

## **An Assessment on the Role of Ashadeep (NGO) in Dealing with Persons with Intellectual Disability in Guwahati, Assam.**

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### **Abstract**

Disability is considered as a serious social stigma along with serious health concern. Persons with disabilities are more likely to experience discrimination and exclusion from the social, economic and political life. They face various challenges to cope up with the society and therefore are more vulnerable to poverty, violence and discrimination. Apart from this, it is obvious that the Covid-19 pandemic has to a great extent made the lives of differently abled persons even much more difficult. There is a wide prevalence of differently abled persons in Guwahati. As the non-governmental organisations play a very pivotal role in addressing societal issues so it is in this context, this paper attempts to analyse the role of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) with special reference to Ashadeep in addressing the grievances of the persons with intellectual disability. This paper also tries to find out the challenges faced by individuals with intellectual disabilities during a pandemic situation and also to find some suitable measures to mitigate the problem.

**Keywords:** Disability, Discrimination, Pandemic, Ashadeep.

### **I. Introduction:**

There are certain groups of human beings which either by nature or because of deep-rooted custom are weak and vulnerable, such as, a child, women, disabled persons, aged persons, migrant workers or persons belonging to a particular race.<sup>1</sup> Disability is a serious health concern that needs extra care and attention. People with disabilities suffer from various challenges and are more vulnerable to poverty and unemployment compared to people without disabilities.

NGOs pursue a number of activities to remove sufferings, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, undertake community development and promote human rights.<sup>2</sup> There is wide prevalence of persons with disabilities in the city of Guwahati and in this regard Ashadeep, a day rehabilitation centre has been working to provide a comprehensive rehabilitation solution to individuals with intellectual disability and mental illness in Guwahati. Ashadeep caters to individuals with intellectual disability and associated disorders and persons recovering from mental illness.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is very pertinent to study their plight because of their vulnerability in the society. The findings of our study would throw some light on the role of the NGO (Ashadeep) in addressing the grievances of the individuals with intellectual disability and to strengthen the capacity of persons with intellectual disability through various means.

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<sup>1</sup> Agarwal, Dr. H.O. (2018, p. 110). Human Rights (16<sup>th</sup> ed.). Central Law Publications. Allahabad.

<sup>2</sup> Agarwal, Dr. H.O. (2018, p. 220). Human Rights (16<sup>th</sup> ed.). Central Law Publications. Allahabad.

<sup>3</sup> Ashadeep Day Rehabilitation Centre. Retrieved from [www.ashadeepindia.org/ashadeep-day-rehabilitation-centre/](http://www.ashadeepindia.org/ashadeep-day-rehabilitation-centre/)

As per Census 2011, in India, out of the 121 crore population, about 2.68 crore persons are ‘disabled’ which is 2.21% of the total population.<sup>4</sup> According to World Health Organisation, Disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions.<sup>5</sup> The WHO is committed to building a world in which all people attain the highest possible standard of health and well-being. This can only be achieved if health systems are accessible to and inclusive of people with disability on an equal basis with others.<sup>6</sup> The purpose of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity. According to the Article 1 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) - Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.<sup>7</sup>

The term “Mental Disability” is used when a psychiatric illness significantly interferes with the performance of major life activities such as self-care, working, moving and getting around, understanding, communication, interpersonal activities, and community participation.<sup>8</sup> There have been various acts and legislations to cater the needs of persons with disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 defines PwD as any person with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which on interacting with barriers hinder effective and equal growth in the society.<sup>9</sup>

The Government of India has taken various initiatives to address the grievances of Persons with Disabilities, such as, the Government of India has launched Accessible India Campaign, a flagship programme to create barrier free environment for Persons with Disabilities in 2015. A project viz. “Unique ID for Persons with Disabilities” aims at creating a national data base for persons with disabilities and issue Unique ID card to each Person with Disability. The Government has launched National Action Plan for Skill Development with the aims to cover 2.5 million persons with disabilities by the year 2022 through various stakeholders.<sup>10</sup> Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) has launched Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) as a nation-wide campaign for achieving universal accessibility for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs).<sup>11</sup>

While Covid- 19 is impacting the entire population, persons with disabilities are more vulnerable to the disease due to their physical, sensory and cognitive limitations. For the persons with disabilities, access to healthcare, resources, education, employment are crucial concerns and more so during the Covid-19 pandemic. Psychosocial issues among children in special schools have increased rapidly during the lockdown and the crisis has further deepened their existing inequalities.<sup>12</sup> During the pandemic, the biggest challenge was dissemination of information in an accessible format for PwD. Among other challenges was the supply of essential goods and medicines to PwD.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Disabled Persons in India A statistical profile 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.mospi.gov.in>

<sup>5</sup> Disabled Persons in India A statistical profile 2016 Retrieved from <http://www.mospi.gov.in>

<sup>6</sup> WHO policy on disability. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/about/policies/disability>

<sup>7</sup> Article 1 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-1-purpose.html>

<sup>8</sup> Hazarika, Mythili. (2020, December 6). *Disability: stigma and barriers*. The Assam Tribune.

<sup>9</sup> The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. Retrieved from <https://journalsofindia.com/right-of-persons-with-disabilities-act-2016/>

<sup>10</sup> Disabled Persons in India A statistical profile 2016. Retrieved from <http://www.mospi.gov.in>

<sup>11</sup> Accessible India Campaign. Retrieved from <accessibleindia.gov.in>

<sup>12</sup> Hazarika, Mythili. (2020, December 6). *Disability: stigma and barriers*. The Assam Tribune.

<sup>13</sup> Karmakar, Rahul. (2020, May 1). *Covid-19 has made our approach to issues of PwD more hands-on*. The Hindu. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/covid-19-has-made-our-approach-to-issues-of-pwd-more-hands-on/article31484967.ece/amp/>

**About Ashadeep:** Ashadeep is a Guwahati-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) working in the field of mental health. It is a Day Rehabilitation Centre for children and adults with intellectual disability and person with mental illness. It also focuses on providing skills to individuals with intellectual disability and associated disorders, so that they can cope with the challenges. Individuals suffering from mental illness and intellectual disability have received therapy, special and conventional education, training in sports and vocational activities in Ashadeep Day Rehabilitation centre over the years. It started off as a small organization for day care and rehabilitation for persons with mental disorders, has now flourished into a full-fledged institution providing mental health care, bringing into its realm a wide range of services that cater to a population beyond the borders of Assam.<sup>14</sup> In the past twenty four years, Ashadeep has directly intervened more than 6000 persons with mental disorders covering ten districts of Assam.<sup>15</sup>

For the individuals with intellectual disability, focus is given on activities of daily living, functional academics, prevocational activities, sports and music along with conventional academics. Individual and group counseling are also provided on regular intervals to persons recovering from mental illness. The vocational unit provides skill development training to the intellectually disabled adults and persons recovering from mental illness which forms a part of therapy as well as a source of facilitating income generation.<sup>16</sup> Sport is given special focus here and students are prepared to compete at various sports forums. As constantly the students are developed as special Athlete under Special Olympics Bharat in various sports. These Special Athletes had represented Ashadeep at local, district, national and international sports arena, thus breaking the myth that ‘people with disability cannot do anything’ (“Annual Report 2018-2019”).

The activities carried out by Ashadeep are :- (1) Day Rehabilitation Centre, Guwahati. (2) Navachetana- Rehabilitation of Homeless women with mental illness, Bamunigaon. (3) Udayan Home for Rehabilitation of homeless Men with mental illness. (4) Free Psychiatric Outdoor Clinic (OPD), Guwahati. (5) Resource Centre. (6) ‘Home Again’- Shared Housing. (7) Study on National Strategy for Inclusive and Community Based Living for Persons with Mental Health Issues (“Annual Report 2018-2019”). Ashadeep’s constant efforts to impart regular lessons in the areas of special and conventional education, life skills, social and communication skills, pre-vocational and vocational skills and extra-curricular activities like yoga, music, drama, guitar and art and craft sessions to its students has shown a positive outcome. The group recovering from mental illness are working in the ‘Sheltered Workshop’ and are earning a livelihood by contributing in the production of various articles such as seminar file, covers, various jute items, door mats and carpets etc.<sup>17</sup>

From the Annual Report of Ashadeep 2018-2019, it can be observed that the organization has taken part in various events that also provided the students of Ashadeep to showcase their talent. Some of the successful events are discussed here. Such as, a twenty one member team of Ashadeep Day Rehabilitation Centre consisting of students and teachers represented Assam in ‘Divya Kala Shakti – Witnessing Ability in Disability’, a cultural extravaganza organized by Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disability and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India held at Rashtrapati Bhavan’s Cultural Centre in 2019. In 2018, an awareness session on the topic- ‘Child Protection Awareness for Persons with Disabilities’ was organized in collaboration with Special Olympics Bharat for individuals with Intellectual Disability at Vivekananda Kendra, Guwahati. In 2018, Ashadeep in Association with Special Olympics Bharat conducted an awareness session on the topic – ‘Fitness – Physical Activity, Yoga and Breathing and Sensitivity’ at Vivekananda Kendra. The 2018, World Mental Health Day was celebrated where a poster competition was organized amongst 40 interns of Ashadeep on the topic – ‘Young People

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<sup>14</sup> Annual Report on Ashadeep 2018-2019. Retrieved from [www.ashadeepindia.org](http://www.ashadeepindia.org)

<sup>15</sup> Annual Report on Ashadeep 2019-2020. Retrieved from [www.ashadeepindia.org](http://www.ashadeepindia.org)

<sup>16</sup> Ashadeep Day Rehabilitation Centre. Retrieved from <http://www.ashadeepindia.org/ashadeep-day-rehabilitation-centre/>

<sup>17</sup> Annual Report on Ashadeep 2018-2019. Retrieved from [www.ashadeepindia.org](http://www.ashadeepindia.org)

and Mental Health in a Changing World. Apart from this Ashadeep has participated in many events and activities that show how the organization has been expanding as well as flourishing in its area.<sup>18</sup>

## **II. Objectives:**

- 1) To analyse the role of the NGO (Ashadeep) in addressing the grievances of the Persons with Intellectual Disability.
- 2) To find out the challenges faced by the intellectually disabled individuals during the pandemic situation.
- 3) To find out suitable suggestions to mitigate the problem of Persons with Intellectual Disability.

**III. Limitations of the Study:** The study is limited only to the study of NGO (Ashadeep).

**IV. Significance of the Study:** The study on persons with intellectually disability is significant as these people constitute the vulnerable sections of the society. It is also important to study the working of an NGO (Ashadeep) in addressing the grievances of persons with intellectually disability. It is expected that this study would help in further policy formulation and undertake required approaches for a more inclusive environment for the Persons with Intellectual Disability.

**V. Methodology:** The research is descriptive and analytical in nature. The research is based on primary and secondary sources. For the primary source, personal communication with the Director of Ashadeep was conducted to have insights about the working of the NGO in matters related to the person with intellectual disability. Secondary sources have been collected from newspaper article, book, reports and various websites.

From the study, it is found that Ashadeep has worked tremendously for the cause of the people with Intellectual Disability. As a service provider in the field of mental health, it is found from the annual report (2018-19) that Ashadeep has carried out a number of interventions. Besides these, the other findings of the study are as follows:-

- It was found that the individuals with intellectual disability have different talents. Some of them are very good at sports, others at craft, singing, drawing and the like. Students of the NGO have taken active part in sports event as well as in mountaineering and also in various programmes. It is of dire necessity that government must make provision to make them employed even in small avenues to earn their livelihood.
- A sense of uncertainty and insecurity lingers about their future as in the long run what would happen to them.
- The NGO could bring a positive behavioural change in them through therapy and social communication.
- It was understood that opening up more avenues to explore their capabilities would bolster their self-confidence and in a way enable them to actively participate in the society. They need a platform to showcase their talent which would make them feel accommodative.
- Creating more such conducive space for the person with intellectual disability where they can utilise their latent talents.
- The differently abled has the talent and skill to engage themselves in productive activities.
- The future of the people with disabilities seems somewhat uncertain when the question of legal guardian comes in.
- Persons with intellectual disability are more vulnerable to the Covid 19 pandemic due to their physical, sensory and cognitive limitations. As such, there is a need to understand their disability

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<sup>18</sup> Annual Report on Ashadeep 2018-2019. Retrieved from [www.ashadeepindia.org](http://www.ashadeepindia.org)

specific requirements, daily living activities and take appropriate measures to ensure their protection and safety during situations at risk.

**VI. Findings of the Study:** Various insights on the working of Ashadeep could be analysed while communicating with the Director of Ashadeep, Dr. Anjana Goswami. It is observed that Ashadeep has brought a positive change to the lives of many individuals with intellectual disability. From Ashadeep, there are many success stories of many individuals with intellectual disability that brought laurels to the state representing at various levels. She further stated that parents of a child with intellectual disability find it difficult to manage them so they feel the necessity of a rehabilitation centre. She also narrated how the lives of the individuals with intellectual disability have been affected by the ongoing pandemic as the pandemic added more troublesome situation to their lives and the parents feel extremely difficult to manage them. It was very difficult to make them understand all the Covid-19 protocols. However, the NGO has extended a great support by engaging them in the day rehabilitation centre where their conditions subsequently improved. (Dr. Anjana Goswami, personal communication, October 19, 2020)

Boosting up the morale of the resident staff during the lockdown was a big challenge for the administration. This was managed by the Social Workers, Psychologist and the Administrative Staff with regular phone calls. The Day Rehabilitation Centre conducted online classes for the wards of the centre during the lockdown period. Online competitions were held on dancing, singing, speech, drawing amongst the wards where they uploaded videos of all their activities. The vocational unit of the centre has geared up for mask making activity because of its growing demand. (Annual Report 2019-2020)

## **VII. Challenges:**

- Persons with Disabilities are more likely to face discrimination in everyday life. People suffering from mental illness are subjected to severe social exclusion. Even the negative attitude held by the society towards them furthers worsen their plight and thereby hinder them from taking any active part in the family, community and workforce.
- People with disabilities face challenges in the area of the lack of affordable access to proper health care, appliances, poorly trained health workers etc especially in the rural areas of Assam.
- In the field of education too, individuals with intellectual disability are more likely to suffer from various issues such as adequate availability of special schools, trained teachers and availability of educational materials and instruments needed for them.
- The number of special care and rehabilitation centres are still very less to cater to the needs of such a huge size of population suffering from intellectual disability.
- Stress has to be made to identify all the individuals with intellectual disability in the state so that they can avail the benefits of the government schemes.
- Physical accessibility in buildings, transportation, access to services etc still remains a major challenge.
- The pandemic has brought a huge challenge for the persons with intellectual disability as it was very difficult to make them understand all the Covid-19 protocols.

## **VIII. Suggestions:** The suggestions based on the study are as following :-

- 1) Persons with intellectual disability need to be empowered with employable skills that would also in a way sustain their livelihood.
- 2) There should be more awareness campaign on disability to build up an inclusive environment for the persons with intellectual disability.

- 4) Specific needs of the NGO must be addressed. Much needed assistance and funds must be easily made available to them.
- 5) To create a barrier free environment is of urgent need to provide social security to the persons with intellectual disability as the violence meted out against them is quite common.
- 6) There should be more therapy centers for the quick recovery of the persons with intellectual disability. More rehabilitation centres should be built up to provide them adequate skills to earn their livelihood.
- 7) Security of women with intellectual disability should be strengthened, as sexual assault of mentally challenged women is quite common as they are very vulnerable.
- 8) As responsible citizens, all need to come forward to reduce stigma and discrimination and fight for the equal rights of this vulnerable population.
- 9) More emphasis should be made on the need of various institutional mechanisms to further design and implement disability inclusive community health and programme.

**IX. Conclusion:** International Day of Persons with Disabilities is marked on December 3 annually. The Theme for International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2021 is Leadership and participation of persons with disabilities toward an inclusive, assessible and sustainable post-Covid-19 world.<sup>19</sup>

As a crusader of the intellectually disabled community, Ashadeep Day Rehabilitation Centre has extended its noble services to people with intellectual disability. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has added more troublesome to the people with intellectual disability. However, the pandemic has provided with an opportunity to rethink of making our health system more inclusive and responsive to the needs of people experiencing disability. The Constitution of India ensures equality, freedom, justice and dignity of all individuals and implicitly mandates an inclusive society for all including person with disabilities. Over the years, it has been realised that a majority of persons with disabilities can lead a better quality of life if they have equal opportunities and effective access to rehabilitation measures. Differently abled persons need to be integrated into the mainstream society to overcome stigmatization. Ashadeep has emerged as a ray of hope for many parents who have children with intellectual disabilities. It is the need of the hour to make an inclusive, conducive and accommodative society for them.

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<sup>19</sup> International Day of Persons with Disabilities – 3 December. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/international-day-of-persons-withdisabilities-3-december.html>

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