# WHEN RIGHTS CANNOT BE HEARD: A SOCIO-LEGAL STUDY OF LEGAL AWARENESS, EDUCATION AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE AMONG DEAF PERSONS IN DHADKHAI (SILENT VILLAGE OF INDIA, JAMMU & KASHMIR)

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**ABSTRACT**

Persons with hearing disabilities continue to face significant barriers in accessing education, legal awareness, justice, employment and effective participation in society, despite the comprehensive legal protection provided under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. This paper examines the gap between the statutory rights guaranteed to deaf persons and their practical implementation, with special reference to Dhadkai village, Doda district, Jammu and Kashmir, popularly recognised as the "Silent Village of India." The study focuses particularly on the rights relating to equality and non-discrimination, access to justice, legal capacity, inclusive education, vocational training, employment, recreation and awareness campaigns. Based on the information obtained through interaction with members of the Dhadkai community, including Mr. Mohammed Hanif, the study identifies concerns relating to inadequate educational facilities, limited legal awareness, absence of accessible communication mechanisms, lack of specialised sign-language support, limited vocational opportunities and inadequate employment prospects. The paper critically examines these grassroots realities against the legal framework and argues that the existence of rights in legislation does not automatically ensure their realisation in practice. It concludes by emphasising the need for stronger grassroots intervention through Legal Services Authorities, legal-aid clinics, advocates, law students, educational institutions, NGOs and local administration to bridge the gap between law and lived reality.

**Keywords:** Deaf Persons, Disability Rights, RPwD Act 2016, Dhadkai, Legal Awareness, Access to Justice, Inclusive Education, Sign Language, Employment, Jammu and Kashmir.

## Research Methodology

The present study adopts a mixed socio-legal approach, combining doctrinal and empirical research methods. The doctrinal component involves the analysis of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, relevant constitutional provisions, judicial decisions and other legal materials relating to disability rights, education and access to justice. The empirical component is based on interaction with members of the Dhadkai community, particularly Mr. Mohammed Hanif, a former Sarpanch and BDC member, to understand the practical challenges faced by deaf persons in accessing legal awareness, education, communication facilities and employment opportunities. The study follows a qualitative case-study approach, using primary information obtained through interaction and secondary sources, including legislation, census data, research publications and online reports. The paper examines the gap between statutory rights and their implementation at the grassroots level and offers recommendations for improving the effective realisation of disability rights.

## 1.Introduction.

Hearing is one of the most fundamental senses we rely on for conversation, for safety, for learning, and for connecting with the world around us. Yet millions of people live with varying degrees of hearing loss, often without formal recognition of their condition or access to appropriate support.[1] According to (WHO), a person who cannot hear as well as someone with normal hearing defined as hearing thresholds of 20 dB or better in both ears is said to have hearing loss. That loss may be mild, moderate, severe, or profound, and it can affect one or both ears. Over 5% of the world's population or 430 million people require rehabilitation to address their disabling hearing loss (including 34 million children). It is estimated that by 2050 over 700 million people or 1 in every 10 people will have disabling hearing loss. [2]

According to the Census of India 2011, India had approximately 26.8 million persons with disabilities, of whom approximately 5.07 million had hearing disabilities. Hearing disability constituted approximately 19% of the total disabled population. The data demonstrates the significant number of persons with hearing disabilities in India and highlights the need for

[1] Teachers Institute, "Understanding Deafness and Hard of Hearing: Medical Definitions and Classifications," *available* at: https://teachers.institute/disability-intro/understanding-deafness-hard-hearing/ (last visited on 14th august 2026).
[2] World Health Organization, "Deafness and Hearing Loss," *available* at: https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/deafness-and-hearing-loss (last visited on 14th august 2026).

accessible education, communication and institutional mechanisms for their effective participation in society.[3]

The Constitution of India, and the corpus of laws enacted under its aegis, have been so meticulously and compassionately designed that human dignity has consistently occupied the very centre of the legal framework not as an incidental value, but as a constitutional cornerstone underlying Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. Time and again, the Supreme Court of India, along with various High Courts, have reaffirmed this constitutional commitment through a consistent line of judicial pronouncements, holding that persons with disabilities including, most notably, persons who are deaf or hard of hearing must be treated on a footing of absolute equality with persons who do not suffer from any disability. *Jeeja Ghosh v. Union of India*,[4]

Courts have held that such persons are entitled to equal treatment, equal justice, and equal enjoyment of fundamental rights, and that disability, in and of itself, can never be a legitimate ground for differential or discriminatory treatment. *Vikash Kumar v. Union Public Service Commission* [5] At the same time, the doctrine of reasonable classification, permissible under Article 14 of the Constitution, has enabled the State to extend special rights, privileges, and protective legislation to persons with disabilities ;a classification that is constitutionally valid precisely because it is founded on an intelligible differentia having a rational nexus with the object sought to be achieved, namely, substantive rather than merely formal equality.[6]

## 2. Statutory Framework under Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 in India.

This constitutional and judicial philosophy is reflected more specifically in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act), which seeks to give effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and establishes a comprehensive rights-based framework for persons with disabilities. The Act expressly prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability and recognises reasonable accommodation as a means

[3] Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, Disabled Persons in India: A Statistical Profile, 2016 (Social Statistics Division, Government of India, 2017), based on Census of India 2011, *available* at: https://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Disabled_persons_in_India_2016.pdf (last visited on 15th august 2026).
[4] (2016) 7 SCC 761
[5] Centre for Journalism and Public (CJP), "Indian Laws Pertaining to Persons with Disabilities," *available* at: https://cjp.org.in/indian-laws-pertaining-to-persons-with-disabilities/ (last visited on 16th august 2026).
[6] Constitution of India, art. 14.

of ensuring the enjoyment and exercise of rights equally with others.[7]

It is pursuant to this constitutional mandate that Parliament has enacted the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which recognises twenty-one distinct categories of disability including, inter alia, hearing impairment (comprising both "deafness" and "hard of hearing," defined by specific decibel thresholds), blindness and low vision, speech and language disability, locomotor disability, dwarfism, and multiple disabilities including deafness & blindness.[8]

**Key Provisions and Rights**

The Act is built on the principle of respect for inherent dignity and individual autonomy. It is designed to ensure that disabled persons enjoy a range of rights and entitlements, including:

- Equality and Non-Discrimination: Disabled persons have the right to be treated equally in all spheres of life. The Act obliges the government and other institutions to take positive steps to prevent discrimination and to create an accessible environment.

- Access to Public Services: Provisions under the Act ensure that disabled persons have barrier-free access to public transport, healthcare, education, and other essential services. For instance, polling booths, government buildings, and transportation systems are required to be accessible.

- Education: The Act mandates inclusive education in government-funded institutions. It provides for:

    - Free and appropriate education for children with disabilities up to the age of 18 years.

    - Special reservation in higher educational institutions, with a 5% quota for disabled students.

    - Provisions for reasonable accommodation, such as the use of sign language

[7] The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, No. 49 of 2016.
[8] The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, No. 49 of 2016, (List of Disabilities); Press Information Bureau, Government of India, *"Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill 2016 Passed by Parliament," available* at: https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/printrelease.aspx?relid=155592&reg=48&lang=2 (last visited on 16th august 2026).

interpreters and alternative examination methods.

- Employment: The Act includes measures to secure employment for persons with disabilities. Employers in government and private sectors are required to provide reasonable accommodation. Furthermore, the Act prohibits any discrimination in promotion or employment based on disability. Special incentives are also provided to encourage private organisations to hire disabled persons, and there is a reservation of posts in government establishments.

- Rehabilitation: Section 27 of the Act places a responsibility on the government to promote the rehabilitation of disabled persons through education, employment, and health services. It also provides financial support to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in rehabilitation.[9]

**3.Dhadkhie Village(J&K) and the Phenomenon of Deafness**

Nestled in the mountainous region of northern India, Dadhkaie is a remote village characterized by a notably high prevalence of hearing and speech impairments among its residents. The village is situated in district Doda of, Jammu & Kashmir. It is located approximately 260 kilometres from Jammu, around 70 kilometres from Doda, and nearly 7 kilometres from the Gundoh sub-district headquarters. According to the 2011 Census, Dhadkaie village had a total population of 1,774 people, including 970 males and 804 females, living in 253 households. The sex ratio was 829 females per 1,000 males. The overall literacy rate was 44.61%, with male literacy at 63.70% and female literacy at 21.62%. The Scheduled Tribe (ST) population was 1,748.[10]

The people of Dhadkai belong to the Gujjar community and speak Gojri. This community majorly engages in agricultural, pastoral, and nomadic activities. The village is nestled in the snowy Himalayas and is also unique for being composed of almost more than half of the population with deafness. [11]This village is popularly known as the Silent village of India. On asking about the status as 'Silent village', the Ex-BDC member Muhammad Haneef replied:

[9] LawBhoomi, "Rights of Persons with Disabilities in India," *available* at: https://lawbhoomi.com/rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-india/ (last visited on 16th august 2026).
[10]Dhadkaie Village,"Dhadkaie Village in Bhalessa (Gandoh), Doda, Jammu and Kashmir," *available* at: https://villageinfo.in/jammu-and-kashmir/doda/bhalessa-gandoh/dhadkaie/ (last visited on 17th 2026).
[11] Sunita Joshi Kathuria , "The Noisy Silence of Villagers with Deafness of Dhadkai, Jammu, India: A Case Study," , *available* at: https://www.qeios.com/read/SD6BEE.3 (last visited on 17th august 2026).

There are about more than 120 present cases of hearing impairment; it was around 1931 that first ever case of hearing and speech impairment was reported back in 1931. There were only 46 cases of people with deafness until 1990. But now, almost every house in Dhadkai has at least one person with deafness condition. "The birth of a child is a very happy occasion, meant to be celebrated. But here the birth of a child leads to harassment not only for the parents but for the entire village," said Hashmiddin, a villager, Some villagers blame it on pollution in the water or air, while others believe they could be cursed, as adjoining villages have not reported any similar disorders.{But an age-old custom of marrying within the community, coupled with lack of access to medical facilities and immunization, probably led to the large number of deaf and mute cases}, says Jan Mohammed, an instructor for the deaf. “I think it is because of a genetic problem," Mohammed said. "Close relatives marry here. In the past there was no immunization given and also there is a lack of iodine and salt.” Lack of education, and hearing aids, has left many locals disillusioned about the future. “These days it is so difficult to find matches for well-educated normal girls, how will I get my deaf and dumb daughters married," says Lal Hussain, who has two daughters.[12]

Many researchers and medical team had visited Dhadkai.For years, the hearing condition was attributed to fate, environment, or lack of medical care. But a 2017 genetic study published by the Journal of Indian Speech-Language & Hearing Association offers a clearer explanation. One of the lead researchers, Sunil Raina, MD, has been working on hearing loss in the community since 2009, when he worked as an assistant professor at a medical college in Jammu. “A few patients from the village had approached us (for treatment) , and there were reports of an unusually high number of people with hearing impairment. A small group of us, led by my colleague Dr. Sushil Razdan, spent a few days in the village collecting blood samples,” says Raina.

The team hypothesized that they might find a specific genetic defect responsible, but when they tested a small, randomly selected group of people, they found multiple genes that could be responsible in some of the patients. The team had published the preliminary findings the first scientific paper on hearing loss in Dhadkai in 2012.[13]

[12] Reuters, “India’s ‘Silent’ Village of Deaf-Mutes,” *available* at: https://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyle/indias-silent-village-of-deaf-mutes-idUSTRE55T22Q/ (last visited on 21 august 2026).
[13] Global Health NOW, “India’s Silent Village Shows What Happens When Genetic Clusters Go Unaddressed,” *available* at: https://globalhealthnow.org/2026-03/indias-silent-village-shows-what-happens-when-genetic-clusters-go-unaddressed (last visited on 21 august 2026).

Dr. Sushil Razdan a renowned neurologist is a co-author of a research paper on the higher prevalence of deaf-mutism in Dhadkai said "for almost 100 years, a high prevalence of deaf-mutism has been found in the village. There is no place in the world with such a high prevalence of deaf-mutism." Dr. Razdan said that there was a myth in the village that the condition had "something to do with its water, soil, and vegetables". However, he explained that it was a genetic disease. He explained that the villagers have "non-syndromic deaf-mutism". The reason why there are many cases he pinned down to "a lot of intermarriages" or consanguinity. These are "unions between couples who share at least one common ancestor".[14]

During a with Mr. Mohammed Hanif, a former BDC council member from Dhadkai village shared some deeply moving experiences about the lives of the people in the village. According to him, when a child is born, parents in Dhadkai are not primarily concerned about whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Their greatest concern is whether the child can hear and speak. The fear they have at the time of childbirth is that the child might be born deaf or unable to speak. For them, the most important thing is that the child should be healthy and able to hear and communicate normally.

Mr. Hanif also explained that, over the years, the villagers have self-developed method what they consider an almost a reliable method way of identifying hearing and speech-related disabilities immediately after birth. He said that when a healthy child is washed after birth, the baby usually cries in a relatively thin voice, quickly opens its eyes, and responds actively. According to him, a child with a hearing or speech disability may cry in a deeper or "thicker" voice, or may not respond as quickly as a child who can hear normally. Dhadkai is predominantly a Muslim village, and, as part of the Islamic tradition, the Azaan is recited softly near a new-born baby's ear shortly after birth. Mr. Hanif said that villagers often observe the baby's response to the sound. According to their belief, a child who can hear normally responds quickly, while a child with a hearing impairment may not show an immediate response or no response at all.

Mr. Hanif also shared something deeply personal with me. He told me that he has six children three daughters and three sons and that two of his daughters and two of his sons are deaf and unable to speak. Hearing him speak about his own children and the challenges his family has

[14] The Citizen, "Football Academies Shape Professional Talent," *available* at: https://www.thecitizen.in/in-depth/football-academies-shape-professional-talent-1342072 (last visited on 21 august 2026).

experienced was deeply emotional. His words offered a very personal insight into the lives of families in Dhadkai and the concerns they face when welcoming a new child into the world. What struck me most was that, for these parents, the question of whether the new-born is a boy or a girl seems secondary; their foremost wish is simply that the child should be able to hear, speak, and live a normal life.

## 4.Rights on Paper, Realities on the Ground: A Critical Appraisal of the Implementation of the RPwD Act, 2016 in Dhadkai.

Having discussed the general features and framework of the Act, the discussion may now be narrowed to those key provisions that are particularly relevant to the present study. These provisions provide the legal framework for understanding the rights, protections, accessibility measures, educational opportunities, social inclusion and access to justice available to persons with disabilities, especially those with hearing and communication disabilities. Examining these provisions in the context of Dhadkai, Doda often referred to as the "Silent Village of India" will help in understanding more deeply the extent to which these legal safeguards are reflected in the actual lives and experiences of deaf persons in the village, as well as the challenges that may arise in accessing and effectively exercising these rights.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act) represents an important shift from a welfare-oriented approach towards a rights-based framework for persons with disabilities. The Act guarantees equality and non-discrimination under Section 3 and provides a comprehensive framework covering access to justice, legal capacity, education, vocational training, employment, recreation, sports, social participation and awareness. Sections 12 and 13 deal specifically with access to justice and legal capacity, while Sections 16 and 17 impose duties upon educational institutions and provide measures for inclusive education. Sections 18 and 19 extend the framework to adult education, vocational training and self-employment. Similarly, Sections 29 and 30 recognise participation in cultural, recreational and sporting activities, while Sections 31 to 36 address educational and employment-related entitlements. Section 37 provides for special schemes and development programmes, and Section 39 deals with awareness campaigns.

For Jammu and Kashmir, the present legal framework must also be understood in conjunction with the Jammu and Kashmir Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2021, which provide the Union Territory-level framework for implementing the RPwD Act, 2016. The Rules

expressly operate under the 2016 Act and therefore provide an important administrative link between the statutory rights recognised at the national level and their implementation within Jammu and Kashmir.

However, the existence of a comprehensive statutory framework does not necessarily guarantee its effective implementation at the grassroots. This becomes particularly evident from the information obtained during the interaction with Mr. Mohammed Hanif, a prominent member of Dhadkai who has served as Sarpanch and subsequently as a BDC member. His account provides an important local perspective through which the statutory promises of the RPwD Act can be examined against the lived realities of deaf and hearing-impaired persons in the village.

### 4.1 Legal Awareness and Access to Justice

One of the first concerns emerging from the interaction relates to the absence of dedicated legal-awareness initiatives. According to Mr. Hanif, during approximately the preceding five to six years, no specific legal-awareness camp had been organised in Dhadkai for persons with disabilities, particularly for deaf or hearing-impaired persons. Consequently, the community has had limited exposure to structured information concerning their legal rights, fundamental rights, governmental schemes, available remedies and mechanisms for approaching authorities when their rights are denied or violated.

This finding assumes particular importance in the light of Sections 37 and 39 of the RPwD Act. Section 37 provides for special schemes and development programmes, while Section 39 requires appropriate Governments to promote awareness campaigns and sensitisation programmes concerning the rights of persons with disabilities. For deaf persons, however, awareness cannot be understood merely as the physical organisation of a programme. The information must also be communicated through an accessible medium, including sign language, interpretation, captioning or other appropriate means wherever necessary.

The absence of dedicated awareness programmes therefore creates a potential gap between recognition of rights and knowledge of rights. A right which remains unknown to its beneficiary is difficult to claim, enforce or protect. Legal awareness consequently constitutes the first stage of access to justice.

The reported situation also demonstrates that access to justice cannot be understood only in

terms of crime or litigation. During the interaction, Dhadkai was described as having an almost negligible crime rate, with no prominent reported problem of drug addiction or drug abuse. Nevertheless, the absence of serious crime does not mean that questions of justice and legal protection become irrelevant. A person may need access to justice for numerous reasons unrelated to criminality such as obtaining a disability certificate, securing educational benefits, approaching a government office, seeking employment-related benefits, claiming a statutory entitlement or challenging discrimination.

This becomes even more significant when examined alongside Section 12, which specifically recognises access to justice for persons with disabilities, and Section 13, which recognises their legal capacity. According to Mr. Hanif, deaf persons in Dhadkai face considerable difficulty when they have to communicate with government authorities because there is no well-established mechanism known to the community through which they can obtain the assistance of a sign-language interpreter. The reported absence of an accessible communication mechanism may make it difficult for a deaf person to explain a grievance, understand an official response or effectively participate in a proceeding.

Thus, the problem is not simply the absence of an interpreter; it represents a broader communication barrier to justice. Formal access to a government office or court does not necessarily amount to substantive access if the person cannot communicate with the institution or understand the information being provided. Equality under Section 3 must therefore be understood in a substantive sense. Treating a deaf person identically to a hearing person, without providing the communication support required by the deaf person, may result in formal equality but not meaningful equality.

In this context, the Dhadkai experience illustrates an important distinction between "rights on paper" and "rights in practice." The legal framework recognises equality, legal capacity and access to justice, but the effective enjoyment of these rights depends upon the existence of practical communication mechanisms at the local level.

### 4.2 Education, Employment and Social Participation

Education emerged from the interaction with Mr. Hanif as the most persistent concern of the Dhadkai community. According to him, parents and members of the community have consistently emphasised the importance of education for deaf children. Yet, there is reportedly

no specially dedicated educational institution for deaf or hearing-impaired children in the village. Such children are required to study alongside other children in ordinary schools.

The local educational infrastructure further compounds the difficulty. According to the information obtained during the interaction, Dhadkai (wing A) does not have a school within the locality, while Dhadkai (wing B) has only a primary school. More importantly, even where ordinary schooling is available, the teachers are reportedly ordinary teachers without specialised arrangements for children with hearing disabilities. Consequently, the child may be physically present in the classroom without receiving education in a manner that is fully accessible to him or her.

This raises a direct question of implementation under Sections 16 and 17 of the RPwD Act. Section 16 imposes duties upon educational institutions in relation to inclusive education, while Section 17 provides specific measures for promoting and facilitating such education. Sections 31 and 32 further provide important educational entitlements concerning children with benchmark disabilities and higher educational institutions.

Inclusive education, therefore, cannot simply mean placing a deaf child in the same classroom as hearing children. Physical inclusion without communicative inclusion may result in attendance without meaningful education. For a deaf child, appropriate communication is fundamental to learning. Where teachers are not equipped to communicate with the child through suitable means, the formal availability of schooling may not translate into substantive educational inclusion.

The seriousness of this problem is reflected in the information provided by Mr. Hanif that, to his knowledge, there has not been a child from the village who has progressed beyond approximately the fifth or sixth standard, while some children have discontinued education at an even earlier stage. The experience of Helen Keller provides a powerful illustration of what accessible education can achieve. Keller, despite being both deaf and blind, received specialised educational support and went on to graduate from Radcliffe College in 1904, subsequently becoming an internationally recognised author and advocate for persons with disabilities. Her life demonstrates that disability does not by itself determine educational or intellectual potential. Rather, appropriate educational and communicative support can enable a person with disability to realise that potential. The contrast is therefore instructive for the Dhadkai study. The concern is not that deaf children lack the capacity to learn; rather, it is

whether the educational environment provides them with the necessary conditions to learn and progress.

**4.3** The educational problem subsequently extends into employment. According to Mr. Hanif, many persons with hearing disabilities have now crossed the usual employment age without acquiring sufficient educational qualifications or vocational skills, and consequently have few opportunities for employment or self-employment. This situation is directly relevant to Sections 18 and 19 of the Act, which concern adult education, vocational training and self-employment. Sections 33 to 36 further provide a framework relating to identification of posts, reservation, incentives to private employers and special employment exchanges. Section 37 additionally provides for special schemes and development programmes.

The Dhadkai experience therefore suggests the possibility of a continuing cycle of disadvantage: inadequate educational support may lead to early discontinuation of education; limited education may restrict vocational opportunities; lack of vocational preparation may reduce employment prospects; and unemployment may increase economic dependence upon family members.

The problem is not restricted to education and employment. According to the interaction, there are also no significant specially organised recreational activities for deaf children in the village. This concern is relevant to Sections 29 and 30, which recognise participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sporting activities. Disability rights must therefore be understood as extending beyond survival, schooling and employment. A dignified life also requires opportunities for social interaction, recreation, sports and community participation.

Taken together, the information obtained from Dhadkai reveals an interconnected implementation gap rather than a single isolated deficiency. The absence of dedicated legal-awareness programmes may limit knowledge of rights; the absence of accessible communication mechanisms may hinder access to authorities and justice; inadequate educational support may contribute to early discontinuation of education; and limited vocational and employment opportunities may subsequently result in economic dependence.

The legislative framework of the RPwD Act, 2016 is considerably broader than merely providing formal recognition to persons with disabilities. It seeks to create a continuum of inclusion—from awareness and equality, to education and legal capacity, and ultimately to

employment, recreation and independent participation in society. The Dhadkai case study, based on the information obtained through the interaction with Mr. Hanif, indicates that the principal challenge lies not necessarily in the absence of legal provisions but in the translation of statutory entitlements into accessible institutions and services at the grassroots level.

The central lesson emerging from Dhadkai may therefore be stated simply: a right written in legislation becomes meaningful only when the person for whom it is created can know it, communicate it, claim it and actually enjoy it. The RPwD Act provides the legal architecture; the experience of Dhadkai raises the critical question of whether that architecture has been adequately converted into lived reality.

In this sense, the Dhadkai experience does not merely reveal a gap between law and implementation. It reveals a deeper gap between legal inclusion and lived inclusion. The challenge for disability law is consequently not only to confer rights upon deaf persons, but to create the educational, communicative, institutional and economic conditions through which those rights can be exercised with dignity and equality.

## 5. From Grievances to Reform: Community Demands and the Way Forward

The interaction with Mr. Mohammed Hanif did not end with the identification of existing difficulties. Towards the conclusion of the conversation, he was asked about the measures and reforms that, in his view, could improve the lives of deaf and hearing-impaired persons in Dhadkai. His response was particularly significant because it shifted the discussion from the identification of gaps in implementation towards possible solutions. His suggestions primarily centred around employment, legal awareness, education and accessible communication, thereby corresponding closely with the rights and obligations already recognised under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

The foremost concern expressed by Mr. Hanif was the creation of sustainable employment and livelihood opportunities. According to him, a considerable number of deaf persons in Dhadkai have now crossed the conventional age of schooling or employment because they were unable to obtain adequate education at the appropriate age. Many are reportedly either minimally educated or have discontinued their education at an early stage. Consequently, they face difficulty in securing employment and remain dependent upon their families for their basic needs. This dependency not only affects their economic independence but may also place an

additional financial and emotional burden upon their families.

Mr. Hanif suggested that the Government, either directly or through NGOs, private organisations or other appropriate agencies, should organise employment camps, skill-development programmes and livelihood opportunities specifically for persons with disabilities. Such initiatives could identify the skills and interests of individual beneficiaries and connect them with suitable employment or self-employment opportunities. For example, girls and women could be provided vocational training in areas such as tailoring, suit stitching and other locally viable skills, enabling them to generate an independent source of income.

This suggestion is consistent with the legislative objective of Sections 18 and 19 of the RPwD Act, which recognise adult education, vocational training and self-employment, and with Sections 34 and 37 concerning employment and special schemes and development programmes. The emphasis should therefore not be limited to providing employment after a person has acquired formal educational qualifications. For persons who have already crossed the conventional age of education, vocational rehabilitation and skill-based livelihood programmes may provide a second opportunity for economic participation.

The underlying principle is simple: disability does not signify the absence of ability. A person's inability to hear cannot, by itself, determine his or her intellectual capacity, creativity or vocational potential. As Helen Keller's life demonstrates, disability may create barriers, but appropriate opportunities and support can enable individuals to develop remarkable capabilities. Her own educational and professional achievements remain an enduring illustration of the proposition that disability should not be allowed to define the limits of human potential.

The second major demand concerned the regular organisation of legal-awareness programmes. Mr. Hanif emphasised the need for the Government to organise awareness camps periodically so that deaf persons and their families become aware of their legal rights, governmental schemes, educational opportunities, employment reservations and available remedies. This demand directly corresponds with Section 39 of the RPwD Act, which provides for awareness campaigns and sensitisation programmes concerning the rights of persons with disabilities.

Such programmes, however, should not merely be conducted in the conventional manner. For a community consisting significantly of persons with hearing disabilities, awareness

programmes must themselves be accessible. The presence of qualified sign-language interpreters, appropriate visual material, written communication and other accessible methods would be essential to ensure that the beneficiaries are not merely invited to an awareness programme but are actually able to understand and participate in it.

The third major demand was the provision of adequate and specialised educational facilities. Mr. Hanif emphasised the need for a dedicated school or an appropriate educational arrangement for deaf children, together with properly trained teachers capable of communicating with them. This demand directly corresponds with Sections 16 and 17 of the RPwD Act concerning inclusive education and the specific measures required to facilitate it. The objective should not simply be to place deaf children in ordinary classrooms but to ensure that they receive meaningful and accessible education.

A particularly important aspect of this recommendation is the availability of trained sign-language interpreters and instructors. As the earlier findings indicate, the absence of an established communication mechanism creates difficulties not only in education but also when deaf persons approach government offices or other authorities. The appointment or availability of appropriately trained interpreters could therefore address several problems simultaneously—education, legal awareness, access to justice and communication with public authorities.

The demands emerging from the interaction may consequently be understood not as isolated requests but as interconnected components of disability inclusion. Employment cannot be separated from education; education cannot be separated from communication; communication cannot be separated from access to justice; and legal awareness cannot be separated from the ability to exercise rights.

The recommendations emerging from Dhadkai may therefore be broadly understood as a call for a shift from passive recognition of disability rights to active implementation of those rights. The community does not merely require the existence of statutory provisions. It requires institutions, trained personnel, accessible communication, vocational opportunities and sustained governmental intervention capable of converting those provisions into practical benefits.

The experience of Dhadkai thus provides an important concluding lesson for the present study:

the ultimate test of disability legislation is not how comprehensively rights are written in the statute book, but how effectively those rights reach the person standing at the last mile of implementation. For deaf persons in a geographically remote community, meaningful inclusion requires taking the law beyond the pages of legislation and into the classroom, workplace, government office and everyday life.

## Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the recognition of disability rights in legislation is only the beginning of the process of inclusion. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides an extensive legal framework guaranteeing equality, access to justice, education, vocational training, employment, communication and social participation. However, the experience of Dhadkai reveals a considerable gap between statutory entitlement and its actual realisation at the grassroots level. The absence of regular legal-awareness programmes, specialised educational facilities, adequate vocational opportunities and accessible communication mechanisms, as reflected in the interaction with members of the community, indicates that legal recognition alone cannot ensure substantive equality for deaf persons.

In the researcher's view, effective implementation must therefore begin at the grassroots. Institutions such as the Jammu and Kashmir Legal Services Authority and District Legal Services Authorities, together with legal-aid clinics established in law universities and colleges, advocates, legal-services volunteers and law students, can play a meaningful role in bridging the gap between law and the community. Regular legal-awareness camps, accessible legal-aid services, interaction with deaf persons through appropriate sign-language support, and systematic documentation of their educational, employment and communication-related difficulties can help bring their concerns before the competent authorities.

Law students and legal-aid clinics can particularly contribute through field-based legal literacy programmes and empirical research, thereby making disability rights a practical component of legal education rather than merely a subject of statutory study. Such initiatives can also generate reliable grassroots data, identify implementation failures and place evidence-based recommendations before the Government and local administration.

The Dhadkai experience ultimately demonstrates that a right becomes meaningful only when the person entitled to it knows it, understands it and is able to claim it. The responsibility of

implementing disability legislation, therefore, cannot rest exclusively with the Government at the higher administrative level. It requires active participation from legal institutions, local authorities, civil society, educational institutions and the legal profession. A sustained partnership between these stakeholders can transform Dhadkai from a case of unfulfilled statutory promises into an example of how law, legal education and community participation can work together to make disability rights a lived reality.

Thus, the real measure of the success of the RPwD Act, 2016 should not be the number of rights contained within its provisions, but the extent to which those rights reach the last person, in the last village, and enable that person to live with dignity, equality and independence.