



Accessibility and Empowerment of PwDs

For Prelims: [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), [Fundamental Rights](#), [Article 41](#), [Rehabilitation Council of India](#), [PM-DAKSH Yojana](#)

For Mains: Rights and Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities in India, Significance of Accessibility in Achieving Social Justice and Equality

[Source:PIB](#)

Why in News?

The **Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD)** under the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment organized the **Inclusive India Summit**, to mark **Global Accessibility Awareness Day (GAAD)**.

- The summit resulted in the **signing of three Memorandums of Understanding to enhance disability inclusion**. Key initiatives include an **'Accessibility Index' to audit public buildings**, promotion of inclusive infrastructure, and awareness through hackathons and national competitions.

Note: GAAD, founded in 2012 by Jennison Asuncion (accessibility professional) and Joe Devon (web developer), is observed annually on the **3rd Thursday of May** to encourage developers, designers, and digital creators to build accessible websites and digital content for **persons with disabilities (PwDs)**.

Why is Accessibility Crucial for an Inclusive Society?

- **Ensures Equal Rights and Participation:** Accessibility enables PwDs to exercise their fundamental human rights, such as **freedom of expression, access to education, employment, healthcare, and social participation**, on an equal footing with others.
- **Removes Barriers for Full Inclusion:** PwDs often face physical, informational, and attitudinal barriers.
 - Accessibility focuses on removing these obstacles by providing reasonable accommodations tailored to diverse needs, ensuring they can engage fully in social, economic, and political life.
- **International Normative Frameworks:** Key UN documents like the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(UNCRPD\)](#), the **World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons**, and the [Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities](#) emphasize accessibility as both a **right and a means to empower PwDs**.
 - These frameworks call for accessible physical environments, information, communication, transportation, education, and healthcare.
- **Fosters Social and Economic Growth:** Inclusive societies that prioritize accessibility unlock the

potential of all citizens, contributing to poverty reduction, equitable economic opportunities, and overall sustainable development.

What is the Current Status of PwDs in India?

- **PwDs in India:** As per Census 2011, the number of PwDs in the country is 2.68 crore (2.21% of the total population).
 - The prevalence of disability was higher among males than **females, with a rate of 2.4% in males and 1.9% in females**. It was also higher in rural areas than in urban areas.
 - As per the [Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(RPwD\) Act, 2016](#), there are **21 types of Disabilities** which includes Locomotor Disability, Visual Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Speech & Language Disability, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Cerebral Palsy, Dwarfism etc.
- **Constitutional Provisions:**
 - **Preamble of the Constitution:** Secures to **all citizens Justice** (social, economic, political), **Liberty** (of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship), and **Equality** (of status and opportunity).
 - **Fundamental Rights (Part III):** The Constitution guarantees six [Fundamental Rights](#) (Equality, Freedom, Protection against Exploitation, Freedom of Religion, Cultural and Educational Rights, and Constitutional Remedies) which apply to all citizens, **including persons with disabilities**, even if not explicitly mentioned.
 - **Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV): [Article 41](#)** calls for **public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness, and disablement**.
 - It mandates the State to make effective provisions, within its economic capacity, for securing the right to work, education, and public assistance for those in need.
 - **Panchayati Raj and Urban Local Bodies:**
 - **Twelfth Schedule (Entry 9 of Article 243-W):** “Safeguarding the interests of weaker sections of society, including the **handicapped** and mentally retarded.”
 - **Eleventh Schedule (Entry 26 of Article 243-G):** “Social welfare, including welfare of the handicapped and mentally retarded.”
- **Policy Frameworks:** The **National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006** aims to ensure equal opportunities, rights protection, and full participation of PwDs in society.
 - India ratified the **UNCRPD in 2008**. To fulfill its obligations under the Convention, Parliament enacted the **RPwD Act 2016** (to ensure dignity, non-discrimination, and equal opportunities for PwDs).
 - The **National Trust Act, 1999**, established a national body to support the welfare of persons with **Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation, and Multiple Disabilities**.
 - The [Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992](#), made RCI a statutory body to regulate and **monitor disability services, standardize training**, and maintain a register of qualified rehabilitation professionals.
 - The **Scheme for Implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (SIPDA)**, launched in 2015, focuses on skill training for PwDs aged 15-59 under the **National Action Plan for Skill Development**.
- **Judicial Pronouncements:**
 - In **Rajive Raturi v. Union of India (2024)**, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that **accessibility for PwDs is a constitutional imperative under Article 21**, linking it to the right to life, dignity, and freedom of movement.
 - It stressed that digital inclusion is vital for ensuring substantive equality and preventing their marginalisation.
 - In **Reserve Bank of India vs. A. K. Nair & Others (2023)**, the Supreme Court held that the **RPwD Act 2016**, expressly provides for **reservation in promotions for persons with disabilities**, in accordance with the instructions issued by the Government from time to time.

What are the Challenges Faced by PwDs in India?

- **Inaccessible Physical Infrastructure:** Most public buildings, transportation systems, and urban infrastructure **remain non-compliant with universal design norms**. According to a 2018 government report, **only 3% of buildings were fully accessible**.
 - The **absence** of basic accessibility features like **ramps, elevators, or tactile paths** effectively segregates PwDs, restricting their mobility and independence.
- **Educational Exclusion:** According to the **76th National Sample Survey (NSS)**, **only 52.2% of persons with disabilities aged 7 and above are literate**, much lower than the **national average of 80%**, due to poor access to inclusive education and lack of accessible school facilities.
- **Employment Barriers and Economic Marginalization:** Societal biases and employer reluctance to provide reasonable accommodations prevent PwDs from securing meaningful employment.
 - Out of **1.3 crore employable PwDs in India**, **only 34 lakh are employed**, reflecting significant underutilization of talent.
 - Additionally, the lack of accessible infrastructure and assistive devices at workplaces continues to limit their participation.
- **Healthcare Inaccessibility:** During Covid-19, PwDs faced heightened risks and reduced access to essential services due to inadequate preparedness and outreach.
- **Expanding Digital Divide:** Around **98% of websites** are not compliant with accessibility standards, excluding PwDs from digital services like education, banking, and governance.
 - Despite programs like **Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA)**, PwDs are **significantly underrepresented** in digital skill development initiatives.
 - Many assistive technologies (e.g., for facial recognition, voice commands) are either unavailable or unaffordable, particularly affecting acid attack survivors and visually impaired individuals.
- **Weak Implementation of Legal and Policy Frameworks:** **Harmonized accessibility guidelines** (2016 and 2021) have **not been integrated into building by-laws**, due to poor awareness and accountability within public works departments.
- **Flexibility to Meet Diverse Needs:** Accessibility is not one-size-fits-all; it means designing environments, services, and technologies that are flexible and usable by people with **varying disabilities, whether physical, sensory, cognitive, or otherwise**.

What Measures India can take to ensure an Inclusive and Accessible Society for PwDs?

- **Ensure Barrier-Free Physical Infrastructure:** Revive and expand the **Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan)**, to ensure barrier-free infrastructure in schools, hospitals, and workplaces.
 - Improve accessibility across transport modes for independent mobility of PwDs.
 - Enhance **availability of sign language interpreters** and promote captioning in public broadcasts for the deaf and hard of hearing.
- **Inclusive Education with Adequate Support:** **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan** must ensure **appointment of special educators in all schools**.
 - **National Education Policy, 2020** recognizes the need for inclusive education but **lacks actionable disability-specific strategies**. Its implementation should prioritize curriculum adaptation and early identification.
 - **Kothari Commission (1966)** recommendations have long emphasized **integration of PwDs in mainstream schools**, which needs financial and academic backing.
- **Equitable Employment Opportunities:** To ensure greater inclusivity, the **PM-DAKSH Yojana** can be strengthened by expanding the reach of **Divyangjan Kaushal Vikas** to rural and underserved regions through mobile training units and partnerships with local NGOs.
 - The **Divyangjan Rozgar Setu platform** should be integrated with national employment portals like **PM Vishwakarma** to ensure seamless job matching.
 - Additionally, **real-time job analytics**, employer incentives for hiring PwDs, and periodic **third-party audits can improve transparency**, reach, and outcomes of the program.
- **Digital and Financial Accessibility:** Comply with **Guidelines for Indian Government**

Websites (GIGW 3.0).

- Mandate **accessible banking services** (talking ATMs, Braille statements) and ensure outreach for PwDs under Jan Dhan Yojana, PMJJBY, and PMFBY.
- **Accessible Healthcare and Social Protection:** Health ID and Ayushman Bharat digital platforms must include **disability-specific data** and ensure **telehealth platforms are screen-reader friendly**.
 - Train **Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs)** to identify and assist PwDs in rural areas under **Comprehensive Primary Health Care**.
- **Promote Awareness and Behavioural Change:** Include disability sensitisation in the training programs of government officials, judiciary, police, and healthcare professionals to **ensure respectful and informed treatment of persons with disabilities**.

Conclusion

Creating an inclusive and accessible society for persons with disabilities requires sustained commitment across infrastructure, education, employment, and digital access. Strengthening existing schemes and enforcing legal frameworks will empower PwDs to live with dignity and equal opportunities. Collective efforts from government, private sector, and society are essential to achieve true inclusion and social justice.

Drishti Mains Question:

Accessibility is a fundamental right and a precondition for the dignity and empowerment of persons with disabilities." Discuss in the context of Indian society and governance.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

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)