

Voices of MECS

Prabhat Education Foundation

Interview by Mani Thompson
April 2026



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Featured Image: A Participant operating Induction cookstove while sitting down in her kitchen space. ©Prabhat Education Foundation.

MECS: Could you give us an overview of Prabhat Education Foundation and its core services?

PEF: Prabhat Education Foundation is a not-for-profit, rights-based organisation based in Ahmedabad, working with persons with disabilities for nearly 20 years. We have directly supported over 3,000 PwDs and impacted more than 200,000 individuals through advocacy and community outreach. Our core services include special education, and skill-building for individuals with sensory, mobility, and intellectual impairments along with Community-Based Rehabilitation. Our work aims to remove environmental barriers in education and daily living. Increasingly, we recognise that foundational needs like energy access determine whether People with Disabilities (PwDs) can genuinely participate in society or remain confined to its margins.

MECS: For this interview we are mainly focusing on the MECS and Prabhat's collaborative report on *disability and energy access in Ahmedabad*; how did Prabhat Education Foundation get involved in this study, and what were you aiming to achieve?

PEF: We partnered with the MECS Programme to address a critical blind spot: the intersection of disability and energy access. While India has expanded electrification, the specific needs of PwDs remain invisible in policy. As an organisation with community at its core, Prabhat understood that for PwDs, energy is not a convenience — it is a necessity for dignity, from charging assistive devices to maintaining health. We wanted to move beyond technical connectivity to document lived experiences and generate evidence-based recommendations. We also saw real potential: clean cooking could open new doors for vocational training and economic self-reliance for the adults with disabilities we work with every day.

MECS: What did the study reveal about how PwDs engage with electricity in their everyday cooking environments?

PEF: The study revealed that PwDs engage with electricity as a lifeline rather than a utility and yet face de facto exclusion. While most of the households had an electricity connection, sixty-two percent of surveyed households in Phase I of the study required caregiver assistance to operate switches, and 45% could not independently read their electricity bills. Engagement becomes a daily negotiation with risk: high switchboards force users to reach with sticks, poorly lit spaces create hazards, and power instability directly threatens health when PwDs depend on nebulisers or wheelchair chargers. The study exposed a fundamental gap between having electricity and being able to use it safely, a gap that current policy and infrastructure consistently and invisibly overlooks.



Figure 1: A Participant's house pre-Kitchen modification and post Kitchen modification. ©Prabhat Education Foundation.

MECS: For this study you used innovative methodologies such as PhotoVoice, how did it benefit or challenge the study and data collection process?

PEF: PhotoVoice was transformative because it positioned participants as experts of their own lives. We asked PwDs to photograph five positive and five challenging moments in their energy use and captured visual narratives that went far beyond numerical data such as the unreachable plug point, the fear of cooking near a refrigerator, the struggle of cooking without sight, and the difficulty of carrying appliances across rooms. The challenge was adaptation: some participants directed us to photograph them rather than holding the camera themselves. We also learned that the process

matters as much as the photographs: conversations behind each image often held the deepest insights, and for some participants, verbal storytelling proved equally powerful.

MECS: How did you identify and select participant households for the study, and what steps did you take to ensure representation of different impairment groups?

PEF: We used purposive sampling from Prabhat's existing networks, primarily targeting low-income urban neighbourhoods while including middle-income households for comparison. Since disability support groups in India are typically segregated by impairment, we actively networked with other organisations to select adults with visual, hearing, and orthopaedic disabilities, including cerebral palsy, alongside caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. Achieving gender balance was a deliberate effort as men rarely appear in such cooking-focused research studies. The result was a sample diverse in disability type, income, gender, and geography, enabling a genuinely **intersectional analysis** of how varied impairments interact with different energy barriers.

MECS: Women's exclusion in energy use is influenced by factors such as gender, cultural norms, disability, and household infrastructure; how did these factors interact in the households you worked with & what were the results?

PEF: These factors intersected in deeply compounding ways. Women with disabilities remained overwhelmingly responsible for cooking even after receiving eCooking appliances, yet their agency was often constrained by household hierarchies. Some of them were prevented from cooking by well-meaning and protective families citing safety concerns. Inaccessible infrastructure such as raised platforms (too high to reach for many physically impaired women) further entrenched this exclusion. The result was often invisible labour, lost autonomy, and deep confinement.

However, eCooking technology created surprising shifts: its "modern" framing drew men and boys into the kitchen to help with setup. Some women reported a profound sense of independence and reclaimed identity through eCooking, and in one household, the daughter with a disability became the one teaching her mother how to use the new appliance.



Figure 2: A participant of the study engaging in the process of PhotoVoice. ©Prabhat Education Foundation.



Figure 3: One of our visually impaired participants operating Induction through Braille labelling done on appliance. ©Prabhat Education Foundation.

MECS: Were there any unexpected or surprising findings from this study?

PEF: Absolutely. Despite negligible prior exposure to such appliances, participants accepted eCooking technologies quickly when facilitated well. The transition went far beyond cooking — it became about mental strength, with participants challenging age-old habits and proudly describing their kitchens as "digital" or "modern." This surge in digital confidence was genuinely moving. Conversely, we found that in some cases, sensory triggers, like a cooling fan's hum, created deep internal fear that halted adoption entirely, even when the appliance functioned normally. We also observed grassroots innovation: participants independently troubleshooted complex electric pressure cooker errors, challenging every assumption about capability. The study proved that the challenge lies in combining mindsets with modernity, not in the equipment itself.

MECS: Were there any challenges that you couldn't overcome? Could you share one learning story where the shift to cleaner cooking proved challenging? What interventions did you implement to mitigate them?

PEF: Each participant's journey was unique. One hearing-impaired participant, solely responsible for cooking for her elderly parents, received full training but could not integrate the appliances as she needed time for mental acceptance, not technical instruction alone.

In contrast, Hiraben, our completely visually impaired participant living independently, embraced the induction cooktop and rice cooker as symbols of her self-reliance almost immediately. We implemented customised interventions throughout: audio tools and cooking diaries for visually impaired participants, sign language interpreters for training sessions, and a pace-led approach free of pressure. One structural challenge we could not fully resolve was "transit dependency" as many PwDs could cook independently but still relied on others to move or plug in appliances due to cramped living spaces or having young children in the house.

MECS: What are some of the key findings of the study? How do you think these findings fit into the work you do at Prabhat Education Foundation?

PEF: The study's headline finding is that physical connectivity does not equal functional access. Accessible infrastructure must precede accessible appliances. Trust is a critical catalyst for adoption and universal design- audible alerts, tactile markers, local-language interfaces, these are non-negotiables. For Prabhat, these findings are deeply resonant. We believe eCooking sits right at the intersection of independence and income. For adults in our vocational programmes, an induction cooktop is a kitchen appliance as well as a business tool. We also learned, firmly, that handing over equipment and walking away changes nothing. The real work is the ecosystem around it that combines adapted technology with intensive training and continuous follow-ups.

MECS: In your opinion, what cross sector policies are needed to address disability in clean cooking transition? What changes should policymakers prioritise?

PEF: Transitioning to clean cooking for PwDs requires policy that goes well beyond equipment provision. Policymakers must prioritise inter-departmental coordination — the Ministries of Social Justice, Power, and Urban Development must share data and responsibilities. National surveys like the Census and NFHS need to capture disability-disaggregated energy data to eliminate planning blind spots. Energy Schemes like PMUY should undergo accessibility audits mandating reachable infrastructure and tactile interfaces, with subsidies linked to the Unique Disability ID. The National Building Code must be amended to enforce universal kitchen design standards in low-income housing. Decentralised repair systems and capacity building through Composite Regional Centres are equally essential. Energy access must be framed as a fundamental human right instead of just a technical provision.

MECS: This study evolved as action research, where continuous engagement with participants shaped the learnings along the way. How did this influence the findings?

PEF: The action research model transformed this from data collection into a living process. Continuous engagement provided participants with psychological reassurance; knowing that dedicated support was available made them willing to try appliances without fear. Our workshops and WhatsApp group created a peer-learning ecosystem where participants across disability types shared challenges and solutions, fostering a powerful sense that "I am not alone." Documenting their own progress gave participants confidence, gradually shifting them from research subjects to experts of their own journeys. This approach revealed what one-time surveys or interviews probably wouldn't have: that adoption is non-linear, deeply emotional, and shaped by trust, and that when people feel genuinely accompanied, they are willing to cross their own boundaries.

MECS: What design insights emerged from the study regarding how cooking appliances could be made more accessible for differently abled people?

The appliance is only one part of what a person with a disability has to navigate. The setup, the storage, the cleanup- all of these should be the part of design brief. Appliances need non-slip bases, reduced weight, and integrated cord storage to address transit dependency. Interfaces must move away from English-only text toward local languages, Braille, and audio prompts. For EPCs specifically, we identified a need for lighter lids with silicone grips and low-force latches. Crucially, design must build in psychological safety; an audible reassurance that normal operational sounds are not malfunction, and exploratory modes that invite use without fear.

"Nothing about us, without us" is a disability rights slogan but in the context of product design, it is the most practical advice a manufacturer could receive. They cannot design for lives they have never lived. The most logical starting point is to employ the people whose needs are being served.

Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to **Krishna Keshavani** and **Katha Bhatt** from Prabhat Education Foundation who kindly agreed to take part in this interview. Also many thanks to Dr Louise Medland and Dr Rihab Khalid (MECS Programme) for their support and guidance.



Figure 4: Participants sharing their experiences and learnings at one of the workshops. ©Prabhat Education Foundation.