



An Analysis of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016: A Step Toward Inclusive Justice in India

Avinash Kumar Shukla, Research Scholar (Law), School Of Legal Studies
LNCT University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, INDIA

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Author

Avinash Kumar Shukla, Research Scholar

E-mail : advocateavinashald@gmail.com

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

Received on : 29/08/2025
Revised on : 29/10/2025
Accepted on : 07/11/2025
Overall Similarity : 07% on 30/10/2025



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Originality Assessment

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Overall Similarity

Date: Oct 30, 2025 (01:51 PM)
Matches: 151 / 2167 words
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ABSTRACT

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, marks a seminal moment in the history of disability rights in India. Enacted to align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which India ratified in 2007, the Act seeks to overturn the antiquated and charity-based approach of its predecessor, the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995. This article provides a critical analysis of the RPWD Act, 2016, arguing that it represents a significant step toward inclusive justice by transitioning the legal framework from a medical and welfare model to a social and human rights-based model. The analysis delves into the Act's key provisions, including its expanded definition of disability, mandate for non-discrimination, and specific entitlements in education, employment, and accessibility. It also examines the strengthened institutional mechanisms, such as the creation of Central and State Advisory Boards and the designation of Chief Commissioners and State Commissioners for Persons with Disabilities. However, the article also identifies persistent challenges in implementation, including attitudinal barriers, inadequate financial allocation, and lack of awareness, which threaten to undermine the Act's transformative potential. The conclusion asserts that while the RPWD Act, 2016, provides a robust legislative foundation for inclusive justice, its ultimate success hinges on effective implementation, sustained political will, and a concerted effort to foster a truly inclusive society.

KEY WORDS

Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, Uncrpd, Social Model of Disability, Reasonable Accommodation, Accessibility.

INTRODUCTION

The historical narrative of disability in India has been predominantly one of invisibility, charity, and medical confinement. For decades, persons with disabilities were perceived as objects of pity or medical intervention, rather than as rights-bearing individuals. The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, was a pioneering legislative attempt to address their needs, but it was fundamentally constrained by its welfare-oriented approach and a narrow definition encompassing only seven disabilities.¹ The Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995, recognized only seven disabilities: blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, locomotor disability, mental retardation, and mental illness.

The global paradigm shift, catalysed by the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2006, compelled a re-evaluation of domestic laws worldwide. India's ratification of the UNCRPD in 2007 created a binding obligation to harmonize its national legal framework with the Convention's human rights ethos, culminating in the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act in 2016 after nearly a decade of advocacy.²

The RPWD Act, 2016, is not a mere amendment but a revolutionary reconceptualization of disability law in India. It signifies the state's commitment to recognizing persons with disabilities as active agents of their own lives, entitled to claim their rights as equal members of society. This article analyses the Act through the lens of "inclusive justice," a concept that transcends formal equality and necessitates the proactive design of societies, systems, and environments to ensure the full and effective participation of all individuals, regardless of their abilities.³ It argues that the RPWD Act, 2016, provides a comprehensive legislative foundation for this ambitious goal. The analysis will proceed by examining the Act's philosophical shift, its substantive rights provisions, its enforcement architecture, and the formidable challenges that continue to impede its full realization.

A Paradigm Shift: From Welfare to Rights

The most profound contribution of the RPWD Act is its philosophical reorientation of the disability discourse in India. It decisively abandons the medical model, which locates the "problem" of disability within the individual's impairment, and wholeheartedly embraces the social model.

The social model, a cornerstone of the disability rights movement, posits that people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment. These barriers can be attitudinal, environmental, or institutional.⁴ This shift is unequivocally embedded in the Act's very definition of disability. Section 2(s) defines a "person with disability" as one "with long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his full and effective participation in society equally with others."⁵ This definition, directly inspired by the UNCRPD, explicitly acknowledges that disability is an outcome of the interaction between an individual and a disabling environment.

Furthermore, the Act dramatically expands the list of recognized disabilities from 7 to 21, including specific conditions such as cerebral palsy, dwarfism, muscular dystrophy, autism spectrum disorder, and intellectual disability, as well as new categories like acid attack victims and specific learning disabilities.⁶ This expansion is critical for inclusive justice, as it brings a vastly larger and more diverse population under the Act's protective and empowering umbrella, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of human experience and impairment.

The Act also operationalizes this rights-based approach by legally enshrining key UNCRPD concepts:

- **Reasonable Accommodation:** Defined under Section 2(y) as “necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise of rights equally with others.”⁷ This is not a privilege but a legal duty essential for achieving substantive equality, requiring tailored solutions in education, employment, and access to services.
- **Universal Design:** Defined under Section 2(z), it means “the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.”⁸ Ibid., Section 2(z).

This promotes a proactive and inclusive approach, preventing the creation of new barriers from the outset.

By embedding these principles, the RPWD Act establishes a framework where the state’s duty is not to bestow charity but to actively remove barriers and guarantee the full spectrum of human rights.

Substantive Rights and Entitlements: The Pillars of Inclusion

The RPWD Act translates its philosophical commitment into concrete, justiciable rights across critical spheres of life, forming the core of its agenda for inclusive justice.

Section 16 of the Act mandates that every child with a benchmark disability has the right to free education in a neighbourhood school, or in a special school, until the age of 18. More significantly, it mandates that all Government and Government-recognized educational institutions provide inclusive education.⁹ This obligates them to make buildings, curricula, teaching methodologies, and evaluation systems accessible. The Act also requires the provision of necessary support services, including transportation, assistive devices, and tailored learning materials. Furthermore, Section 32 reserves not less than 5% of seats in all Government and Government-aided higher educational institutions for persons with benchmark disabilities.¹⁰ This measure is crucial for promoting higher education and professional development, moving beyond basic literacy toward genuine empowerment and economic self-sufficiency.

The Act significantly strengthens provisions for employment, a key domain for dignity and social integration. Section 34 increases the reservation in Government establishments from 3% (in the 1995 Act) to 4% for persons with benchmark disabilities.¹¹ This quota is further distributed as 1% each for persons with (a) blindness and low vision, (b) locomotor disability, (c) deaf and hard of hearing, and (d) intellectual and specific learning disabilities. This sub-categorization is a strategic move to ensure that the benefits of reservation are not monopolized by a single, more vocal group. For the private sector, Section 21 requires establishments with a prescribed minimum number of employees to formulate equal opportunity policies, register employees with disabilities, and maintain records.¹² However, the absence of a mandatory reservation quota in the private sector remains a significant limitation, reflecting a gap in the pursuit of comprehensive inclusive justice.

The principle of accessibility is the gateway to all other rights. Chapter VIII of the Act lays down a comprehensive framework for ensuring access to the physical environment, transportation, and information and communication technology (ICT). It sets a five-year time limit (from the Act’s commencement) for making existing public buildings and transport services accessible. While this deadline has largely been missed across the country, the provision itself sets a clear, justiciable legal obligation. The Act also mandates that all consumer goods and services offered to the public, including websites and software, must be in an accessible format. Crucially, Section 3 establishes a general principle of non-discrimination, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability in any sphere, and Section 17 specifically protects against discrimination in employment, including in recruitment and promotion processes.¹³

Strengthened Institutional Mechanisms

A progressive law is only as effective as its enforcement machinery. The RPWD Act establishes and fortifies institutions to monitor implementation and provide grievance redressal.

- **Central and State Advisory Boards:** Constituted under Sections 34 and 35, these high-level bodies comprise experts, officials, and, most importantly, persons with disabilities. They are tasked with advising Governments on policy formulation and reviewing the Act's implementation, ensuring that policy-making is informed by ground realities.¹⁴
- **Chief Commissioner and State Commissioners for Persons with Disabilities:** These offices, established under Sections 74 and 75, are granted enhanced quasi-judicial powers. They can function as civil courts, summon witnesses, requisition documents, and issue orders. They are empowered to investigate complaints, take *suo moto* (on their own motion) cognizance of violations, and recommend corrective actions to Governments, making them pivotal watchdogs.¹⁵
- **Special Courts:** Section 84 provides for the designation of one or more courts in every district as Special Courts to try offenses under the Act, aiming to expedite the legal process and ensure that justice is not delayed for persons with disabilities.¹⁶

These mechanisms are designed to create a multi-layered system of accountability, moving beyond a purely litigious model of enforcement.

Persistent Challenges and the Implementation Gap

Despite its progressive and comprehensive provisions, the RPWD Act faces significant hurdles that create a chasm between its promise on paper and its reality on the ground.

- **Attitudinal Barriers:** Deep-seated social stigma, superstition, and paternalistic attitudes remain the most formidable obstacle. Persons with disabilities are often perceived as objects of pity, burdens, or recipients of charity, rather than as autonomous rights-holders.¹⁷ This affects everything from family decision-making and community inclusion to employer willingness to provide reasonable accommodation.
- **Inadequate Financial Allocation:** The effective implementation of the Act requires massive and sustained financial investment—for creating accessible infrastructure, providing assistive devices, training teachers and officials, and running nationwide awareness campaigns. Budgetary allocations, both at the central and state levels, have consistently fallen short of the requirement, stalling tangible progress.¹⁸
- **Lack of Awareness and Capacity:** A significant portion of the population, including persons with disabilities, their families, service providers, and even Government officials, remains unaware of the specific provisions and entitlements under the Act. This lack of awareness prevents people from claiming their rights and officials from fulfilling their duties. Capacity building for implementing agencies is also insufficient.
- **Data Gaps and Delayed Rule-Making:** Reliable, disaggregated data on persons with disabilities is scarce, making evidence-based planning and policy formulation difficult. Furthermore, many states were slow to notify their State Rules, creating a legal and administrative vacuum that delayed implementation at the sub-national level for several years.
- **Weak Enforcement of Penalties:** The penalties for non-compliance, such as those for failing to make buildings accessible or for discriminating in employment, are often not enforced rigorously. This lack of enforcement reduces the deterrent effect of the law and allows violations to continue with impunity.

CONCLUSION

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, is undeniably a landmark legislation that has redefined the legal and social status of persons with disabilities in India. By embracing the social and human rights model, expanding the definition and categories of disability, and articulating a comprehensive set of justiciable rights, it has laid a formidable foundation for the pursuit of inclusive justice. It represents a conscious and commendable effort to dismantle systemic barriers and foster a society where diversity is respected, and participation is universal.

However, the Act must be understood as a beginning, not an end in itself. Its transformative potential will remain unrealized if the formidable challenges of implementation are not addressed with urgency, commitment, and strategic planning. This requires a multi-pronged strategy: sustained and well-funded public awareness campaigns to change deep-rooted societal attitudes; robust financial planning and allocation to back the legal mandates with necessary resources; systematic capacity building for all stakeholders, from judges and commissioners to teachers and employers; and, most importantly, the active and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations (DPOs) in the monitoring, evaluation, and implementation process. The RPWD Act, 2016, has handed India a powerful and progressive tool. The arduous but essential work of forging a truly inclusive and just society now depends on the nation's collective will, political resolve, and societal empathy to wield this tool effectively.

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