# Shaping Disabled-Friendly Digital Ecosystem

This editorial is based on **"Shaping a more disabled-friendly digital ecosystem"** which was published in the Hindu on 15/02/2023. It talks about the Challenges with the Digital Ecosystem for Disabled in India.

**For Prelims:** E-commerce, World Health Organization, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, National Disaster Management Authority, CoWIN website, Aarogya Setu app, digitization of Indian courts, WCAG, BIS

**For Mains:** Challenges with the Digital Ecosystem for Disabled in India, Government Policies & Interventions

According to a recent report titled 'Making the Digital Ecosystem Disabled Friendly, **WhatsApp has been ranked India's most accessible app for persons with disabilities,** which evaluated the most popular apps across categories like messaging, online payments, transport, **e-commerce** and food delivery.

According to the **World Health Organization,** about **16% of the global population is disabled.** Based on that figure, there are at **least 192 million disabled Indians.**

Also, India had 750 million Internet/smartphone users in 2020, including 120 million people with disabilities.

Despite technology's tremendous potential to level the playing field for the disabled, it can also reinforce barriers if it is not designed with their needs in mind.

## What are the Challenges with the Digital Ecosystem for Disabled in India?

- **Lack of Accessibility:**
    - **Many websites, apps, and online resources are not designed with accessibility in mind**, making it difficult for people with disabilities to access them.
    - This includes **barriers to using assistive technologies** like screen readers, magnifiers, or voice recognition software, which makes it hard for people with visual, auditory, or motor disabilities to access the digital content.
- **Limited Availability of Assistive Technologies:**
    - Many people with disabilities in India **do not have access to the necessary assistive technologies to access digital content.** The cost of these devices is often prohibitive, and there is also a lack of awareness about their availability and benefits.
- **Limited Awareness:**
    - Many people with disabilities in India are **not aware of the available digital resources or how to access them.**

- For instance, there is a lack of information on the accessibility features of various digital platforms, apps, and websites.
- **Language Barriers:**
  - There is a **significant language barrier in India**, with a vast population speaking different regional languages.
  - Many digital resources are available only in English or Hindi, making it difficult for people who speak other languages to access them.
- **Limited User Testing:**
  - User testing for people with disabilities is often limited or non-existent. Therefore, the accessibility features and overall usability of digital resources for people with disabilities are not adequately assessed.

## What is the State of Digital Accessibility Rights in India?

- **Legal Efforts:**
  - India signed and ratified the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007.**
  - To ensure compliance with the UNCRPD, India enacted the **(Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016)** to replace the **Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995.**
    - The RPWDA adopts the same definition of universal design as in the UNCRPD and places obligations on the appropriate government to ensure universal design for everyday electronic goods and equipment and consumer goods.
  - During Covid-19 Period, the **Supreme Court directed the government to conduct a disability audit for the** CoWIN website and the **Aarogya Setu app.**
  - **National Policy on Electronic Accessibility, 2013:**
    - It seeks to remove discrimination by focusing on awareness, capacity building, institutional training and research and development.
  - **Disability-inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction Guidelines:**
    - The guidelines released by the National Disaster Management Authority **in 2019** provide accessible information on the websites in the situation of risk, armed conflicts, humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters to help persons with disabilities.
- **Judicial Efforts:**
  - The **e-Committee**, which is a governing body set up by the Supreme Court to oversee the **digitization of Indian courts,** has been **making changes to court websites to ensure that they are accessible to PwDs.**
  - For instance, it has **ensured that all High Court websites have accessible captchas** by including audio captchas in addition to visual captchas.
  - The e-Committee has also **ensured that these websites are accessible in terms of text colour, contrast, text size,** and mostly in terms of screen reader access as well.
  - The e-Committee runs training programmes for lawyers to make filings accessible.

## What should be the Way Forward?

- **Accessibility Standards**:
  - India can **implement accessibility standards to ensure that digital products and services are accessible to persons with disabilities.**
  - The accessibility standards should be based on **international standards such** as **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)** or **Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) standards.**
- **Inclusive Design:**
  - Inclusive design can **ensure that digital products and services are designed to be accessible** to everyone, including persons with disabilities.
  - Inclusive design involves designing with the user in mind, taking into consideration their abilities, needs, and limitations.

- **Assistive Technology:**
  - India can **encourage the development and use of** [assistive technology](#) **to help persons with disabilities** access digital products and services.
  - Assistive technology includes software, hardware, and devices that help persons with disabilities to interact with digital products and services.
- **Training and Awareness:**
  - India can **provide training and awareness to digital product and service providers,** developers, and designers on accessibility and inclusive design. This can help ensure that accessibility and inclusive design are integrated into the design and development process.
- **Collaborations:**
  - India can **collaborate with organizations, researchers, and experts in the field of disability and accessibility** to develop innovative solutions to make digital products and services accessible to persons with disabilities.
- **Government Policies:**
  - The Indian government can **create policies that incentivize companies to implement accessibility standards and inclusive design in their digital products and services.** The government can also create policies that require digital products and services to be accessible to persons with disabilities.
- **Use of AI:**
  - Currently technology is **used to automate a large number of accessibility tests,** and combine that with in-depth manual testing to provide comprehensive accessibility feedback to developers.
  - Developers and companies can now use AI to automate accessibility testing and analyze feedback from users with disabilities to provide actionable insights.

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### *Drishti Mains Question*

Discuss the challenges in creating a more disabled-friendly digital ecosystem in India and suggest measures that can be taken to ensure inclusivity and accessibility for persons with disabilities.

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## UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

### *Prelims*

**Q. India is home to lakhs of persons with disabilities. What are the benefits available to them under the law? (2011)**

1. Free schooling till the age of 18 years in government run schools.
2. Preferential allotment of land for setting up business.
3. Ramps in public buildings.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

**(a)** 1 only
**(b)** 2 and 3 only
**(c)** 1 and 3 only
**(d)** 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (d)**