



Enhancing PwD Inclusion in India

*This editorial is based on “[Clicking through barriers, empowering persons with disabilities](#)” which was published in *The Hindu* on 25/02/2025. The article brings into picture the exclusion of PwDs from India's digital economy despite legal safeguards.*

For Prelims: [Persons With Disabilities](#), [Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023](#), [World Health Organization](#), [Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(RPWD\) Act, 2016](#), [Mental Healthcare Act, 2017](#), [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#), [Digital Personal Data Protection \(DPDP\) Act, 2023](#), [Accessible India Campaign](#).

For Mains: Key Provisions Related to Persons with Disabilities in India, Key Issues Associated with PwDs in India.

As India advances toward a **\$1 trillion digital economy by 2028**, [Persons With Disabilities \(PwDs\)](#) remain significantly overlooked in digital inclusion policies. Despite frameworks like the [Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023](#) and **IS 17802 standards** (provide a set of accessibility requirements that specify how to make content accessible), PwDs face substantial barriers to accessing digital services. With approximately **70+ million PwDs in India**, the country requires **not just improved digital access but a holistic transformation across all sectors** to ensure their meaningful participation. India must urgently reassess its inclusion strategies to create a society where **PwDs can fully participate with dignity and independence** in both digital and physical spaces.

What are the Key Provisions Related to Persons with Disabilities in India?

- **Definition of Disability**
 - **Legal Definition:** The **Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995** defines disability as a condition causing impairment (**physical, mental, or sensory**) affecting normal functioning.
- **Key Legislations:**
 - **The [Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(RPWD\) Act, 2016](#)**
 - Expands the definition of disability from 7 to 21 categories.
 - Emphasizes dignity, non-discrimination, and inclusion.
 - Guarantees rights related to education, employment, healthcare, accessibility, and legal capacity.
 - Provides **4% reservation** in government jobs and **5% in higher education institutions**.
 - **Other Relevant Laws**
 - The **Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992** – Regulates rehabilitation

services and professionals.

- The **National Trust Act, 1999** – Supports persons with autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, and multiple disabilities.
- The **Mental Healthcare Act, 2017** – Provides rights-based mental healthcare services.

▪ **Related Landmark Cases:**

- **Deaf Employees Welfare Association v. UoI (2013):** Directed equal transport allowance for hearing-impaired government employees, ensuring non-discrimination.
- **Union of India v. National Federation of the Blind (2013):** Clarified that **3% reservation** applies to vacancies in total cadre strength, not just identified posts.
- **Govt. of India v. Ravi Prakash Gupta (2010):** the Supreme Court ruled that job identification cannot be used to deny reservations to visually impaired candidates, ensuring fair appointments.
- **Suchita Srivastava v. Chandigarh Administration (2009):** Court upheld the reproductive rights of a mentally retarded woman, mandating consent for termination unless she is mentally ill.
- **Bhagwan Dass v. Punjab State Electricity Board (2003):** the Court ruled that employees acquiring disabilities cannot be terminated but must be given alternative employment under Section 47 of the PWD Act, reinforcing that PwD rights are a constitutional obligation, not charity.

▪ **International Frameworks Supporting PwD Rights**

- **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006)** – Ensures equal rights and non-discrimination.
- **Salamanca Statement (1994)** – Promotes inclusive education.
- **Asian & Pacific Proclamation on Disability (1992)** – Advocates full participation and equality.

What are the Key Issues Associated with PwDs in India?

- **Digital Exclusion and Accessibility Barriers:** Despite India's push for a \$1 trillion digital economy, **digital platforms, e-governance services, and fintech solutions remain largely inaccessible to PwDs due to lack of assistive technology and inclusive design.**
 - The **Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023**, by requiring '**verifiable consent**' from a guardian, undermines the autonomy of PwDs rather than enabling their independent digital participation.
 - Most government websites and digital services do not comply with the **ICT Accessibility Standard IS 17802**, further marginalizing PwDs in the digital ecosystem.
 - According to the **Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) study (2024)**, only **36.61% of PwDs** regularly use digital services, often facing usability challenges.
- **Employment and Economic Marginalization:** Despite their potential, **PwDs face** significant barriers in employment due to workplace discrimination, inaccessible work environments, and limited vocational training opportunities.
 - India has almost 3 crore people with disability (PwD) of which around 1.3 crore is employable but only **34 lakh of them have been employed.**
 - Many companies prefer to **pay fines rather than comply with disability hiring norms**, and the informal sector remains largely unregulated in this regard.
- **Limited Inclusion in Healthcare and Social Welfare Schemes:** PwDs struggle to access healthcare due to **inaccessible hospitals, lack of specialized medical personnel, and inadequate disability-friendly health insurance policies.**
 - Most public health schemes, including **Ayushman Bharat**, **do not adequately cover assistive devices**, rehabilitation therapies, or long-term disability care.
 - Additionally, mental health services for PwDs remain highly underdeveloped.
 - Insurance coverage for persons with disabilities in India is lacking, leading to high **out-of-pocket health expenses** and access challenges.
 - Also, more than 1,400 complaints related to accessibility have been lodged through the government's flagship **Sugamya Bharat mobile application since its launch in 2021.**
- **Lack of Disability-Inclusive Urban Planning:** Despite the **Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan)** launched in 2015, **most public spaces, transport systems, and**

urban infrastructure remain inaccessible to PwDs.

- **Housing policies rarely mandate accessibility norms**, making even private accommodations difficult for PwDs.
- A **2018 report** found that **only 3% of India's buildings** are fully accessible.
 - Also, currently, railway stations without proper ramps rely on either escalators or overcrowded lifts, which are frequently used by **able-bodied passengers**.
- **Disproportionate Impact of Climate Change and Disasters:** PwDs are among the most vulnerable during **climate disasters** and **extreme weather events**, as evacuation protocols, emergency shelters, and relief measures rarely account for their needs.
 - Disaster management policies do not explicitly integrate disability-inclusive measures, leading to higher casualties and displacement among PwDs.
 - PwDs have **two to four times the mortality rate in acute-onset disasters** compared to the general populace.
- **Intersectional Marginalization: Gender, Rural-Urban Divide, and Caste Barriers:** Women with disabilities face **dual discrimination**—due to gender and disability—limiting their access to education, employment, and healthcare.
 - As many as 18 million persons with disabilities (**69% of the disabled population**) live in rural India and they experience **higher exclusion** due to lack of assistive technology and community awareness.
 - Additionally, PwDs from marginalized caste groups, such as Dalits and Adivasis, encounter **triple discrimination**, further exacerbating their social and economic exclusion.
 - Also, Only **23% of women with disabilities** are working as opposed to **47% of men with disabilities**.
- **Legal Identity and Bureaucratic Hurdles in Availing Benefits:** Many PwDs struggle to obtain a **Unique Disability ID (UDID)**, which is required for availing government benefits, due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and stringent disability assessment criteria.
 - Digital exclusion worsens this issue, as many **PwDs lack the means to apply online**.
 - Also, India's disability pension scheme is marred by poor compensation, strict verification demands, and exclusionary eligibility criteria.
 - However, **legal loopholes are also misused**, as evident in the **recent Pooja Khedkar case**.
- **Societal Stigma and Lack of Awareness:** Ableist attitudes and stereotypes about PwDs continue to persist, leading to **social exclusion, discrimination, and limited opportunities** in both personal and professional spheres.
 - Cultural narratives often frame **disability as a liability rather than a condition requiring empowerment**, reinforcing dependence rather than inclusion.
 - Media representation of PwDs remains minimal and often portrays them in a patronizing manner.
 - It is of the belief that PwDs require **'special care' rather than 'equal opportunities'**.
 - Recent **Supreme Court norms against offending disability depiction in films** and the guidelines provided for visual media, highlight the gravity of the issue.

What Key Measures to Enhance Inclusion and Empowerment of PwDs in India?

- **Digital and Technological Accessibility:** India must ensure **universal compliance with the ICT Accessibility Standard IS 17802** across government and private digital platforms.
 - All e-governance portals, fintech services, and educational platforms should be integrated with assistive technologies such as **screen readers, voice commands, and AI-driven accessibility tools**.
 - Public-private partnerships should focus on **subsidizing assistive technology devices** for PwDs to improve digital inclusion.
 - Expanding **remote digital service centers with trained personnel** can help PwDs in rural areas access essential digital services.
- **Strengthening Implementation of Disability Rights Laws:** A strict **monitoring and accountability mechanism** must be established to ensure **full enforcement of the Rights of**

Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 across sectors.

- Government institutions and private companies should be mandated to **submit annual disability-inclusion reports** on job reservations, accessibility, and welfare measures.
- **Time-bound grievance redressal systems** should be created to address cases of non-compliance, discrimination, or denial of rights.
- The **Office of the Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities** should be given **more autonomy and enforcement powers** to ensure policy implementation.
- **Inclusive Employment and Workplace Policies:** A national-level **Disability-Inclusive Employment Policy** should be framed to mandate **workplace accessibility, flexible working hours, remote work options, and customized training programs** for PwDs.
 - Skill development initiatives under **Skill India and PMKVY** must include **tailored vocational training** for PwDs based on market demand.
 - A **disability employment index** should be introduced to track **inclusive hiring practices in both public and private sectors**.
 - **Startups and SMEs** should receive **tax incentives and financial support** for hiring and training PwDs.
- **Comprehensive Healthcare and Rehabilitation Services:** Healthcare services for PwDs must be integrated into **Ayushman Bharat and other national health schemes**, covering **assistive devices, therapies, and long-term rehabilitation**.
 - Disability-inclusive **telemedicine platforms** should be developed to provide **remote medical consultations, physiotherapy sessions, and mental health support**.
 - **District Disability Rehabilitation Centers (DDRCs)** should be strengthened with **specialized staff, advanced assistive technology, and community outreach programs**.
 - Insurance companies should be **mandated to offer disability-inclusive health policies** covering pre-existing conditions and assistive devices.
- **Accessible Urban Planning and Transport Systems:** The **Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan)** should be expanded with a **legally binding framework** for ensuring **barrier-free public infrastructure, transport systems, and housing**.
 - **All new smart city projects** must incorporate **disability-friendly design principles**, including **wheelchair-friendly pathways, tactile paving, voice-assisted crossings, and universal restroom access**.
 - Public transport systems, including buses, metros, and railways, must be mandated to provide **real-time accessibility support, low-floor entry, and audio-visual assistance**.
 - Affordable, accessible housing schemes should be developed under **PM Awaz Yojana**, with mandatory disability-friendly features in all new constructions.
- **Disaster Resilience and Climate Adaptation for PwDs:** A **Disability-Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction (DiDRR) framework** should be implemented to ensure **early warning systems, accessible shelters, and targeted evacuation strategies** for PwDs.
 - Disaster management agencies and NDRF teams should receive **specialized training on assisting PwDs during emergencies**.
 - Relief packages should include **assistive devices, medication, and personal care support** for PwDs affected by climate disasters.
 - Community-based **disaster preparedness programs** should involve PwDs in planning and execution, ensuring a **participatory approach**.
- **Addressing Intersectional Barriers: Women, Rural PwDs, and Caste Marginalization:** A **gender-sensitive disability framework** should be adopted to address the **unique challenges faced by women with disabilities**, ensuring **safe mobility, access to reproductive healthcare, and financial independence**.
 - Rural PwDs should be integrated into **Digital India and livelihood programs** through community-based digital literacy centers and localized entrepreneurship initiatives.
 - **Dedicated support groups and self-help collectives** should be formed at the village and district levels to empower PwDs through **peer networks and community mentorship**.
 - Local governance structures, **such as Gram Panchayats**, should include **PwD representatives** for better policy advocacy.
- **Simplifying Bureaucratic Processes for Legal Identity and Welfare Access:** The **Unique Disability ID (UDID) system** must be streamlined with **automatic Aadhaar integration** to

reduce bureaucratic delays in accessing welfare benefits.

- Doorstep **disability certification services** should be introduced to assist PwDs who face mobility challenges in obtaining official documents.
- A **single-window online platform** should be created to provide **all PwD-related welfare schemes, job opportunities, healthcare services, and legal aid** under one umbrella.
- The **inclusion of AI-driven chatbot services** can make welfare application processes more **user-friendly and accessible**.

- **Changing Social Perceptions and Promoting Disability Awareness:** A **nationwide disability sensitization campaign** should be launched to challenge ableist stereotypes and promote an inclusive mindset.

- **Schools and universities** should integrate **disability awareness modules** into their curriculum to create an **early culture of acceptance and empathy**.
- Mainstream media and the entertainment industry should be encouraged to feature **PwDs in positive, non-stereotypical roles** to change public perception.
- Celebrating **PwD achievements** (like Medal Winners of Paralympic Games) **through national awards and public recognition** can further encourage societal acceptance and empowerment.

Conclusion

India's journey toward a **\$1 trillion digital economy and broader socio-economic transformation** must be truly inclusive, ensuring that **Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) are not left behind**. This requires a paradigm shift—from **viewing disability inclusion as a compliance requirement to making it a cornerstone of national development**. By embedding inclusivity at every level, India can build a future where PwDs participate with dignity, independence, and equal opportunity in all aspects of society.

Drishti Mains Question:

Despite legal provisions, the employment rate of PwDs in government and private sectors remains low. Analyze the challenges and suggest measures to enhance their workforce participation.

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)

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