

## MOVING FROM 'DISABILITY' TO 'SPECIAL ABILITY' IS THE LANGUAGE OF AN INCLUSIVE TODAY AND TOMORROW, WRITES MINU BUDHIA



This article actually began as an email. With the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (sic) celebrated on December 3, we received a collaboration request for an event related to the day. And upon reading it in detail, something in me fired up immediately. The email had used the term "persons with disabilities" as per United Nations & World Health Organization nomenclature. "Disabilities"? Twenty-five years into a new millennium and on the brink of 2026, we're still using "disabilities"? "Dis" means "lack of" and "ability" means "capacity/skill". In common, everyday understanding, "disability" is too easily mistaken for "no ability" or "no capacity" to do something. And that is definitely not the case for specially-abled individuals. They have the ability to not only learn, but also do several things, provided they are taught in special ways using language and methods they can comprehend. Like any person, the degree, depth and breadth of learning will naturally differ according to the capacity of the individual.

For example, imagine you are putting together a piece of DIY furniture yourself. The languages you understand are English, Hindi and Bengali. When you open the manual, you find that not only is it written in a foreign language, it has no pictures either. Everyone you ask for help only speaks that foreign language and no one is able to draw the assembly process, which would bypass the need for any written/spoken language at all. Then finally one person shares an illustration or speaks to you in a language you comprehend, and you are able to complete the DIY. It takes you longer, you make mistakes, correct them, restart, but at the end, you ARE ABLE to put together the piece of furniture.

For decades, the internationally accepted term "persons with disabilities" has held the weight of legal recognition. It has been central to human-rights progress and to securing much-needed

respect and protection that were denied for far too long. "Persons with disabilities" was coined around the 90s and the term was revolutionary when introduced. It shifted the conversation from pity to rights, from charity to access, from hiding away to inclusion. It has anchored decades of legal progress and human-rights work.

Yet the moment we stop and ask what that phrase emphasises, we see why a next step in our language is overdue. The language around inclusion has significantly evolved. Terms like "disabled" or "disability" tend to emphasise limitations, whereas "differently abled" or "specially abled" reflect the strengths, capabilities, and dignity of the individuals we are celebrating.

As a mother of a special needs child, the founder of a special needs school and mental health clinic, and of course a psychotherapist, I have been actively working towards creating a progressive, ability-first perspective for over a decade and a half. I believe that the words we use to name individuals, communities and issues don't just describe reality, they create it. They colour how we see the world, the people who are "different", and most importantly, open or close doors of access.

Today, it is time to consider whether an "ability-first" lens can take us one step closer to dignity, acceptance and opportunity. This is not a matter of a cosmetic wording change. It is a matter of how human potential is treated.

Focusing on the person allows society to view the difficulties of the differently abled differently — not just as something that affects

a minority, but an every-person issue where health conditions and environmental factors influence the degree of "disability". The differently abled lead a different life not only because of their physical/intellectual issues alone, but also due to inaccessible/non-inclusive environments and social barriers.

### WHY RETHINK THE LANGUAGE NOW?

**Human Dignity:** Words like "disabled" tend to prime society to imagine limitations first. An ability-first term shifts the spotlight to strengths, skills and potential. Because inclusion is about dignity, it is not a favour, but should be the norm. When people are seen through their capacity rather than their challenges, society shifts its viewpoint on the specially-abled from burdens to contributing members of society. Employers begin to see what someone can bring to the table, educators adjust expectations regarding students' success, and the government focuses on investing in capability-building rather than only welfare.

**Acceptance Grows When Language Evolves:** We have seen how terminology can transform attitudes. When the outdated term "mental retardation" was replaced globally with "intellectual disability", families, educators and society at large opened up. Conversations deepened. Acceptance increased. Support-seeking became less frightening. The condition did not change, but the harshness of the label did, and this reduced stigma in a way no awareness campaign alone could have achieved.

*Alag Hai, Galat Naht:* At

the heart of this evolution is a simple truth we know deeply in our culture: *alag hai, galat naht*. The differently abled are only different, not less, not wrong. And if something is simply different, why should "normal" be the yardstick for value, ability or opportunity? "Normal" is merely what is statistically common, not what is superior. Once we stop treating "normal" as the automatic benchmark, we free ourselves from the hierarchies that have shaped discrimination for too long.

### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LANGUAGE LIFTS INSTEAD OF LIMITS?

**Better Mental Health of Differently Abled Individuals & Families:** Words have psychological weight as people internalise the labels used around them. Negative labels can reinforce social anxiety, withdrawal and low confidence. A deficit-heavy term can embed shame so deeply that it affects daily life. But ability-first language helps individuals see themselves as valued and capable, not just defined by what society perceives as lacking. This shift reduces internalised shame, creates emotional safety, and improves mental well-being. People and families feel seen for who they are, not defined by their differences.

**Encourages Families to Seek Help Earlier:** Language with stigma attached often delays action. Families fear labels more than they fear the challenge itself. When the terminology is humane and non-threatening, they approach assessments with openness. Early intervention, which is so crucial to development, becomes possible simply because the words are kinder.

**Reshapes Classroom Expectations and Experience:** Educators' expectations are influenced by the words they use. Ability-first language prompts teachers to search for strengths, adapt learning methods and design more inclusive classrooms. It shifts the educational environment from accommodation to empowerment. It also makes for a friendlier classroom environment as peers see their differently-abled classmates as belonging to the same academic, vocational and sporting spaces.

**Transforms Charity into Partnership:** When language focuses on ability, people are viewed as collaborators, not dependents or beneficiaries. Organisations begin designing programmes with community members rather than for them. This shift from benevolence to partnership is one of the most

powerful cultural changes inclusive language can spark.

**Breaks Generational Stigma:** Within families, especially in culturally traditional households, older terminology has carried enormous stigma. Updated language becomes a bridge across generations. It invites conversation instead of silence, acceptance instead of fear. Families evolve, and with them, the child's environment evolves too.

**The Way Forward: A Dual-Track Approach:** We can take baby steps by using "persons with disabilities" in legal, medical, educational formal documents, and ability-first terms in campaigns, event names or awareness initiatives. When accompanied by education and support, this approach avoids legal confusion while allowing cultural progress.

### MYTH VS FACT: CLEARING THE FOG AROUND LANGUAGE CHANGE

**Myth:** Ability-first language hides the challenges.

**Fact:** It doesn't hide them; it reframes them without focusing on the negative. Support needs remain the same, but dignity increases.

**Myth:** It is disrespectful to ignore the UN-approved term.

**Fact:** Official documents must use standard terminology, but public communication can evolve based on community preference. Even UN guidelines acknowledge the need for clarity and cultural sensitivity.

**Myth:** Everyone in the differently-abled community prefers one type of language.

**Fact:** There is diversity within communities. Some prefer identity-first, some person-first, some ability-first. Respect lies in offering a choice, not in imposing uniformity.

**Myth:** Changing language is superficial.

**Fact:** Language influences confidence, access, policy and societal attitudes. There is nothing superficial about dignity.

### WHY THIS MATTERS FOR ALL OF US

Language is one of the most quiet, subtle, yet powerful tools of cultural transformation. When we shift language thoughtfully, we shift society. We build classrooms that are more compassionate, workplaces that see potential rather than limitation, and families that embrace difference with pride rather than fear.

Today, we stand in a moment in time where inclusion is not just about accommodation, but a celebration. And the words we consciously choose today will decide our tomorrow. People evolve. Society evolves. It is high time that the definition of DIGNITY evolves.

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#### Dos and Don'ts

**DO:** Ask people how they want to be referred to. Use ability-first or dignity-first language in public-facing communication and explain the

reasoning. For educational, legal and medical documents, maintain the required official terminology.

**DON'T:** Use "normal" as a standard or

comparison point as there is no universal "normal". Impose terminology on communities without consultation. Treat language change as a PR exercise without backing it with tangible inclusive policies.

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