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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION [ECCE] IN NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020 AND QUESTIONS ON DISABILITY

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Abstract

Disability as a physical or mental impairment has been with us since the origin of mankind. As science and technology improved, religious notions of disability were out-dated and scientific medical understandings of disability emerged. Disability as a social construct has been emerged questioning the validity of treating disability as a biological presence or absence of something. In this article, the investigators explore the effectiveness of the 'Early Childhood Care and Education' [ECCE] provisions in the National Education Policy of India 2020 to address the problems of disability as a social construct. Investigators contextualize and problematize with the exclusion of social disabilities from the definition of disability and limiting the definition of disability within broad categories of mental and physical impairments. The article explains how ECCE could be an effective and innovative measure to tackle issues of psychosocial disabilities among children.

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Introduction:-

All people are not born perfect. Imperfection is the rule of nature. "Perfect man" is only a social construct of dominant classes lived in different historical eras. The concept of perfect man has also been varying from time to time. People are born with physical or mental disabilities. Disabilities were once treated as god's punishment for bad behaviour in one's past births. In ancient Greece disabled people were brutally killed as unwanted. In ancient Rome they were kept as jesters. Jesus Christ, in New Testament, shows more empathy towards cripples, blinds and lepers but that was not the attitude of the common people and rulers from ancient Greece to renaissance. Crippled babies were poisoned, burned or drowned during the Inquisition period in Spain. "Institution for idiots" established in Massachusetts in 1848 and involuntary sterilization in 1907 in America are examples of how People treated disabled people. Eugenics spree also was an attempt to create the perfect human breed. Disabled was gassed, gunned down, drugged and euthanized during the Nazi regime. On the one side able bodied people ostracised the disabled but on the other side they lavished charity upon those poor handicapped people with the hope that these charities would help them to reach heaven and attain their salvation." All of these social adjustments of 'acceptance' occur without integrating disabled populations in the modern sense of the term."¹

As man's understanding of disability grew along with the progress in science and technology, religious and superstitious notions of disabilities were given up and their place was occupied by medical and social knowledge of

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disabilities. As society progressed, social sciences, social understanding, and democratic values were emerged and shaped human life. A new humanistic, altruistic and empathetic understanding of disability was emerged and societies across the globe started to integrate disabled population to the mainstream giving them education, healthcare and emotional support. Today no one considers disability a shame or god given punishment. Biological disadvantages of disabled people can be overcome through enabling provisions of socio-economic services is the modern view of disability. Disabled is not someone to be killed, ostracised or objectified but to be integrated and accommodated. People with disabilities are not abnormal or exceptional in a modern democratic world. They are as human as anyone else who enjoys the unearned privilege of 'ableism'. Biological impairment becomes a 'disability' in a given social structure. Impairment is a physical thing but disability is a social construction. A person on a wheel chair has mobility but once his/her mobility is terribly restricted by a staircase without ramp, physical impairment becomes a disability. Disability as a physical impairment has been with us right from the very origin of mankind but disability as a social category has only two hundred years of existence.

Statistical profile of disability in India

The Hindu caste system with its inherent social hierarchies and untouchability clearly gives us a hint that all might not be equally treated in ancient India. Disability was believed to be a punishment of the god befall upon a person for doing sins in his/her previous births. It was not only a bad luck for the disabled but also for the entire family. People truly believed that disabled member would bring bad luck to the entire family. So they either abandoned crippled babies or killed them at birth. Disabled people were not only discriminated but also these discriminations were justified by religious sanctions.² Even today in India people practise infanticide and selling their babies for money. People mock and ridicule disabled people at home and in public places. Disabled people have been experiencing socio economic exclusion and psychological alienation. They experience difficulties in having a meaningful relationship with the mainstream world of able-bodied people.

As per census 2011, in India, out of the 121 Cr population, about 2.68 Cr persons are disabled which is 2.21 % of the total population³. As per World Health Organizations' statistics, about 15% of the world population is disabled persons⁴. Huge difference between disabled population in India and its world average indicates that our disability population is most probably underreported or unaccounted. Problems associated with defining the disability, different purposes of measuring disability, lack of coverage of population in counting disabled, underreporting of disability due to stigma shrouded over it are the major contributory factors that make India's disability population seems lower than world average. Seeking information regarding disability was included in all censuses from 1872 to 1931. Census questions on disability were omitted in censuses from 1941 to 1971. In 1981 census information regarding three types of disability [totally blind, crippled and dumb were these three categories] was sought. The question of disability was again vanished from census in 1991. In 2001 census disability was again reappeared and that time authorities included five types of disabilities. They were disability in hearing, seeing, in speech, in movement, and in mental abilities. In 2011 census we collected information regarding eight types of disabilities. They are disability in hearing, seeing, speech, movement, mental retardation, mental illness, any other disability to be reported and other multidimensional disabilities. Section 2[1] of the Persons with Disabilities [Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation] Act, 1995 defines disability as: -[1] blindness; [2] low vision; [3] leprosy cured; [4] hearing impairment; [5] loco motor disability; [6] mental retardation; [7] mental illness.

As per 2011 census among total disabled population 56 % are female and 44 % are male. 69 % of the disabled people are living in rural areas that occupy 69% of the total population too. 2.45% of Scheduled Caste population and 2.05% of Scheduled Tribe population belong to disabled category as per 2011 census. Percentage of population of disabled persons to total population was increased from 2.13% in 2001 to 2.21% in 2011. The percentage of decadal changes in disabled population during 2001-2011 is 22.4%, whereas for the total population, the percentage of decadal change is 17.7%.

Table 1:-Disabled population by the type of disability in India.

Type of disability	Percentage to total disabled population	Percentage of male	Percentage of female
In seeing	19	52	48
In hearing	19	53	47
In speech	7	56	44
In movement	20	62	38

In Mental retardation	6	58	42
In Mental illness	3	58	42
Any other	18	55	45
In Multiple disabilities	8	55	45

Census Report 2011.

Table 1 shows the severity of physical and mental disabilities among people. Many of these disabilities may be cured completely or partially by early detection and medical intervention. Socio economic conditions of the disabled people and the extent of governmental interventions in helping them from detection to cure or effectively managing their disability without compromising their meaningful daily life are the two major factors that determine the quality of life of poor disabled people.

Table 11:-Disabled population in India by Age Group.

Age Group	In Lakh
0-4	12.9
5-9	19.6
10-19	46.2
20-29	41.9
30-39	36.4
40-49	31.2
50-59	24.9
Above 60	55.1

Census Report 2011

Table 11 shows that about 58.33% of disabled population fall below the age of 40. 24.53% of the disabled population fall below the age of 20. 12.11% of the disabled population fall below the age of 10. Disability among children of age group 0-6 years has greater socio economic implications. As per 2011 census one in every 100 children in the age group of 0-6 has at least one form of disability that impairs their participation in personal and social life including their education. 33% of the total disabled population in India belong to the age group of 10-29. Age wise distribution of disabled population in India signifies the need, significance and urgency of providing "inclusive education" under the aegis of the state. State participation in providing educational services to disabled children deserves more attention because majority of disabled children live in rural areas where their families have been passing through the great ordeals of poverty, inequality and different forms institutional discriminations. The burden of disability multiplies when a candidate belongs to different categories of marginalization like female child, disabled, Dalit, and rural dweller. In the light of contemporary socio political developments in India, 'Muslim' is also to be added to the list of factors that aggravate burden of disability.

The idea of disability as a social construct has been emerged by questioning the validity of religious and medical notions of disability. Unfortunately still disability of a person is measured on medical terms and criteria in India. This narrow definition of disability does not address the invisible world of social disabilities existing in India due to caste system and myriad forms of inhuman untouchability practices. A human body becomes disabled when it is interacted with others in a given socio economic and political environment shaped by class, caste, race, religion, attitudes, beliefs, sexual orientations and aesthetic notions of body of the people. A Dalit body experiences casteism, untouchability and social inferiority, not because the person is a Dalit or he belongs to a particular caste but the existence of certain predetermined socio economic conditions and hierarchical power relations that decide his degraded status and create social disability. In this broad socio-political environment, we analyse how National Education Policy 2020 of India deals with the problems of disabled children. In Indian context disability includes not only mental and physical ailments but social disabilities also. Casteism, untouchability, denial of access to public places like schools, police stations, legal services, abode of gods, etc. are also to be included to determine disability. Defining disability limiting its scope within realms of physical and mental impairment hides a vast world of social disabilities many marginalized communities have been experiencing in their daily life.

National Education Policy 2020 and Questions on Disability.

Indian constitution offered citizenship to all people who lived in this country at the time of our independence irrespective of our caste, class, religion, colour, gender, sex and sexual orientation. Indian constitution by its article

14 treats everyone equal before law, by article 15 it prohibits any discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, by article 16 it provides equal opportunity for all in matters of public employment and by article 17 it has abolished untouchability, one of the basic institutional structures of caste Hindu society. Article 21 of Indian constitution ensures protection of life and personal liberty and 21A of article 21 mandates the state to provide “free and compulsory” education to all children of the age of six to fourteen. Indian constitution envisions providing equal opportunity for all citizens to lead a meaningful life with sufficient means to attain it. Right to education is a right step to attain right to life. Socio economic backwardness of weaker sections and prevalence of historical conditions that maintain this backwardness are the two greatest impediments in India’s development path. We believe that Early Childhood Care and Education provision in the National Education Policy 2020 has great potential to address the issues related with biological and social disabilities experienced by millions of people in India.

National Education Policy document in its introduction proclaims that India aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030 as per the Sustainable Development Goal of UN. National Education Policy 2020 identifies social, physical and mental impairments different categories of people have been experiencing and offers comprehensive and multi-level strategies to overcome educational problems of disadvantaged groups. National Education Policy document states unequivocally that “Education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality. Inclusive and equitable education -while indeed an essential goal in its own right- is also critical to achieve an inclusive and equitable society in which every citizen has the opportunity to dream, thrive, and contribute to the nation.”⁵

National Education policy 2020 foresees two kinds of developments in labour markets. Intensive mechanization and subsequent massive loss of jobs is the one area of concern. The other is the emergence of new employment opportunities related with the rise of new issues like climate change, increasing pollution and depleting natural resources and human search for alternative energy sources and new life styles. New jobs expect new skills and abilities from labourers. Old conventional education is not sufficient to meet the requirements of a new world. National Education Policy envisions providing such a new skilled labour force to make India a developed nation among the three largest economies in the world.

Early Childhood Care and Education [ECCE] has been introduced in the National Education Policy as the foundation of learning. New educational policy asserts the significance of integrating Early Childhood Care and Education as foundation of learning in following words. “Over 85% of a child’s cumulative brain development occurs prior to the age of 6, indicating the critical importance of appropriate care and stimulation of the brain in the early years in order to ensure healthy brain development and growth. Presently, quality ECCE is not available to crores of young children, particularly children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Strong investment in ECCE has the potential to give all young children such access, enabling them to participate and flourish in the educational system throughout their lives. Universal provisioning of quality early childhood development, care, and education must thus be achieved as soon as possible, and no later than 2030, to ensure that all students entering Grade 1 are school ready.”⁶

Early Childhood care and Education [ECCE]

National Education Policy aims to achieve early integration of children into formal education network via Anganwadi or Balvatika where children of age between three and five years can start their formal education. This system is designed as a “preparatory class”. A fully qualified teacher who is capable of handling little children shall be appointed in-charge of this preparatory Balvatika. The policy dreams of integrating Anganwadies with local schools and facilitating interactions between the school and the Anganwady. ECCE scheme is critical in ensuring the integration of disabled children into the wide world of formal education. A qualified teacher can effectively handle such students who need more attention and care. ECCE is truly a great step towards inclusive education that is one of the aims of New Education Policy. When Early Childhood Care and Education becomes a part of formal education, authorities can redesign infrastructure facilities and other amenities in Anganwadies or Balvatikas to accommodate disabled children. When Balvatikas are integrated with local schools, local school authorities can know well in advance that some disabled students are coming to their school. So they can prepare their school to accommodate special needs of such students. Noon meal system and periodic health check-ups also shall be available to these preparatory schools. These initiatives would be great beneficial to disabled pupils belong to weaker sections of the society.

National Education Policy 2020 enthusiastically describes an ECCE “ECCE ideally consists of flexible, multi-faceted, multi-level, play-based, activity-based, and inquiry-based learning, comprising of alphabets, languages, numbers, counting, colours, shapes, indoor and outdoor play, puzzles and logical thinking, problem-solving, drawing, painting and other visual art, craft, drama and puppetry, music and movement. It also includes a focus on developing social capacities, sensitivity, good behaviour, courtesy, ethics, personal and public cleanliness, teamwork, and cooperation. The overall aim of ECCE will be to attain optimal outcomes in the domains of: physical and motor development, cognitive development, socio-emotional-ethical development, cultural/artistic development, and the development of communication and early language, literacy, and numeracy.”⁷ ECCE can create an effective socio cultural environment in which students coming from different socio economic backgrounds can sit together and learn the value of living together, respecting and accepting each other’s place in a polyphonic society like India. Attitudinal barriers that create ‘disability’ can be effectively addressed in an ECCE through play and doing methods. The fact that Ministry of Human Resource Development shall be in-charge of preparing the curriculum for preparatory classes to ensure the continuity of teaching learning process in higher classes is a right move. If the ministry prepares the curriculum for the preparatory class incorporating learning experiences that inculcate in the mind of the child a feeling of oneness and brotherhood irrespective of gender, caste or religion would be of great use.

Preparatory school is nothing but an extension of the home where kinship matters while in preparatory school a feeling of brotherhood matters. Preparatory schools known in different names like kindergarten, nursery schools and Anganwadies. They teach children letters, numbers, colours, shapes, forms, names of animals, plants, flowers, vehicles, toys, utensils, etc. A preparatory school acts like a gateway for a kid to enter into the vast and complicate outer world existing outside the four protective walls of his/her happy home where everybody is at his/her beck and call. It gives the child first-hand experiences of “others.” It tells the child that there are other people other than you and your parents and siblings in this world. It reminds the child the importance of imbibing values of “justice, liberty and equality” enshrined in our constitution through plays and other activity based methods. Preparatory school envisioned in the National Education Policy 2020 is a place of games that are intended to teach children bigger life lessons. Children understand about the heterogeneity of the physical and social world in which they need to live. A preparatory school can easily identify learning disabilities or any other subtle disabilities a child has. Parents may not be much aware of those developmental goals, defects or deficiencies. A trained teacher in a Balavatika can easily identify such developmental issues and can ensure early medical interventions effectively. A Balavatika envisioned in the National Education Policy is not only preparing kids “ready to learn bigger lessons” but also moulding them to interact with others effectively and amiably. It cultivates among the children a shared feeling of oneness and brotherhood. Psychomotor and affective domains are the target of the preparatory schools’ curriculum. Developing a feeling of fraternity among children is the first priority of a preparatory school rather than “teaching and learning.” Here lies the greater role a preparatory school can play in eradicating attitudinal aspects of disabilities.

Conclusion:-

Indian constitutions dreams of establishing a ‘secular democratic republic’ by ensuring all its citizens ‘justice, liberty and equality’ and promoting ‘fraternity’ among the people assuring them individual dignity. Disabilities of all kinds, mental, physical and social, prevent India from achieving its enlightened aims of justice and fraternity enshrined in the constitution. Social disability originated from caste system, patriarchal values, and religious conflicts hinders socio economic development of India. Advancement in science and technology may reduce severity of physical disability. Disabled friendly laws, architectures, economic provisions will surely remove many aspects of physical disabilities. Psychosocial causes of disabilities are to be removed from the malignant psyche of the people. Preparatory school visualized in National Education Policy 2020 is a scientific move in that right direction. Contemporary India has been passing through a spirited nationalism and cultural brotherhood irrespective of caste, class or religion. National Education Policy 2020 aims to create an egalitarian society of educated people who are below to none in skills and intellect. Let us hope that National education policy 2020 may strengthen the on-going process of nationalism and brotherhood formation in India above all sectarian notions of caste, class, religion and faith. Early Childhood Care and Education visualized in the policy document can do wonder, if the authorities and all other stakeholders in teaching learning processes devote their wholehearted effort and support in realizing the educational goals enshrined in the National Education Policy document.

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