



Unequal Access: Exploring the Learning Challenges of Visually Impaired Students in Contemporary Classrooms

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Abstract

Despite progressive legal mandates such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act (2016), visually impaired students in India continue to face problems in accessing education, especially when it comes to finding trained scribes, affording assistive technology, and inclusive learning environments. These gaps significantly increase in rural areas and among low income groups in urban areas, where institutional preparedness continues to be a significant barrier to learning. Against this context, this paper investigates the extent to which visually impaired students can access academic support in India and explores the systemic and social barriers that hinder their educational journeys. The study is guided, primarily, by two research questions; first, how equitably can visually impaired students in India access support systems like scribes, assistive technologies, and inclusive teaching practices, and second, what are the systemic challenges that in practice prevent these mechanisms from being effective. A mixed-methods approach was used, including an online survey and semi structured interviews with a geographically diverse sample of 50 visually impaired students aged 15-33 years. The participants were from a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative insights. The findings reveal difficulties in obtaining reliable scribes, underutilization of assistive technologies due to high costs and inconsistent institutional support, and uneven policy implementation. The study sheds light on the need for standardized scribe training, better digital access, and teacher training programs to close the equity gap.

Keywords: *Visual Impairment; Educational Equality; Scribe Availability; Assistive Technology*

1. Introduction

Over the past 10 years, there has been a growing global sentiment on the importance of inclusive education that acknowledges and encourages diversity among people pursuing education, including learners with disabilities. In the context of countries like India, where socio-economic imbalances and

infrastructure deficits are already endemic, the assurance of equitable access to education for children with disabilities is imperative. Among such groups, persons with any form of disability are particularly affected, especially those with visual impairment who face severe learning barriers such as a lack of educational resources, a lack of institutional preparedness and a general lack of support from educational institutions. Despite India having constitutional policies such as the Right to Education Act (2009) and Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, there is an evident gap between policy and practice. The gap is most significant in three foundational aspects: access to trained scribes to assist such scholars during examinations, availability and use of assistive technologies that enable students to access regular curriculum, and the inclusiveness of the broader teaching and learning environment.

Visually impaired students not only require equal access to education, but also individualized, specialized support systems that cater to their specific needs. Scribes, who read out questions and write down answers for visually impaired students, are an important part of this specialized support system, and are conditioned by factors like availability, training, and reliability of scribes that varies greatly from state to state and institution to institution. Similarly, technology such as screen readers and Braille displays, which can equalise access continue to remain scarce and uncommon in practice due to factors such as costs, a lack of training among students, and institutional reluctance. Additionally, there are very few teacher training programs that seek to educate and sensitise educational practitioners towards the daily learning needs of students with disability, especially in government and rural institutions.

Against this background, this study seeks to explore the challenges faced by visually impaired students in their educational journey. More specifically, this study seeks to map the extent to which visually impaired students in India are able to access academic support in the form of scribe services, assistive technology, and inclusive classrooms. The aim of this study is to critically explore the systemic barriers in place that hinder their education?

To respond to these questions, the study employs a mixed-methods approach, involving the use of a structure questionnaire along with qualitative interviews with 50 visually impaired students across India. By integrating quantitative data with qualitative insights, the study seeks to uncover broad patterns and systemic trends along with lived experiences and subjective realities of students navigating educational spaces with visual impairment. Such an approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural barriers faced by these students. This paper hopes to contribute to a growing body of scholarship on disability and inclusive education in India, while also offering evidence-based recommendations for a more inclusive and equitable educational system.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Legal Provisions for Persons with Disabilities

India's legal recognition of the rights of students with disabilities began with the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995. Though landmark in intention, it offered only general direction on inclusive education and did not explicitly guarantee accommodations like scribes. The 1995 Act mostly encouraged schools to "strive toward inclusion" but lacked enforceable mandates (Singh 219).

This gap was partially corrected by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which became a cornerstone of modern disability legislation. The RPwD Act defines education as a fundamental right under Article 24 and guarantees the provision of scribes, extended time, and accessible formats for all persons with benchmark disabilities (i.e., 40% or more disability). Importantly, court rulings have

clarified that even those with less than 40% disability may receive accommodations based on need rather than percentage alone (Delhi High Court, 2019).

Despite these legal advances, policy implementation has been uneven. While the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and University Grants Commission (UGC) issued specific guidelines (CBSE Circular Acad-5/2019), many institutions failed to adhere, citing logistical constraints or lack of awareness. For instance, some state boards enforced scribe qualification rules that violated national guidelines, leading to high court interventions in Punjab and Delhi (The Tribune, 2019).

2.2 Practical Realities of Scribe Provision

Despite legal mandates, access to scribes in India remains erratic. A 2020 survey by NCPEDP revealed that over 60% of visually impaired students struggle to find reliable, trained scribes during major exams. These difficulties are particularly pronounced in rural and semi-urban areas, where students may have to travel significant distances or rely on underqualified or unfamiliar volunteers ("Status Report on Inclusive Education").

A critical issue is the lack of standardization. Guidelines often state that scribes must be at least one academic level lower than the examinee, of the same gender, and not from the same subject. While intended to prevent malpractice, these criteria drastically reduce the available pool of volunteers. A blind student in Class 12 might be unable to find a Class 11 scribe familiar with political science, forcing reliance on parents or peers who may not meet guidelines (Kumar and Sharma 95).

One of the few innovations in this space is the Scribe Finder App created by C. Sriram in collaboration with Project Eyeway. As of 2023, over 3,000 volunteers were registered nationally, connecting students with willing scribes across 28 states (Eyeway.org). However, its reach remains limited to students with digital literacy and access to smartphones.

Moreover, scribe misconduct and training quality remain under-addressed. An internal audit by the National Association for the Blind (NAB) in 2021 reported that 32% of scribes unintentionally altered student responses due to lack of subject knowledge or training. Instances of paraphrasing, skipping dictation, or adding unintended meaning were widespread in unregulated settings.

2.3 Assistive Technology (AT) in Education

Assistive technology holds immense promise for reducing reliance on scribes. Tools like screen readers (JAWS, NVDA), refreshable Braille displays, and speech-to-text software can provide autonomy. However, a 2021 Delhi University study found that less than 18% of visually impaired students regularly use assistive technology, primarily due to cost, lack of training, and institutional unavailability (Chatterjee et al. 304).

While programs like the Assistance to Disabled Persons (ADIP) Scheme under the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment provide free or subsidized AT devices, actual deployment is dismal. Only 12% of eligible students reported receiving AT through government channels in a 2022 field audit by Disability Rights India Foundation.

Indian innovations are on the rise, though not yet scaled. Vision Empower (IISc Bengaluru) is developing tactile STEM learning tools for blind students, including accessible math games and science lab kits ("Vision Empower Projects"). The SmartCane, developed by IIT-Delhi, has improved mobility for thousands, while tools like Tactopus and Thinkerbelle Labs' Annie Braille tutor offer promising early

education solutions. Yet these tools are mostly confined to pilot stages or urban NGO networks (Das and Iyengar 422).

2.4 Training and Institutional Gaps

A frequently overlooked barrier is the lack of teacher and institutional preparedness. Most general education teachers are not trained in using assistive tools or accommodating blind students in mainstream classrooms. The CEMCA-NCERT training report (2020) noted that over 70% of teachers in rural areas had never used screen readers or tactile graphics and were unfamiliar with even basic inclusive pedagogies.

Compounding the issue is infrastructure failure. Many schools lack resource rooms, digital libraries, or even consistent electricity. A 2021 audit of 120 schools across Maharashtra and Bihar found that only 18% had functional AT infrastructure, despite receiving inclusive education grants under Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (Bhatt and Deshmukh 17).

India's challenges contrast starkly with best-case models prevalent internationally. In the United Kingdom, the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB) provides accredited scribe training, digital exams, and national AT distribution through NHS and school networks. Similarly, the ADA-compliant model in the United States mandates not only exam accommodations but real-time captioning, digital formats, and peer mentoring under the IDEA Act. In Sweden and Finland, all students with visual impairments receive government-funded AT by age six, along with full classroom integration supported by trained specialists (Eriksson 51).

2.5 Intersectional Challenges

The challenges faced by visually impaired students in India are not homogenous. Girls with visual disabilities often face additional stigma and mobility constraints, especially in conservative or patriarchal communities. A qualitative study by UNESCAP (2021) revealed that female students were 2.3 times less likely to request scribe support than their male counterparts, fearing judgment or misunderstanding from proctors or male scribes.

Rural students, especially from SC/ST backgrounds, are doubly disadvantaged by poor infrastructure and systemic exclusion. Lack of digital access further impedes awareness of entitlements. The Digital India campaign has yet to meaningfully touch rural disability networks.

The literature also acknowledges the emotional and psychological consequences of relying on untrained scribes. Students report anxiety, shame, and helplessness when scribes are late, rude, or unprepared. Research by Desai and Rajput (2022) correlates scribe dependency with reduced self-efficacy, especially in competitive settings like board exams or entrance tests. The lack of autonomy contributes to a sense of infantilization and chronic underperformance.

Despite the growing body of documentation, few longitudinal or large-scale studies assess the effectiveness of accommodations like scribes or AT in India. Little is known about how policies differ by state or what outcomes follow successful AT deployment. There is also an absence of empirical data on scribes in higher education, vocational institutes, or competitive exams like UPSC/JEE.

3. Research Questions

The paper focuses on two main research questions:

1. To what extent can visually impaired students in India access equitable academic support via scribes, assistive technology, and inclusive environments?
2. What persistent systemic barriers hinder their academic experiences?

4. Research Method

A mixed-methods research design was employed to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the experiences and barriers faced by visually impaired students in accessing equitable academic support. The study involved two distinct but complementary data collection phases: a quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews.

Initially, a structured online questionnaire was developed, focusing on key areas including demographic data, socioeconomic status, educational background, accessibility and availability of scribe services, usage and accessibility of assistive technology (AT), social support mechanisms, and experiences of discrimination. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and multiple-choice questions to facilitate clear statistical analysis and comparison.

Subsequent to the survey, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to explore participants' personal narratives, experiences, and perceptions in greater depth. The interviews provided detailed insights into systemic challenges, personal coping strategies, and specific recommendations participants deemed necessary to enhance academic support. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility to probe emerging themes and ensuring a nuanced understanding of participant experiences.

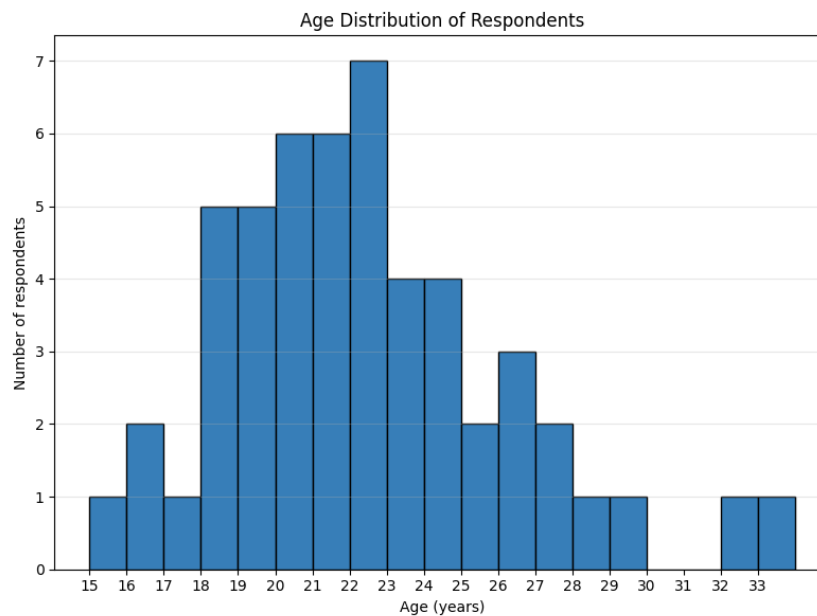
Convenience sampling was selected due to its practicality and efficiency in accessing visually impaired students dispersed geographically across India. A total of 50 visually impaired students participated, representing diverse demographic backgrounds (age, gender, residence type, socioeconomic status). This sample size was deemed sufficient for an exploratory study aiming to identify prevalent issues and detailed qualitative insights.

Data collection was carried out over three weeks. The online survey was distributed through social media platforms, visually impaired student networks, educational institutions, and NGOs working with visually impaired individuals. Participants provided informed consent before participating. Follow-up interviews were scheduled with consenting survey respondents, conducted via telephone and online platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet).

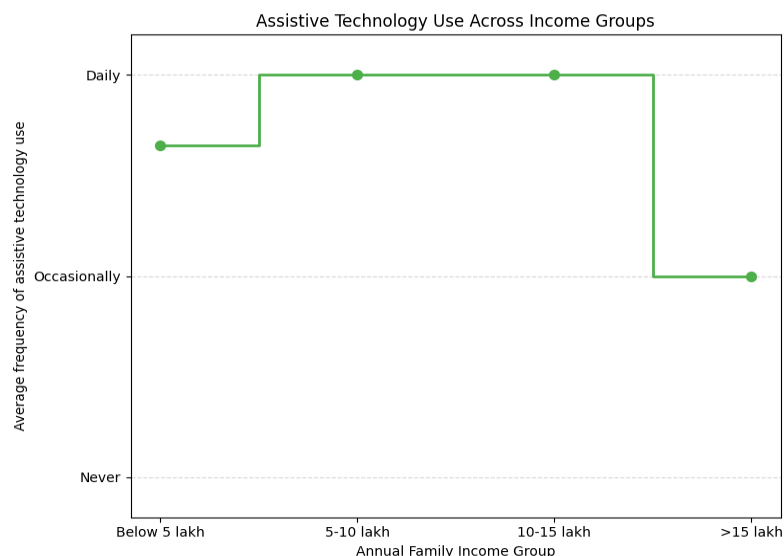
Quantitative data were analyzed, employing descriptive statistics, frequency distributions, and cross-tabulations to identify prevalent trends, patterns, and correlations. Qualitative data was systematically coded and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and in-depth insights into systemic barriers and support needs. Through an integration of quantitative and qualitative findings, this study aimed to develop a holistic understanding of the academic experiences of visually impaired students in India.

5. Research Findings

The demographic profile of the respondents (N=50) was diverse, comprising individuals aged between 15 and 33 years. The majority of participants were within the age group of 18 to 25 years, accounting for 60% of the sample. Gender representation was skewed, with males making up 68.3% and females representing 31.7%. A significant proportion of respondents, approximately 70%, reported an annual family income of less than rupees 5 lakh a year, highlighting substantial economic vulnerability among the participants. Geographically, respondents were predominantly from urban areas (78%), while the remaining belonged to semi-urban and rural areas at 15% and 7% respectively, making it the sample diverse in terms of residential backgrounds.



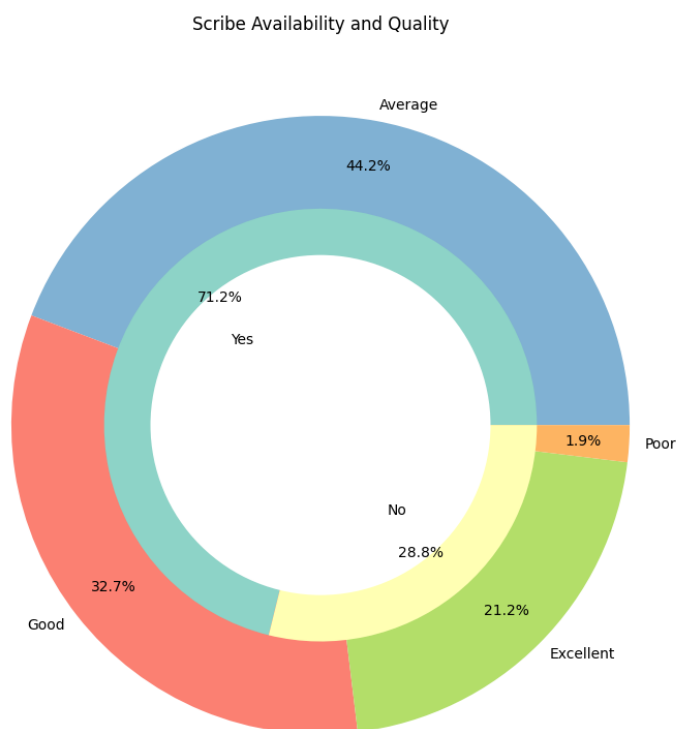
Graph 1: Residential Distribution of Respondents



Graph 2: Assistive technology use across income groups

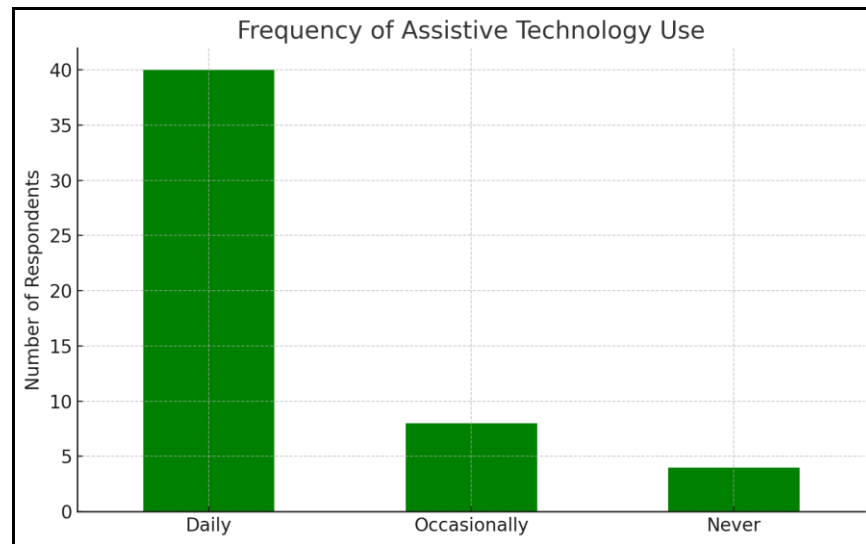
Regarding educational contexts and resources, participants were enrolled across different types of institutions, with 40% attending private schools, another 40% enrolled in government schools, and the remaining 20% in special or inclusive educational settings. Among these schools, educational materials were predominantly provided in regional languages, mainly Hindi (50%), followed by bilingual formats (30%) and English (20%). Although 60% of respondents reported high accessibility to classroom resources, a noteworthy 30% indicated partial or no access, suggesting significant disparities in resource availability and quality across educational settings.

In terms of examination accommodations, 80% of the respondents regularly utilized scribes. However, despite such a high level of scribe usage, securing reliable scribes remained a prevalent challenge, with 50% of students facing consistent difficulties. Among the specific issues encountered, 40% of respondents highlighted the unavailability of scribes, 30% mentioned poor scribe quality, and 25% reported experiencing last-minute cancellations. Further, when evaluating the overall quality of scribe services, responses varied significantly, with only 30% rating their experiences as excellent, indicating substantial room for improvement in scribe service provision.



Graph 3: Doughnut chart: scribe availability and quality

Assistive technology was prevalent among participants, with screen readers being the most commonly used tool, reported by ~70% of respondents. Although regular usage of these tools was limited, with only ~60% using the tools daily. The primary factors that affected the use of these tools are high barrier costs, which was reported by approximately 30% of respondents, followed by concerns related to maintenance difficulties which was reported by approximately 25% respondents, and limited support from institutions was reported by approximately 20% respondents. These barriers shed light on critical gaps in encouraging effective usage of assistive technologies among visually impaired students.



Graph 4: Bar chart - frequency of assistive technology use

Table 1: Barriers to learning, percentage reported and impact on daily use

Barrier	% Reporting	Impact on Daily Use (OR)
High device cost	64%	0.28 (p = 0.005)
Lack of training	52%	0.41 (p = 0.013)
Maintenance issues	37%	0.63 (p = 0.042)

Social support systems appeared generally helpful, as shown by 70% of respondents positively rating peer support. To examine whether living arrangements influence perceived peer support, a Welch's independent-samples t-test contrasted students living with their families ($n=25$) to those in hostels ($n=27$). Peer-support ratings were converted to a numeric scale (1 = Not supportive, 2 = Somewhat supportive, 3 = Very supportive). The hostel group reported significantly higher peer-support scores (mean = 2.74, SD = 0.45) than the family group (mean = 2.36, SD = 0.64), $t(\approx 48) = -2.09$, $p = 0.043$, Cohen's $d = -0.59$. This suggests that students living in hostels experience a stronger sense of peer support, possibly due to the communal living environment. Although, experiences of discrimination still remained significant, as reported by 30% of participants. Discriminatory experiences were shown in contexts from exclusion from activities to unfair treatment, emphasizing persistent social barriers within educational systems and highlighting the need for individuals and institutions to promote inclusivity.

Table 2: Mean peer support score based on living arrangements.

Living arrangement	Mean peer-support score	SD	n
Family	2.36	0.64	25
Hostel	2.74	0.45	27

6. Discussion

The findings of this study largely align with existing literature regarding the educational experiences of visually impaired students in India, shedding light on persistent systemic barriers despite robust legal frameworks. The demographic data signalled noticeable socioeconomic vulnerability, restating previous research highlighting financial constraints as a significant barrier in accessing equitable educational support (Chatterjee et al., 2021). A significant proportion of economically disadvantaged participants highlighted their obstacles in terms of affordability and accessibility of assistive technologies.

Institutional differences in the provision of assistive technology, resources and support is a notable imprint of least and moderate presence category that aligns to existing literature, that suggests variation in the enforcement of the policy and difference in available infrastructure vested within educational institutions (Bhatt & Deshmukh, 2021; CEMCA-NCERT, 2020). Unfairness in the provision of educational materials and resources, particularly that which exists between urban and rural environments, also legitimizes concerns over geographical deprivation and uneven application of inclusive education orders.

The findings of this study with regard to struggles in finding suitable and dependable scribes are consistent with the widely reported inadequacies in the provision of scribes throughout India (NCPEDP, 2020; NAB, 2021). Problems, such as last-minute removals, were expected, but the widespread and extreme nature of the issues reinforces the urgent need for structural reforms to the system, standardized training, and robust monitoring.

Relevant results for the use of assistive technologies (ATs) shows a striking gap between availability and sustained use. While earlier reports had pointed to the transformative potential of ATs (Vision Empower, 2023), the pragmatic machining of cost, maintenance and institutional support obstacles we found in this study were to some extent less anticipated. These barriers also signal that the current policies are far from being adequate, underscoring that much more robust institutional support and incentives are required for AT use to be continued over time.

Finally, the experiences of discrimination reported by a significant proportion of respondents underscores the persistent societal and cultural barriers that visually impaired students face in educational environments. Despite helpful peer interaction discriminatory experiences underscore the importance of wider cultural changes and institutional support when it comes to supporting inclusive education.

Overall, the findings support the existing literature of systemic educational challenges for Visually impaired students, and highlight specific areas that need targeted interventions to improve educational inclusivity for visually impaired students in India.

7. Conclusion

This study brings to light the deep-seated challenges Visually impaired students continue to face despite the evolution of progressive legal and educational frameworks. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, offers a promising legal intervention in support of inclusive education, but despite the act there is a disconnect between the policy's creation and its implementation. The evidence presented through both, qualitative and quantitative, survey responses inform us that legal policies alone cannot ensure equitable education

The findings revealed a mixed landscape: a landscape in which individual resilience and peer support coexist with institutional inefficiencies and social stigma. The students face numerous challenges from not finding reliable scribes and facing inconsistent teacher preparedness to facing the high costs of

assistive technology and lacking fundamental infrastructural support. The barriers identified are not isolated issues, they're deeply interconnected. These systemic failures cumulatively undermine the educational autonomy and dignity of visually impaired learners. The study also highlighted an undercurrent of hope and ambition among students, who, despite numerous challenges, continue to aspire toward meaningful careers and self-reliant futures.

Findings from this research revealed a mixed landscape: one where individual resilience and peer support coexist with institutional inefficiencies and societal stigma. From unreliable scribe access and inconsistent teacher preparedness to the high costs of assistive technology and lack of infrastructural support, the barriers identified are not isolated but deeply interwoven. These systemic failures cumulatively undermine the educational autonomy and dignity of visually impaired learners. The study also highlighted an undercurrent of hope and ambition among students, who, despite numerous challenges, continue to aspire toward meaningful careers and self-reliant futures.

Importantly, this research underscores that inclusion in education is not a privilege or a supplementary measure—it is a fundamental right. Achieving this vision will require a coordinated, multi-stakeholder effort involving government bodies, educational institutions, civil society, and the private sector. Only by translating legal provisions into actionable, measurable, and sustainable practices can India truly uphold its constitutional promise of equal opportunity for all.

This paper not only serves as a call to action but also as an important contribution to the understanding of inclusive education for the Visually impaired and the barriers they face in this context. It is hoped that future research will build upon this information, further exploring longitudinal impacts, policy enforcement strategies, and the voices of visually impaired students across diverse socio-cultural contexts.

8. Recommendation

Based on the findings and discussion presented, several strategic recommendations are proposed to address the systemic barriers faced by visually impaired students in India. First, a national standardized registry and training program for scribes should be established, ensuring reliability and quality across examinations. This program would involve certification processes, standardized ethical training, and regular evaluations to maintain consistent quality.

Second, improving assistive technology accessibility through government-supported subsidies and institutional provisions is critical. Policies must mandate educational institutions to provide necessary technological tools, complemented by regular maintenance and robust institutional support systems. Collaborative partnerships between governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, and private sector innovators could further expand technological accessibility and usage.

Third, comprehensive mandatory training programs for educators on inclusive pedagogies and assistive technologies are urgently required. Pre-service and in-service training modules should be developed and periodically updated to ensure educators remain adept at addressing diverse learner needs effectively.

Fourth, institutional infrastructure improvements must be mandated, encompassing accessible resource rooms, digital libraries, and consistent availability of assistive materials. Regular infrastructure audits and accountability measures would ensure compliance with inclusive educational standards.

Additionally, fostering stronger social support mechanisms is recommended. Institutions should facilitate peer mentoring programs and actively work to create awareness campaigns addressing

discrimination and fostering inclusivity within academic settings. Family counseling and involvement initiatives can further reinforce support systems at home.

Lastly, expanding scholarship programs and financial aid specifically targeted toward economically disadvantaged visually impaired students will substantially alleviate financial barriers. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and research initiatives should be implemented to regularly assess program effectiveness and ensure adaptive, evidence-based policy development.

Collectively, these recommendations offer a structured approach toward mitigating systemic barriers, ultimately enhancing educational equity and inclusivity for visually impaired students in India.

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