

“Accessibility Cannot Be an Afterthought”: DEPwD Calls for a Whole-of-Government Approach to Sugamya Bharat

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“Accessibility cannot be an afterthought, nor can it be left to a single department or agency. It requires a concerted effort across all ministries, departments and levels of government, in partnership with civil society.” This was the central message of Ms. Manmeet Kaur Nanda, IAS, Additional Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), as she called for a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to advancing accessibility across India at the consultation *“Sugamyata Ka Sankalp”* held at the India International Centre, New Delhi.



Emphasising that accessibility cuts across education, healthcare, employment, transport, financial services and public infrastructure, Ms. Nanda stressed that progress in one sector depends on coordinated action across others. She underscored the need for States to accord accessibility the priority it deserves and for all stakeholders to work together to translate the vision of an inclusive and accessible India into reality. Her message reinforced that accessibility must be embedded at the design stage itself, rather than being added on or corrected later.

Organised by DEPwD, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, in partnership with The Association of People with Disability (APD), India, and in collaboration with Ipsos, the consultation brought together representatives from government, the disability sector, academia, research and civil society to assess the progress of the Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, identify persistent accessibility gaps and deliberate on priorities for its next phase.



Shri Girish C. Hosur, Joint Secretary, DEPwD, presented the journey and achievements of the Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, highlighting the Department's role in leading the initiative and advancing accessibility across public infrastructure, transport and digital services. His presentation provided the context for discussions on consolidating progress and strengthening implementation in the years ahead.

Shri S. Govindaraj, Commissioner, Office of the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, emphasised that accessibility is the need of the hour. He highlighted the importance of the Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan in advancing accessibility across the country and stressed the need to build on the progress achieved so far to address the barriers that continue to affect persons with disabilities.



Welcoming the participants, Mr. Subir Hari Singh, President, APD, highlighted the importance of bringing together diverse stakeholders to advance accessibility. He emphasised that meaningful progress depends on sustained partnership among government, practitioners, experts and persons with disabilities. He also outlined APD's mission and its work in the disability sector.

The consultation featured two moderated roundtable discussions led by Ms. Tripti Sharma, Director, Ipsos. The first examined sectoral challenges in the implementation and use of accessibility data, while the second explored approaches to measuring accessibility across sectors and the essential features of a credible and practical measurement framework. The discussions underscored the importance of reliable data and evidence to guide planning, monitor implementation and assess progress.

Participants included representatives from the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Prasar Bharati and the Airports Authority of India. State Commissioners for Persons with Disabilities, representatives of the State Governments of Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, and disability-sector leaders from across India participated both in person and online.

Launched in 2015, the Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan marked a significant national initiative to advance accessibility in the built environment, transport systems and information and communication technologies. The consultation, held against the backdrop of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, provided an opportunity to reflect on achievements, identify continuing barriers and explore ways to strengthen accessibility standards, implementation and measurement.

In his closing remarks, Mr. Sukanto Aich, Chief Executive Officer, APD, observed that the gathering itself—bringing stakeholders together to learn from one another and commit to collaboration—was a sign of hope for making the vision of Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan a reality.

The consultation reinforced the shared responsibility of governments, institutions, civil society and the disability sector in building an accessible and inclusive India. Its central message was clear: accessibility must move beyond isolated initiatives to become an integral, measurable and coordinated priority across every sector.

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