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Disability and Artificial Intelligence: Redefining Empowerment in India

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence has become a phenomenon in the world. The machine with ability of doing cognitive task and automation have made this technology beneficial for almost every aspect of human life. Even though, there are many challenges and threats are attached to it, AI has been blessings in many areas such as health, education, transportation, hotel, agriculture and defence. Apart from these areas, AI has emerged as a new ray of hope for the Differently abled persons. The machine has been beneficial for all categories of the disability. It is bringing massive changes in the lives of the Differently Abled. People suffering from different types of disabilities are now becoming capable with the use of Artificial Intelligence. People with visual impairment and hearing loss are experiencing normal life with the use of smart phones and audio devices. People with physical disabilities are able to make their lives easier through artificial limbs and robotic devices. AI is playing an important role in giving people with disabilities their place and rights in social participation. Hence, people with various types of disabilities are accepting AI as the best assisting device for themselves. This paper will enumerate the leverages of AI for PwDs and how it is redefining the meaning of empowerment with accessibility and participation. It further describes the policy and applicability of AI in facilitating accessibility and empowering differently abled persons in India.

Keywords: *Artificial Intelligence, Persons with Disabilty (PwDs), Empowerment, India*

Introduction

Disability has been a stigma in Indian society for long. The change in perception has come during 1970s; the period, which is also known as social movements era. In India, the first movement for the Persons with Disability (PwDs) has started with the basic demand of recognition and medical facility. This movement helped them to unite and made people aware with their rights and demands. Since 1970s to 2016 Act, the movement of dignity and respect has been challenged and controlled by many actors and factors. However, the significant change came with the 2016 RPwD (Rights of People with Disability) Act when policy makers to populace, started taking cognisance of the issues and challenges of PwDs face in day to day life. The Government of India is not only focusing on the changing basic infrastructure for inclusive society for PwDs but also using new technology to bring significant changes in their lives. Artificial Intelligence is one of the new technology that has been used widely for upgrading and uplifting lives of PwDs with providing assistive devices that could eliminate the hindrance from

their lives. Moreover, AI tools and applications facilitate PwDs accessibility and mobility for education and jobs. Empowerment includes education, jobs and self-reliant and AI has the capacity to fulfil all aspects.

This paper is a descriptive study in which Disability and types of disability have been discussed. The paper has in-depth study of how AI is beneficial for PwDs and its significant role in empowering them. The paper is based on primary source in which Act on Disability in India has been discussed and the paper exclusively based on analysis of secondary sources i.e. books and articles.

Disability: Definition and Types

According to Oxford Dictionary, disability is defined as an impairment or deficiency in which it affects the body at cognitive, intelligence, limitations, exercise, sensory and physical levels etc. It can happen at birth or sometimes after birth. According to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)-2006, disability has also been defined as a person suffering from disability when they suffer from impairment on physical, mental and intellectual grounds for a long period of time. It affects them in many ways in interacting with other people or participating socially as well as hindrances in their life (Government of India, 2021).

According to the Disability Act introduced by Americans, "person who has any kind of physical or mental impairment, due to which he/she becomes incapable of doing daily or other tasks in their life or their ability to work gets limited, he/she is called disabled". However, disability cannot be defined by limited definitions as it has many dimensions. It can be found in many forms (see Figure-1) such as visible, invisible, simple, difficult, physical-mental, vision, hearing and speech. It is not necessary that it is similar for each person and easily identifiable (Jangeed, 2023).

Types of Disability

Figure - 1

Cerebral palsy	Multiple Disabilities	Leprosy Cured Person
Hearing impaired	Low Vision	Intellectual Disability
Specific Learning Disabilities	Autism Spectrum Disorder	Sickle Cell Disease
Speech and Language Disability	Parkinson's Disease	Acid Attack Victims
Chronic Neurological Conditions	Haemophilia	Muscular Dystrophy
Thalassemia	Multiple Sclerosis	Dwarfism
Mental Illness	Deaf	Blindness

Source: (Government of India, 2016)

Cerebral Palsy : It is related to neuromotor disorders. Due to which the person's movement, muscle tone and posture are affected. As a result, the person faces difficulty in walking, talking and other work activities (Patel, Neelakantan, Pandher, & Merrick, 2019).

Hearing Impaired : A person who has less than normal hearing ability. This disability can be mild, moderate or severe (WHO, 2024).

Specific Learning Disabilities : This disability affects a person's ability to learn, speak, read, write etc. (Wecapable, 2019).

Speech and Language Disability : It is a permanent language related disability. Which occurs due to damage to a particular part of the brain. In this the person feels unable to speak, that is, he is unable to express his thoughts properly (Wecapable, 2019).

Chronic Neurological Conditions : It is related to Central and Peripheral Nervous System. This disease affects human spinal cord (Wecapable, 2019).

Thalassemia : Thalassemia is a blood related disease caused by haemoglobin deficiency. This disease destroys red blood cells (Wecapable, 2019).

Mental Illness : This completely affects the mental level of the person - like mood, thinking, attitude, memory, decisions and behaviour etc (Wecapable, 2019).

Multiple Disabilities : If a person has more than one disability, he is placed in the category of multiple disability (Wecapable, 2019).

Low Vision : A person who has low vision ability compared to normal vision ability.

Autism Spectrum Disorder : It affects the full development of a person's skill abilities. It also affects communication and social abilities (Wecapable, 2019).

Parkinson's Disease : This disease affects the physical functions/movements of a person and keeps increasing with age and time. Therefore, as a result of increase in age, the condition of a person becomes worse. At present there is no permanent treatment for this disease (Wecapable, 2019).

Leprosy Cured Person : This disease can occur in a person at any age. It is caused by a Mycobacterium Leprae Bacteria. This disease directly affects the skin, eyes and peripheral nerves (Wecapable, 2019).

Blindness : When a person is not able to see completely with both eyes and cannot distinguish between darkness and light. That person is defined by the disability of blindness (Wecapable, 2019).

Deaf : A person who does not have the ability to hear in both his ears cannot hear anything (Wecapable, 2019).

Haemophilia : This is a blood related disease caused by deficiency of protein in the blood. As a result of which the blood flow stops. This disease is mostly found in men.

Multiple Sclerosis : It affects the person's brain through the central nerve. Due to which the person's ability to communicate is reduced (Wecapable, 2019).

Intellectual Disability : This is a condition in which a person becomes intellectually differently abled. The person is not able to learn, understand, and reason (Wecapable, 2019).

Sickle Cell Disease : This is also a blood related disease that quickly destroys the blood cells and changes them into abnormal shapes. It starts stopping the flow of oxygen to various parts of the body through red blood cells (Wecapable, 2019).

Acid Attack Victims : People who become disabled due to exposure to acid or any other dangerous substance (Wecapable, 2019).

Muscular Dystrophy : Muscular dystrophy is a disease related to the muscles of the entire body. This is a continuously growing disease. In this, the ability of the person's muscles to work gradually decreases. Therefore, there is no treatment available for it (Wecapable, 2019)

Dwarfism : This is a disorder related to physical development. In this the height of the person is much less than normal (Wecapable, 2019).

Disability laws in India in the Context of Technology

During 1970s, India has witnessed movements and awareness for disability rights. This era has marked as paradigm shift from the prevailing societal perception where individuals with disabilities were often marginalized and overlooked and existed on the fringes of society, devoid of basic human rights and recognition. These movements gradually helped differently abled people to have recognition on medical grounds. Efforts were made to raise the status of the PwD's in society with the help of assistive devices and medical treatment. In this direction, Indian Rehabilitation was established in 1986 by the Government of India to protect the interests of the differently abled (AshaBhawan Centre, 2017), in which proper education, research and rehabilitation of the differently abled people were discussed, this society was later known as the Indian Rehabilitation Act of 1992. Under this, development of all services for technology was also discussed. However, this Act was not implemented properly rather it was very selective (Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, 1992).

Though, this act was harbinger of the fight for the dignity and inclusivity of PwDs. After this Act, many laws were laid down by the Indian Government over the period of time such as- Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act 1995 - The Act was divided into 14 chapters, covering 7 types of disabilities. It included all the problems related to disabilities such as education, freedom, equality and physical access. Along with, 3% reservation was also given for the PwDs in all government jobs and higher education institutions (Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, 1996). Similarly, the National Trust Act 1999 was established. This Act included persons who were related to intellectual disability i.e. mental retardation, cerebral palsy, autism and multiple disabilities. The basis of this Act was to empower those people in the society who could not fight for their own rights (Chandra & MD, 2011).

After National Trust Act of 1999, the Indian government felt the need to determine a national policy in which rules for improving the quality of life of the PwDs should be discussed. As a result, the National Policy for Persons with Disability was implemented in 2006, in which, like other citizens, the Differently abled people were also considered important for the society and social development (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2006). In the 2011 Indian Census, it was found that almost 2.68 crore people in India are differently abled. Whereas the reality was the opposite as this number was of only 7 types of disabilities (Office of Chief Commissioner for Person with Disabilities, 2021). In view of this situation Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 (RPWD-2016) was introduced and implemented by Government of India. This act is including all perspectives of the rights of the differently abled people. In this Act, through 17 chapters, an attempt has been made to solve every problem related to the life of the differently abled people. Apart from equality, freedom, education and economic rights, some other rights have also been included in this Act like technology, access and communication. As a result, the lives of the differently abled have become more efficient. Efforts have been made by the Indian government that on the basis of these rights they should face less obstacles in their daily life experiences. They should be able to do all their work like other people in every field. In this context, the chapter 8 of RPWD Act 2016 has been set on the subject of technology, access and communication. So that all the differently abled people can get other rights in addition to the fundamental rights and become more capable. In Chapter 8 of the Act, Sections 40, 41 and 42 are created related to issues of communication, technology and accessibility; these sections cater the interest and policy on AI for PwDs (Government of India, 2016). Following are the salient features of Sections 40, 41 and 42.

Section 40 Accessibility : This section has been made in the context of different types of accessibility of persons with disabilities in each area. It was said by the Central Government that with the help of Chief Advisors, it would make communication, technology, transportation, exchange of information, accessibility of physical environment and other facilities for the differently abled fully accessible to the differently abled (Government of India , 2016).

Section 41 Access to Transport : In this section, some criteria have been set for the participation and accessibility of differently abled people for all types of transport. It was made mandatory to provide all types of facilities as per the requirement of the differently abled people at railway station, airport, bus stop etc. Orders were given to create physical accessibility to facilities like ticket counters, parking and toilets. Orders were given to determine these facilities in such a way that every type of differently abled person can avail all the facilities for example providing all the information to a blind person through technology (Government of India, 2016).

Section 42 Information and communication technology : According to this section, all types of

information and communication facilities will be designed in such a way that all differently abled people can access them. Like – all the material will be made accessible to all through audio, printing form and electronic medium. For those who are unable to hear or see, the material will be available electronically and in sign language etc (Government of India, 2016).

The main purpose to discuss all rights of PwDs above is to put Artificial Intelligence in a legal framework while using it to the leverages of PwDs. AI and rights related to AI come under all three sections. AI has profound role to facilitate differently abled persons to empower and it can be used for any type of disability. As Indian government emphasises on the Responsible Use of AI as in this arena AI it would be a significant and revolutionary step. It has leverages of empowering PwDs in all aspects such as education, transportation and accessibility.

Artificial Intelligence: Definition and Development

Artificial Intelligence can be defined as an ability of machine to achieve goals, especially in a complex, uncertain environment. Machine has ability to perform cognitive tasks like thinking, perceiving learning, problem solving and decision making (NITI Discussion Paper). It is a wide-open field that can be used in any area from Robots to self-driving cars. The genesis of the development of this technology begun in mid twentieth century. In 1956, John McCarthy organized a ground-breaking workshop centered around the newly coined concept of AI. This two-months event encouraged research that eventually led to the development of automated systems in the 1970 and anexpert systems which came into existence in 1980s. The automated systems primarily focused on automating mathematical and statistical tasks, such as solving logical proofs. Expert systems were introduced to address the limitations of these earlier systems by incorporating specialized knowledge from specific fields. However, expert systems had a significant drawback: whenever the expert knowledge was updated, the coding, training, and implementation had to be entirely redone. During 1957, John McCarthy generated LISP (List Processing Language) for Artificial Intelligence that was considered as the oldest programming language that helps in programming easily. In the years that followed, not much success was achieved in developing Artificial Intelligence due to complexity and expertise to operate AI based appliances and Machines. However, the leverages of AI could not be ruled out and scientists and engineers were working on to make it more accessible and approachable. Therefore, after a few years, the development of Artificial Intelligence again took a new turn and around 1970 it was believed that Artificial Intelligence could be capable in other areas also. Gradually Artificial Intelligence started being used for big tasks & projects with which artificial intelligence continued to develop (Mijwel, 2015). The important breakthrough came in 1990s when third revolution happened that is also known as Information and Technology Revolutions and subsequently another breakthrough with a period of introduction of "Deep Learning" that models higher level processing through extracting smaller

modules together (Ayoub and Kenneth, 2016). With incredible advancement in data collection, processing and computation power, intelligent system can do variety of tasks and enhance productivity. Expansion in AI's capabilities have expanded its utility in different fields. Comparing to initial period of its development, growth and advancement in AI in recent times is exponential.

AI can be broadly categorized in to two types: Modular and General. Modular AI has specialized in a specific domain and improves its performance through practice. In contrast, General AI can apply its knowledge flexibly to address a wide range of abstract and complex problems that involve reasoning, meaning and grasping values. Both categories have the ability to 'learn' from their tasks and enhance their performance over time.

The general area of Artificial Intelligence can be divided into more specialized branches. At a 'micro-level', we find the research on neural-net analogies, an area concerned with models composed of several simple and often randomly connected components. At the 'macro-level' we combine the simple basic components to complex but specialized problem-solving units (Persson, 1964). In present, modular AI have been used in all areas of human life and in few selective areas, there are appliances of general AI especially in automobile (self-driving car) and health sectors.

Artificial Intelligence in India

1960 was the year when AI was introduced in India. During that time, the first course on AI was started in IIT Kanpur. After a year prof HN Mahabala returned to India and started to discuss its context with prof Marvin Miskey. The first research on separate Artificial Intelligence was started by Prof. Narasimhan in TIFR. After this, in the time period of 1980, a machine was made which could translate the Indian language project and the optical Character Recognition project at ISI Kolkata. These two functions have been defined historically in the Indian perspective. In 1986, the Indian Government supported a five-year project with the assistance of UNDP and accepted the Knowledge Based Computing System as the Indian Fifth Generation Computer System (Itihaasa Research and Digital ,2018). Afterwards, Artificial Intelligence has been continuously growing in India. Leaders and policy makers have been keen to develop AI through various technical institutes, researches and scholars. In addition, India has adopted IT revolution (Third Revolution) at initial stage and it gave leverages for adaptation and advancement of the technology during the second breakthrough. Not only AI based applications and leverages but also implementing national strategy paper to use AI responsibly is a major concern of Indian government. Considering the benefits of AI, it is pertinent to use AI in such areas where this technology facilitates human life, hence then empowering person with disability is one of the major areas where AI can play an important and significant role.

Leverages of AI in Empowering PwDs

Generally, in the daily activities of life, all persons are connected with technology. Technology, in this paper, Artificial Intelligence has made remarkable presence in our daily activities. AI has emerged as a new power for the differently abled; through AI, suggestions and facilities are being provided to solve various problems of the differently abled. As a result, many obstacles in the life of the differently abled can be easily resolved (Analytics Insigh, 2022). AI is no less than a boon for the differently abled. It is enabling PwDsto overcome all the obstacles ranging from physical barriers to communication and information. AI is providing its best facilities in all fields like education, communication, transportation and employment. With its help, now even differently abled people have been able to participate independently in every field. It has also reduced the perception of difference and discrimination between people with disabilities and non-differently abled. With its help, differently abled people are being able to do tasks along with non-differently abled people due to which the differences between them and various types of discrimination have also ended (Christopherson, 2023). The symptoms and effects of each disability are different. Similarly, the problems and needs of differently abled people are also different from each other. The persons with disability experience challenges in daily life. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence, accessibility and mobility have become easier for the lives of all differently abled people. AI has ability to perform all tasks on its own, unlike human intelligence that provides an important opportunity for the PwDs. It promotes the participation of the differently abled in the society (Barik, Aggarwal, Deepak, & Raj, 2023). AI has played significant roles for differently abled in the following areas:

i) Education : First and foremost is in the field of education, a good number of AI tools have been created for PwDs. For instance, a self-learning Braille device has been created for visually impaired children which is called "Anni". It has emerged as an important assistive device for visually impaired children to read and write. Similarly, many other AI tools like notebook, Readable.com, Digital Art Academy for the Deaf (DAAD), Indian Science Technology and Engineering Facilities Map (I-STEM), Dyslexia Assessment for Language of India (DALI) are few examples of AI tools for empowering and educating PwDs. All these devices provide immense assistance to differently abled children in reading, writing, understanding teaching material and reading documents and empower children to participate in classes without any hesitance (Shivani, Gupta, & Gupta, 2024). Recently, during Purple Fest, in Panaji, an innovative device "HearSight Audio Vision" was launched for blind people. This device has 21 types of features and capable of providing information about any obstacle coming within a distance of 4-5 feet. The device also has facial recognition of people registered on this device with voice control system and recognizes Indian currency. This device can be accessed without the use of Internet. With all these basic facilities, the device has the ability to make life easier and accessible for any blind people. It will fulfil the needs of millions of people and simplify their daily life (Monteiro, 2024).

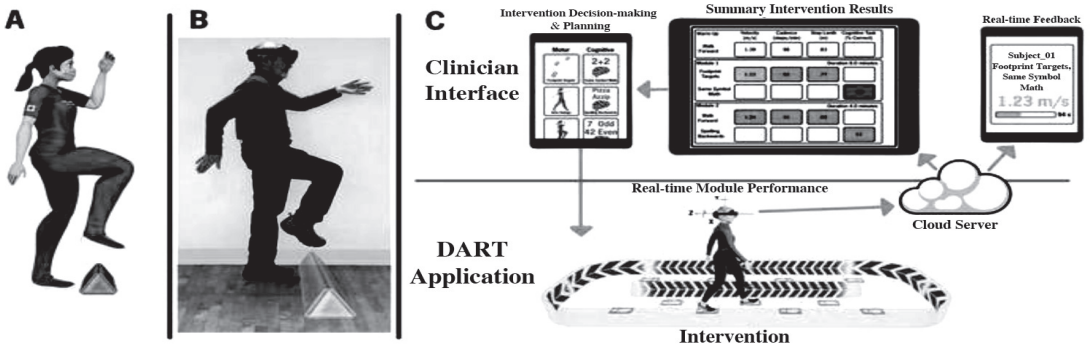


Voiceitt: This app uses AI to translate non-standard speech patterns into clear, understandable language, benefiting individuals with speech impairments like cerebral palsy or ALS



(Source: Google) OrCamMyEye: This device uses AI to read text aloud, recognize faces, and identify products for individuals with low vision

ii) Physical Accessibility : There are many differently abled people who are unable to walk or do physical activities. But now, with the help of technology, they are living their lives like other people in the society by using electronic and robotic wheelchairs and other equipment. Such facilities have provided a new ray of hope to their lives. Through which they can now educate themselves and get employment in the future. Earlier, the biggest challenge before them was to get out of the house that has now been eliminated by technology. Now, all differently abled persons are able to access and avail opportunity from education to employment (Stanly, 2023). A person who is not able to walk, AI based electronic wheelchairs are available for them. This wheelchair can be modified and designed as per the need of the person. It has many advanced features such as voice control, remote control, and can even do tasks like climbing stairs. Using this wheelchair, the differently abled person has been able to re-establish his participation at employment, education and social life (Singh & Gaharwal, 2018). At present, these new technologies are providing equal environment and facilities to everyone at the same level. It is helping the society to become more inclusive and PwDs are working together with non PwDs. Though, these facilities were not available earlier to the differently abled and it was the major reasons behind the confinement of the PwDs to their homes only (Martinez, 2021).



(Source:Google) Using augmented reality to make Parkinson's disease physical therapy more accessible (IMAGE)

iii) Communication Access : With the help of various AI technologies, many barriers to communication for the differently abled have been removed such as talking to non-differently abled people, using mobile, writing and reading etc. Voice technologies like Alexa, Siri and AI have made communication easier for people with disabilities. For example, blind people can now use the voice system to talk to other people or share their thoughts with them. They can also record it and send it. Similarly, mentally differently abled people are able to share their feelings and thoughts with other people by availing AI based tools.



Some Apps like AVA leverages AI for real-time captioning and transcription of conversations, making it easier for people with hearing impairments to participate.

iv) Empowered by Technology : In terms of providing basic infrastructure, the Government of India may have not achieved goals especially facilities like ramps, toilets and lifts for PwDs. However, the facility of upgrading technology and using it for their utmost benefits are quite visible in government's policy and actions. The significant contribution of technology or AI is visible in eliminating hurdle of accessibility of PwDs. It is making them capable in performing their tasks. Through this, now a blind person can write without seeing and a person with physical disability can walk with the help of electronic wheelchair. Therefore, technology has given a way to live the life of the differently abled as they want. It is not only empowering them but also making them happy and innovative.

v) Connectivity with world : Through various AI based assistive devices, all types of differently abled people have now been able to connect with people across the world at a large scale. Through facilities like email, mobile, audio etc., they have been able to discuss and hold virtual meetings with other people sitting at home. People with severe disabilities are also able to access and reach out people with the help of tools such as language translators and content readers. On the contrary, differently abled people have got more opportunities to get employment from home (Weitzman, 2023).



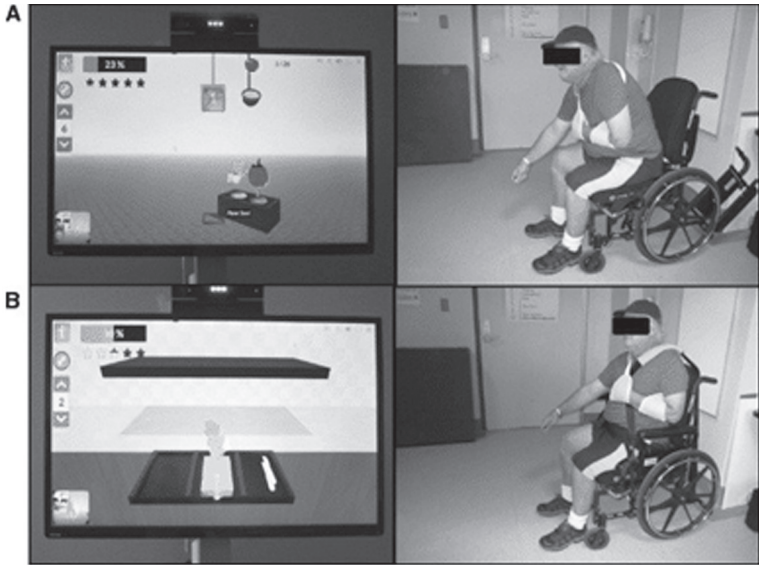
(Source: Google) Project Euphonia is a Google Research initiative working to make speech recognition software more accessible. Conversations are a daily occurrence, but talking can be a major challenge for millions of people around the world with atypical speech

vi) Opportunity of Employment : New opportunities have also been found in employment for the differently abled in the technological field. The benefits are directly being availed by them. There are various private companies which are suitable in providing virtual employment to the differently abled as per their requirement. Physically differently abled people, who are not able to go to office on regular basis, are getting maximum benefit from it. AI has provided them a new direction to become financially independent (Shenoy, 2022).

With these leverages, we can say that AI has the potential to make life of PwDs more inclusive and simpler. AI tools are resolving their basic and fundamental problems of accessibility that is the utmost reason of their no participation in public sphere. Another significance of AI is that it is very cost-effective. Based on the problems and needs of the differently abled, AI is bringing a hope to them to live independently.



Trexo Home : cerebral palsy rehabilitation at your finger tips



(Source: Google) Participant performing virtual reality training using Jintronix Rehabilitation software and a Kinect v2 camera.a Intervention game - uses leaning to challenge sitting balance b Control game: uses limited arm movements only. Participant is strapped into his chair

Conclusion

The life of PwDs is considered to be challenging in India. This is the reason why disability has been considered as stigma in society. It took many years and constant fights and movement to make society and policy makers to think PwDs beyond their physical limitations and treat them with dignity and respect. Moreover, consider them as equal citizens with equal rights. Their physical structure makes them dependent on others because of their special need and limitation of accessibility. Artificial Intelligence may have mixed impact and response from the populace, but in the area of empowering PwDs, it has remarkable benefits with less harms. AI based applications and tools are extremely beneficial and it has changed the lives of PwDs beyond expectations. It has given power to accessibility, education and jobs that will eventually give them life of dignity and self-dependent. AI has facilitated to make an inclusive society in which digital divide is prevalent. However, in terms of disability, it is exceptional and improving the lives of isolated and marginalized people with disability. Various assistive devices have also opened new avenues for the differently abled in the field of education and employment. Therefore, AI should be used more responsible and empowering PwDs with education, jobs and happy life.

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