

ABSTRACT

From the ancient times, disability is associated with bad karma or bad character and resulted in social stigma and discrimination – the image got strengthened over the centuries by popular depictions ranging from characters of Indian epics to modern-day movies. The disability rights movements in 1950s and 1960s in the US and the UK resulted in rules, guidelines and eventually laws safeguarding rights of the persons with disabilities (PwDs) in various parts of the world. In subsequent decades, the voice got solidified with the UN declaring 1981 the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYPD) and passing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2008.

In this backdrop, India also introduced legal framework in 1990s including Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995 for the PwDs. But it was two back-to-back initiatives in form of Accessible India in 2015 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 that put disability rights in sharp focus. It increased number of recognized disabilities from 8 to 21 and made assimilation in society a matter of right. The word ‘Divyang’ to describe PwDs in a more dignified manner was also coined by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in December 2015.

The review of literature indicated a repository of work – especially after 1990s – in the field of disability and media as the new discipline of disability studies took shape globally. Summary of the review indicate that media's role in creating a perception about issues such as disability is crucial as it is often defining the way the society interacts with reality. However, the media coverage is often termed stereotypical, riddled with cliches and few and far compared to overall scope of media. Medical Model of Disability where disability is seen as a problem with a person instead of society and need for rehabilitation was considered the most prevalent frame to look at PwDs.

The research gap found included lack of studies in context of the media coverage of the RPwD Act, Accessible India and ‘Divyang,’ changes after the RPwD Act, and view of different stakeholders including PwDs, journalists and NGO officials to understand depiction of disability in media, issues of representation and ways to address it.

The present study followed descriptive survey research design where three tools of data collection namely document analysis, questionnaire with perception scale and interview schedule were used to answer three primary research objectives – examine and quantify media

coverage of disability from the year 2015 to 2017, find perception of PwDs on media coverage, and identify key issues related to disability representation in media. Two prominent newspapers, The Times of India and Divya Bhaskar, were chosen for analysis. All articles from 2015 to 2017 containing mention of PwDs or disability were included for analysis. A total of 431 PwDs or their close relatives were chosen for perception scale through stratified random sampling, and 16 experts (four each from journalists, NGO officials, educators/ experts, and achievers categories) were interviewed.

The study was conducted in three phases where interviews were conducted after document analysis and perception scale to bridge the findings and derive meaning out of the data collected and analysed from two other methods. Descriptive statistics was used for document analysis, Likert Scale for perception scale, and thematic analysis for interview schedule.

In all, 433 stories from The Times of India and 331 stories from Divya Bhaskar were found during the study period which were analysed based on 16 parameters including word length, use of picture, byline, place of occurrence, dominant model of disability, disability mentioned, direct quotes in the story, and use of terminology for persons with disabilities among others.

Increasing trend in number of stories related to disability was recorded in Divya Bhaskar, whereas the trend remained almost the same for The Times of India. The word count remained below 300 words for both publications, whereas front page stories remained few compared to total stories. Both publications had more than half of the articles using pictures, whereas share of positive stories remained around 44% to 52%. Direct quotes of persons with disabilities remained low. Features remained the mainstay of coverage, but improvement was seen in diversity of topics – apart from human interest narrative, sports, crime, and legal stories also got prominence. ‘Divyang’ word to describe persons with disabilities gained prominence in 2016 and continued to be the most-used word for Divya Bhaskar in 2017, whereas its use was found to be limited in The Times of India that preferred word ‘disabled.’

Questionnaire and perception scale was used as the second method to understand how the persons with disabilities look at media coverage of disability issues. The analysis indicated that the most pertinent issue was awareness among reporters and editors, followed by ease with social media over conventional media, and need for persons with disabilities in media to improve representation. The t-test result indicated that there was no statistically significant impact of gender, education, or age. Relatives of the persons with disabilities had more positive outlook. The ANOVA test results indicated positive correlation between the time spent on

media and attitude towards media representation. Those who read more newspapers were also found to have relatively positive outlook.

Majority of the interviewees agreed that media has a major role to play in shaping the societal perception of disability. Criticism stemmed from lack of adequate technical knowledge and focus on special days for coverage opportunities. Experts suggested improved media interaction, conducting workshops and advocated use of right terminology. They indicated that NGOs often lack media strategy, and it impacts the coverage. Majority had positive outlook towards word 'Divyang' but mentioned that the initiatives such as Accessible India and the RPwD Act would bear fruit if it were implemented in right spirit. Social media was found to be emerging as an alternative for conventional media to take the issues right to the target audience.

The study is one of the few that captures the impact of factors such as introduction of word 'Divyang,' legislative framework in form of the RPwD Act and government-run initiative of Accessible India in the context of Indian media and disability sector. The findings present a mixed picture where the media coverage has improved in both quality and quantity on one hand but the persons with disabilities and activists are increasingly leaning towards social media to tell their tale. The coverage of new disabilities has increased in the study period, but way of looking at disability still lacks nuance and priority. Media's expectations from the sector are to present an opportunity to engage.

The findings fill a gap of understanding media mechanism when it comes to covering minority sector such as disability and how major movements, legal framework and terminology is reflected in media coverage. Outcomes of the study will help media and stakeholders including Union and state governments and NGOs understand each other better and formulate ways to improve representation. The study also adds to Indian scholarship on disability and media studies.