Towards a Dignified Future for Divyangjan

This editorial is based on "Humour targeted at disabled reveal a troubling mindset" which was published in The Indian Express on 12/09/2025. The article brings into picture the subtle exclusions persons with disabilities still face in media and society, reminding us that true empowerment lies in authentic representation, inclusive policies, and seeing disability as a valued part of human diversity.

For Prelims: Articles 15 and 21, Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities , PM-DAKSH Yojana, Unique Disability ID (UDID) project, Divya Kala Mela, UNESCO, Special Accredited Institutions for Education of Divyangjans.

For Mains: Major Progress that India has Made in the Inclusion and Empowerment of PwDs, Critical Barriers that continue to hinder Inclusion and Empowerment of PwDs in India

Recent developments on social media and in the entertainment industry highlight how **persons with disabilities** still encounter subtle forms of exclusion from being **overlooked in social settings to being portrayed in ways that invite humor at their expense.** In *Nipun Malhotra v. Sony Pictures Films (2024),* the Supreme Court reminded us that while freedom of expression is vital, it must **remain consistent with the constitutional values of dignity and equality under Articles 15 and 21**. The **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016,** further enshrines these protections, affirming the principles of respect and inclusion. True empowerment of persons with disabilities calls for breaking down these barriers through authentic representation, inclusive policies, and a shift in collective consciousness that **views disability as a valued dimension of human diversity rather than a limitation.**

What Major Progress has India Made in the Inclusion and Empowerment of PwDs?

- **Progressive Legal Framework and Rights-Based Approach: The enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, marks a paradigm shift by moving beyond the outdated Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995.**
  - This new law increased the number of recognized disabilities from 7 to 21, aligning with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).
  - It mandates a 4% reservation in government jobs and a 5% reservation in higher education institutions, solidifying PwDs' rights to equality, dignity, and non-discrimination.
    - The Supreme Court has also actively upheld these rights, as seen in a recent 2025 judgment that ruled against the exclusion of visually impaired candidates from judicial services.
- **Inclusive Infrastructure and Mobility:** The Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), launched in 2015, is a major national initiative to create a barrier-free environment for PwDs.
  - It targets accessibility in three key sectors: built environment, transportation, and

[Information and Communication Technology (ICT)](#).
  - The campaign has led to a significant increase in the number of government buildings and public transport systems becoming accessible.
    - For instance, as of 2022, almost half the State and Union Territory government buildings identified during access audits in 2016-2017 have been made accessible.
- **Economic Empowerment and Skill Development**: The government has launched several targeted schemes to boost the economic independence of PwDs.
  - The **[PM-DAKSH Yojana](#)** and the **National Action Plan for Skill Development of Persons with Disabilities** provide vocational training and placement assistance.
  - The **Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids/Appliances (ADIP) Scheme** provides financial aid for assistive devices.
    - **National Divyangjan Finance and Development Corporation** provides loans at concessional rates to PwD entrepreneurs.
- **Technological and Digital Inclusion:** Recognizing the power of technology to bridge gaps, India is pushing for greater digital inclusion. The government's **e-Governance initiatives** now prioritize web accessibility, with many public websites adhering to the **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)**.
  - The **[Unique Disability ID (UDID) project](#)** is a significant step, creating a nationwide database of PwDs and providing a smart card that serves as proof of disability.
- **Educational Inclusion and Scholarship Schemes: The [New Education Policy (NEP) 2020](#) places a strong emphasis on inclusive education, promoting a rights-based framework for PwD students.**
  - The government has launched several scholarship schemes to support PwD students from pre-matriculation to post-graduation.
  - The National Scholarship for Persons with Disabilities has supported tens of thousands of students. This focus aims to address the historically low literacy and enrollment rates among PwDs.
- **Promoting Awareness and Inclusive Narratives:** Beyond legal reforms, there is a conscious effort to change societal attitudes from a charity-based to a rights-based perspective.
  - Initiatives like the annual **["Divya Kala Mela](#)"** showcase the artistic and entrepreneurial talents of PwDs, challenging stereotypes and fostering a sense of pride and dignity.
  - The use of the term **"Divyangjan"** by the government is part of this broader shift to reframe disability as a unique ability rather than a limitation.
    - The **growing success of Indian para-athletes on the global stage,** like at the **Paralympics**, further amplifies this positive narrative.
- **Decentralized and Coordinated Governance**: The establishment of the **Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD)** in 2012 gave a dedicated institutional focus to PwD issues.
  - The department, along with the **Rehabilitation Council of India** and various **National Institutes**, works to coordinate policy implementation and provide rehabilitation services across the country.
  - The creation of **District Disability Rehabilitation Centres (DDRCs)** in many districts brings services closer to PwDs in rural areas, improving access to professional guidance and assistive devices.

What Critical Barriers Continue to Hinder Inclusion and Empowerment of PwDs in India?

- **Inaccessible Infrastructure and Widening Digital Divide: Despite policy pushes like the Accessible India Campaign, urban design and transport systems remain exclusionary, reflecting an entrenched "architectural apartheid."**
  - Most government offices, schools, and workplaces lack ramps, tactile paths, or accessible toilets, making daily mobility a struggle.
  - On the digital front, non-compliance with accessibility standards leaves PwD excluded from e-governance, banking, and telehealth platforms.
    - The **Supreme Court** affirms digital access for PwDs as a fundamental right under **Article 21,** but implementation remains inconsistent.
    - In February 2025, **155 private and government organizations** were penalized

by the **Court of the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD)** for non-compliance with digital accessibility standards
- ○ **This dual exclusion, physical and digital, curtails independent living and deepens structural inequalities.**
- ▪ **Deficits in Inclusive Education:** The education system largely remains integrationist rather than truly inclusive, often treating PwD as afterthoughts.
  - ○ Shortage of special educators, assistive technologies, and inclusive pedagogies limits effective learning outcomes.
  - ○ Inaccessible school infrastructure and rigid assessment patterns further marginalize children with disabilities.
  - ○ The result is low enrollment, high dropout rates, and intergenerational cycles of exclusion.
    - **Three-fourths of the children with disabilities at the age of 5 years** and one-fourth between 5-19 years did not go to any educational institution in India. **([UNESCO](#) Report 2019)**
  - ○ **This educational gap translates into reduced employability, perpetuating economic vulnerability.**
- ▪ **Employment Exclusion and Workplace Discrimination:** Despite statutory reservation under the RPwD Act, implementation bottlenecks and attitudinal biases continue to lock PwD out of meaningful employment.
  - ○ Private sector hiring remains tokenistic, with limited focus on reasonable workplace accommodations or flexible roles.
  - ○ Lack of skilling ecosystems, accessible job portals, and employer sensitization compounds this challenge.
    - Government data indicates that **only 36% of 26 million PwDs are employed.** Among them, men are more likely to be employed than women, with 47% of men securing jobs versus **23% of women.**
  - ○ **Consequently, PwD remains overrepresented in the informal sector, excluded from upward mobility, and denied economic dignity.**
- ▪ **Healthcare Inaccessibility and Neglect:** Healthcare services for PwD are marred by systemic neglect and lack of specialized care.
  - ○ A recent survey found that **more than 80% of persons with disabilities in India remain without health insurance**. Strikingly, 53.2% reported being unable to obtain coverage due to repeated rejection of their applications.
  - ○ Also, hospitals lack trained staff to handle diverse needs such as **sign language or rehabilitation therapy.**
  - ○ **Preventive and rehabilitative care remains underdeveloped, leading to untreated secondary conditions.**
  - ○ The pandemic exposed these fault lines, where PwD were left out of digital telehealth, emergency responses, and vaccination drives. This medical marginalization undermines both survival and quality of life.
- ▪ **Policy-Practice Gap and Weak Governance:** Although India has progressive laws like the RPwD Act 2016, fragmented governance, poor monitoring, and weak accountability hinder their implementation.
  - ○ Advisory boards, accessibility audits, and grievance redress mechanisms are either absent or dysfunctional in many states.
    - Disability issues are often siloed under welfare departments, reducing inter-sectoral coordination with education, labor, and urban development.
  - ○ The **Supreme Court in 2024** found many states lagging in implementing key RPwD Act provisions, **such as appointing state commissioners.**
    - **As a result, legal entitlements risk remaining "paper rights" without ground impact, eroding trust in institutions.**
- ▪ **Data Deficit and Information Blind Spots:** Accurate disability data remains scarce, outdated, and fragmented across sources. The reliance on the 2011 Census with limited definitions severely underestimates the PwD population.
  - ○ Absence of real-time disaggregated data by type, gender, and socio-economic background impairs targeted interventions.
    - **Less than 50% of India's PwDs** have a Unique Disability ID (UDID) card, hindering access to government benefits, **due to delays and digital literacy.**
  - ○ **Without robust evidence, policymakers face blind spots in planning budgets,**

schemes, and monitoring impact.
- This invisibility at the data level translates into invisibility in development discourse itself.
- **Entrenched Social Stigma and Everyday Discrimination:** Societal perceptions still frame PwD within a charity and dependency narrative, ignoring their rights and agency.
  - Such stigma often starts at the family level, leading to concealment, underinvestment in education, and internalized exclusion.
  - In public spaces, discrimination translates into limited social participation and invisibility in cultural discourse.
    - This "othering" perpetuates cycles of exclusion, where PwD are not seen as contributors to society but as burdens. Breaking this requires attitudinal change and value reorientation.

What Measures can India Adopt to Build a More Inclusive and Empowered Future for PwDs?

- **Universal Design in Infrastructure and Technology: There is a need to move beyond token accessibility to enforce universal design principles in all new public infrastructure, housing, and mobility systems.**
  - Integrate accessibility standards in urban planning codes, smart city projects, and digital platforms from the blueprint stage rather than retrofitting.
  - Promote assistive technologies, voice-enabled services, and inclusive fintech tools through innovation hubs.
    - Such integration normalizes accessibility as a mainstream development priority rather than a welfare add-on.
    - **Varanasi's "Sugamya Kashi" vision** is a significant step in the right direction.
- **Inclusive Education Ecosystem: Shift the focus from integration to true inclusivity in classrooms, ensuring accessible curricula, learning materials in multiple formats, and teacher training in disability-sensitive pedagogy.**
  - Establish resource centers in every district to support mainstream schools with assistive devices and special educators.
  - Embed inclusive practices into digital education platforms to ensure no child is left behind in hybrid learning models. This nurtures dignity and agency from an early stage.
    - **Special Accredited Institutions for Education of Divyangjans (SAIEDs)** are a significant step in the right direction.
- **Equitable Employment and Workplace Transformation: Mandate inclusive hiring audits for both public and private sector institutions, linking incentives and tax benefits to diversity outcomes.**
  - Create dedicated skilling pipelines in emerging sectors like green energy, digital economy, and creative industries tailored to PwD capabilities.
  - Enforce reasonable accommodations and flexible work models, especially in remote and gig-based work. Such systemic reforms convert employability into long-term economic empowerment.
- **Health and Rehabilitation Continuum:** Redesign healthcare delivery by embedding disability-inclusive protocols in primary health centers, telemedicine services, and insurance schemes.
  - Build a national rehabilitation network covering physiotherapy, mental health, prosthetics, and community-based care.
  - Promote disability-sensitive training for medical staff to ensure dignity in service delivery.
    - Investment in preventive and rehabilitative care ensures not just survival but quality of life and autonomy.
- **Social Attitudinal Transformation:** Mainstream disability discourse into mass media, popular culture, and civic campaigns, replacing charity narratives with empowerment narratives.
  - Integrate disability rights education into school civics and corporate sensitization programs. Incentivize local community initiatives that showcase PwDs as leaders, entrepreneurs, and innovators.
  - This attitudinal shift transforms them from "recipients of care" into equal stakeholders in society's growth story.

- **Governance and Policy Accountability:** Move beyond fragmented welfare schemes by establishing a convergent Mission on Disability Inclusion to coordinate across sectors.
  - Ensure time-bound implementation audits, real-time grievance redress, and social audits led by PwD groups themselves.
  - Use digital dashboards and open data portals for transparency on budget utilization and outcomes. Strong governance converts legislative intent into tangible grassroots transformation.
- **Data and Innovation for Policy Precision:** Create a dynamic national disability registry with granular, disaggregated, and continuously updated data to inform policies. Leverage AI-driven analytics and GIS mapping to identify gaps in accessibility and service delivery.
  - Encourage partnerships with startups for innovative assistive technologies tailored to diverse needs. Data-backed governance ensures resources are targeted, inclusive, and measurable.
- **Community Empowerment and Decentralization:** Institutionalize self-help groups, cooperatives, and federations led by PwDs, giving them voice in local governance and development planning.
  - Promote microfinance, entrepreneurship grants, and decentralized livelihood models anchored in community strengths.
  - Strengthen Panchayati Raj and urban local bodies to ensure PwD representation in decision-making forums. Empowered communities reduce dependency and build localized ecosystems of resilience.

Conclusion:

India has made notable progress in disability inclusion, yet persistent barriers in infrastructure, education, employment, and attitudes remain. A truly empowered future for **PwDs rests on the 4E's of Empowerment: Equity, Enablement, Engagement and Employment.** By embedding these principles in **policy and practice**, India can move from **welfare to rights-based inclusion.** Such a shift will ensure persons with disabilities are not just supported, but equal stakeholders in the nation's growth story.

> **Drishti Mains Question:**
>
> India has progressive disability rights laws, yet persons with disabilities (PwDs) face persistent barriers in inclusion and empowerment. Critically analyze.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

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

Free schooling till the age of 18 years in government run schools.

Preferential allotment of land for setting up business.

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)