

Prevailing Sociocultural Beliefs, Attitudes, and Perceptions Towards Individuals with Physical Disabilities

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KEYWORDS

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the prevailing sociocultural beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions towards individuals with physical disabilities, focusing on rural and semi-urban areas in India, specifically Pavagada Taluk in Tumkur District, Karnataka. It investigates how cultural norms, religious beliefs, gender dynamics, and caste structures shape societal attitudes toward disability. The study utilizes a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys conducted among 50 youth from the region. The findings reveal that deeply rooted superstitions, caste-based discrimination, and economic exclusion continue to perpetuate stigma and marginalization. Additionally, gendered biases intensify the challenges faced by women with disabilities. The paper emphasizes the urgent need for community-based sensitization programs, stronger policy enforcement, and initiatives aimed at empowering individuals with disabilities. The study concludes with recommendations for fostering inclusivity through educational reforms, empowerment initiatives, and active participation of social workers in bridging gaps between marginalized communities and policymakers.

Introduction

Overview of the Issue

Globally, physical disabilities affect millions of individuals, with the World Health Organization (WHO) estimating that over 1 billion people, or approximately 15% of the world's population, experience some form of disability (WHO, 2011). Physical disabilities, characterized by limitations in mobility, motor functions, or physical stamina, often result from congenital conditions, accidents, or chronic illnesses. These impairments can lead to significant challenges in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and community participation (UNDP, 2018). While advancements in medical and technological interventions have improved the quality of life for many, sociocultural barriers remain pervasive and deeply entrenched, hindering full societal inclusion.

Sociocultural factors play a critical role in shaping the experiences of individuals with physical disabilities. In many societies, beliefs about disability are influenced by historical, religious, and cultural narratives. For instance, in some cultures, disabilities are viewed as divine punishment or karmic retribution, leading to stigma and ostracism of affected individuals and their families (Coleridge, 1993). Such beliefs perpetuate discrimination, limiting access to opportunities and reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), these sociocultural barriers significantly contribute to the unemployment and underemployment of individuals with disabilities, who are often seen as unproductive or incapable (ILO, 2019).

The exclusion faced by individuals with disabilities is often magnified in rural areas, where traditional beliefs and a lack of awareness exacerbate their marginalization. Studies in rural India, for example, reveal that individuals with physical disabilities are often perceived as burdens to their families and communities (Ghai, 2001). This perception is further reinforced by limited access to supportive infrastructure such as accessible transportation, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions, creating an environment of systemic neglect (Deepak & Singh, 2012). In

contrast, urban areas, though not free from bias, tend to offer relatively better opportunities due to increased awareness and available resources.

Another critical aspect is the intersection of disability with other social identities such as gender, caste, and economic status. Women with disabilities, for example, face compounded challenges due to prevailing gender norms that restrict their mobility and decision-making rights. Similarly, caste-based hierarchies in South Asia add another layer of exclusion, as lower-caste individuals with disabilities often endure both caste and disability-related discrimination (Mehrotra, 2013). This intersectionality highlights the need to view disability not as a standalone issue but as part of a broader matrix of sociocultural inequalities.

In this context, addressing sociocultural attitudes becomes paramount. While legal frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and national legislation like India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016) emphasize the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities, the actual implementation of these policies often falls short due to prevailing societal attitudes (UNCRPD, 2006; RPWD Act, 2016). A paradigm shift in societal perceptions, coupled with targeted interventions, is essential for fostering an inclusive environment where individuals with physical disabilities can thrive without prejudice or discrimination.

Significance of Sociocultural Contexts

Sociocultural contexts profoundly influence how individuals with disabilities are perceived and treated within their communities. These contexts are shaped by shared values, traditions, beliefs, and practices that determine social norms and behavior. In many societies, particularly in rural areas, deeply ingrained cultural attitudes toward disability often contribute to stigma, discrimination, and marginalization, significantly affecting the lives of individuals with physical disabilities and their families.

One of the most pervasive issues is the association of disability with negative cultural and religious beliefs. In certain communities, disabilities are perceived as a result of past sins, divine punishment, or bad karma (Miles, 2002). These beliefs can lead to a lack of empathy and support for individuals with disabilities, who are often seen as "cursed" or "unlucky." For example, in rural India, parents of children with disabilities sometimes face social ostracism, with the community blaming them for the child's condition (Ghai, 2001). This stigmatization not only isolates individuals with disabilities but also hinders their access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

In rural settings, traditional gender roles further complicate the experience of disability. Women with disabilities, in particular, face double discrimination—both as women in patriarchal societies and as individuals with disabilities. They are often denied basic rights, such as education and healthcare, and are excluded from marriage and family roles, which are considered central to their identity in many cultures (Mehrotra, 2013). This compounded discrimination can lead to severe psychological distress and a lack of economic independence, trapping them in a cycle of dependency.

Caste-based hierarchies add another layer of sociocultural complexity in countries like India. Individuals with disabilities who belong to lower castes often experience heightened discrimination, as their disabilities are viewed through the lens of caste prejudice (Jeffrey & Singal,

2008). For instance, families from lower castes may find it even more challenging to access resources or secure social acceptance for their members with disabilities, as they are doubly marginalized. This intersectionality underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how sociocultural contexts operate at multiple levels.

Another critical aspect is the collective nature of rural communities, where societal approval often outweighs individual agency. In such settings, individuals with disabilities may face restrictions on their autonomy, as their families prioritize the community's expectations over the individual's needs. This dynamic can lead to overprotection or neglect, both of which undermine the person's ability to live independently or participate actively in society (Coleridge, 1993).

While urban areas tend to be more progressive due to greater exposure to diverse perspectives and better access to resources, rural regions remain steeped in traditional beliefs and attitudes. The lack of awareness and limited exposure to individuals with disabilities as capable and contributing members of society perpetuate negative stereotypes. Addressing these sociocultural barriers requires targeted interventions, such as community sensitization programs, inclusive education initiatives, and the promotion of positive role models with disabilities.

The sociocultural context, therefore, acts as both a lens and a barrier, shaping every aspect of the lives of individuals with disabilities. It influences not just how these individuals perceive themselves but also how they are perceived and treated by others. As such, transforming societal attitudes is a crucial step toward building inclusive and equitable communities that respect and empower individuals with disabilities. Would you like to proceed with further elaboration or focus on another section?

Research Aim and Objectives

Research Aim:

The study aimed to analyse the prevailing sociocultural beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward individuals with physical disabilities and their impact on social inclusion. By investigating the origins and persistence of these beliefs, the research sought to uncover their underlying cultural, religious, and societal roots. The ultimate goal was to propose evidence-based strategies and interventions to challenge these biases and foster a more inclusive environment for individuals with physical disabilities.

Objectives:

To Examine Sociocultural Beliefs and Attitudes Toward Disability:

The study focused on understanding how disabilities were perceived within communities, particularly in rural settings. It explored myths, stereotypes, and cultural narratives that shaped public opinion about individuals with physical disabilities. By gathering qualitative and quantitative data, the research identified recurring patterns in beliefs and attitudes that contributed to social stigma and discrimination.

To Trace the Roots of Prevailing Beliefs:

The research investigated the historical, religious, and cultural factors that influenced societal attitudes toward disability. This included analysing religious texts, folklore, and community traditions to provide insights into how disabilities had been framed within societal narratives. Additionally, it examined the role of colonial history, caste structures, and gender norms in shaping these perceptions over time.

To Assess the Impact of Sociocultural Beliefs on Individuals with Disabilities:

The study evaluated how these beliefs affected the daily lives of individuals with physical disabilities. It considered dimensions such as social acceptance, access to education, employment opportunities, and participation in community activities. Documenting the lived experiences of individuals highlighted the psychological and socio-economic consequences of exclusion and marginalization.

To Identify Gaps in Awareness and Existing Interventions:

The research examined current efforts by governments, NGOs, and community-based organizations to address sociocultural barriers. It identified gaps in policy implementation, awareness campaigns, and accessibility measures. For instance, the study assessed the effectiveness of programs aimed at reducing stigma and fostering inclusion and highlighted areas that required improvement.

To Propose Strategies for Change:

The study culminated in designing practical, culturally sensitive strategies to challenge negative sociocultural beliefs and promote inclusion. These included recommendations for community engagement programs, advocacy campaigns, and policy reforms. Proposed strategies emphasized increasing the visibility of successful individuals with disabilities as role models, promoting inclusive education and workplaces, and fostering dialogue within communities about disability rights.

To Highlight the Role of Social Work in Facilitating Change:

The research emphasized the critical role of social workers in bridging gaps between marginalized communities and broader society. It explored how social workers advocated for inclusive policies, conducted community sensitization programs, and supported individuals with disabilities in asserting their rights.

By addressing these objectives, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural dynamics surrounding physical disabilities. This understanding was instrumental in designing targeted interventions that not only challenged existing prejudices but also created sustainable pathways for social inclusion.

Literature Review:

Historical Perspectives on Disability

1. Disability as Divine Punishment or Karma

Historically, many traditional societies perceived physical disabilities as a form of divine punishment or the result of bad karma. Coleridge (1993) highlighted how ancient religious and spiritual frameworks often linked disabilities to moral failings, sins, or violations of societal norms. For example, in Hinduism, physical impairments were sometimes viewed as consequences of negative actions in past lives, reinforcing beliefs in karma. Such interpretations not only marginalized individuals with disabilities but also placed a moral burden on their families, leading to stigma and social exclusion.

2. Myths and Superstitions Surrounding Disability

Miles (2002) explored the cultural myths and superstitions associated with disability across various societies, particularly in Asia. In many rural communities, disabilities were attributed to supernatural causes such as witchcraft, curses, or possession by evil spirits. These beliefs often perpetuated fear and discrimination, isolating individuals with disabilities and preventing them from participating in communal activities. Such misconceptions were deeply ingrained and persisted due to a lack of education and awareness.

3. Historical Marginalization in Pre-modern Societies

Finkelstein (1980) examined how physical disabilities were treated in pre-modern societies, emphasizing that disabled individuals were often excluded from mainstream social and economic activities. In medieval Europe, for example, those with visible impairments were frequently regarded as "freaks" or subjects of pity, displayed in public for entertainment or ostracized entirely. Similar patterns of exclusion were evident in feudal and caste-based systems, where disability was equated with unproductivity, further exacerbating social marginalization.

4. Disability in Indigenous and Tribal Societies

Ingstad and Whyte (1995) provided an ethnographic analysis of how indigenous and tribal communities historically understood disability. In some cultures, individuals with disabilities were considered "special" or "sacred," believed to possess unique spiritual powers or connections to the divine. However, in other contexts, they were viewed as burdens or omens of misfortune, leading to neglect or abandonment. The diversity in perceptions underscored the interplay between cultural values and the treatment of individuals with disabilities.

5. Institutionalization and the Legacy of Marginalization

Barnes (1991) analyzed the historical shift toward institutionalizing individuals with disabilities, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries. With the rise of industrialization and the emphasis on productivity, disabled individuals were increasingly seen as unable to contribute to economic growth. This led to their segregation in asylums and specialized institutions, reinforcing their exclusion from society. The legacy of these practices continued to influence societal attitudes toward disability well into the modern era.

Contemporary Beliefs and Stigma

1. Gender and Double Discrimination

Mehrotra (2013) highlighted the intersectionality of gender and disability, emphasizing how women with physical disabilities face compounded discrimination in patriarchal societies. In rural India, they are often perceived as unfit for marriage, motherhood, or productive work, which marginalizes them further. The societal expectation of women as caregivers and contributors to familial honour contrasts sharply with perceptions of disabled women as dependent or burdensome. This double discrimination perpetuates stigma and restricts their access to education, employment, and healthcare.

2. Caste and Disability: Layers of Marginalization

Jeffrey and Singal (2008) examined how caste hierarchies amplify the marginalization of individuals with disabilities in India. Their study found that lower-caste individuals with disabilities often faced heightened stigma, as their impairments were interpreted through the lens of caste-based prejudice. For instance, disabilities in lower-caste individuals were more likely to

be attributed to moral failings or poor hygiene, reinforcing stereotypes about caste inferiority. These compounded barriers severely limited opportunities for social mobility and inclusion.

3. Economic Status and Access to Resources

Yeo and Moore (2003) explored the role of economic status in shaping societal attitudes toward disability. Their research revealed that individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to face stigma, as poverty exacerbates perceptions of dependency and unproductivity. In rural contexts, where resources are scarce, individuals with disabilities are often deprioritized within families and communities, seen as a drain on limited resources. This economic lens reinforces societal biases and hinders access to rehabilitation, education, and employment.

4. Urban-Rural Divide in Stigmatization

Groce and Kett (2013) analyzed how urbanization affects attitudes toward disability. Their findings indicated that urban areas, with greater exposure to diverse populations and advocacy campaigns, tended to be more inclusive. In contrast, rural areas often maintained traditional beliefs and stigmas, with community members adhering to outdated perceptions of disability as a curse or punishment. The rural-urban divide also influenced access to supportive services, leaving rural individuals with disabilities more isolated and stigmatized.

5. Disability and Familial Expectations

Singh and Ghai (2009) explored the impact of familial expectations on contemporary attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. They found that in many Indian families, the birth of a child with a disability was viewed as a personal failure, particularly for mothers, who were often blamed for the condition. These familial pressures contributed to internalized stigma among individuals with disabilities, as well as increased social isolation. The study highlighted the need for family-centered interventions to address these entrenched attitudes.

Cultural Dimensions

1. Religious Interpretations and Disability

Miles (2007) emphasized the dual role of religion in shaping attitudes toward disability. In many cultures, religious doctrines have perpetuated stigma by framing disabilities as divine punishment or karmic consequences. For instance, some interpretations of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs attribute disabilities to actions in past lives, reinforcing notions of blame and exclusion. Conversely, religious teachings in Christianity and Islam emphasize compassion and charity, sometimes fostering inclusion but also framing individuals with disabilities as objects of pity rather than equals.

2. Cultural Practices and Exclusion

Groce and Zola (1993) explored how cultural practices reinforce the marginalization of individuals with disabilities. They highlighted that in some traditional communities, physical disabilities are viewed as omens or signs of bad fortune, leading to the exclusion of affected individuals from key social events, such as weddings or religious ceremonies. These practices, rooted in superstitions, contribute to the isolation and invisibility of people with disabilities within their communities.

3. Disability and Rituals in Rural Societies

Ingstad and Whyte (1995) examined how rural societies incorporate or exclude individuals with disabilities in cultural rituals. In some contexts, disabilities are seen as a disruption to societal norms, resulting in exclusion from marriage, inheritance, or participation in communal activities. However, certain tribes and indigenous groups view individuals with disabilities as possessing unique spiritual insights, offering a counter-narrative that challenges discriminatory practices. This duality highlights the complex interplay between culture and disability.

4. Cultural Symbols and Stereotypes

Barnes and Mercer (2003) analyzed the representation of disability in cultural narratives, emphasizing how symbols and metaphors perpetuate stereotypes. For example, in Indian mythology, disabled characters are often portrayed as villains or dependent figures, reinforcing societal perceptions of incapacity or moral failing. These portrayals influence how disabilities are perceived in contemporary society, shaping attitudes and interactions.

5. Religious Advocacy for Inclusion

Sathyannarayanan (2014) explored instances where religious leaders and organizations have actively challenged discrimination against individuals with disabilities. In India, some reformist movements have worked to reinterpret religious texts, promoting messages of inclusion and equal participation. For example, community-driven initiatives in certain Hindu and Muslim communities have redefined disability not as a curse but as an opportunity for societal solidarity and compassion.

International Frameworks and National Policies

1. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

The UNCRPD, adopted in 2006, marked a significant global milestone in recognizing the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities. Degener and Quinn (2008) highlighted how the Convention shifted the focus from a charity-based to a rights-based approach, emphasizing equality, inclusion, and autonomy for persons with disabilities. Key provisions include accessibility, non-discrimination, and participation in education, employment, and public life. The Convention also urges signatory nations, including India, to align domestic laws with its principles. However, implementation challenges, such as limited awareness and resources, often undermine its effectiveness at the grassroots level.

2. India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, was a landmark legislation that brought India's legal framework in line with the UNCRPD. Mohapatra (2018) noted that the Act expanded the definition of disability to cover 21 conditions, strengthened anti-discrimination provisions, and introduced a reservation quota of 4% in public sector jobs. It also mandated the establishment of accessibility standards across physical, digital, and service domains. Despite these advances, the Act has faced criticism for gaps in enforcement, lack of funding, and insufficient capacity-building measures, particularly in rural areas.

3. Education and Employment Provisions

Sharma and Das (2019) explored the impact of the RPWD Act on education and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in India. The authors observed progress in inclusive education, particularly in urban areas, where schools began adopting universal design principles. However, rural regions lagged significantly due to inadequate infrastructure and

societal resistance. In employment, while the Act mandated workplace accommodations, compliance remained low, especially in the private sector, highlighting the need for robust monitoring mechanisms.

4. The Role of Accessibility Standards in Promoting Inclusion

Bhanushali (2020) evaluated the accessibility provisions under the RPWD Act and their alignment with international frameworks like the UNCRPD. The study emphasized the importance of accessible public spaces, transportation, and digital platforms in fostering inclusion. However, the findings revealed significant gaps in implementation, with many public spaces and government services remaining inaccessible to individuals with disabilities. This discrepancy was attributed to limited political will and inadequate training for policymakers and architects.

5. Global Comparisons and Best Practices

Banks and Polack (2014) compared disability policies across various countries, highlighting best practices that could inform India's approach. For example, nations like Sweden and Canada have implemented comprehensive disability-inclusive strategies, including universal healthcare, social security, and strong anti-discrimination laws. The study emphasized that India's efforts could be bolstered by adopting similar approaches, particularly in areas such as community-based rehabilitation and financial support for individuals with disabilities.

Methodology

The research methodology employed a structured approach to investigate the prevailing sociocultural beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions toward individuals with physical disabilities, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The methodology was designed to integrate both qualitative and quantitative techniques, allowing for a multidimensional analysis of the topic.

Study Design

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to provide a holistic understanding of the research problem. This approach integrated:

Qualitative Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with diverse stakeholders, including individuals with physical disabilities, their family members, community leaders, and service providers. These interviews aimed to explore personal experiences, attitudes, and sociocultural influences in depth.

Quantitative Surveys: Structured questionnaires were administered to gather measurable data on demographic details, community attitudes, and accessibility to resources. The surveys complemented the qualitative findings, offering a broader perspective on the patterns and prevalence of beliefs and practices.

This dual approach ensured that the study captured both the lived experiences of individuals and the larger trends in societal attitudes.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Pavagada Taluk, Karnataka, a rural area known for its sociocultural diversity and challenges in disability inclusion. The selection of this region was deliberate, as rural areas often exhibit entrenched traditional beliefs and infrastructural barriers that shape the lives of individuals with disabilities. This area served as a microcosm for understanding the broader dynamics of disability-related stigma and inclusion in rural India.

The choice of Pavagada Taluk also aligned with the study's objective of highlighting localized challenges and strategies, making the findings contextually relevant for similar rural settings.

Sampling Techniques

A purposive sampling method was employed to ensure the inclusion of key stakeholders with firsthand experience or influence in disability-related matters. The sampling included:

Individuals with Physical Disabilities: Adults who had lived experiences of navigating societal beliefs and barriers in the study area.

Family Members: Those providing care or support to individuals with disabilities, offering insights into familial attitudes and coping strategies.

Community Leaders: Influential figures such as village elders, religious leaders, and local policymakers, who play a role in shaping community norms and practices.

Service Providers: Professionals from healthcare, education, and social welfare sectors, who could provide perspectives on service accessibility and institutional barriers.

A total of 50 participants were selected for qualitative interviews, ensuring diverse representation. For the quantitative surveys, 300 respondents were targeted to capture statistically significant patterns.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Data:

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview transcripts. The process involved:

Coding: Identifying recurring themes and patterns in participants' narratives.

Categorization: Grouping codes into broader categories such as "stigma in education," "religious beliefs," and "access to healthcare."

Interpretation: Contextualizing findings within the sociocultural framework of Pavagada Taluk.

This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the nuanced ways in which sociocultural beliefs and attitudes influence the experiences of individuals with disabilities.

Quantitative Data:

Descriptive statistics were used to analyze survey responses, focusing on:

Demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, educational background).

Community attitudes (e.g., perceptions of disability as a curse or medical condition).

Access to services (e.g., healthcare, transportation, and education).

The statistical analysis helped identify trends and correlations, providing a broader perspective to complement the qualitative insights.

Ethical Considerations - The study adhered to ethical research practices, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. Ethical clearance was obtained from an institutional review board, and culturally appropriate methods were used to engage with participants.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings from the study conducted among 50 youth in Pavagada Taluk, Tumkur District, Karnataka, highlighting how sociocultural beliefs and attitudes impact the lives of individuals with physical disabilities. The discussion includes insights from the research, focusing on the contextual realities of Pavagada Taluk and comparing them with other rural and urban contexts. Relevant tables summarizing the findings are included to support the analysis.

Context of Pavagada Taluk, Tumkur District

Pavagada Taluk is a rural administrative region located in Tumkur District, Karnataka, India. The region is known for its agricultural economy, which heavily relies on rain-fed farming. Despite significant developmental initiatives, Pavagada Taluk faces challenges such as limited access to healthcare, education, and infrastructure, which disproportionately affect marginalized groups, particularly individuals with physical disabilities. The sociocultural fabric of Pavagada is deeply influenced by traditional beliefs, caste hierarchies, and gender roles, which often shape perceptions of disability and exclusion.

1. Beliefs and Superstitions

A prominent finding from the study was the deep-rooted beliefs and superstitions that link disabilities to karma, divine punishment, or the wrath of deities. Respondents in Pavagada Taluk frequently cited cultural narratives that attributed disabilities to past life actions, thus framing disability as a form of divine retribution. These beliefs were especially pervasive among older generations and religious community leaders.

Table 1: Beliefs and Superstitions Regarding Disabilities

S.No.	Belief Type	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
1	Disability is a punishment for karma	28	56%
2	Disability is caused by divine wrath	17	34%
3	Disability is a medical condition	5	10%
Total		50	100%

For instance, 56% of the respondents reported hearing from elders that individuals with disabilities were punished by the gods for sins committed in previous lives. This perception often leads to the social marginalization of people with disabilities, who are viewed with pity or seen as "cursed." This cultural attitude contributes to exclusion from religious ceremonies and social gatherings, further alienating individuals with disabilities from mainstream society.

2. Gender and Disability

The intersection of gender and disability emerged as a significant challenge for women in Pavagada Taluk. Women with disabilities often faced compounded forms of discrimination due to gender-based biases. In a patriarchal society like Pavagada, women with disabilities were perceived as "doubly disadvantaged," facing not only the societal stigma associated with disability but also the gendered expectations of women in rural India.

Table 2: Challenges Faced by Women with Disabilities

S.No.	Challenge	Number of Female Respondents	Percentage of Female Respondents (%)
1	Exclusion from marriage	32	64%
2	Limited access to education	36	71%
3	Economic dependency on family	40	80%
Total		50	100%

74% of the women participants in the study reported facing heightened levels of exclusion from marriage prospects, education, and employment due to both their gender and disability. Family responsibilities, often compounded by their disability, restrict their mobility and participation in public life, leading to greater isolation. Furthermore, women with disabilities reported being subject to gender-specific violence, including emotional abuse and neglect from family members.

3. Caste and Economic Factors

Caste and economic status were identified as critical factors that exacerbated the exclusion of individuals with disabilities in Pavagada Taluk. The study found that people from lower castes, particularly Dalits, faced additional challenges in accessing healthcare, education, and social services. The rigid caste hierarchy often relegates individuals with disabilities to the lowest social strata, reinforcing their marginalization.

Table 3: Impact of Caste and Economic Status on Disability Inclusion

S.No.	Factor	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
1	Caste-based discrimination	34	68%
2	Economic exclusion (unemployment)	41	82%
3	Limited access to social services	37	75%
Total		50	100%

While 50 individuals were surveyed, some have reported experiencing more than one challenge, so the numbers for each challenge has exceeded 50 when considered independently. Therefore, the total number of challenges reported (i.e., 34 for caste discrimination, 41 for economic exclusion, and 37 for limited access to services) does not indicate that these are unique individuals but that there was an overlap in responses.

82% of participants from economically disadvantaged backgrounds reported facing barriers in accessing government disability benefits and healthcare. They were also more likely to be unemployed or engaged in low-paying, informal jobs. Caste-based discrimination, coupled with poverty, often led to exclusion from social gatherings and public spaces.

4. Community Perceptions

The study highlighted that the predominant community perceptions toward individuals with physical disabilities were characterized by pity, charity, and neglect, rather than empowerment. 68% of the participants reported that the general attitude towards them was one of sympathy rather than respect or empowerment. This perception was often expressed through the provision of charity or "alms" rather than fostering meaningful inclusion in community life.

Respondents noted that local community leaders and service providers often viewed individuals with disabilities as "objects of charity" rather than equal members of society, reinforcing their dependency rather than promoting independence. This fostered a sense of helplessness and social stigma among individuals with disabilities, further isolating them from the community.

Table 4: Community Attitudes Toward Individuals with Disabilities

S.No.	Attitude Type	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents (%)
1	Sympathy and pity	34	68%
2	Charity-based perceptions	31	62%
3	Empowerment and inclusion	8	15%
Total		50	100%

The total number of respondents remains 50, and like in table no. 3, these percentages represent the views or attitudes of respondents, not unique individuals. Some respondents have reported multiple types of attitudes, reflecting the complexity of community perceptions.

Impact on Individuals

The sociocultural attitudes discussed above have profound psychological, social, and economic consequences for individuals with disabilities in Pavagada Taluk. Psychologically, individuals reported feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, and depression due to societal rejection. Socially, they faced isolation from peer groups, exclusion from community events, and discrimination in educational and employment settings. Economically, many were dependent on their families, with limited access to sustainable livelihood opportunities. The stigma and discrimination not only affected their quality of life but also perpetuated a cycle of exclusion that hindered their social and economic development.

Comparison with Other Contexts

When comparing the findings from Pavagada Taluk with other rural and urban contexts globally, several similarities and differences emerged. Similar to rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, disability in Pavagada Taluk is often viewed through a lens of superstition and stigma, with limited access to support services and opportunities for empowerment. However, urban areas such as Bangalore (Karnataka's capital) show a marked difference, where inclusive policies and greater awareness have begun to shift attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Globally, while urban areas may offer better access to resources, the cultural and societal barriers to inclusion remain a significant challenge in both rural and urban settings. This comparison underscores the importance of addressing cultural beliefs and social structures in creating inclusive societies that value the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study on prevailing sociocultural beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions towards individuals with physical disabilities in Pavagada Taluk, Tumkur District, several recommendations are made to address the challenges faced by this group. These recommendations focus on enhancing inclusion, challenging discriminatory beliefs, and promoting the rights and empowerment of individuals with disabilities.

Community-Based Sensitization Programs

A significant portion of the study revealed that harmful stereotypes and superstitions about disability are deeply ingrained in the community, often leading to the marginalization of people with disabilities. To address this issue, it is essential to implement community-based sensitization programs. These programs should be designed to engage various community stakeholders,

including schools, religious institutions, and local governing bodies, in challenging these harmful beliefs.

In schools, sensitization initiatives should educate students and staff about the rights and capabilities of individuals with disabilities. Early education is crucial in fostering empathy, reducing stigma, and promoting inclusive behaviour. Religious institutions also play a pivotal role in rural communities. By collaborating with religious leaders, these institutions can be a strong force in reshaping the community's perception of disability. These leaders can advocate for the dignity and rights of people with disabilities, emphasizing inclusive religious practices and dispelling beliefs rooted in superstition. Furthermore, local governing bodies such as panchayats should be involved in these efforts, as they have the authority to implement policies that ensure the inclusion of people with disabilities. Workshops aimed at local leaders can focus on disability rights, the need for inclusive governance, and the benefits of an inclusive community for everyone.

Policy Interventions

The study also highlighted the lack of access to essential services and benefits, despite the existence of laws like the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Policy interventions are critical to ensuring the effective implementation of these laws in rural areas like Pavagada Taluk. The first priority should be strengthening the enforcement of disability rights laws. Local authorities should be better trained to understand the rights of people with disabilities and to facilitate access to government schemes, such as financial assistance, healthcare services, and educational opportunities.

Accessibility to healthcare and education must also be prioritized. Local schools and healthcare centres should be made physically accessible, with necessary infrastructure such as ramps, elevators, and disability-friendly equipment. Additionally, healthcare providers should be trained to offer specialized care for individuals with disabilities. Efforts should also be made to raise awareness among community members about the entitlements available to people with disabilities, ensuring that they are not excluded from these benefits due to lack of information or awareness.

Empowerment Initiatives

Empowerment is a key component of breaking the cycle of exclusion. The study found that individuals with disabilities often lack the opportunities to participate in social and economic activities, which leads to dependency and disempowerment. Empowerment initiatives should focus on improving the economic, social, and leadership opportunities for people with disabilities.

Self-help groups (SHGs) can serve as a platform for individuals with disabilities to come together, share their experiences, and support each other. These groups should focus on skill development, financial literacy, and health management, helping members become economically self-sufficient. Additionally, micro-enterprises can be promoted by providing financial support, training, and mentorship to help individuals with disabilities start small businesses. These initiatives not only help individuals become financially independent but also foster a sense of pride and self-worth.

Leadership opportunities should be created to encourage individuals with disabilities to take on active roles in their communities. Whether through involvement in local governance, community organizations, or as leaders of SHGs, these opportunities will help individuals gain

visibility, break societal stereotypes, and become advocates for their own rights and the rights of others in their community.

Role of Social Work and Advocacy

Social workers play a critical role in advocating for individuals with disabilities and bridging the gap between marginalized communities and policymakers. The study found that one of the significant barriers to inclusion is the lack of advocacy for the rights of people with disabilities. Social workers should be actively involved in educating communities about disability rights and working to ensure that policies are inclusive and are being properly implemented.

In rural areas like Pavagada Taluk, social workers can serve as a link between local communities and government services. They can help individuals with disabilities access legal support, healthcare, and education, while also assisting in navigating bureaucratic systems. Social workers should also engage in raising awareness about disability issues, working with local media, community leaders, and advocacy organizations to challenge stereotypes and foster an environment of inclusion and respect.

Social work and advocacy should also focus on policy change, ensuring that local and national disability laws are not only enacted but also implemented effectively. This can be achieved through lobbying efforts, engaging with lawmakers, and organizing community-based campaigns to raise awareness about the rights of people with disabilities.

The recommendations outlined above focus on a comprehensive approach that integrates community education, policy reforms, empowerment initiatives, and social work advocacy. By addressing these key areas, individuals with physical disabilities in Pavagada Taluk and other similar rural areas can be empowered to overcome the barriers that perpetuate their exclusion. This holistic approach will foster greater inclusion, empowerment, and social change, helping create a society where people with disabilities are treated with dignity and respect.

Conclusion:

The study on prevailing sociocultural beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions towards individuals with physical disabilities in Pavagada Taluk, Tumkur District, has highlighted the deeply entrenched challenges that individuals with disabilities face in rural settings. Key findings revealed that traditional beliefs and superstitions, often rooted in myths about karma or divine punishment, significantly shape societal attitudes towards people with disabilities. Gender and caste biases further compound these challenges, leading to additional marginalization, especially for women and individuals from lower castes. The community's general perception of people with disabilities is often one of pity or neglect, rather than empowerment, which impacts their psychological, social, and economic well-being.

These findings underscore the urgency of dismantling harmful sociocultural beliefs that perpetuate exclusion. The negative impact of these beliefs not only limits the opportunities for individuals with disabilities but also affects their self-esteem, social participation, and access to essential services like healthcare and education. The study advocates for a collective effort to challenge these harmful narratives and promote a culture of inclusion and respect.

To achieve this, a multi-stakeholder approach is essential. Policymakers must prioritize the enforcement of disability rights laws and ensure that adequate resources are allocated for

accessibility and empowerment initiatives. Community leaders and religious institutions play a crucial role in reshaping societal perceptions and advocating for the dignity and rights of people with disabilities. Finally, civil society organizations and social workers can bridge the gap between marginalized individuals and formal support systems, providing both advocacy and practical assistance. Together, these collective efforts can create a more inclusive society, where individuals with disabilities are seen as active participants with the potential to contribute meaningfully to their communities. The need for these changes is pressing, as they are essential for fostering an environment where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can live with dignity, equality, and opportunity.

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