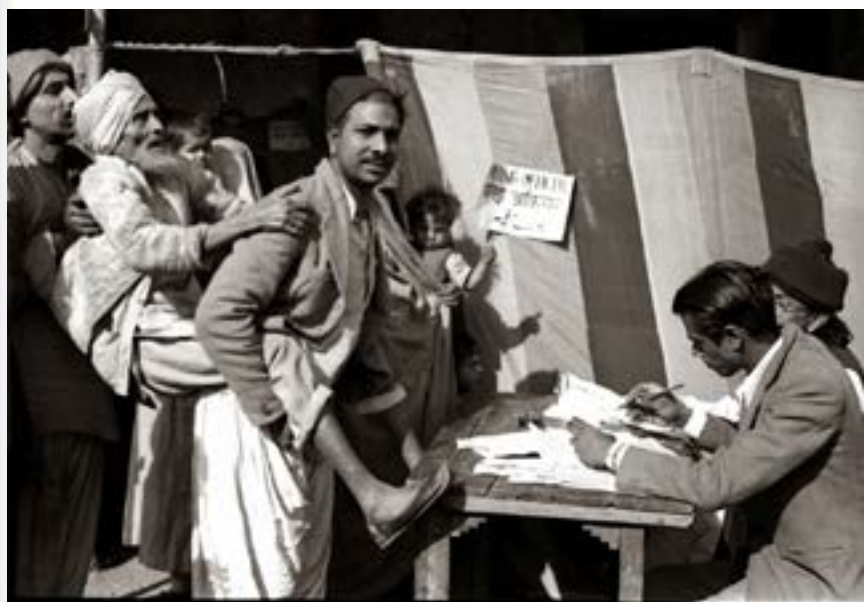


Success &

ABILITY

India's Cross-disability Magazine

March 2019: Vol 1



**GO
VOTE**

CONTENTS

3

NEWS & NOTES

Goa's disability helpline; the instructive TRRAIN report on employees with disabilities; the ambitious 'Valuable 500' initiative; and 'Sapna': NILEP's new strategy to bust myths on leprosy.

COVER FEATURE

6

The 2019 General Elections, declared by the Election Commission of India to be 'Accessible Elections', are just around the corner. How far has the spirit of access and inclusion trickled down the system and policy been translated to practice? Activists and observers decode the scenario.

20

INITIATIVE

Dr. Samuel Mathew and Dr. Madan Vasishtha track the evolution of Kerala Government's Youth Innovation Program that trains youth with and without disabilities in developing innovative solutions to common challenges.

ON POINT

24

Success & ABILITY quizzes disability rights activist ARMAN ALI, the newly appointed Executive Director of National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People, on his roadmap for NCPEDP.

27

MANAGEMENT

In a milieu that is witness to relationships breaking down across society, Dr. Ketna L Mehta ponders over the reasons for this and looks for solutions.

WE'D REALLY LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU

Whether you are a person with disability,
or a parent or a friend or just someone who cares,
we look forward to getting to know you and your concerns.
You are just a click away!



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News & Notes

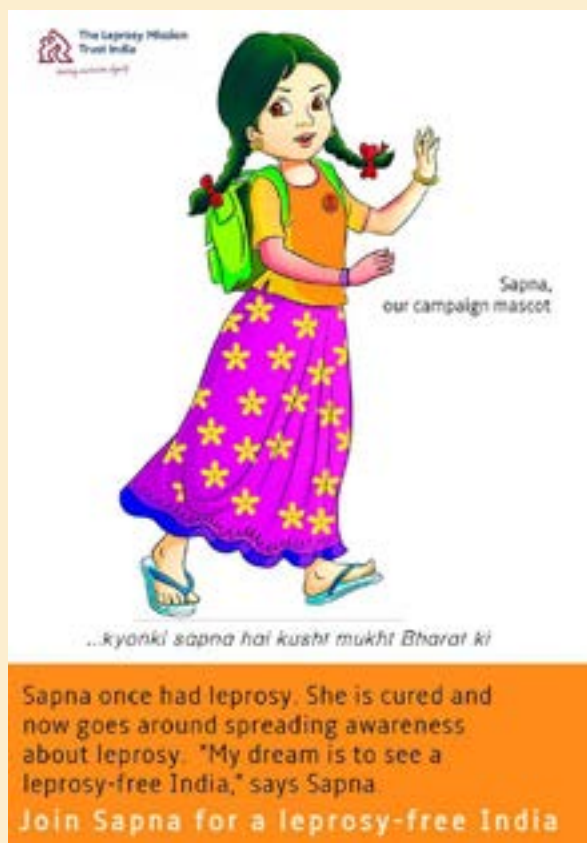
GOA GETS A DISABILITY HELPLINE

While the Government of India has instituted many programmes, laws and schemes for the empowerment of people with disabilities, there is a lack of awareness about this among most people with disabilities. Here is a brilliant and simple initiative that could enable people with disabilities to make use of the laws, policies and programmes in place for their empowerment. Disability Rights Association of Goa (DRAG) has launched a helpline for Goa – 9971820420. Interested persons can call this number or query through a WhatsApp message for any information they seek regarding applying for schemes, grievance redressal, employment opportunities, finding marriage partners, etc. This helpline service will be operational between 9 a.m. and 9.p.m.



DRAG would take up the matter put forward by the caller with the department concerned, according to Avelino D'Sa, President, DRAG. In cases where DRAG did not have the requested information on hand, DRAG would revert to the caller with the requested information within 12 hours.

‘SAPNA’ TO SPREAD LEPROSY AWARENESS



Recently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that two lakh cases of leprosy are reported every year, and that India accounts for over half of this number. Marking an innovative strategy to tackle leprosy in India, the National Leprosy Elimination Programme (NLEP) has adopted ‘Sapna’ a fictional 12-year-old school girl to spread leprosy awareness in communities through posters, board games and interactive community games.

The thrust of this campaign is to spread awareness in a positive way, because the grim image of leprosy that prevails has led to a stigma around the disease, leading to under reporting of cases. These cases therefore go untreated and proceed to the Grade 2 Disability (G2D) stage of irreversible damage that is currently at 3.34 cases per million population.

If people understand that leprosy is a skin disease and can be completely cured, the stigma associated will get negated. The fact that sitting and eating with

affected individuals will not make one catch the infection and that once an infected person starts his course of medication there is almost no chance of him infecting others needs to be widely publicised. A combination of vaccination, detection campaigns, multidrug therapy (MDT), medical rehabilitation such as free reconstruction surgery and monetary compensation for post-operation recovery, along with better awareness will help India become leprosy-free, just like how India became polio-free.

IT PAYS TO EMPLOY PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

90% of employees with disabilities are in the unorganised sector, reports a survey by the Trust for Retailers & Retail Associates of India (TRRAIN). This survey’s report ‘Disability Employment: Indian Retail Changing Equations’ also states that only 36% of people with disabilities are employed.

Another instructive data reported by this survey is that around 50% of the country's people with disabilities is in the employable age of 20-59 years, and that they are not able to find jobs because of widespread illiteracy.

Policy makers should make note of an important point made by the report, indicating that mainstreaming people with disabilities could add around 5-7% to the country's GDP. Hence, promoting employment and employability status of people with disabilities could boost the overall Indian economy.

The survey further reports that hiring of people with disabilities in the retail sector has increased by 53% between 2011 and 2018 and that there is a positive correlation between customers and stores manned by the disabled. Activists working in the sector should capitalise on this fact and make a big thrust for getting the retail and other sectors to employ people with disabilities, as this visibility would also sensitise society to disability.



THE VALUABLE 500!

Fortune 500 companies are well known. Hopefully, soon, 'The Valuable 500' companies will become trendsetters too. 'The Valuable 500' is an ambitious initiative towards inclusion, launched at this year's World Economic Forum summit at Davos.

The Valuable 500 will try to get 500 global businesses to commit to disability inclusion. By becoming members of The Valuable 500, these firms agree to table disability on their board agenda from 2019 onwards and fulfil one commitment towards disability inclusion in 2019. Unilever, Microsoft, Barclays, Fujitsu, Cinopolis, and Accenture have already signed up as members. Valuable 500 will also work with experts to help the business community across the globe do away with disability exclusion.

'The Valuable 500' is led by Caroline Casey, award-winning activist, social entrepreneur and founder of Binc, an organisation founded in 2015 to spark off a global movement for business inclusion. Caroline Casey is a person with visual impairment (registered blind). This is the first time that Davos has included disability on the main stage. The launch of 'The Valuable 500' was accompanied by the campaign 'Diversish', by Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO, that satirises how businesses that call themselves diverse, overlook, ignore or postpone anything to do with disability inclusion. ■

...BECAUSE OUR VOTES COUNT

The 2019 General Elections has been declared to be 'Accessible Elections' by the Election Commission of India. How far has this intent of access and inclusion trickled down the system and accessible voting been enabled on ground? HEMA VIJAY explores the scenario, with expert opinions from activists working towards this.



It's the most basic aspect of exercising our rights. Saying that we exist, as a citizen, as a member of community, that we matter, that we care, that we have a say in who comes to power. The right to vote is the most powerful one in a democracy. The exercise of this constitutional right is key to achieving what's rightfully ours, because political participation and political powers are deeply entwined. It is political participation that makes a said interest group a potential vote bank, and only then do the issues they flag evoke attention, and merit a response. That's how democracy works.



**Hema
Vijay**



“For the first time ever, due to the consistent efforts of disability activists and NGOs and the mandate of the RPD Act, elections in India are being officially geared for the participation of voters with disabilities.”

For far too long, people with disabilities have found inadequate representation in the political process. ‘Nothing for us, without us’ came to be the credo. This notwithstanding, a huge chunk of people with disabilities have scarcely exercised their right to vote, leave alone won the right to set policy as democratically elected powers that be. The reason for this, primarily being the inaccessible voting spaces.

For people with disabilities, the right to vote is preceded by an enabling factor – access to voting. The grim reality is that universal inclusive infrastructure is yet to define itself in our cities and towns, even in its rudimentary form. No surprises then, that accessible voting has largely eluded us and it goes without saying that it is even more of a challenge in rural areas. However, times are now changing. Organisations and government bodies have now started responding to the just demand for access to the voting process, of course, with varying levels of dynamism, inventiveness and commitment. Brazil’s ‘Electoral Justice Accessibility

Programme’ and the Canadian ‘Elections Saskatchewan’s Accessibility Implementation Plan’ that brought about home-bound voting for about 500 of its citizens with disabilities, are some of the notable world initiatives in this regard.



In recent times, India is seeing a lot of action to ensure the access to vote, heralded by a slew of policy measures. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has introduced an extensive range of measures, right from making its website accessible, to providing transportation arrangements on the day of voting. Many including Nagaland-based disability activist Diethono Nakhro have expressed their appreciation of the Election Commission of India for according priority to people with disabilities.

In fact, the 2019 General Elections has been declared to be “Accessible Elections” by the ECI. Across the country, there has been a flurry of consultations and deliberations between the Election Commission of India and disability activists at the national, state and district levels, besides the sensitisation and training camps, the access audits and the follow ups on the audit reports. A series of consultations on the inclusion of people with disabilities in the electoral process were held in districts and states across the country to identify existing barriers and challenges, to assess the implementation of the directives given by the ECI, and to learn from existing good practices. The reports that emerged were then analysed in the National Consultation on Accessible Elections (3-4 July 2018), and following this, steering committees were formed with extensive representation from stakeholders and nodal officers were identified to make possible accessible elections, right down to the Block level.

“For the first time ever, due to the consistent efforts of disability activists and NGOs and the mandate of the RPD Act, elections in India are being officially geared for the participation of voters with disabilities”, says Dr. Sruti Mohapatra, Founder and Chief Executive, Swabhiman, Odisha. Dr. Mohapatra was part of the National Consultation on Accessible Elections, is a member of Odisha’s State Level Steering Committee for accessible elections and works at the ground level for accessible elections too. Incidentally, Swabhiman was invited to give an orientation and to sensitise Odisha’s State

Organisations and government bodies have now started responding to the just demand for access to the voting process with varying levels of dynamism, inventiveness and commitment.

It is a matter of concern that a sizeable number of people with disabilities have not come forward and enrolled themselves in electoral rolls.

Level Master Trainers (SLMTs) as well as District Level Master Trainers (DLMTs) on basic disability etiquette.

Other states in India have also seen such action at varying levels. In Kerala, enumeration of disabled voters is already on, in order to make transportation arrangements from homes to the polling booths on polling day. In Nagaland, on the other hand, as of November 3, only around 2500 persons with disabilities were identified in the electoral rolls, according to the Chief Electoral Officer, Nagaland.

It is a matter of national concern that a sizeable number of people with disabilities have not come forward and enrolled themselves in electoral rolls. Indrani Malkani, an Ashoka Fellow and Consultant and Chairman of Maharashtra based VCitizens Action Network (VCAN) that promotes citizens' engagement with the Government, believes that the challenges in getting people with disabilities registered as voters also include the access of the crucial information to the voter, not to mention the stigma and misconceptions associated with persons with disabilities. "They don't know anything - how will they vote properly? This is a common attitude in society! The second part of the challenge is in the actual casting of votes. It is now incumbent to address the issue of inclusive accessibility of the built-in infrastructure, transportation, public utilities and other objects of public use for voters, as well as the human interaction by the polling staff", she says.

The question is, how far has the spirit of access and inclusion trickled down the system? How far has policy translated to practice? How far has accessible voting been enabled on ground? True, the answer to these questions can be answered only after the last vote has been cast in the forthcoming general elections, but, certainly, there are pointers to reflect upon.

"Polling booths are being made accessible. However, requests to send an observer team from among people with disabilities has not been accepted. The accessibility support system is restricted to just the provision of





wheelchairs. The number of persons with disabilities is not being ascertained nor followed as per 2011 Census figures. Only those having disability certificates are being recognised, numbering just about one lakh”, points out Sruti Mohapatra, with respect to Odisha.

Granted, making elections accessible in the world’s largest democracy, a developing country at that, is a humongous task. Even in a developed country like the United States, today, as many as one in five potential voters face barriers to voting on account of disability, according to the Accessible Voting Technology Initiative that operates in the U.S. For a populous, developing country like India, the task ahead is more challenging, and one that requires a concerted, on-going initiative.

So then, how much has India progressed towards universal accessibility to voting and where do we lag? Although there has been progress, there is much ground still to be covered. However, the future holds hope. Our country’s journey towards accessible elections and widespread participation of people with disabilities in the electoral process is best narrated by Sruti Mohapatra. She shares, “When I was in Delhi for the National Consultation on Accessible Elections in July 2018, I was reminded of 2004. There had been an agitation then, led by the late Javed Abidi, followed by the April 19 circular including an interim order for the State Governments to provide wooden ramps in all polling booths across the country for the second phase of elections.

Back then, when I reached the polling booth, a school, to cast my vote, not just the poll booth officer but also voters seemed irritated by my presence. There was no ramp and the wheelchair was lifted over the five steps, resulting in chaos. The wheelchair could not be brought into the room. Between the tables, there was no space to move and I couldn’t reach the ballot box on the high table. No one cared for my vote. Everyone was irritated as to why this disabled person was creating a delay. It was the fourth General Election since the passing of the Disability Act, 1995, yet, facilities for millions of voters were still missing.

However, the persistence and continuous hard work by persons with disabilities have paid off. In 2014, it was still work in progress. In July 2018, New Delhi hosted the historic national consultations on accessible elections, with central and all state election commissioners, and senior representatives of all political parties working sincerely to ensure our participation in the voting process! It has been a long journey, but it is happening in my lifetime! Waiting to cast my vote in 2019 with dignity. Here is to an accessible election for all”, she says.



Here are some more write-ups by prominent national activists, which give you a clearer picture of India's accessible voting scene for ALL persons with disabilities...

TOWARDS... ACCESSIBLE ELECTIONS

In Jammu and Kashmir, accessible elections remain an unfulfilled dream for persons with disabilities, because of a variety of reasons across the board, writes JAVED AHMAD TAK, disability activist and founder chairman, Humanity Welfare Organization Helpline. He suggests a host of measures to remedy the situation.



Javed
Ahmad Tak

Inaccessibility, including infrastructural and communication barriers, keep persons with disabilities away from the election process. Thus, over the last 70 years, persons with disabilities haven't been able to make themselves count as a votebank for political parties. Because of this, rights-based developments remain non-existent, and political parties still operate on a charity-sympathy mode, announcing schemes or support *ad hoc*, be it at the state or the central level.

Jammu and Kashmir has the least accessibility, as far as polling stations in India are concerned. Ramps are not present in all polling stations, and the polling stations are often in the third storeys of buildings. Because most of these buildings house private schools or government offices, they are in



no way disabled-friendly. Voters with severe disabilities are not given reasonable space in the polling centres to move around on wheelchairs. The introduction of EVMs has only added to the barriers. Braille signs are absent on all electronic voting machines. The EVM is placed at a height in corners, because of which persons with visual impairment, wheelchair users and persons on crutches face problems in accessing it.

Voters with disabilities are unaware of the contents of the party manifestos. No party manifesto is available in accessible format for voters with blindness. Persons with disabilities sometimes vote on odd conditions. When they approach the elected MLA, MP or councillor for fulfilling the promises they had made, the politicians deny that it was in their manifesto. On the other hand, voters with disabilities believe that their votes have no value. So, they prefer to remain inside their homes on poll days.

Voter IDs used to be preferred by persons with disabilities as Kashmir, a security zone, demands photo IDs from time to time. Since the Aadhaar card has gained importance for seeking benefits like disability pension, mobility aids and ration, persons with disabilities now prefer Aadhaar cards to voter IDs. Thus, the popularity of voter IDs among voters with disabilities has faded.

There are no observers at all to check upon voting facilities and challenges faced by rural voters with disabilities. Voters with disabilities face severe challenges in reaching polling stations far away from their residences. In the absence of conveyance allowance, the number of votes cast is thus very much less. Voters with disabilities also face extra challenges in reading banners and posters. So, accessible banners and posters should be available with parties. Moreover, aspiring candidates with disabilities are not able to file their nomination papers because of the expensive electioneering processes.

Jammu & Kashmir has the least accessibility, as far as polling stations in India are concerned.

The Government of India should institute financial assistance schemes for deserving candidates with disabilities to contest elections. Like women and other reserved categories, the state should reserve one MLA seat for candidates with disabilities. In the upper house of the Parliament and that of the states where the upper house exists, one berth or nomination for candidates with disabilities should be ensured. Seminars to create awareness among voters with disabilities should be conducted in all constituencies.



Persons with disabilities should be invited to rallies and seminars to understand the parties' manifestos and promises. For voters with hearing impairment, sign language interpreters should be made available. The websites of all political parties should be mandated to be accessible, besides of course those of the state-level chief electoral officers, and the election commission at central level. There should be a special helpline in all states and at the central level, for the assistance of voters with disabilities. The census of voters with disabilities should be made available on all election related websites.

The state should reserve one MLA seat for candidates with disabilities.



**LET
no voter
be left
behind**

K. Raghuraman, disability activist from Tamil Nadu, looks back at the major milestones that have gone into the making of accessible election process and the lacunae that still exist, and solutions that would help.



K Raghuraman

The theme for the 9th National Voters' Day, (25 Jan 2019), "No Voter to be Left Behind", not only reiterates the commitment of the Election Commission of India (ECI), but also integrates into the constitutional mandate of universal adult suffrage.



Voting is a constitutional right that enables citizens to choose their leaders, who they believe could serve them the best. It provides the voter a unique opportunity to design the fabric of the new government. The right to vote is very crucial for persons with disabilities as every policy decision from employment to housing, transportation, funding of programmes, social security, medical care, etc, are initiated and influenced by whom we elect.

To look back at the chain of events that has led to this day, the landmark letter of the late Javed Abidi to the Chief Justice of India in 2004 on making polling booths accessible to persons with disabilities was converted into a writ petition. The Supreme Court, in its 'Order in the case of Disabled Rights Group Vs Chief Election Commissioner & Anr [W.P.(C) No. 187/2004]', for the first time in India, passed directions to the Election Commission of the world's largest democracy to make the voting process accessible for persons with disabilities. It is then that the ECI introduced ramps for the physically impaired and Braille on the EVMs for the visually disabled. This is the first significant achievement of the Election Commission of India wherein they walked an extra mile to introduce accessibility and inclusion in Indian elections.

Accessibility is one of the prime aspects of the UNCRPD, as well as the RPD Act, yet, it has not been understood properly by many authorities in government administration.

In the following years, the ECI took enormous steps towards ensuring accessibility for persons with disabilities in the election process. It framed and shared the 'uniform guidelines' and instructed the Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs) of all the states to ensure availability of ramps and inclusion of Braille at polling booths.

The ECI has also committed to have inclusion and accessibility as one of the themes every year. In order to strengthen its efforts towards inclusive elections, the Election Commission of India organised a one-day International Conference on the 'Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in Electoral Processes' on 24 January

2018, in New Delhi, as part of the National Voters' Day Celebrations. This was followed by a two-day 'National Consultation on Accessible Elections' in Delhi with the aim of making elections accessible for Persons with Disability (PwDs) in India. A booklet titled 'Breaking Barriers: Making Elections Accessible' and a strategic framework was also published and circulated. This booklet provides us with clear, full-fledged instructions and guidelines to make every step in the electoral process accessible for persons with disabilities.

During the last (2016) assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, the Election Commission of India had endeavoured to provide maximum number of wheelchairs in most of the polling booths. The



enrolment and subsequent voting by persons with psychosocial disability and disabled people with reduced mobility and limited motor function in homes/institutions has also become a reality.

While all the aforesaid details are heartening to know, it must be understood that this did not happen without constant negotiations, struggle and pressure from the disability sector. In the context of implementation of all the guidelines for accessible elections, looking at in Tamil Nadu, the response of Kamaraj, a field worker, is that of “disappointment”. He says, “There was no proper functional wheelchair available at the polling booths and hence the voting experience was unhappy.”

Assured Minimum Facility (AMF) is one of the prime commitments of the Election Commission of India in ensuring accessible and inclusive elections for persons with disabilities. It includes:

- Provision of a permanent sturdy ramp with handrails (3”, gradient of 1:12 to 1:10), wheelchair, wide non-slippery path
- Separate queue for senior citizens and people with disabilities, seating arrangements inside the polling station
- Ensuring three-feet wide doorways at the entry and exit points, providing adequate space inside the polling station
- Desk and counters at wheelchair accessible heights
- Braille-enabled ballot sheets and EVMs
- Braille-enabled voter slips
- Tables of adjustable height for placing the EVMs
- Provision of amplifiers for the hearing impaired, sign language interpreters and trained volunteers on the polling day
- Drinking water facility at accessible height
- Easily accessible rest rooms, ‘Thank You’ cards

“Unfortunately, in reality, the Assured Minimum Facility for people with disabilities was not fully in place during the 2016 TN assembly elections”, says Venkatesh, a fieldworker from Thiruvannamalai. “Even the ramps were not properly built, and as a result, the wheelchair was not able to get through”, he added. Gnana Bharathi, President, Spinal Cord Injured Persons Association, informed that their organisation had undertaken accessibility audits in polling booths well before the 2016 assembly elections for correction and modification, and the report shared with the Disability Rights Alliance (DRA) India, to be collectively submitted to the ECI.

While heartening measures for accessible voting have been instituted. It must be understood that this did not happen without constant negotiations, struggle and pressure from the disability sector.



Accessibility audit of polling booths is a new concept initiated by Disability Rights Alliance – a group of like minded individuals and organisations that promote advocacy and activism for the empowerment of persons with disabilities. “We had done accessibility audits in 235 polling booths in Chennai, Dindigul, Salem, Madurai, Viluppuram and Nagapattinam”, shares Sathya Madurantakam, volunteer from NTT Data and Member, DRA India. He also added that some changes were made by the ECI in the polling booths based on the audit report. This facilitated the ECI to frame basic standards for assessing and ensuring accessibility in polling booths. It is also understood that the Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) was made accessible through the intervention of DRA India.



“Ramps and Braille are not the only accessibility features in a polling booth. It involves sign language availability, adequate space for wheelchair movement, etc. Moreover, accessibility features should remain permanent, rather than be a makeshift arrangement. Only then does it give us a full-fledged experience of independent voting”, says P. Simmachandran, President, TN Differently-Abled Federation.

Accessibility is one of the prime aspects of both the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPD) Act, 2016. But this has not been recognized or understood properly by many authorities in government administration.

While the accessibility of polling booths is of concern on one hand, data on persons with disability is of greater concern to the Election Commission, Tamil Nadu, in the current scenario. Enrolment and mapping of disabilities with the polling booths is a major action point of the ECI. Yet, the final revised voters list of Tamil Nadu that was released on 31 Jan 2019 by TN’s Chief Electoral Officer did not include any data on persons with disabilities in the state.

With the Parliament elections around the corner, the only solution to making elections accessible and inclusive to persons with disabilities is in creating a ‘barrier free environment’. The word “Barrier” should not be understood merely as physical barriers, but also include bureaucratic barriers, i.e., the attitude of the administrative authorities. Clearly, it is the activism by disability groups that has prompted the ECI to come thus far. It is now the Election Commission of India’s sole responsibility and commitment to ensure that the “No Voter to be left Behind” mandate is completely realised at the ground level.



Should we vote at all?

A change in the way people with disabilities are being looked at and treated can happen only if we engage with the political system of the country. No longer should we be silent observers; rather, we should consciously exercise our vote and make a difference, writes Ankit Rajiv Jindal, Founder, Friends for Inclusion.



Ankit
Rajiv Jindal

All of us have often been frustrated with the ignorant behaviour of the Government of India with respect to the needs of persons with disabilities. So much so that we can hardly find any substantial action item in the manifesto of any political party. Indeed, there is a need to bring about a CHANGE in the way people with disabilities are being looked at and treated. However, this change can materialise only if we change. Let us not merely be silent observers and become victims of political undoing. Instead, let's be the Pied Pipers who can lead and bring about the much-desired change. Let us all vote and make a difference.

Here are some factors we need to understand, as to why we should vote...

YOU HAVE THE POWER TO BRING A CHANGE

There is a myth that the disabled population, being small in numbers, cannot influence electoral outcomes. Consequently, a majority of us are not motivated to engage with the political class. However, here are some facts which will give you some food for thought:

The World Health Organization estimates that 15% of the population has a disability, meaning India has roughly about 20 crore people with disabilities. This makes the disabled population of India one of the largest interest groups in the country, with significant power to influence the fate of any political establishment in India.

The disabled population of India constitutes one of the largest interest groups in the country, with significant power to influence the fate of any political establishment in India.



Compare this with the vote difference between the two national parties, Congress and BJP in the 2004 Lok Sabha Elections – just 98 lakh votes out of a total 38.99 crore votes polled. In the 2004 Lok Sabha polls BJP got 22.2% and Congress – 26.7% of the total votes polled – 38.99 crores, which is 58% of the total 67.15 crore registered voters.

DO YOU STILL THINK THAT IT DOES NOT MAKE A DIFFERENCE IF WE DO NOT VOTE? YOUR VOTING UPSETS POLITICAL CALCULATIONS

Political parties can forecast how many votes they are going to get from their constituency, and they know how to get them. Hence, they don't really want you to vote, as you can upset their calculations being an unknown factor. Politicians themselves perpetuate the myth that it makes no difference if you vote or not. It is simple arithmetic that the fewer the people who come out to vote, the fewer the votes that are needed to win an election.

The 2019 General Elections are positioned to be an accessible election in India. It is rather unfortunate that the disabled population still finds it difficult to assert the right to vote and eventually vote, even after 70 years of our independence. A right enshrined to all, whether disabled or not, by the Constitution of India. However, it took the enforcement of the Supreme Court verdict to ensure accessible infrastructure for the disabled population to access their voting rights.

However, to be fair, the Election Commission of India, ably supported by Smitha Sadashivan, Assistant Coordinator at Disability Legislation Unit, Vidya Sagar, has taken great strides

Whether you vote or not, elections are going to shape you and your country. So, come out and vote and have your say and be counted, rather than being counted-out.



forward to make our election process accessible. The 2019 general elections will see ramps, priority queues, Braille stickers on the Electronic Voting Machines and so on, to ensure that disabled citizens of India, the world's largest democracy, can effectuate their voting rights.

YOUR VOTE WILL ENCOURAGE GOOD CANDIDATES TO STAND FOR ELECTIONS

Good candidates must be supported, irrespective of whether they may win or not. It is essential that good candidates get a respectable number of votes so that, next time around, more good candidates are encouraged rather than embarrassed to stand for elections. Introspect and try to analyse all the reasons why you would yourself not stand for elections. And if one of the reasons is that you won't get enough votes to win, then that should make you go out and vote.

YOUR VOICE IN THE INDIAN PARLIAMENT

The Lok Sabha elections make for the most important direct democratic process in our country. It enables the election of Members of Parliament who will be YOUR voice and the voice of the 1.3 billion citizens, including millions of citizens with disabilities, in all decisions taken at the national level.

YOUR VOTE WILL SHAPE YOUR OWN WORLD

Every action you take every day determines what sort of country you will live in, and eventually shapes your fate. Voting is one such action; whether you vote or not, elections are going to shape you and your country. Moreover, the 2019 general elections are different in many ways. We have a real opportunity to MAKE A DIFFERENCE, this time around. So, come out of your shells, vote and be counted, rather than being counted-out.

Let us not be puppets in the hands of the political system but be torch-bearers of our rights and responsibilities. Let us come out in full strength and participate in the world's biggest democratic exercise. Let's not be counted-out. Let's go out and vote. ■

STOP PRESS

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has launched the 'PwD App' to ease identification, registration and offer customised services to voters with disabilities. Through this app, one can request for new registration, change in address, change in particulars, or mark oneself as 'PwD' if already enrolled as non-disabled. This app can be downloaded at <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=pwd.eci.com.pwdapp> These details may be shared with the ECI through its call service numbers too.





WILL THEY CHANGE THE WORLD?



Dr. Samuel
N Mathew

The Kerala Government's Youth Innovation Program to train youth with and without disabilities in developing innovative solutions to common challenges could turn out to be a societal game-changer. DR. SAMUEL N MATHEW and DR. MADAN VASISHTA explore the nuances of this ingenious initiative.



Dr. Madan
Vasishtha

For long, Kerala has been registering social indices on par with developed countries and has been a model for the rest of India. The story is no different when it comes to inclusion of persons with disabilities. Kerala was a step ahead when it set up the State Initiative on Disabilities as a pioneering mission with an approach that addressed the entire gamut, from prevention of disabilities during pregnancy to integration of adults with disabilities into the mainstream through higher education and job opportunities. District-level early intervention centers were set up across the state to provide assessment and therapy for children below three years. Free cochlear implantation and auditory verbal training was imparted successfully. What sets the Kerala programmes apart is that these were implemented in a mission mode, and not as government schemes.

Generally, the benefits of government programmes don't reach the needy because those responsible don't understand the spirit behind the programmes and focus on the paper work, allowing corruption to creep in, and finally, the programmes end with a glossy report to the Secretariat that "all is well". In fact, most of the needy would not even have known about the schemes they were to benefit from. The only way to get a scheme or an idea to work is to hand it over to people who care, to persons who are passionate. For them, it is not a job but a mission, it is not routine paperwork but an urgent task to be done.

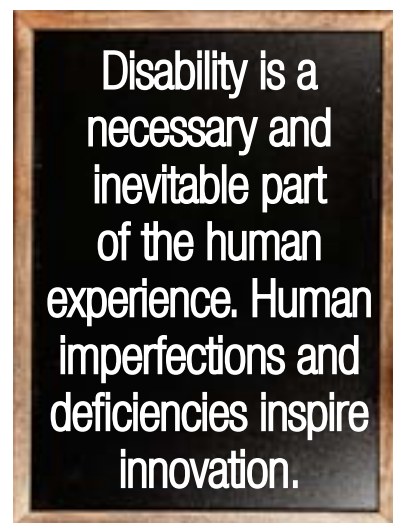
Youth as innovators

In 2018, the idea of Youth Innovation Program (YIP) was mooted by the Kerala Development and Innovation Strategic Council (K-DISC) directly under the able aegis of an Ex-Chief Secretary to the Government, Dr. K.M. Abraham. The programme targets empowering children and youth to become future innovators.

The aim is to prepare youth to identify problems in society and find innovative solutions that would have maximum impact. The target group of youth is expected to initiate products, services or models to meet emerging needs in a fast-changing society. As changemakers, they are expected to identify unarticulated needs of the society and generate solutions that will make the world a better place for present and future generations.

Including youth with disabilities

What's interesting is that the council wanted to include youth of all abilities in this programme. Youth with disabilities were to be included too. Not stopping with putting this idea on paper, K-DISC took steps to initiate a component in the programme for youth with disabilities. What led Dr. Abraham to such an initiative was a practical, action-oriented thought process, unlike the typical sympathy-charity approach.



Disability is a necessary and inevitable part of the human experience. The truth is that human imperfections and deficiencies inspire innovation and creativity and have led to progress. Looking at people with disabilities from this perspective, he forced his organisation to turnaround from the “defective” mode, towards a “we need thinkers and creators who have



the existential need to solve problems on a daily basis” outlook. He got together with Dr. Gita Gopal, Advisor to the Government of Kerala on social and gender issues and charted out a plan of action.

The Path

Since the idea was innovative, K-DISC planned a multi-phased approach to take it forward. As a first step, it was decided to have an Internet-based asynchronous discussion among an invited group of experts



from around the world, so that the initial inputs from experts could be gathered without any fiscal investment, and the feasibility of such a programme verified. The experts included people with disabilities, academicians working in related fields, researchers, practitioners, and others passionate about the empowerment of people with disabilities. Dr. Samuel N. Mathew, Former Executive Director, National Institute of Speech and Hearing (NISH), Trivandrum, experienced in academics and research related to the disability sector, was assigned the task of coordinating and moderating this discussion.

Over 60 people spread across India, USA and UK were brought together on the Facebook Workplace platform. Questions were asked on the different aspects related to starting a training programme to mould innovators from among people with disabilities. More than 20% of the participants were persons with disabilities including those with deafness, blindness, autism, and cerebral palsy.

The set of ideas that emerged from the discussions had a rich mix of suggestions. Different ideas, successful models and possible issues were discussed, all of which required serious consideration and face-to-face interactions of a selected group of experts.



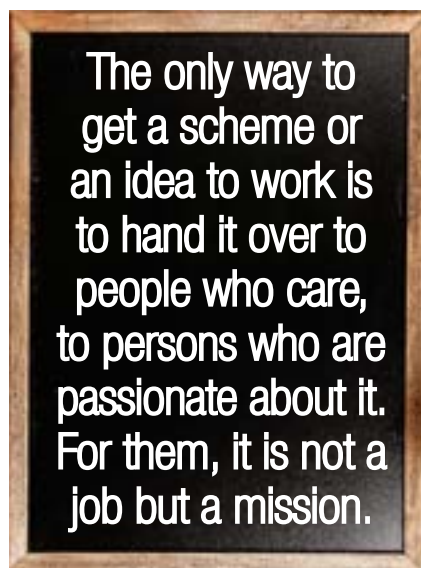
Following this, K-DISC organised a national workshop in Trivandrum on December 5 and 6, 2018, bringing together a select group of participants who had actively participated in the online discussions.

The plan was to have at least 50% of the participants to be persons with disabilities, and invitations were sent out accordingly. Of those who responded favourably, about 32 participants were considered for the workshop, women outnumbering men (19 to 13). There were thus five persons who were deaf, three blind persons and one person with CP, making for a total of nine persons with disabilities among the 32 participants.

Some of the high-profile participants included Dr. Sachin Dev Pavithran, who served as the Chairperson of the US Access Board and Advisor on Disability Affairs to President Obama and Dr. Madan Vasishta, author, researcher and academician from Gallaudet University. Academicians such as Dr. Balakrishnan from IIT Delhi and Dr. Ulrike Zeshan from University of Central Lancashire, UK, also led the discussions. Poonam Natarajan, Ex-Chairperson of National Trust and Dr. Prathibha Karanth who founded Comdeall Institutions for Autism Interventions were among the participants. From the industry sector, there were Rajasekhar, founder of V-shesh and Annice Joseph from SAP Labs. There were young activists such as Dr. Habib C and Dr. Alim Chandani and experienced leaders such as Dr. Surinder Randhawa and Dr. Asmita Huddar who contributed to the two-day workshop. The team from NISH was led by Dr. K G Satheesh Kumar, Executive Director. G. Vijaya Raghavan, founder, NISH and Center for Autism and other Disabilities Rehabilitation Research and Education (CADRRE), Trivandrum, also joined the discussions.

The discussions focussed on the selection of target population, curriculum for the programme, the team – staff, trainers and mentors, and implementation of the programme. A 100-page report was prepared and submitted to K-DISC. This report is to function as a road map for each step of this ambitious and first-of-its-kind programme, not only in India, but perhaps the whole world. This programme will be very keenly observed by those in the disability sector and various stakeholders.

The ripples of this project may well be seen beyond the Kerala borders. The innovators are optimistic that they can change the world for the better – creating an inspired society that is completely inclusive – and physical, communication and attitude barriers removed forever! ■



ON ONE PLATFORM



Disability rights activist Arman Ali's pivotal role in consolidating the disability sector in the North-East, and his engagement with the judiciary through several public interest litigations to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities is well known. After helming the Shishu Sarothi Centre for Rehabilitation and Training for Multiple Disability at Guwahati for nearly 20 years, he has now taken on a bigger role as Executive Director, National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP). We at *Success & ABILITY* got in touch with **ARMAN ALI** to find out the priorities he has set for himself in his new role and his roadmap for NCPEDP.

Q: It has been a little over three months since you took over as Executive Director of NCPEDP (National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People). How does it feel to be in this position and what new vision do you hope to bring in?

A: Feels good! You know, my intention is basically to take NCPEDP's work forward. With the new law, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, in place, there is a lot of work that must be done to create widespread awareness about the law, and on how to use the law. This awareness needs to be taken to policy makers, so that they can change policies in accordance with this new law. That is my immediate plan. For this, we are working with the National Disability Network's (NDN) partner agencies across the country, who in turn will connect with their district level partner organisations. They will be conducting programmes, collecting information and taking appropriate action, wherever required.

Q: So, how does this work at the ground level? For instance, in the case of accessible architecture/infrastructure, would you be working with stakeholders like architects and builders too, rather than just policy makers?



A: No, that will not be required. It works like this... To usher in accessible built environment, we work with the Ministry

of Urban Development and Housing to harmonise the building codes in tune with the new law. All architects/builders are obliged to follow these guidelines set by the ministry and thus our objective will be achieved.

Q: As Director of Shishu Sarothi, you have been associated with NCPEDP as an activist and as a strong advocate of disability rights. Now that you are at the helm of affairs at NCPEDP, what are the additions that you plan to bring in?

A: Yes, since Shishu Sarothi is NDN's partner in Assam and the North-East, I have been associated with NCPEDP for the last two decades. I had been working closely with the late Javed Abidi for the last 15 years and have participated in many NCPEDP campaigns nationally and in the North-East. So, I know the work that is done at NCPEDP, and this definitely helps.

Q: *What are your current focus areas and top priorities, and why? Please give us an insight into this, as well as on your short-term and long-term goals.*

A: One focus area is in bringing the entire disability sector together on one platform and speaking in one voice for the disability sector to achieve its rights. We already have the NDN, we need to strengthen it. Another major area of focus is to understand the new disabilities and the issues involved.

Q: *The National Disability Network is a unique and path-breaking initiative of NCPEDP. How do you evaluate the reach and scope of the NDN as of now, and how do you propose to take this further ahead?*

A: NDN operates with partner organisations at the state level... Almost all states and union territories are connected by the NDN, with a few exceptions, and these regions too will get connected shortly.

Q: *For more than two decades, NCPEDP has been at the forefront, aggressively carrying forward activism with respect to practically every aspect of disability rights. Your take on this?*

A: NCPEDP has been at the forefront. It will continue to be at the forefront! ■



STAY

Connected!



Why are relationships breaking down, across society? While there are no quick fixes for this, this crucial question has to be addressed and solutions found, writes DR. KETNA L MEHTA, Founder Trustee, Nina Foundation.



**Dr. Ketna
L Mehta**

Mrs. Prochi Writer was our kindergarten teacher. We continue to meet this young 74-year-old and share a bond, thanks to our parents who nurtured the relationship and valued her role in our growing-up days!

My friend Gladys has the same driver working for her for as long as I can recall.

Our family friend, Pragnesh Shah, has an elderly househelp living with them like a family member, even though she is unable to work now and serve the family like before.



Ever since my senior professor Sahuraja Sir's wife took seriously ill three years ago and was hospitalised, his old student has been carrying hot breakfast made by his wife to the professor's house, each morning.

My friend from the Rotary, Satish, has had the same staff in his office for as long as I can remember; even though his business has transformed, they are still with him and will continue to be with him till their retirement.

Our former residential building has had three generations of a family devotedly serving as watchmen with great commitment and satisfaction.

Our entire universe is based on interpersonal relations. Earlier, we had huge joint families and monolithic organisations with employees serving the same company their entire lives.

In earlier days, we used to have a common telephone in our living rooms and everyone would use that phone; whoever picked up the phone would have a conversation with the caller, that's

how sharing and bonding happened amongst our friends and families. The positioning of the phone, the fact that it was the only phone in the house, and that we were open about our conversations is evident. Nothing was secret or clandestine about our emotions and feelings. We did not need LOL or ROFL short texting formats with emojis!

There was nothing confidential that a family member couldn't be allowed to know... names of children's friends, office colleagues and family members was all common knowledge.

There was abundant direct and open communication. One didn't have to ask questions or leave chits anywhere.

These relationships had free flowing conversations without any affectations or hypocrisy. We enjoyed sharing each other's lives, looking at each other, talking with each other and focusing on only one thing – the conversations.

The positioning of the phone, the fact that it was the only phone in the house, and that we were open about our conversations is evident. Nothing was secret or clandestine about our emotions and feelings.



There has been a steady degeneration of relationships within families, between families, between neighbours, amongst the community, at the workplace, among political parties, in the field of sports, in marriages, among siblings, and everywhere else.

Are there any management solutions for building and maintaining honest, value-driven, long-term relationships?

Why are relationships no longer long-lasting? What is creating this chasm and rift? Why aren't there many 25-years or 50-years of service awards in companies anymore? Why is there a breakdown in communication even amongst family members living under the same roof?

The rise in the number of counsellors and life coaches for managing all kinds of relations reflects that connections between people are breaking down.

The rise in the number of counsellors and life coaches for managing all kinds of relations reflects that connections between people are breaking down.



I believe the most important mission for anyone today is to reconnect with fellow human beings – I believe this is the major cause for all kinds of stress. Can doctors, engineers and management professionals fashion this RECONNECT? This thought is worth pondering over. There is no quick fix solution for sure.

Relationship management is all about our interpersonal communication and body language, encompassing human skills. It's all about our ability to get the best out of others, our ability to inspire and influence them, our ability to communicate and build bonds with them, and our ability to help them change, grow, develop, and resolve conflicts, if any.

Building relationships is about our ability to identify and initiate working relationships and to develop and maintain them in a way that it is of mutual benefit to both ourselves and the other party. Good relationships are the key to getting things done and are essential when our success is dependent on others.

Professional relationships are solely for the purpose of getting our work done. They help to advance careers and would not exist if not for our jobs.

Personal relationships at work are those we have in the workplace for social reasons. They don't impact our jobs other than improving our workplace satisfaction and keeping us sane.

To quote from philosopher *J Krishnamurti's 'Not an island': "No one can live without relationships. You may withdraw into the mountains, become a monk, a sannyasi, wander off into the desert by yourself, but you are related. You cannot escape from that absolute fact. You cannot exist in isolation."* ■

16 வகை அனைத்தும் சிறந்த சுவை

உங்கள் உணவை மேலும் சிறப்பாக்க,
நாங்கள் ஆவக்காய், தொக்கு, எலுமிச்சம்,
பூண்டு, தக்காளி, இஞ்சி போன்ற 16
சிறந்த ஊறுகாய் வகைகள் தருகிறோம்,
அத்தனையும் ருசித்திடுங்கள்.

