

## **Report of the One Day Symposium on Mainstreaming the Disabled: Inclusion, Accessibility and Equity**

The One Day Symposium on Mainstreaming the Disabled: Inclusion, Accessibility and Equity, organised by the Enabling Unit for PWD, Central University of Tamil Nadu [CUTN], in association with the Department of English Studies, was conducted on 13 December 2022, in the seminar hall of the Department of Economics. The programme was conducted as part of the celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2022, on the theme “Transformative solutions for inclusive development: the role of innovation in fueling an accessible and equitable world”.

The programme commenced with a rendition of ‘Tamil Thaa Vazhthu’ by the students of the Department of Music. Dr Boopathi P., Coordinator, Enabling Unit, CUTN, delivered the welcome address, wherein he highlighted how CUTN was one of the very few universities that had established an Assistive Technological Centre for visually impaired students. The University provided accessible transport facilities to disabled students, and the University Library had almost 1 Tera-Byte worth of audiobooks for the visually impaired: a facility that students from nearby institutions were also free to utilise. The address focussed on the idea of disability and bodily difference as diversity, and how this would lead to inclusivity, accessibility, and equal opportunity for all. The talk also dwelled upon the need to make higher education more accessible and inclusive for the disabled.

Prof. M. Krishnan, Honourable Vice-Chancellor, CUTN, delivered the inaugural address. He stressed upon the need for equal respect and promised free education for disabled students at CUTN. Prof. Krishnan subsequently distributed the prizes of the poster-making and open mic. competitions that were conducted in connection with the International Day for Persons with Disabilities. Prof. Sulochana Shekhar, Registrar-in-charge, CUTN, and Dr. R.

Parameswaran, Librarian, CUTN, delivered the felicitations, following which Mr. Rajiv Rajan, Executive Director, Ektha, addressed the gathering. This was followed by the felicitation address by Dr. A. Chidambaram, Assistant Professor and Coordinator, Enabling Unit, Pondicherry University, who talked about free education for the disabled.

Ms. Sophia Malathi B., Principal, Special Higher Secondary School for the blind at Thanjavore, spoke about “Special Education of the Blind” and highlighted the role of Christian missionaries, and Louise Braille, in propagating education among blind people. She spoke about the methods that were being followed at various levels for the education of visually impaired students, and discussed the necessity of supporting disabled students’ education.

Mr. Satendra Singh IAS delivered the key note address through online mode, wherein he spoke about the challenges he had faced in his journey to becoming an IAS officer. He spoke at length about the need to have internal harmony of thought and action, and deliberated on the different ways by which people can address their insecurities. He also spoke about the role of education in liberating women from the clutches of patriarchy. The inaugural session concluded with the vote of thanks by Dr. B. J. Geetha, Associate Professor and Head, Department of English Studies.

The afternoon session began with a demonstration of assistive aids used by students with visual impairments. Mr. Rajiv Rajan gave an interactive talk on the topic “Perspective to Disability and Accessibility” wherein the questions ‘What is disability?’, ‘What is normalcy?’, and ‘What is independence?’ were discussed at length. Mr. Rajiv deliberated on pressures that disabled persons were subjected to by societal norms, and illustrated how it was physical and attitudinal barriers more than bodily impairments that made a person

disabled. The idea of normalcy, according to him, is a construct, and nobody is entirely independent; rather, everybody is interdependent.

Mr. Rajiv's session was followed by the session by Dr. A. Chidambaram, who spoke on the topic "Facilitating Strategies for the inclusion of people with disabilities". He stressed upon the need for empathy, more than sympathy, and deliberated on the distinction between impairment, disability and handicap, before going on to discuss the various educational provisions for disabled children, like assistive devices, identification and assessment camps, and ICT resources like JAWS and SAFA. The event drew to a close with the vote of thanks.

By Dr. G. Velumani, Liaison Officer, PWD, CUTN.