India’s differently-abled are left in the lurch by virus and lockdown. The govt’s measures, or the lack thereof, fail to ease their burden

Almost everybody at some point in life becomes disabled; those who survive to old age face increasing disabilities. According to Amartya Sen: “Disabled people are not only the most deprived human beings in the developing world, they also are the most neglected”. Globally, 15 per cent (around one billion) of the world’s population lives with some form of disability, notes the WHO. The Census 2011 reveals that every 10th household in India has a disabled member.

Disabled communities, elderly populations and individuals with chronic health conditions are the worst hit by Covid-19. Nonetheless, there is little mention in the media of Covid-19’s impact on their lives when millions are under lockdown.

People with disabilities (PWDs) are more susceptible to viruses like Covid-19 relative to others. We take “hand-washing” as a normal precaution, but PWDs face serious limitations to follow this practice frequently. Besides, there is a lack of public toilets for them. Next is “social-distancing”, but most PWDs depend on others due to physiological constraints. Many disabled have to frequently visit hospitals and rehabilitation centres.

Further, most of the PWDs are largely dependent on the caregivers (family, relatives or professionals). Many caregivers may be reluctant to provide their services as the coronavirus is highly contagious. Persons with intellectual impairment cannot be expected to practice or cope with self-isolation.
Government response

Post-coronavirus, a number of welfare measures have been initiated by the government for the disabled. The Centre will provide three months’ pension in advance to widows, senior citizens and the disabled under its National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). Further, it announced an ex-gratia of ₹1,000 over three months in two instalments for poor senior citizens, widows and PWDs. The National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled (NPRD) has expressed dismay as the ex-gratia amount is “very meagre” and “grossly inadequate”. Half the disabled don’t have a disability certificate; they cannot avail of government schemes.

Besides, as per the 2011 Census, there were seven types of disabilities, which has increased to 21 as per the PWD Act of 2016. Therefore, most PWD people would be left out of the government targeting.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued the first advisory on March 5, 2020. Comprehensive disability-inclusive guidelines were issued. The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPWD) recognised that PWDs are more vulnerable to the virus because of their physical, sensory and cognitive limitations. However, actual implementation of these guidelines requires long-term preparedness and mass awareness.

Lack of adequate measures

The coronavirus poses serious threats for PWDs. Persons with visual disabilities rely on “touch functions for mobility and work”, thus, increasing their risk of infection.

The deaf have been facing lack of Indian sign languages and necessary communication equipment. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment asked the departments in collaboration with States/UTs to make Covid-19 related information accessible in audio-formats and Braille for visually impaired people.

The PWD Act of 2016 mandated dissemination of information in accessible formats (print and electronic) in addition to making government websites accessible. Little progress was achieved on this front. The sudden instructions to create such infrastructure may remain a dead letter.

Further, the State disability commissioners are nodal agencies and have been instructed to coordinate with other relevant bodies. However, these posts are not permanent in nature and the personnel lack power, planning, adequate knowledge and motivation to execute action plans. Perhaps, it is time India created a “National Disability Commission” in line with the commissions established for other vulnerable sections.

Around two-third of the PWDs are unemployed, and those who are employed, are in the unorganised sector. A large number of PWDs are homeless, contractual labourers, migrant workers, and beggars. These guidelines don’t address their concerns. Further, the Centre has instructed States to provide medical aid to disabled at their home, and ensure their caregivers provide them uninterrupted services. However, the litmus test will be if these are actually implemented.
What can be done

There are a large number of workers who are moderately impaired. Like most informal workers, they have migrated to different corners of the country in search of livelihood. These people are panicking and want to return home. Thus, it is crucial that stranded PWDs be rehabilitated on priority basis.

An official online portal may be created to specially disseminate authentic information related to the coronavirus crisis to PWDS, in regional languages. Many services required on a daily basis for PWDs are suspended. Access to aid and devices for the disabled during the lockdown should be made available. Alternative provisions should be made for the PWDs who don’t have disability certificates so that they could avail uninterrupted government services.

In addition, special provisions may be explored for PWDs under “Ayushman Bharat”. PWDs with chronic illness are going through mental trauma, thinking that they won’t be able to access groceries or medicine if the supply runs short. Door-step delivery should be ensured for free or at affordable rates. Direct cash assistance can be provided along with special provisions under the public distribution system (PDS) for PWDs.

There should be separate rehabilitation and quarantine centres for the disabled population. Special training may be required for health professionals to deal with PWDs when quarantined.

A large number of PWDs are beggars and homeless. Reasonable accommodation could reduce the risk of contamination. For example, Australia has reserved a separate time slot in supermarkets only for PWDs and senior citizens.

The Prime Minister has done a great job by repeatedly talking about PWDs. Many disability rights organisations and advocacy groups believe that coining terms like divyang, enacting the PWD Act of 2016 (not adequate but at least an improvement over the earlier provisions) and initiatives like the ‘Divyang Kumbh Mela’ recently held at Allahabad, hold a silver lining. The pandemic gives an opportunity to the government to reorient its health strategies towards the disability sector.

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