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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Inclusive Digital Accessibility — When Digital India Leaves the Disabled Behind

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SUBJECTS COVERED**SOCIAL ISSUES****POLITY****SCIENCE & TECH****GS PAPERS****GS2****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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GS2



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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Digital India has transformed service delivery, but accessibility for persons with disabilities remains an afterthought. What legal, technical, and institutional measures are needed to make India's digital infrastructure truly inclusive?"

WHY IN NEWS

A parliamentary committee report and disability rights petitions before the Supreme Court have highlighted that most Indian government websites, mobile apps, and digital services remain inaccessible to persons with visual, hearing, or motor disabilities — a systemic failure that contradicts both the RPwD Act 2016 and India's commitments under the UN CRPD.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

India's Census 2011 counted **2.68 crore persons with disabilities** (~2.2% of population) — a figure widely considered an undercount, with more recent estimates placing the true figure at **4–5 crore** (using WHO classification standards).

Disabilities affecting digital access include:

Visual impairment: ~45 lakh blind + ~23 lakh low vision (Census 2011)

Hearing impairment: ~51 lakh

Multiple disabilities and cognitive/intellectual disabilities: significant but undercounted

For these citizens, inaccessible digital platforms are not an inconvenience — they are **barriers to fundamental rights**: banking, government services, employment, education.

WHAT IS DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY?

Digital accessibility means that websites, apps, and digital content can be used by people with various disabilities using assistive technologies:

Disability	Assistive Technology	Requirement
Blind	Screen readers (JAWS, NVDA, TalkBack)	Alt text on images, keyboard navigation, semantic HTML
Low vision	Screen magnifiers	Scalable text, sufficient colour contrast
Deaf/hard of hearing	Captions, transcripts	Video captions, text alternatives
Motor impairment	Switch controls, eye-tracking	Full keyboard navigability, no time-limited interactions
Cognitive disability	Plain language	Simple navigation, consistent layout

THE WCAG STANDARD

The global benchmark is the **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)**, developed by the **World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)**. The current version is WCAG 2.1, with WCAG 2.2 published in 2023.

WCAG is built on four principles (POUR):

Perceivable — all information must be presentable in ways users can perceive

Operable — interface components must be operable (e.g., keyboard, voice)

Understandable — information and UI must be understandable

Robust — content must be interpretable by assistive technologies

WCAG has three compliance levels: **A (minimum)**, **AA (recommended)**, **AAA (highest)**. Most international standards require **WCAG 2.1 Level AA**.

INDIA'S LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The RPwD Act, 2016

The **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016** — enacted to implement the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)** (which India ratified in 2007) — mandates:

Section 42: Every establishment shall take steps to ensure that all electronic contents, websites, and electronic documents are accessible to persons with disabilities

Section 40: Establishment must provide reasonable accommodation in workplaces

Section 46: Government shall develop barrier-free accessibility standards

The RPwD Act recognises **21 categories of disabilities** (expanded from 7 under the previous Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995) including:

Blindness, low vision, deaf-blindness

Hearing impairment

Locomotor disability, cerebral palsy

Intellectual disabilities

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Chronic neurological conditions

Blood disorders (thalassaemia, haemophilia, sickle cell)

Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD)

The statutory authority to receive complaints under the RPwD Act. Has repeatedly issued directions on digital accessibility but enforcement remains weak.

Constitutional Basis

Article 21: Right to life and personal dignity — courts have interpreted this to include right to access government services

Article 14: Right to equality — denying access to disabled persons is discriminatory

Article 41: DPSP — State shall make provision for disabled persons

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES — GAP BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE

GIGW 3.0 — Guidelines for Indian Government Websites

MeitY (Ministry of Electronics and IT) issued **Guidelines for Indian Government Websites (GIGW 3.0)** in 2023, mandating WCAG 2.1 AA compliance for all central government websites and apps.

However:

Compliance audits show majority of government portals fail even basic accessibility tests

Many portals use CAPTCHA that is inaccessible to screen readers

PDF documents (the preferred format for government circulars) are often image-based, not text-based — invisible to screen readers

Video content on government platforms (YouTube channels, MyGov) often lacks captions

DigiLocker and Aadhaar

DigiLocker — the digital document repository used by hundreds of millions — has been flagged for accessibility gaps. Aadhaar enrollment and authentication kiosks lack assistive technology support.

PM Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan)

Launched December 2015; focuses on built environment, transport, and information/communication accessibility. Deadline after deadline has been missed on the ICT component.

BEST PRACTICES — WHAT INDIA MUST EMULATE

USA: Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act mandates federal ICT accessibility; DOJ actively enforces compliance

EU: European Accessibility Act (2022) will mandate accessibility for broad range of private sector products and services

UK: Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018 require WCAG 2.1 AA for all government digital services

India must move from **aspirational guidelines** to **mandatory compliance with enforceable penalties** and regular third-party accessibility audits.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: RPwD Act 2016 (21 categories of disabilities), WCAG (W3C), UN CRPD (India ratified 2007), Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, GIGW 3.0, CCPD, Section 508 (USA).

Mains GS-2: “The RPwD Act 2016 has strong provisions for digital accessibility, yet implementation has been poor. Critically examine the barriers and suggest a roadmap for inclusive digital governance.”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN INDIA:

- Census 2011: 2.68 crore PWD (~2.2% of population)
- Actual estimate (WHO classification): 4-5 crore
- Visually impaired: ~45 lakh blind + 23 lakh low vision (Census 2011)
- Hearing impaired: ~51 lakh

LEGAL FRAMEWORK:

- RPwD Act 2016: Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act; replaced 1995 Act; 21 disability categories
- UN CRPD: UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities; India ratified October 2007
- Section 42 RPwD: mandates accessibility of electronic content/websites
- CCPD: Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities; statutory grievance body
- Constitutional basis: Articles 14, 21, 41

WCAG STANDARD:

- Developed by: W3C (World Wide Web Consortium)
- Current version: WCAG 2.1 (WCAG 2.2 published October 2023)
- Levels: A (minimum), AA (recommended international standard), AAA (enhanced)
- POUR principles: Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, Robust

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES:

- GIGW 3.0: Guidelines for Indian Government Websites version 3; issued by MeitY (2023); requires WCAG 2.1 AA
- Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan (Accessible India Campaign): launched December 2015; PM Modi
- MeitY: Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology
- DigiLocker: digital document storage; ~300 million users

GLOBAL COMPARISONS:

- USA: Section 508 Rehabilitation Act (1998, amended 2017) mandates federal ICT accessibility
- EU: European Accessibility Act 2022 (implementation 2025)
- UK: Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES:

- Screen readers: JAWS (Windows, paid), NVDA (Windows, free), VoiceOver (Apple), TalkBack (Android)
- Screen magnifiers, Braille displays, switch access devices
- Alt text: text description of images, read by screen readers

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

- DEPwD: Department for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities; under Ministry of Social Justice
- National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NIEPVD): Dehradun
- Ali Yavar Jung National Institute of Speech and Hearing Disabilities (AYJNISHD): Mumbai
- Divyangjan: official terminology used by Government of India for persons with disabilities (since 2015)

Sources: Indian Express, MeitY, DEPwD

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