Neoliberal Affirmations, Local Distinctions: Disability Policies and Praxes in India

Plain English Summary

Introduction

This article examines how disability is understood, governed, and experienced in modern India, especially in the era of neoliberalism — an economic and political approach that favours free markets, reduced state welfare, and policies that prioritise economic growth over social protections. It draws from the argument that much disability research relies on frameworks developed in wealthier, mainly Western countries, which often fail to reflect India's history, culture, and economic realities. Instead, it proposes a locally grounded approach that takes into account India's colonial past, its changes in welfare policy, and the political shifts linked to economic liberalisation. Drawing on ideas from decolonial theory (which questions the continuing effects of colonial power) and disability justice (which focuses on the rights and lived experiences of disabled people), the article traces the history of India's disability policies, examines how neoliberal reforms have reshaped the state, and analyses how these changes affect disabled people's everyday lives and political recognition.

Approach

The article uses a critical and historically informed method, combining disability studies with a decolonial perspective. It does so by analysing policy documents, census records, government development schemes, and public statements from the post-independence period to the present. It questions the dominance of "Northern" models — that is, theories and policies from wealthier countries — and examines how they fit (or fail to fit) Indian contexts. It also explores how neoliberalism and "biopolitics" (the management of people's lives by the state, often through health, welfare, and data systems) influence disability policies in ways that can oversimplify or erase the complexity of disabled people's experiences.

Summary of Main Arguments

The article presents its arguments in three key sections:

1. **Disability Policies in India: The Trajectory and Transitions**
   Early Indian disability policies were shaped by Western models — including moral-religious views, medical rehabilitation approaches, and social models — but these often clashed with India's diverse medical traditions and social realities. Building on the work of scholars such as Shilpaa Anand, Anita Ghai, and G. N. Karna, we show how colonial legacies encouraged custodial (institution-based) approaches to disability, and how even after independence, disability was often absent from official data and planning. Key laws such as the Persons with Disabilities (PwD) Act of 1995 and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016 were important on

paper but suffered from slow implementation and limited reach. Symbolic gestures — such as Prime Minister Modi's introduction of the term *divyāṅg* ("divine body") — reinforced patronising and spiritualised views of disability, while avoiding real structural change.

2. **India's Rise as a Neoliberal State**
   The article places disability in the wider story of India's shift from democratic socialism to a neoliberal economy. It traces this back to colonial land policies like the Permanent Settlement, showing how systems of economic extraction persisted over time. Post-independence Five-Year Plans promised social justice but often excluded disabled people from development goals. The neoliberal turn of the 1980s–1990s — marked by market liberalisation, privatisation, and global integration — rebranded welfare schemes to support economic growth, often targeting poor people without tackling poverty itself. Disabled people were still marginalised, now under the logic of "inclusion" that tolerated but did not genuinely accommodate them in workplaces or civic life. The decline of agriculture as a secure livelihood hit rural disabled populations especially hard, given agriculture's continuing importance in India.

3. **Disability Experience in Neoliberal India**
   In contemporary India, disability is increasingly managed through bureaucratic and data-driven systems such as the Unique Disability ID (UDID), which categorises disabled people mainly by medical impairment rather than their lived realities. Official commitments to global goals like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) often mask the lack of substantial change at home. The shortage of reliable disability data is not accidental — we argue it is a deliberate way to avoid accountability while maintaining an image of compliance. By embedding disability policy within wider governance structures, the article shows that neoliberalism shapes not only how disabled people live but also how disability itself is defined, recorded, and made visible (or hidden) in public policy.

Main Implications

The article calls for a shift away from uncritically applying Western disability models in India. Instead, it argues for approaches rooted in India's own history, material conditions, and social realities — including caste, religion, agricultural labour, and rural–urban divides. For researchers, it highlights the value of decolonial, context-specific analyses that take account of these factors. For policymakers and disability organisations, it warns that adopting international disability policies without addressing structural barriers — such as inaccessible infrastructure, exclusionary labour markets, and inadequate social protection — risks making them ineffective. The article also shows how euphemistic rebranding, weakening of state commitments, and overemphasis on individual productivity undermine disability justice.

Finally, for activists and the disability justice movement in India and the Global South, the article emphasises the need for collective organising to challenge the narrow,

economic focus of neoliberal governance. It calls for policies designed with disabled communities at the centre, grounded in social justice, participatory processes, and strong accountability.

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