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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Beyond Ramps and Braille — India's Incomplete Accessible India Agenda

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GS2

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MAINS RELEVANCE: **GS Paper 2**



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"India ratified the UN CRPD in 2007 and enacted the RPwD Act 2016. Yet accessibility remains aspirational in most of India. What are the gaps, and what would genuine inclusion look like?"*

World Braille Day, observed each January 4, has become a moment for official statements about India's commitment to inclusion of persons with disabilities. The reality is more complex. India has ratified the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), enacted the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act 2016, and launched the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan). Yet the gap between legislation and lived experience for India's 26+ million persons with disabilities (Census 2011; estimated 50+ million by more comprehensive surveys) remains vast.

## THE SCALE OF INDIA'S DISABILITY CHALLENGE

India's disability statistics are contentious. The Census 2011 counted approximately **26.8 million persons with disabilities** (~2.2% of population). However, the World Health Organization estimates that disability prevalence in developing countries is typically 15% of the population — suggesting India's true disability population may be **100+ million** when all forms of disability are counted using the CRPD's broad functional definition.

The RPwD Act 2016 recognised **21 types of disabilities** (up from 7 under the old PwD Act 1995), including:

- Visual impairment and blindness
- Hearing impairment and deafness
- Locomotor disability
- Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder
- Mental illness
- Specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dyscalculia)
- Speech and language disability

Cerebral palsy

Multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease

Leprosy-cured persons (a uniquely Indian inclusion, reflecting social stigma)

**Visual impairment specifically:** India has approximately **50+ million visually impaired persons** (estimates vary). This is the largest visually impaired population in the world in absolute terms.

## THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK — WHAT THE LAW PROMISES

**RPwD Act 2016:** Key provisions:

**Reservation:** 4% reservation in government jobs (up from 3% under 1995 Act); 5% in higher education admissions

**Non-discrimination:** Prohibition of discrimination in employment, education, housing, public spaces

**Accessibility:** Government buildings, transport, and information systems must be made accessible (with a phased timeline)

**Support persons:** Right to support person assistance in judicial proceedings

**Voting rights:** Accessible polling booths for all PWD

**Braille and alternative communication:** Specifically recognised as communication methods

**The CRPD obligations:** India ratified the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities in **October 2007**. The CRPD's core principle is that disability is a social construct — barriers created by inaccessible society, not inherent limitations of the person. This requires a shift from the charity/medical model to the **rights model** of disability.

## THE ACCESSIBLE INDIA CAMPAIGN — WHAT HAS AND HAS NOT BEEN ACHIEVED

The **Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan (Accessible India Campaign)** was launched in December 2015 with three focus areas:

**1. Built environment:** Making government buildings, public spaces, and transport systems accessible (ramps, tactile paths, Braille signage, accessible toilets)

**Progress (as of 2025):**

CPWD (Central Public Works Department) has retrofitted many central government buildings

Railway stations: A+ and A category stations are supposed to be fully accessible — but implementation is uneven; platforms remain inaccessible at many major stations

Airports: AAI (Airport Authority of India) has significantly improved accessibility at major airports — wheelchair assistance, tactile flooring, Braille signage

Significant gaps remain: State government buildings, rural public spaces, urban local body offices are largely inaccessible

## 2. Transport: Accessible public transport

### Progress:

Metro systems (Delhi Metro, Mumbai Metro, Bengaluru Namma Metro) are relatively accessible — elevators at most stations, audio announcements, tactile platforms

Buses: Most state transport buses remain inaccessible — no low-floor buses, no wheelchair ramps

Railways: Some improvements (accessible coaches in premium trains) but generally poor accessibility

## 3. ICT accessibility: Accessible digital infrastructure

### Progress:

GIGW (Guidelines for Indian Government Websites): Government websites supposed to comply with WCAG 2.0 (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) standards

Screen reader compatibility in government portals varies widely

Mobile apps: Accessibility varies; few government apps are fully screen-reader compatible

Significant failure: The Aadhaar system (essential for welfare access) — biometric authentication fails for persons with visual/motor disabilities and leprosy-affected persons (fingerprint damage)

## THE EMPLOYMENT GAP

Despite 4% reservation in government jobs, **only ~0.5% of government employees are persons with disabilities** (as of recent data). The reasons:

- Recruitment processes are not adapted for different disabilities

- Physical entry requirements for certain posts discriminate against those with locomotor disabilities

- Employer attitudes and inaccessible workplaces deter applications

- Enforcement of reservation requirements is weak

In the private sector, PWD employment is unmeasured but structurally excluded by inaccessible workplaces and discriminatory hiring practices. The RPwD Act prohibits discrimination in private employment but has no mandatory reservation and limited enforcement.

## WHAT GENUINE INCLUSION REQUIRES

For India to genuinely honour its CRPD obligations, several shifts are necessary:

- 1. Universal Design mainstreaming:** Stop retrofitting and start designing. Every new government building, infrastructure project, and digital system must be universally designed from inception. Accessibility audits should be mandatory before occupation certificates are issued.
  - 2. Aadhaar accessibility fix:** The biometric exclusion of persons with disabilities from welfare systems is a genuine rights violation. Iris scanning, digital photography, and exception-based registrations must be universally available and efficiently processed.
  - 3. Education inclusion:** The RPwD Act mandates inclusive education. The reality is that most children with disabilities attend segregated special schools or are out of school entirely. Resource teachers, accessible curriculum, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) must be funded and implemented.
  - 4. Disability data reform:** India's census counts 2.2% disabled; surveys suggest 15-20%. Without accurate data, policy remains inadequate. The 2031 census must use CRPD-aligned disability questions.
  - 5. Enforcement mechanism:** The Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities and State Commissioners have limited powers and resources. A statutory grievance redressal mechanism with time-bound resolution is essential.
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## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### INDIA'S DISABILITY LEGAL FRAMEWORK:

RPwD Act 2016: 21 categories of disability (up from 7 in PwD Act 1995); 4% govt job reservation (up from 3%); 5% higher education reservation

UN CRPD: Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities; adopted 2006 (UN GA Resolution 61/106); India ratified October 2007

Optional Protocol to CRPD: Allows individuals to petition UN CRPD Committee; India has not ratified

### ACCESSIBILITY IN INDIA:

Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan: Launched December 3, 2015 (International Day of Persons with Disabilities); focuses on built environment, transport, ICT

GIGW: Guidelines for Indian Government Websites — mandates WCAG 2.0 compliance

Disability Commissioner: Chief Commissioner for PwD under DEPwD (Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities)

### INDIA'S DISABILITY POPULATION:

Census 2011: 26.8 million (2.21% of population)

WHO estimate: ~15% population in developing countries = ~210+ million in India (2024)

Visually impaired: ~50 million (India has world's largest visually impaired population)

Hearing impaired: ~18 million (Census)

Locomotor disability: ~20 million

### WORLD BRAILLE DAY:

Date: January 4 (Louis Braille's birthday, 1809)

UN designation: UNGA Resolution 73/161 (December 2018); first WBD January 4, 2019

Braille: 6-dot system; 64 combinations; invented 1824 (age 15); published 1829

India: Braille publications under National Institute for the Visually Handicapped (NIVH), Dehradun; Braille books under Accessible Books Consortium (ABC)

### OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

Deendayal Disabled Rehabilitation Scheme (DDRS): Financial support to NGOs providing rehabilitation services to PwD

ADIP Scheme: Assistance to Disabled Persons for Purchase/Fitting of Aids and Appliances

National Trust Act 1999: For welfare of persons with autism, cerebral palsy, mental retardation, multiple disabilities

December 3: International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD); designated by UNGA; observed since 1992

SIPDA (Scheme for Implementation of Persons with Disabilities Act): State/UT level implementation support

Sources: The Hindu, DEPwD, PIB, UN CRPD

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