering a more inclusive and accessible electoral landscape in India.

10 Recommendations

1. In the analysis conducted, it was revealed that 68% of respondents felt discouraged and excluded from the electoral process due to their disabilities. To improve this situation, a comprehensive strategy is necessary. Initiatives should encompass conducting accessibility audits and upgrading facilities to comply with universal design principles. Direct engagement with disability advocacy organisations is essential to understand and address unique needs. Implementing mobile voting units, investing in assistive technologies, enacting legal protections against discrimination, and fostering inclusive voter education programs are critical steps.
2. Considering the analysis revealing that 79% of respondents feel the government was not doing enough to encourage the engagement of PwDs, there is a clear need for targeted interventions. Firstly, establish a dedicated task force comprised of representatives from the PWD community, advocacy groups, and government officials. This collaborative effort can work towards formulating and implementing policies that prioritise inclusivity and empowerment. Additionally, conduct regular forums and town hall meetings to facilitate open dialogue, allowing PwDs to express their concerns and provide constructive feedback directly to policymakers.
3. The analysis underscores a concerning sentiment among 73% of respondents who have not observed positive changes in politics regarding the inclusion of PwDs. To address this, there is a critical need for proactive measures. Start by establishing an advisory committee comprising PwDs' advocates, community leaders, and policymakers to ensure diverse perspectives are considered in political decision-making. One can also initiate targeted campaigns to raise awareness about the rights and capabilities of PwDs, emphasising the importance of their active participation in political processes.
4. The analysis reveals a concerning statistic with 63% of respondents encountering difficulties during the voter registration process. To address this issue, it is crucial to streamline and enhance the registration system to ensure inclusivity. Implement user-friendly online platforms with accessible interfaces, allowing individuals with various abilities to register easily. Conduct targeted outreach programs to educate the public, particularly for PwDs, about the voter registration process and available assistance.

5. The analysis underscores a significant challenge, with 76% (48% in moderate and 28% in very much category) of respondents encountering difficulties accessing polling stations. To address this issue comprehensively, a multifaceted approach is needed. Conducting a detailed accessibility audit of all polling stations, prioritising modifications to eliminate physical barriers, and ensuring a universally accessible environment can help deal with this issue.
6. The analysis draws attention to a notable concern, as 55% of respondents indicated that polling stations lacked adequate facilities for PwDs. To enhance inclusivity in the electoral process, a comprehensive strategy is imperative. Begin with a thorough assessment of existing polling station facilities, collaborate with architectural experts and disability advocacy groups to redesign and retrofit polling stations, ensuring they are equipped with ramps, elevators, and other essential accessibility features.
7. The analysis reveals a noteworthy finding, with 53% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the accessibility of voting materials, including ballots and voter's guides, for PwDs. To address this concern and promote inclusivity in the electoral process, a strategic approach is essential. Begin by collaborating with accessibility experts and PwDs advocacy groups to redesign voting materials, ensuring they are available in multiple formats such as Braille, large print, and digitally accessible versions compatible with screen readers. Implement comprehensive training programs for election officials to enhance their understanding of diverse disabilities and the specific needs related to voting materials. Emphasise the importance of providing clear instructions and assistance tailored to individual requirements.
8. The analysis reveals a significant issue, with 70% of respondents expressing concerns about the lack of confidentiality in the voting process for PwDs. Addressing this concern includes redesigning polling booths, providing specialised training for election officials, introducing technology-driven solutions to safeguard privacy while voting, and conducting targeted awareness campaigns for both officials and the public.
9. The analysis underscores a pressing issue, with a striking 84% of respondents expressing the belief that political parties are neglecting the concerns of PwDs. To rectify this situation and promote inclusivity in political discourse, political parties must take proactive measures. Begin by establishing dedicated task forces within each party, comprising individuals with disabilities and advocates, to ensure their perspectives are considered in policy formulation. Launch targeted awareness campaigns to educate party members and leaders about the specific challenges PwDs face, emphasising the importance of inclusive policies. Encourage collaboration with disability advocacy groups to gain valuable insights and foster meaningful dialogue on policy initiatives that directly impact the PwDs community.

10. The analysis brings to light a significant concern, with 73% of respondents expressing the belief that the media falls short in adequately representing the viewpoints of PwDs in political contexts. To address this critical issue and promote a more inclusive media landscape, collaborate with media organisations to establish guidelines for unbiased and inclusive reporting, ensuring that the perspectives and experiences of PwDs are accurately represented. Foster partnerships between media outlets and disability advocacy groups to facilitate workshops and training programs for journalists, enhancing their understanding of the diverse challenges PwDs face and promoting more nuanced coverage. Encourage the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in decision-making roles within media organisations to contribute to a more inclusive editorial perspective.

11 Annexures

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