Pallavan Learning Systems

RITINJALI

CENTRE FOR ESCALATION OF PEACE | CEP

PALLAVANJALI

JOURNEY OF INCLUSION:

Through the Voices of Families

20 AUGUST 2026

WEBINAR REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Pallavan Learning Systems, in collaboration with Centre for Escalation of Peace, Ritinjali and Pallavanjali, organised the webinar “Journey of Inclusion: Through the Voices of Families” on 20 August 2026. The webinar brought together family advocates representing different lived experiences of disability: a mother and long-standing autism advocate, a father and single parent of a daughter with cerebral palsy, and a sibling of an adult with an intellectual disability.

The session approached inclusion through the experiences of families rather than only through institutional policies or professional practice. It recognised the family as the first unit of society and the first system of care and support available to an individual. The session opened by reflecting on how the strength and well-being of families influence society as a whole. When families are adequately supported, individuals are better placed to thrive; when families supporting persons with special needs struggle, those pressures are eventually reflected in the wider social system. The discussion therefore asked how far society has travelled towards inclusion, where the gaps remain, and how families, institutions and communities can collectively work towards narrowing them.

The webinar moved across the life course, beginning with diagnosis and early acceptance and extending to family relationships, caregiving, schooling, adulthood, employment, healthcare, advocacy and long-term support. The personal experiences shared during the session illustrated that inclusion is not achieved at a single moment. The needs of individuals and families continually evolve, requiring systems and communities to evolve alongside them.

A recurring theme was that inclusion must extend beyond physical presence. Being admitted to a school, being offered an internship or being permitted to enter a public space does not automatically create belonging. Meaningful inclusion requires institutions and communities to recognise individual agency, understand different needs and create opportunities for participation, dignity and purpose.

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ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Moderator:

Neena Wagh

Founder, ALAP – Assisted Living for Autistic Persons

Founder, ALFOC – Assisted Living Facility Organisations Consortium

Neena Wagh is a parent, advocate, and changemaker who has been actively involved in autism advocacy for over two decades. As the mother of a 26-year-old son on the autism spectrum, her work has been shaped by lived experience and by the question, “What after us?”

Driven by the need to create sustainable support systems for autistic adults, she founded ALAP – Assisted Living for Autistic Persons, which focuses on supported living solutions for young adults on the autism spectrum. Recognising the need for greater structure, collaboration, and standards within the assisted living sector, she also founded ALFOC – Assisted Living Facility Organisations Consortium, bringing together organisations working in this space across India.

Neena is a regular speaker and writer on inclusion, disability rights, and the rights of persons with disabilities. Alongside her advocacy work, she is also a poet, playwright, and Hindi translator.

Panelist:

Pooja Sharma

Founder & CEO, The Sarvodya Collective

Pooja Sharma is the Founder and CEO of The Sarvodya Collective, an organisation working to build informed, enabling, and inclusive communities around persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities in India. Drawing on her lived experience as a

sibling, she focuses on cultivating active allies across schools, workplaces, and communities, and on shifting attitudes from awareness towards deeper acceptance and meaningful inclusion.

Before founding The Sarvodya Collective, Pooja spent over a decade working in corporate strategy and portfolio management with organisations including Pearson plc and Central Square Foundation. She has also served as a trustee of The Bell Foundation, as a school governor, and in advisory roles with social impact organisations.

Her work is grounded in the belief that inclusion is shaped not only by policy, but through everyday choices that enable people to be seen, accepted, supported, and included as equal members of society.

Panelist:

Raman Bhushan

Independent Data Science & Analytics Consultant

Parent Advocate and Primary Caregiver

Raman Bhushan is the primary caregiver to his daughter with cerebral palsy, and his lived experience as a parent has shaped his understanding of care, development, dignity, and quality of life. His primary focus has been on supporting his daughter's development and creating the conditions that enable her to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Professionally, Raman is an independent consultant with close to 30 years of experience in functional and business leadership roles across analytics and data science. He has extensive experience in designing and implementing data science solutions for leading global and Indian corporations, as well as government and social sector organisations. Raman brings together his professional experience and personal journey as a caregiver.

Panelist:

Merry Barua

Founder-Director, Action For Autism

Director, National Centre for Autism

Merry Barua is an activist, special educator, parent advocate, and one of the pioneers of the autism movement in India. She began her work at a time when awareness, understanding, and support for autism were extremely limited, and has since played a significant role in advancing autism awareness, education, diagnostics, training, advocacy, and policy in the country.

As Director of Action For Autism, Merry has worked extensively with autistic individuals, families, educators, and professionals, helping to strengthen services and support systems while encouraging the growth of parent-led initiatives across India. She is also a writer, teacher, trainer, counsellor, and advocate, and is an Ashoka Fellow.

Her work reflects a longstanding commitment to building an inclusive society that challenges narrow definitions of “normal” and recognises the rights, strengths, individuality, and potential of autistic persons. She has received national and international recognition for her contribution to the field.

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WEBINAR SESSION

Beginning the Journey: Recognition, Diagnosis and Acceptance

The discussion began by exploring the earliest moments when families recognised that their child or sibling might experience life differently.

A Father's Journey towards Acceptance

The father and single parent on the panel shared that his daughter was born prematurely, at approximately 31–32 weeks and remained in hospital for almost a month because of medical complications. Although the family was initially apprehensive, there was no clear indication of what the future would hold. It was only over the following year and a half that developmental differences became more apparent. These included delays in crawling and walking as well as difficulties related to vision.

He acknowledged that personal acceptance took considerably longer. During his daughter's early childhood, he remained deeply involved in his corporate career

while his wife assumed the role of primary caregiver. The family concentrated on securing the best possible therapy, counselling, education and other interventions and continued to hope that the difficulties might eventually be overcome.

It was only six to eight years later that he began to recognise that while his daughter could continue to make significant progress, there were certain limitations that would remain. The family, therefore, needed to stop thinking exclusively in terms of overcoming the condition and begin building a fulfilling life around the realities that existed.

He identified his daughter's transition from a pram to a wheelchair as a particularly powerful moment of realisation. A young child in a pram could still be perceived simply as a baby. Moving into a wheelchair made the difference much more visible and marked, for him, the point at which he fully understood that his daughter's life would follow a different trajectory.

A Mother's Experience of Diagnosis Without Information

The mother and autism advocate described receiving her son's diagnosis in the 1980s, when information about autism was extremely limited. Her son was almost five at the time. Even before the diagnosis, she had sensed that something was different. However, people around her repeatedly reassured her that nothing was wrong and suggested that she was simply an anxious mother. This led her initially to believe that the difficulty lay with her own parenting. She saw other parents appearing to manage their children and wondered whether she was somehow failing to manage hers.

The diagnosis itself did not immediately provide clarity. She had never heard the word autism before, the doctor could offer little detailed guidance, and there was no internet through which families could quickly access information. The limited

material she initially found even suggested that the mother was partly responsible for the child's autism.

It took approximately a month and a half for her to obtain a useful book. She described the period before that as one of complete uncertainty: she was ready to act and wanted to help her son, but did not know what to do. Access to reliable information allowed her to begin understanding the condition and moving forward. Her experience highlighted the importance of timely, accurate and accessible information for families, particularly in the earliest period following diagnosis.

Growing Up as a Sibling

The sibling advocate offered a different perspective. Her middle brother has an intellectual disability, and because he was already part of the family when she was born, she described disability as something that had always been part of her everyday life.

There was no formal moment when the family sat the siblings down and explained that their brother was different. Instead, she gradually became aware through everyday experiences. She watched her mother conduct speech therapy with him at night and assist him during meals because of early motor difficulties. These interventions were simply integrated into family routines.

One particular childhood memory remained with her. While visiting the school where her mother taught and her brother studied, she saw him in a class with younger children. Because he had not been placed in an age-appropriate class, he was visibly taller than the other students and even struggled to fit comfortably into the classroom furniture.

As a young child herself, she remembered wondering whether the situation was right and how her brother might feel. The experience became an early recognition

that while difference felt normal within the family, institutions were not necessarily structured around the needs or dignity of the individual.

These early experiences also highlighted the sense of isolation that families may encounter when beginning their own journeys. Parents may initially feel extremely isolated and believe that they are the only family confronting such circumstances. Sharing lived experiences can therefore help families recognise that they are not alone.

Caregiving Must Be a Shared Responsibility

The discussion then examined how caregiving responsibility is distributed within families.

The father reflected on his own experience during the first 15 years of his daughter's life. While he focused largely on his career and on ensuring financial security, his wife took primary responsibility for everyday caregiving.

The work of raising a child with special needs cannot reasonably be left to one parent.

Looking back, he recognised that one of the most important lessons from his experience was that the work of raising a child with special needs cannot reasonably be left to one parent. Securing good therapy, education and financial stability is important, but it cannot replace participation in the continuous physical and emotional work involved in supporting a child. If he could revisit those years, he said he would have been much more directly involved in his daughter's upbringing. The family was also living as a nuclear household, with limited access to an extended family support system. This increased the pressure placed on the primary caregiver.

The conversation, therefore, emphasised that caregiving needs to be regarded as a shared parental and family responsibility. The conventional division in which one parent earns while the other becomes the principal caregiver may create considerable strain, particularly when care is intensive and lifelong.

Single Parenthood and the Impact on Professional Life

The discussion moved into the realities of balancing caregiving with work. After becoming a single parent, the father faced a significant professional decision. At the time, he was a full-time partner in a major professional services firm and his work involved travelling three or four days every week. Continuing at the same intensity while becoming the primary caregiver was no longer practical. He therefore stepped away from that role and moved into independent consultancy, choosing to work with only one or two clients at a time so that he could balance professional commitments with his daughter's needs. He did not describe the decision with regret, but acknowledged that it altered his professional trajectory considerably.

An important dimension of this transition was the loss of intellectual stimulation. Moving from a fast-paced environment involving complex assignments and different clients into a much smaller professional role meant finding new ways to remain intellectually engaged. This highlighted a less frequently discussed aspect of caregiving. Supporting caregivers involves not only providing time or financial flexibility, but also recognising their own professional identities, aspirations and need for intellectual and personal growth.

The Role of Workplaces in Supporting Families

The discussion expanded to what organisations can do to support employees who are parents or caregivers of persons with disabilities. The father shared that he had personally experienced considerable understanding from colleagues and had been able to continue working for a period because his mother was also present to support his daughter. However, he acknowledged the tension between personal responsibilities and

organisational performance structures. Employees with substantial caregiving responsibilities may sometimes have to reconsider expectations around the pace of career advancement. This did not mean that organisations should remain passive. The conversation emphasised the need for formal policies that support caregivers through flexibility and appropriate workplace provisions.

It was observed that many large multinational companies and major Indian organisations may already have policies of this nature, while mid-sized businesses often do not. Since such companies employ a considerable proportion of the workforce, the absence of supportive policies can leave caregivers particularly vulnerable to career disadvantage and discrimination.

It was suggested that organisations could consider more structured support for employees with caregiving responsibilities, thereby allowing them to give necessary attention to family needs without being forced to withdraw completely from professional life.

A Sibling's Decision to Return and Contribute

The sibling advocate reflected on her decision to return to India after building a successful career in the United Kingdom. She clarified that while she had begun her professional life in banking, immediately before returning to India she had been working with a major education company. She was professionally settled and happy, but reached a stage at which she wanted to be physically closer to her brothers.

Growing up with a brother with an intellectual disability and a mother who worked as a special educator had also created a longstanding desire to contribute to this field. As the siblings became adults, differences in their life opportunities became increasingly visible. While the other siblings could pursue employment, relationships, mobility and other conventional adult milestones, comparable opportunities were not readily available to their brother. This growing awareness of unfairness was one of the factors

that led her to want to create change. Her father was also ageing and unwell, further strengthening the need to return to India and be closer to the family.

The transition itself was challenging. She spoke of returning from a highly organised environment to the everyday unpredictability and infrastructural difficulties of life in India. She also faced repeated questions from family, friends and colleagues about why she had left a successful career and what exactly she intended to do.

At that point, she did not have a fully developed plan. She simply knew that she wanted to return, immerse herself in the field and begin contributing. She reflected that family members who make significant personal or professional changes in order to take on care or advocacy responsibilities should not constantly be required to justify their motivations. Such experiences become formative parts of identity and deserve to be understood as legitimate life choices rather than deviations from conventional success.

From Personal Experience to Advocacy

The mother and autism advocate described how her own family experience gradually grew into wider advocacy.

Before her son was diagnosed, his extremely high levels of activity frequently led other people to regard her as a poor parent who simply could not discipline or manage her child. Once the diagnosis provided some understanding, she realised that returning to her previous career after a five-year break was unlikely to happen in the way she had originally imagined.

She did not initially plan to establish an organisation. Her primary desire was to ensure that more people understood autism and disability. She began writing articles for newspapers and magazines and undertaking small awareness-building initiatives. The organisation she later established emerged organically from this work. She recalled having very little knowledge about the formalities of starting a not-for-profit organisation and learning the registration process herself with guidance from friends.

The early years were therefore not based on a predetermined organisational roadmap. Each new step emerged from an immediate need and the conviction that something had to be done. She also acknowledged that her own extended family had been largely supportive. Through her professional work, however, she had encountered many mothers and families who faced intense criticism and judgment.

Her central observation was that when the family is distressed, the individual with the disability is inevitably affected. Supporting families is therefore inseparable from supporting persons with special needs themselves.

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Changing Family Structures and Shrinking Support Networks

The moderator then reflected on broader changes in family structures. In earlier decades, larger family networks often included grandparents, several siblings and extended relatives. Increasingly, families have become nuclear, with fewer children and fewer relatives living together.

The conversation also acknowledged the strain that intensive caregiving can place on relationships and the growing reality of single-parent households. As traditional support structures shrink, relying exclusively on the immediate family becomes increasingly difficult.

This led to a wider discussion about the need to rethink what is meant by family and community. Supported and assisted living models were presented as one response to

the long-term question of how individuals can continue to receive companionship, care and opportunities when parents grow older or are no longer able to provide daily support. The moderator suggested that society needs to strengthen networks through which people, organisations and communities can become part of one another's support systems rather than leaving individual families to manage in isolation.

Inclusive Education Begins with Admission

The conversation then turned to schooling. The sibling advocate emphasised that schools, like families, are foundational social institutions. India already has legislation and education policies supporting inclusion, but children with disabilities continue to be refused admission.

The first priority, she argued, is to ensure that children are allowed through the school gate.

When children with disabilities are excluded from school, they lose far more than academic instruction. They also lose everyday opportunities for socialisation, friendships and participation in ordinary childhood experiences. Exclusion also affects children without disabilities. If children grow up without meaningful interaction with persons who are different from them, they lose the opportunity to understand diversity through lived experience. Inclusion then remains a theoretical concept rather than part of everyday life.

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Building Teacher Capacity and Supporting Different Learners

Admission alone, however, was recognised as insufficient. Schools must develop the ability to respond to individual learners. The discussion highlighted the shortage of special educators, large class sizes and the heavy emphasis placed on syllabus completion and academic achievement within the Indian education system. These pressures can leave teachers with little opportunity to understand what individual learners actually require.

The panelist argued that this should not be understood only as a disability issue. Every child learns differently. Creating more space for teachers to offer personalised attention would therefore improve learning for all students.

She also acknowledged that inclusion cannot be transformed overnight. What has changed positively in recent years is that the conversation is becoming more visible. Policy developments and conferences on inclusive education have created opportunities for school leaders and specialists to examine the challenges more openly. One particularly important development is the creation of spaces where schools can admit what they find difficult. Institutions cannot solve challenges they are not permitted to acknowledge. Honest discussion about what schools currently struggle to support is therefore necessary before practical solutions can be developed.

Children, Difference and the Development of Bias

It was asked whether young children might naturally be more accepting of diversity before they absorb social prejudices. The discussion suggested that young children frequently demonstrate considerable openness towards difference.

The sibling advocate explained that her organisation begins working with children at approximately eight years of age. At younger ages, children frequently play across social divisions without attaching the same significance to them that adults do.

The moderator referred to an example involving pairs of children with visible differences, including race and disability. When asked what differences they noticed between one another, the children focused on ordinary preferences and circumstances rather than the physical or developmental differences that adults might immediately notice.

The exchange raised a wider question about how much bias is transferred from one generation to the next. The panelist emphasised that simply telling children to be inclusive is not enough. Their natural openness needs to be translated into practical understanding and action. This is particularly important before adolescence, when young people begin forming tighter social groups and may gravitate towards those perceived as similar.

Schools can support inclusive attitudes, but families also play a decisive role. Children may return home from inclusive school environments and receive messages discouraging friendships with classmates because of disability, appearance, socioeconomic background or other differences.

Thus, inclusion cannot be cultivated by schools while being contradicted at home. Families and schools both shape the attitudes children carry into adulthood.

Employment: The Difference Between Exposure and Real Opportunity

The conversation moved from education to employment and vocational preparation for autistic adults. The mother and autism advocate described employment outcomes as challenging. Although her organisation had successfully enabled many adults to undertake internships, only a relatively small number had moved into sustained employment.

She specifically cautioned against treating internships as equivalent to employment. Internships provide valuable experience, but a short-term placement cannot be presented as evidence of meaningful long-term workforce inclusion. The key challenge

remains creating jobs in which individuals are not only recruited but are able to remain, contribute and belong.

Visibility, Public Spaces and Normalising Disability

The discussion connected employment with the wider issue of social visibility.
Many families remain uncomfortable taking family members with disabilities into public spaces because of staring, judgment or misunderstanding. The panelist strongly encouraged families to resist this tendency towards withdrawal. Public spaces belong equally to persons with disabilities.

Visibility therefore becomes part of inclusion. People cannot understand or accept populations that remain invisible to them.

If citizens do not regularly encounter people using wheelchairs, persons with cerebral palsy, autistic individuals and others with disabilities in ordinary social spaces, disability will continue to be perceived as something outside mainstream life.

Visibility therefore becomes part of inclusion. People cannot understand or accept populations that remain invisible to them.

Awareness as a Systemic Priority

Lack of awareness emerged as one of the most persistent barriers to inclusion. Many people may recognise individual disability labels but still have little understanding of what disability means, how different conditions affect everyday life or what kinds of support individuals and families require.

It was also observed that disability conferences and events frequently involve participants who are already familiar with the field. In effect, advocacy sometimes

remains within a community of people who are already convinced of its importance. Meaningful change requires awareness to reach people outside the disability sector — the ordinary citizen, teacher, employer, administrator and healthcare professional.

The panel also discussed the gap between rights on paper and rights in practice. Government provisions may exist to protect employees caring for children with disabilities — for example, around transfers to locations where appropriate services are available—but families can still be forced to fight for these entitlements because officials do not understand why such provisions matter.

The discussion therefore called for sustained public awareness campaigns and stronger investment in disability awareness. Similar gaps exist within government schools. Children with disabilities may be enrolled, yet teachers may have very little knowledge of how to support them effectively. Teacher training must therefore accompany policy requirements for inclusion.

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Q&A AND INTERACTIVE REFLECTIONS

The webinar concluded with questions from the audience that brought the conversation back to some of its central themes: belonging, the progress of advocacy, the larger meaning of inclusion, and the continuing challenges families encounter in creating meaningful opportunities for persons with special needs.

Q 1: Can you share a moment when you felt, "My child truly belongs here"?

A. Neena Wagh: For me, I think that moment came the day I decided that I did not have to explain or give anyone a reason for my child's existence in this world. He has an equal right to be here, just like you and me. He is not the sum total of a label that has been given to him. He is an individual and he has his own agency. I think that was the moment when I truly felt that my child belonged. In many ways, my own journey of inclusion started from there. When we expect inclusion from the world, it also has to begin with us and with how we see and accept our own children.

Q 2: How has the journey of advocacy and inclusion evolved from the 1990s to now?

A: Merry Barua: I would not say that nothing has happened. Change has certainly taken place. But if we look at the period from the 1990s to now—more than 30 years—the change has been very slow. There should have been much more progress by now. What has happened is simply not enough. Take school education as an example. Schools now have to admit children with disabilities because of changes in legislation, but merely having a child sitting in a classroom is not enough. The question is: Is the child actually getting an education? Is that child being prepared for life? Very often, that is still not happening. Schools are not doing our children a favour by taking them in. It is their right to be there. We have to begin looking at education from that perspective—as a right. Very often, as parents, we approach institutions almost as supplicants and say, "Please take my child." I do not think we should do that. As parents, we have to be able to say: This is my child's right, and you have to provide the kind of education my child needs. Only when

there is that demand will systems begin making the necessary effort. I remember that in the early years of our work, people would ask us: “You have started a special school, you are training people, but where are the autistic people?” It became a vicious cycle. So we began working with doctors and paediatricians to improve diagnosis. Once diagnoses increased, we could say, “Here are the people. Now where are the schools?” So, yes, things have changed, but we cannot accept the present situation as enough. Families have to recognise their rights, make their needs visible and continue demanding that systems respond.

Q 3: What is one message you would like to give everyone attending this webinar as a takeaway?

A. Neena Wagh: For me, it goes back to a reflection. Ramana Maharshi was once asked, “How do we treat others?” His response was: there are no others. We have grown up with philosophical traditions that speak about this interconnectedness, yet we do not always live by it. We live in a very transactional world. So much is based on exchange—what somebody can give us and what we receive in return. When people are at the margins of society, we sometimes do not know how to value them because we cannot immediately understand what they can give us within this transactional framework. I think we need to recognise the intangible things as well, beyond material give and take. Our children, our brothers, our siblings and the people whose lives have brought us into advocacy have taught us empathy, sensitivity and the importance of never giving up. These are also extremely valuable contributions. If those experiences have made us more sensitive, encouraged us to reach out to others, and led to the creation of organisations and support systems that help many more people, then that too is a significant contribution. We have come some distance, but we need to do much more. We need to step up, we need to speed up and, most importantly, we should never give up.

Q 4: What has been the biggest challenge your family has faced in creating inclusive opportunities for your child or family member?

A. Pooja Sharma: What I have seen as a younger sister is that my brother has grown to be very capable. But in many ways, all that capability has not translated into the opportunities that should naturally follow. For most of us, as we grow up, we eventually move into employment and spend a full day at work. That is a conventional part of adult life. With my brother, we have struggled to find a meaningful, long-term opportunity that allows him to do the same. And where we have found opportunities, the environment has not necessarily been very receptive. It has not always been an environment that creates a sense of belonging, and sometimes it has not even felt sufficiently safe. I think that has been our biggest struggle. We have done all this work to build his capabilities, and he is capable of going out and participating meaningfully in society and in a workplace, but he has not really had that opportunity. For me, that gap between what a person is capable of doing and the opportunities that society actually provides remains one of the biggest challenges.

A: Merry Barua: Whenever I faced a challenge, I generally tried to figure out some way of doing something about it. But there are two experiences that I would call particularly difficult. My son is minimally speaking and has high support needs. When he was younger, I worked with him through a home programme for about a year and a half. Through that experience, I realised that he was actually very smart and that he could learn in a regular school. I found a small school for him and enrolled him. After about a week, I was told to take him out because he flapped in the classroom and they considered him violent. That was extremely difficult for me. Here was a child who was ready to learn, but the school was unwilling to take him because he flapped his hands and they interpreted that behaviour as violence. I remember thinking: if a school is not willing to take him because of that, what am I supposed to do? That experience, of course, pushed me to do something about the situation. The other major challenge was healthcare. When he was young and needed medical procedures, the systems were simply not prepared for somebody who could not respond in the expected way. I remember taking him for a chest X-ray. He was required to stand in a particular position, place his chin correctly and stay still, but he could not do that. He kept moving, and rather than finding another way of completing the procedure, we were asked to leave. There was another occasion when he had a dental problem and I took him to a dentist. The response

was simply: “Take this boy out of here. I cannot deal with him.” These are the kinds of challenges families face. My own response has usually been, “All right, I will find somewhere else. I will figure out another way.” But not every family is able to do that. Many families are completely shattered by these experiences. That is why inclusion has to extend beyond schools. Healthcare providers and other services also have to understand disability and learn how to respond differently instead of rejecting a person simply because the standard procedure does not work for them.

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CONCLUSION

The webinar Journey of Inclusion: Through the Voices of Families reinforced that inclusion is a lifelong process extending across families, schools, workplaces, healthcare systems, public spaces and communities.

The different perspectives shared during the conversation demonstrated that the journey begins long before a child enters school and continues long after formal education ends. Diagnosis, acceptance, caregiving, sibling relationships, career decisions, adulthood, employment and future planning all become part of the wider inclusion landscape.
One of the strongest messages emerging from the discussion was that the responsibility for inclusion cannot remain with families alone.

Families may spend years seeking therapy, building skills, finding appropriate education, developing independence and preparing individuals for adulthood. Yet these efforts can only translate into meaningful participation if society is prepared to respond.

A capable individual still requires a school willing to teach, an employer willing to offer meaningful work, a healthcare professional willing to adapt, and a community willing to recognise that difference is an ordinary part of human life.

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The webinar also emphasised the importance of shared caregiving. The physical, emotional and practical demands involved in supporting a person with special needs cannot sustainably rest with one parent. Families require greater participation from

spouses and extended networks, while workplaces need policies that make it possible for caregivers to balance professional and personal responsibilities.

As traditional family structures become smaller, the need for community-based support will become even more significant. Assisted living, supported living and other collective models invite society to reconsider what family and community can mean in the future.
Education emerged as a critical starting point because schools shape not only the experiences of children with disabilities but also the attitudes of their peers. Children who grow up alongside diversity are more likely to understand it as normal. However, schools require teacher capacity, institutional flexibility and an honest willingness to acknowledge the challenges they encounter.

The discussion around employment demonstrated that exposure alone cannot be mistaken for inclusion. Internships may provide valuable experiences, but adults ultimately need meaningful, sustained and safe opportunities through which they can participate and contribute.

Similarly, simply having laws and policies in place cannot guarantee inclusion. Rights become meaningful only when people understand them and institutions implement them.

This makes public awareness fundamental. Disability needs to become visible in classrooms, workplaces, public spaces, healthcare systems and ordinary community life. Awareness cannot remain confined to families and professionals already working within the disability sector.

Perhaps most importantly, the webinar shifted inclusion away from the language of sympathy and towards the language of rights, agency and belonging. Persons with special needs do not need to justify their presence in society. Schools, workplaces and communities are not doing them a favour by allowing them to participate.

They belong because they are equal members of society.

The responsibility of inclusion therefore lies with all of us: families, educators, employers, professionals, policymakers and communities. Progress has undoubtedly been made, but significant gaps remain. The way forward requires stronger partnerships, greater awareness, more responsive institutions and continued advocacy.

The session ultimately left participants with a message of collective persistence: society needs to step up, speed up and never give up in creating environments where every individual can participate with dignity, purpose and a genuine sense of belonging.

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LEARNINGS FROM THE WEBINAR

One of the strongest learnings from the webinar was the importance of looking at inclusion as an ecosystem rather than as a series of isolated interventions. Families may be doing everything possible to support an individual, but progress can only be sustained when the different systems around that person are able to work in concert. This shifts the focus from asking whether a child or adult is “ready” for a school, workplace or community to asking whether those environments are themselves ready to respond to different ways of learning, communicating, participating and contributing.

The webinar also reinforced the value of lived experience as a source of knowledge. The perspectives shared by parents and siblings showed that families often understand where systems break down long before those gaps are visible at the policy level. Their experiences can therefore inform better institutional practices, more realistic support structures and more responsive decision-making. A key takeaway is that meaningful progress will depend not only on creating more provisions, but on listening more closely to families and individuals, recognising the complexity of their journeys, and using those insights to shape environments that are more humane, flexible and sustainable.

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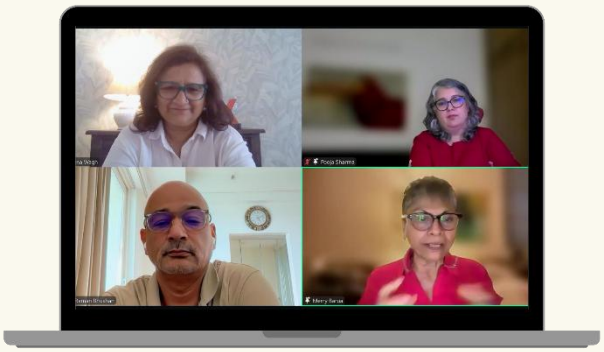

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contact@plspvt.com
www.pallavanlearningsystems.com

Ritinjlai

ritinjali@ritinjali.org
www.ritinjali.org

Centre for Escalation of Peace

contact@cepeace.org
www.cepeace.org

Pallavanjali

info@pallavanjali.com
www.pallavanjali.com