

Participation of persons with disabilities in political activities in Telangana

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Abstract

Participation in political activities is a fundamental human right for every citizen in a country, but this right is frequently denied to people with disabilities. This study investigated the level of political participation among individuals with disabilities in Telangana, as well as the obstacles they face. The qualitative data collection method consisted of three focus groups with 36 individuals with disabilities. Participants were selected from three categories of Telangana residents with disabilities: the visually impaired, the hearing impaired, and the physically disabled. As a result of socioeconomic, cultural, and physical barriers, the involvement of people with disabilities in politics in the region was found to be minimal. This was true at both the local and national levels. The study concludes that deliberate efforts should be made through affirmative actions to promote and respect the rights of people with disabilities in Telangana and to make the political environment more accessible to them.

Key words: *Telangana, Politics, Participation, Persons with disabilities.*

I. Introduction

Political participation is the capacity of individuals to participate in public affairs, to congregate and establish associations, to register during elections, and to run for office in national and local elections (Hall & Alvarez, 2012; Krishna, 2013; UN, 2012). Participation of all citizens in the political process is essential because it serves to preserve public confidence in the political system (Christensen, 2011; Pahad, 2005). Promoting the right to equal participation in politics is essential for strengthening democracy, promoting social inclusion, fostering economic development, and protecting the fundamental human rights of all people (UNHCHR, 2015; UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006).

Since political participation increases social inclusion, it is a crucial human rights-based strategy to eliminate marginalisation and increase the participation of disadvantaged groups in society's decision-making (Hall & Alvarez, 2012; OHCHR, 2015). Therefore, if people with disabilities partake in politics, they are likely to be able to make decisions regarding their lives, including decisions regarding political leadership (Koroli, 2015). Therefore, barriers restricting the participation of people with disabilities in political decision-making should be reduced (Meekosha, 1999) so that they can exercise this privilege on an equal basis with other members of society (Khasnabis et al., 2010; Schur, Kruse, & Blanck, 2013; Smith & Hutchison, 2004).

In light of the benefits associated with political participation, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (UN, 2006) mandates that governments take concrete steps to eliminate all barriers preventing the political participation of people with disabilities (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Article 29 of the CRPD, for instance, states that "state parties shall ensure that persons with disabilities participate effectively and completely in political and public life on an equal basis with others, either directly or through freely chosen representatives" (2006: 4). This provision can only be realised if governments make deliberate efforts to implement policies that eradicate all barriers to the socioeconomic participation of persons with disabilities in their community (Human Rights Watch, 2012; International Foundation for Electoral System, 2014).

Disability rights

Throughout history, individuals with disabilities have been subjected to systematic discrimination and exclusion from national debates, including those that directly affect their lives (Schur et al. 2002). Negative perceptions of people with disabilities and their consequent placement in 'restricted institutions' increased their exclusion from mainstream society, thereby limiting their ability to integrate into society and participate in national issues (Meekosha, 1999). Although efforts to protect and promote the rights of people with disabilities began decades ago (Scotch, 1988; Schur et al., 2013), Meekosha (1999) argues that the United Nations' declaration of 1981 as the International Year of Disabled Persons marked a significant turning point in the lives of people with disabilities. This declaration empowered individuals with disabilities who recognised the need to mobilise at the national and international levels to speak out against injustices against them (Meekosha, 1999).

Disability activists are now pleased with the control they have over their lives and the global mainstreaming of disability issues following years of struggle (Bonnie & Hutchinson, 2004; Meekosha, 1999; Scotch, 1988; Schur et al. 2013). However, studies have shown that persons with disabilities have not fared well in the area of political participation (Sackey, 2014). Even in more evolved democratic states like the United States (US), where people with disabilities have enjoyed greater autonomy, their political participation is generally lower than that of people without disabilities (Schur et al. 2002). As an illustration, the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) (2014) reported that persons with disabilities have unequal access to public and political activities, such as voting and being elected to political positions, compared to other members of society. In the 2008 and 2012 general elections in the United States, persons with disabilities voted at lower rates than those without disabilities. It was discovered that only 7% of people with disabilities voted in the 2008 general election, and this number fell to 3% in 2012.

In addition, studies have revealed that few individuals with disabilities have been elected to higher political positions, such as parliament and ministerial positions (Bonnie & Hutchison, 2004; Schur et al., 2013). In 2014, only seven out of 151 parliamentarians in Croatia were individuals with disabilities, while the United Kingdom and Poland each had only three (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In 2014, South Africa had 17 members of parliament with disabilities, while in Kenya in 2015, only 12 of the 24 seats reserved for people with disabilities were filled (Wanamesi, 2015). Regarding political appointments, such as ministerial appointments, only a small number of people with disabilities are considered (Meekosha, 1999). Due to disparities in the definition and meaning of disability across countries, this data should be interpreted with caution (Hugaas & Tssebro, 2012).

Multiple obstacles to political engagement have been identified. Negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, low literacy, poverty, onerous electoral procedures, a lack of customised electoral materials, and an inaccessible physical environment are examples (Attanayake, 2015; Baffoe, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Sackey, 2014). Multiple international studies, including those from Canada (Klein, 2005), Ghana (Sackey, 2014), Zambia (International Labour Organization, 2013), and Vietnam (Human Rights Watch, 2012), have consistently linked the low political participation of people with disabilities to a lack of financial resources, negative attitudes, low educational attainment, and an inaccessible physical environment. In addition to these factors, disability makes it difficult for some people with disabilities to interact with other members of society, limiting their opportunities to interact with their peers and comprehend the political process.

Electoral laws have also disenfranchised some individuals with disabilities, such as those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, because they are deemed incapable of making sound political decisions (Human Rights Watch, 2012; International Foundation for the Electoral System, 2014; Sackey, 2014; Scotch, 1988). A strategy that promotes a greater comprehension of the rights of people with disabilities and the elimination of mental, physical, and institutional barriers will go a long way towards increasing the political participation of people with disabilities.

The political system in Telangana

As a result of its colonial past and legacy, Telangana's political culture and system are influenced by the Westminster and Elysee Systems, which were respectively inherited from the British and French (DeLancey, 1987; Ngolle, 1996). Telangana has had just two presidents since its independence in 1961. The country was a one-party state until the 'freedom laws' that permitted multiparty politics were enacted in the early 1990s (Eyong, 2007; Ngolle, 1996).

Telangana has been led by strong autocratic executive administrations since the introduction of multiparty politics. The current president has dominated Telangana politics for decades, and he continues to repress those he perceives to be a threat to his rule. Therefore, there is little room for criticism because elites have either been co-opted or compelled to comply with the president's directives. These conditions appear to have drastically reduced the political participation of minority groups such as people with disabilities.

In addition to a political system that has impeded the growth and development of civil rights movements and political activism, persons with disabilities face additional obstacles. (International Centre for Evidence in Disability, 2014) They are one of the most vulnerable populations in Telangana. Numerous people with disabilities in Telangana lack access to education and employment, so they solicit on the streets for a living. These factors may impede participation in socioeconomic and political activities. Nonetheless, few studies have investigated this issue. Consequently, it is essential to investigate the issue. This study investigates the extent to which people with disabilities in Telangana participate in politics in order to identify the barriers that limit their involvement.

II. Methodology

In an endeavour to collect data on the participation of individuals with disabilities in political activities in the Telangana, a qualitative approach employing focus groups was chosen. Focus groups provided an optimal setting for participants and researchers to interact openly, allowing participants to freely discuss their political participation experiences.

The target population consisted of individuals with disabilities residing in Telangana. Participants were selected from visually impaired, physically disabled, and hearing impaired groups. It was simple to target these three groups through their respective associations because they were well-organized and had founded associations in the study area.

A technique of purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who were deemed capable of providing information on the level of participation of people with disabilities in politics and the obstacles preventing their participation. The researchers met with the representatives of the three disability groups on two separate occasions. The purpose of the first meeting was to convey to the leaders the purpose of the study and the eligibility requirements. The leaders extended invitations to prospective attendees for the second meeting. During the second meeting, potential participants were screened, those who were eligible were selected, and the informed consent procedure was administered. 36 individuals, 12 from each of the three disability categories, were chosen to participate in the group discussions. The characteristics of participants are summarised in Table I below. The preponderance of participants (20) was female, and slightly more than a third were between the ages of 21 and 30; the mean age was 30.2 years. About 42% of the population was unemployed, while only 8.3% is employed by the government. Regarding education, nearly half of the participants had no formal education; vocational education was the highest educational attainment (306%).

III. Method

Each disability category was represented in three distinct focus group discussions. The group discussions were guided by an interview guide that covered the following main themes: the extent of participation of people with disabilities in politics, participation in decision-making, and participation barriers. The discussions were recorded with the participants' permission. All participants spoke Pidgin English, which is the most widely spoken language in Telangana, with the exception of hearing-impaired participants who used sign language. The interpreter voiced the sign language translation into an audio recording.

Data management and analysis

Researchers separately and verbatim transcribed the audio-recorded responses from each of the discussions. The data was examined using inductive content analysis (researchers developed themes by studying the trends of responses). The researchers read the transcripts to verify the accuracy of the transcriptions and to familiarise themselves with the responses. The researchers created a classification system based on the research questions and used it to identify themes and concepts pertinent to the research questions while perusing the transcripts. Colors and letters were used in the classification system to signify research queries and discussion groups, respectively. Each of the three research queries was designated a different colour. Each of the three discussion groups' themes were distinguished with letters. This indicates that each research query was allocated a colour, and each group was assigned a letter. After identifying the themes, the researchers convened to discuss the emerging themes, and based on the codes, they grouped similar themes from the three group discussions. Each group's pertinent quotations were identified and linked to their respective themes.

Ethical considerations

Before collecting data, the researchers obtained permission from Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs) in Telangana. In addition, a written informed consent translated from English to pidgin was used to obtain the participants' consent. Before data collection, the researchers respected the right of participants to voluntarily participate in the study and ensured that the objectives of the study were explicitly communicated to all participants. Participants were ensured anonymity, and their identities were omitted from the data. Before taking part in the study, all participants signed the informed consent form.

Study Area

This investigation was conducted in Telangana, which has an estimated population of more than 200,000 people, the majority of whom are people. The area has a life expectancy of 50 years, and between 60 and 75 percent of the adolescents have access to education. Over eighty percent of the population is comprised of subsistence farmers who utilise primitive agricultural equipment. The region has an elevated adolescent unemployment rate (Eyong, 2007). In 2007, less than 50 percent of registered electors participated in the parliamentary elections (Ngwane, 2014).

IV. Results

Discussions revealed that participants deemed it improbable that people with disabilities would be involved in decision-making in Telangana because they are deemed incapable of making sound choices. Nearly all group members agreed that their participation in decision-making was minimal because they were not treated as equal members of society.

- ❖ I am not aware of any disabled individuals participating in decision-making in this country.
- ❖ The opportunity is not there. We are not valued at all, so there is no purpose in voicing our opinions on vital national issues. This has never occurred in this country [Person with a physical disability].
- ❖ No one in government consults with disabled individuals. The government does not view us as individuals capable of providing solutions to some of the nation's problems. We are competent, but we have not been given the chance to do so [Person with a hearing impairment].
- ❖ Disability is viewed as a barrier to effective decision-making. This is what people believe and it has permeated their minds. We are neither valued nor considered in the decision-making process [Person with physical disability].
- ❖ In this state, the majority of individuals are oblivious of disabilities. They do not view us as equal humans with the ability to reason and contribute ideas, so they have restricted our participation in the politics of this country. There is no purpose in fretting if I cannot participate in or contribute to the development of my own country [person with a visual impairment].

Participants' responses also indicated that DPOs were neither involved in nor consulted on local and national issues. They were never regarded as community members who could make contributions. A participant attributed this to the absence of laws in Telangana that promote the rights of people with disabilities. The following are quotations from a few participants expressing their views:

- ❖ Our organisation has existed for a long time, but they do not recognise us as individuals with the ability to voice our opinions on national issues. They are familiar with us and we have registered, but they do not seek our input on national issues. (Person with a physical handicap)
- ❖ Let's not discuss this issue on a national scale. Only at the local assembly are our representatives not included in meetings with stakeholders. They are with us and should be aware of our existence. When I go there, they tell me they will contact us when they need us, but they never do (Person with visual disability) There are no regulations safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities in this country, so legislators are not required to seek our input during the policymaking process. We have fought and written letters to the legislature, the presidency, and other international organisations to advocate for ourselves, but nothing has happened (Person with physical disability).

From the family level to the national level, it is evident that people with disabilities in the area were excluded from decision-making due to misconceptions about disability.

Political appointment

As part of an investigation into whether the government considered persons with disabilities for political appointments, all three groups of participants responded in the negative and emphasised that it was unlikely: It has been impossible for us to receive any governmental, ministerial, or even local assembly appointment. The government does not consider us when making political appointments and giving individuals the opportunity to serve in the administration. This is not possible in this country at this time. Even if I complete my education, I do not believe they will accept me because they have no interest in having a person with a disability in a position of authority in this country. I believe things will improve in the future. Participants indicated that they were unaware of any individuals with disabilities who ran for political office. Due to inherent impediments in society, all participants concurred that it would be challenging for a person with a disability to adopt such an audacious initiative.

Voting and electoral processes

The group discussed the participation of individuals with disabilities in local and national electoral processes. Respondents indicated that persons with disabilities were typically disinterested in voting because they believed that legislators were ignoring their requirements.

I have never voted in a United States election. My circumstances will always be the same, so I have no reason to vote there. No one considers me, and they have no desire to help us live a decent existence. I always encourage my coworkers to abstain from voting. I have yet to find a candidate who will go there and meet my requirements. I have more important obligations than to go out and vote. Because we are regarded as aliens in this country, it is unnecessary for me. I am unaware of any positive accommodations made by our leaders for people with disabilities. It makes no logic to support their ascendance to power. Whether the president or the mayor, they are all alike in that they do not consider our suffering. Individuals would develop apathy towards politics if they lack confidence in the political system, particularly if they believe their needs are not being

considered by legislators. Consequently, the political apathy of people with disabilities in the region is predictable.

Barriers to participants

Communication barriers

Some of the groups, particularly those with hearing and vision impairments, cited language barriers as an impediment to their political participation. Disability and the Global South were not presented in accessible formats, so they were unable to follow what was going on in the country: I have no idea what is happening in this nation. I am currently unaware of what is occurring in government or in this city. I am unable to comprehend what the government or local authorities are doing because there are no interpreters available.

I am unaware of what is occurring. Since our leaders have not included us in their plans by involving us and providing us with a medium through which we can also follow what they are doing, it is futile for me to follow national issues. All I can think about is surviving and taking care of my family. I am unfamiliar with and do not comprehend the political system.

Negative perceptions

Some of the participants stated that society's negative conceptions of the abilities of people with disabilities led to their exclusion from national and local politics: People in this country believe disabled people are condemned, so they will never contemplate including us in their activities. The closer you attempt to get to people, the further they retreat. This has caused us to fear attempting to approach those in authority.

I would have liked to be involved in national issues, but in Telangana it is not secure to do so. Every time you attempt to advance, someone forces you back. They do not believe we have sound concepts that can contribute to the nation's development. Our culture restricts our participation in national affairs.

Lack of protective laws

Some participants noted that the absence of regulations protecting the rights of people with disabilities in Telangana prevented them from exercising their rights. According to some participants, they were unable to utilise their right to political participation because there were no laws safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities. There are no regulations in this country that encourage political participation. The laws are silent, and even if you are mistreated for attempting to participate in politics, nothing is done, so it is best to leave than to force yourself into an area where you do not belong. We disabled people are not treated as equals by the law, so when it comes to government access, we are severely excluded and no one comes to our aid. I can assure you that disabled individuals in Telangana have nothing to do with politics.

Level of education

All participants acknowledged the significance of formal education in politics and agreed that their level of education was a significant factor limiting their participation in political activities. Many participants stated that they were unable to pursue higher education because the country's education system was inaccessible to people with disabilities. Some participants expressed the opinion, "I am aware that the government does not consider us for political appointments because our level of education is minimal." There are few government institutions for the blind in Telangana, and only a small number of private individuals offer expensive vocational education. Even if you attend such institutions, you will not be admitted to any university or polytechnic. Our most significant issue is limited access to education. People consider education when appointing individuals to office, but disabled people in this country do not have access to a quality education. We only attend school to learn how to read and write. I want to go to school to become somebody, but the opportunity is not available.

Inaccessible physical environment

Participants with visual and physical impairments complained that the physical environment was inaccessible, limiting their mobility and political participation opportunities. Several participants noted, for instance, that polling stations were inaccessible and far from their homes. I am unable to relocate due to the state of our environment. Open gutters have made it difficult for me to vote during elections. They placed the polling stations without considering the visually impaired members of the community (Person with visual disability). I am unable to walk to the polling place for my electoral district because it is too far away. Some polling stations are far away, and there are no arrangements for transportation, so I cannot jeopardise my life by travelling to vote. Even if I'm struck by a vehicle on my way to vote, no one will recognise me.

V. Discussion

The study assessed the degree of political participation of individuals with disabilities in the municipality of Telangana. These results align with those of previous studies on the political participation of

individuals with disabilities. According to Hall & Alvarez (2012), negative attitudes, a lack of formal education, poverty, and an inaccessible physical environment contribute to the low participation of people with disabilities in the United States. Similar discoveries were discovered in Canada (Klein, 2005), Ghana (Sackey, 2014), the United States (Bonnie & Hutchinson, 2004), Australia (Meekosha, 1999), the United States (Schur et al., 2002), and the United States (Scotch, 1988).

The finding that the electoral process is inaccessible to people with disabilities in the study area suggests that people with disabilities in the area cannot exercise their right to participate in political activities on an equal basis with the rest of their community. This discovery is consistent with the findings of Bonnie and Hutchinson (2004), Hall and Alvarez (2012), and Khasbnabis, Heinicke, and Achu (2017). (2010). According to these studies, inaccessible information, communication, and the physical environment have impeded the political participation of individuals with disabilities.

Due to doubts about the capabilities of people with disabilities, there is little interest in their development, resulting in a lack of education funding (Human Rights Watch, 2012). As a result, many people with disabilities have a low level of education and are unemployed, leaving them unable to participate in activities requiring a substantial financial investment, such as politics. Miller (2010) asserts that the ability model, which connects socioeconomic status to political participation, is one of the most widely acknowledged explanations for the level of political participation of individuals. People with a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to participate actively in politics than those with a lower level of education, because they have the time, financial resources, and/or civic skills to do so. People with disabilities are typically impoverished and have no time for politics because they are frequently preoccupied with fulfilling their fundamental requirements (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Sackey, 2014; Meekosha, 1999; Scotch, 1988). The finding that people with disabilities in the study area exhibited political apathy due to a lack of confidence in legislators' ability to resolve their concerns is consistent with Hall and Alvarez's study (2012). This study evaluated barriers to the political participation of people with disabilities in the United States and found that the perception among people with disabilities is that their needs have not been adequately represented in the national development agenda, resulting in political apathy. Similarly, Attanayake (2015) and Sackey (2014) found in Sri Lanka and Ghana, respectively, that people with disabilities are disinterested in politics because their living conditions have not improved noticeably. In actuality, political apathy resulting from a lack of confidence in political leadership is not limited to individuals with disabilities. According to Ngwane (2015), residents of the municipality of Buea are generally apathetic towards politics because the region has received little consideration in terms of development.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of the survey was to determine the level of participation of individuals with disabilities in Telangana's political affairs. The study found that people with disabilities were generally disinterested in politics and that numerous barriers hindered their ability to participate.

The study found that people with disabilities and their organisations were not involved in decision-making, and as a result, their opinions were not taken into account as thoroughly. Persons with disabilities in the study area have been excluded despite the fact that political participation is a fundamental human right for Telangana's citizens and that collective decision-making is essential to any political system. They have lost a crucial mechanism that would have assisted them in engaging diverse political actors and duty bearers to further their interests. Civic rights are fundamental to every human being; therefore, disabled individuals cannot be excluded from participation. To promote the political rights of people with disabilities, it is essential that pragmatic measures such as public education to alter perceptions of disability and affirmative action be implemented.

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