

## Empowering 'Divyang' and Senior Citizens

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The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 that came into force on April 19, 2017, has empowered India's divyang population in many ways. Applicable all over the country, this Act mandates the appropriate government to take measures to promote education, skill development, social security, health, rehabilitation and recreation for Divyangjans. Apart from the Divyangjans, senior citizens who are a treasure of knowledge and experience, deserve care and concern as well. Care of senior citizens forms a crucial mandate of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Looking after senior citizens who have invested their entire lives giving their children the very best is our traditional, moral and now even legal responsibility.

**R**eservation of seats for senior citizens and divyang in crowded public transport is a common sight in India. Thankfully, there are numerous meaningful government initiatives and interventions that may not be equally visible but have brought about a qualitative difference in the lives of the elderly and the Divyangjans.

As per the Census 2011, there are 2,68,14,994 persons with disabilities (Divyangjans) in the country. It was none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi who in his Mann ki Baat radio address on December 27, 2015 suggested that Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) have a divine ability and therefore Hindi word 'Viklang' should be replaced with 'Divyang'. This is how persons with disabilities began to be referred as Divyangjans.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 that came into force on April 19, 2017, has

empowered India's divyang population in many ways. The Act replaces the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. It fulfils the obligations to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which India ratified in 2007. Applicable all over the country, this Act mandates the appropriate government to take measures to promote education, skill development, social security, health, rehabilitation and recreation for Divyangjans.

Through the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, the government increased the percentage of reservation in government jobs from 3 percent to 4 percent and from 3 percent to 5 percent in seats in government/ government-aided higher educational institutions for persons with benchmark disabilities. However, the Central Government supplements the efforts of the States Government.



The broad components in the Scheme for Implementation of Right of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (SIPDA) entail:

- (i) Creation of a barrier-free environment for Divyangjans,
- (ii) National Action Plan for Skill Development of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs),
- (iii) Accessible India Campaign,
- (iv) Establishment of District Disability Rehabilitation Centre (DDRC) in the Identified Districts, and
- (v) Unique Disability Identification (UDID) Project.

Before launching the job portal for Persons with Disabilities, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment launched in March 2015 the National Action Plan to equip them with skills. Training for these skills is imparted through a network of empanelled training partners. The skills have given the target beneficiaries the confidence to take on the world and explore employment options at the National Job Portal ([www.disabilityjobs.gov.in](http://www.disabilityjobs.gov.in)). Launched on January 27, 2016, the portal is being maintained by National Handicapped Finance and Development Corporation (NHFD), a Central Public Sector Enterprise under the administrative control of the Department.

Divyangjans can apply through the portal for jobs, skill trainings, scholarships, education loans and self employment loans. From the time this portal was launched, 292 Divyangjans have applied for self-employment loans and 20 Divyangjans have applied for education loans using the portal. The total numbers of Divyangjans registered on the portal are 26,233. This information was shared on February 11 this year in reply to a question in the Lok Sabha by the Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment, Shri Krishanpal Gurjar. The Minister informed Parliament that 28 State channelizing agencies, 18 regional rural banks and four public sector banks have also been registered with the portal to facilitate Self-Employment and Education Loans for Divyangjans. Apart from these, 89 private companies and 50 training institutes have registered with the portal to facilitate job employment and skill trainings.

The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPWD), named the Department of Disability Affairs at the time of its creation in May

2012, was renamed Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Viklangjan Sashaktikaran Vibhag) vide Cabinet Secretariat's notification dated December 9, 2014. It is this department that implements numerous schemes for empowerment of Divyangjans. These include Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances (ADIP), skill development for Divyangjans, Deen Dayal Disabled Rehabilitation scheme and scholarship for students with disabilities.

The Swavlamban Health Insurance Scheme for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) was launched by the Department. The objective of the scheme is to provide affordable health insurance to Persons with Disabilities, i.e. Blindness, Low Vision, Leprosy-cured, Hearing Impairment, Locomotor (Physical) disability, Mental-Retardation and Mental Illness and to improve the general health condition and quality of life of divyangjans. Another scheme of the DePWD that has been hailed by the target beneficiaries is the Unique Disability Identification Project. According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, implementation of the Unique Disability ID cards project was started in 2016-17.

These unique ID cards actually save Divyangjans the trouble of carrying multiple copies of documents. The UDID card will be the single document of identification, verification of the Divyangjans for availing various benefits in future. All States/Union Territories came on board only in December 2019. Since the State health authorities are responsible for issuing certificate of disability/Unique Disability ID card, the actual implementation of the project lies with the preparedness of the States concerned.

Any person who has any specified disability mentioned under the Schedule of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 can apply for the certificate of disability through the UDID portal or otherwise, irrespective of the cause of disability i.e. by birth or by accident. Any person who has a valid certificate of benchmark disability i.e. 40 percent and above is eligible for the UDID card as of now.

No specified benefit has been linked to Unique Disability ID card at this stage. However, some States such as Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh have linked the benefit of concessional travel by State Transport undertaking buses with Unique Disability ID card.

Union Minister of Social Justice and Empowerment recently called upon Divyangjan and their family members to get enrolled for Unique ID Cards for Divyangjan which are valid all over India. Sharing information, he said that till mid-June, 31 lakhs Unique ID Cards have been delivered to Divyangjans in our country. As on June 16, 2020, more than 48 lakh UDID Cards have been generated.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment organised in mid-June a Virtual Camp for free distribution of assistive aids and devices at Block level for Divyangjans under the ADIP scheme in Talwandi Bhai Block of Firozpur District in Punjab.

Under the ADIP scheme, funds are released to various implementing agencies to assist the needy persons with disabilities in procuring durable, sophisticated and scientifically manufactured, modern, standard aids and appliances. This noble endeavour is aimed at promoting their physical, social and psychological rehabilitation by reducing the effects of disabilities and enhance their economic potential throughout the country.

The camp in Ferozpur was the first of its kind where decentralized pattern of distribution and distant addressing through virtual was attempted by the Artificial Limbs Manufacturing Corporation of India (ALIMCO), Kanpur working under the aegis of Department of Empowerment of Person with Disability (DEPWD), Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJ&E), Government of India and the district administration, Firozpur. Aids and appliance distributed in this camp included motorised tricycles, wheel chairs, crutches, walking sticks, smart cane, smart phones, hearing aids, artificial limbs and callipers. By doing so, the government ensured that there is no disruption in the welfare schemes for Divyangjans even while the country is tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Accessible India Campaign launched on December 3, 2015 is a nationwide campaign for achieving universal accessibility. It focuses on enhancing the accessibility of built environment, transport system and information and communication ecosystem for the benefit of Divyangjans.

The Deen Dayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme (DDRS), executed by the Department of

Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities provides grant-in-aid to non-government organisations/voluntary organisations for projects aimed at rehabilitation of Divyangjans.

The Department implements another Central sector umbrella scheme where scholarships are given across the country to students with disabilities. These scholarships are for Class IX and X students as well as students pursuing studies post matric. The Department also gives Top Class Education Scholarship for graduate and post-graduate degree/diploma in notified institutes of excellence in Education. Students with Disabilities who wish to pursue higher studies abroad can apply for National Overseas Scholarship (For Master's Degree/Ph.D. in foreign universities). The Department also offers National Fellowship for Divyangjans (For M.Phil. and Ph.D. in Indian universities). To enable the target beneficiaries compete better, free coaching is provided for recruitment examinations for Group A and B posts and entrance examinations for admission in technical and professional courses.

Apart from the Divyangjans, senior citizens who are a treasure of knowledge and experience, deserve care and concern as well. Care of senior citizens forms a crucial mandate of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. According to Census 2011, the population of senior citizens in India is 10.36 crore which was 8.56 percent of the total population of the country. In the noise and din of fast-paced lives that are continuously widening the gap between the young and the elderly, policy makers and law makers are doing their best to ensure that the elderly are not neglected. Looking after senior citizens who have invested their entire lives giving their children the very best is our traditional, moral and now even legal responsibility.

The Annual Report (2018-19) of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment says that in 2011, about 8.57 percent of the total population, 8.20 percent of the total male population and 8.97 percent of the total female population were aged 60 years and above. These figures are projected to go up to 12.4 percent 11.7 percent and 13.1 percent respectively in 2026.

The report points out that the Old Age Dependency Ratio has been steadily rising during the past three decades. This ratio is defined as the

number of persons in the Old Age group 60 plus per 100 persons in the age group 15-59.

According to the Ministry, there has been a steady rise in the population of senior citizens in India.

The number of elderly persons has increased from 1.98 crore in 1951 to 7.6 crore in 2001. Projections indicate that the number of 60 + people in India will increase to 14.3 crore in 2021 and 17.3 crore in 2026. A senior citizen is a citizen of India who has attained the age of 60 years or above. (Section 2, The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007)

The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens (MWPSA) Act, 2007 was enacted to ensure need-based maintenance for parents and senior citizens and their welfare. The Act inter alia provides for maintenance of parents/senior citizens by children/relatives obligatory and justiciable through Tribunals, revocation of transfer of property by senior citizens in case of neglect by relatives, penal provision for abandonment of senior citizens, establishment of Old Age Homes for Indigent Senior Citizens, adequate medical facilities and protection of life and property of senior citizens. And the execution of provisions of this legislation for the elderly comes with accountability too.

The government seeks annual progress reports on the implementation of the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007 from the State Governments and UT Administrations. The Government has introduced 'The Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens (Amendment) Bill, 2019' in the Parliament which seeks to amend the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. In the Bill, ceiling of Rs. 10,000 as maintenance allowance as given in the existing Act has been removed. Provisions for timely disposal of maintenance petitions of the parents (those below 60 years) and senior citizens have also been incorporated in the Bill and priority in disposal of petitions of parents and senior citizens of 80 years and above have also been made.

The existing National Policy on Older Persons (NPOP) was announced in January 1999 to reaffirm the commitment to ensure the well-being of the older persons. The Policy envisaged support to

ensure financial and food security, health care, shelter and other needs of older persons, equitable share in development, protection against abuse and exploitation, and availability of services to improve the quality of their lives.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has conceptualised and rolled out the National Action Plan for Senior Citizens (NAPSrC), which is based on the National Policy for Older Persons 1999 and the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007. The NAPSrC has been formulated after consultations with various stakeholders and outside experts in the field.

The NAPSrC highlights all the facets which are needed to create an ecosystem where all the Indians can age gracefully and live a life of dignity. The action plan includes the following 10 components encompassing the needs of senior citizens. These are financial security, health care and nutrition, shelter and welfare, protection of life and property of senior citizens, active and productive ageing with intergenerational bonding and skill development, accessibility, transport and age-friendly environment, awareness generation and capacity building, promoting senior-friendly industrial goods and services in the society, research and study and project management.

According to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the NAPSrC would operate as an umbrella scheme for senior citizens with the merger of Integrated Programme for Senior Citizens.

Keeping in mind that many senior citizens may not have a roof on their head, the Ministry provides grants-in-aid for maintenance and running old age homes to implementing agencies. The Ministry is implementing a Central Sector Scheme of Integrated Programme for Senior Citizens (IPSrC) under which grant is given for running and maintenance of Senior Citizens Homes (old age homes)/Continuous Care Homes, Mobile Medicare Units. The main objective of the scheme is to improve the quality of life of the Senior Citizens by providing basic amenities like shelter, food, medical care and entertainment facilities.

The projects are for Senior Citizens' Homes/Senior Citizens' Homes for 50 Elderly Women including those under Sansad Adarsh Gram Yojana (SAGY) – popularly known as Old Age

Homes, Continuous Care Homes and Homes for senior citizens afflicted with Alzheimer's disease/ Dementia for a minimum of 20 senior citizens who are seriously ill requiring continuous nursing care and to provide medical care to the Senior Citizens living in rural, isolated and backward areas. Grant-in-aid for Physiotherapy Clinics for Senior Citizens is given to agencies that have shown a credible track record in running projects for the welfare of the senior citizens for running of physiotherapy clinic for a minimum of 50 senior citizens per month.

Under the Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana, aids and assistive living devices are provided to senior citizens belonging to BPL category who suffer from age-related disabilities such as low vision, hearing impairment, loss of teeth and loco-motor disabilities. The aids and assistive devices viz. walking sticks, elbow crutches, walkers/crutches, tripods/quadpods, hearing aids, wheelchairs, artificial dentures and spectacles are provided to eligible beneficiaries. The scheme Rashtriya Vayoshri Yojana (RVY) was announced by the Finance Minister in the Budget Speech of 2015–16. It is being implemented by ALIMCO a Public Sector Undertaking under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment since April 1, 2017.

The Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana was launched in 2018 by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for covering up to 10 crore people belonging to poor and vulnerable families. Under this scheme, coverage of up to Rs. 5 lakh per family for secondary and tertiary hospitalisation is provided. This too is bound to benefit the elderly.

Besides the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, other ministries also run schemes for senior citizens. The National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP), for example, is a centrally-sponsored scheme of Ministry of Rural Development. NSAP is a social security/social welfare programme meant for old widows, disabled persons and bereaved families belonging to below poverty line households who have lost their primary bread winner.

Old age pension is provided under Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS) to the persons belonging to below poverty line (BPL) household.

Department of Food and Public Distribution allocates food grains as per requirements

projected by the Ministry of Rural Development under the Annapurna Scheme, wherein indigent senior citizens, who are not getting pension under IGNOAPS, are provided 10 kg of food grains per person per month free of cost. This Department also implements Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), under which rice and wheat at a highly subsidised cost, is provided to households, headed by widows/terminally ill/disabled persons/senior citizens, with no assured means of maintenance or support from society.

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (HFW) has been implementing National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly (NPHCE) from the financial year 2010–11 to provide dedicated healthcare services to the elderly people at various levels of state health care delivery system.

The Varishta Pension Bima Yojana is also worth mentioning here. Launched by the LIC, this scheme provides its beneficiaries a steady 8 percent per annum interest rate for a period of 10 years. Unlike other schemes, one doesn't have to go through any medical check-ups to avail its benefits.

The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has requested the Department of Revenue to consider waiving off Income Tax for Divyangjans who are 80 years or above keeping in view their increased cost of living due to enhanced cost of medication, therapeutic/ rehabilitation services, caregiver support, transportation, etc.

The government can do its best to roll out meaningful schemes but it is for the target beneficiaries to make good use of provisions of progressive legislations and programmes that can transform their lives.

(The information in this article has been sourced from several resource tools of the government including annual report of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, website of the nodal ministry and Lok Sabha website for answers given by the Minister in Parliament)

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