Accessibility and Inclusion in Indian Corporate Workplaces

Designing workplaces that work for everyone.



2025

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1. Introduction

1.1 Understanding Accessibility and Inclusion in Indian Workplaces

Inclusion begins with access. Yet many Indian workplaces continue to treat accessibility as a matter of compliance, rather than a foundational pillar of organisational culture. An employee with visual impairment unable to use the company's HR portal, or a wheelchair user unable to enter and navigate a floor independently, are not facing minor inconveniences. They're encountering systemic failures that restrict opportunity, compromise dignity, and hinder productivity. Though India recognises accessibility is a fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution[1], the ground reality is reflected in the employment rates for persons with disabilities (PwD). They make up only 1%–2% of the workforce in many modern Indian businesses. Just five out of the Nifty 50 companies employ more than 1% PwDs. Most of these being public sector organizations (Ram, 2025). The overall workforce participation rate for PwDs is about 36%, compared to around 60% for those without disabilities.[2] Only about 11.3% of the 30 million Indians with disabilities have jobs[3], and nearly 70% of employable PwDs remain unemployed[4]. Women with disabilities are more severely underrepresented; only 23% oare employed, compared to 47% of disabled men.

This is a glaring social gap. It is also a missed business opportunity. Inclusive workplaces create opportunities for a diverse workforce, fostering innovation. Employees with disabilities often bring unique problem-solving skills, resilience, and a diversity of perspectives and experience to their teams and roles.

As part of my research, I tried contacting more than 20 office complexes across Mumbai to ask about their accessibility infrastructure. None responded. That silence, in itself, speaks volumes about the lack of urgency and accountability.

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[1] Rajive Raturi vs Union Of India

[2] https://www.undp.org/india/blog/bridging-gap-enabling-disability-inclusion-indias-private-sector-workplaces

[3] https://www.ibef.org/blogs/the-diversity-equity-inclusion-de-i-landscape-in-india

[4] https://cll.nliu.ac.in/breaking-barriers-fostering-disability-inclusion-in-the-indian-workplace/

Consider the story of Prasanth Kamath, a mobile app developer with cerebral palsy. Prashanth was hired in 2007 at the IT firm Mindtree through the Spastic Society of Karnataka. Securing the job was easier than identifying a suitable role for Prashanth. Initially placed in HR, which didn't align with his interests, he later transitioned to technical work. His passion for technology and commitment to supporting others with disabilities led Mindtree to create a dedicated assistive technology department for him[5]. His journey underscores a critical truth: talent is not scarce, but opportunity is.

Accessibility must be embedded from the start. It's not just about compliance; it's about creating workplaces where everyone can thrive.

1.2 Beyond retention: Productivity Impact of Accessibility

The correlation between disability inclusion and business performance is strongly reinforced by data. An Accenture study of 140 large US companies found that disability inclusion leaders experienced [6]:

Metric	Impact for Inclusion Leaders
Revenue	28% higher than other companies
Profit margins	30% higher than other companies
Net income	Double compared to other companies

Further studies have found productivity rising by up to 25% in companies with strong accessibility and inclusion practices[7]. These outcomes are not only correlated with inclusive culture but also with accessible hardware – without accessible offices, adaptable tools, and universal design, cultural intentions cannot yield measurable results.

Accessibility upgrades are force multipliers: they eliminate avoidable friction, enhance safety, simplify navigation for employees and visitors, and support broader organizational agility and innovation. As we are discovering ourselves at the Godrej Industries Group, when workplaces are designed for everyone, everyone benefits.[8]

[5] https://yourstory.com/2019/01/enabling-disability-inclusion-india?utm

[6] Accenture: GETTING TO EQUAL: THE DISABILITY INCLUSION ADVANTAGE

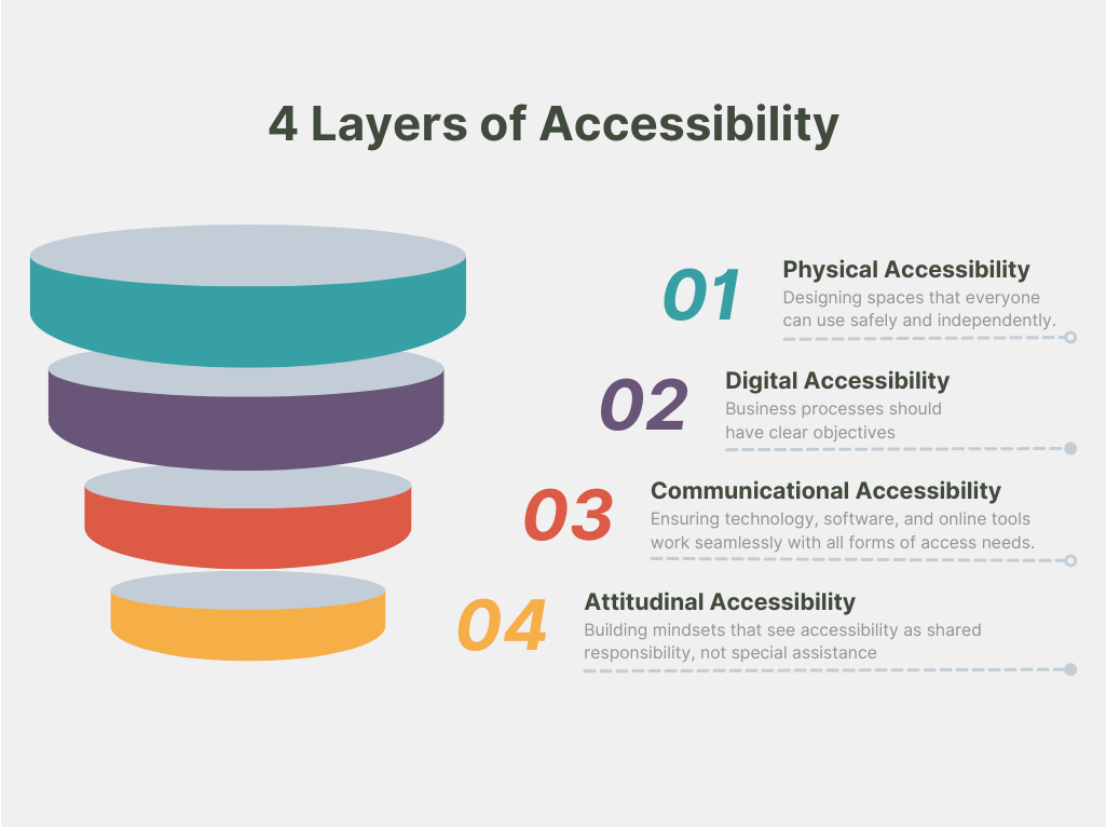
[7] https://broad.msu.edu/news/how-disability-diversity-in-the-workplace-can-improve-productivity/

[8] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0263237324000951

1.3 A Holistic Framework for Accessibility

A truly accessible workplace rests on four key pillars: **physical, digital, communication, and attitudinal accessibility**. The fifth is us, humans. Without them inclusive policies remain theoretical.

- **Physical accessibility** ensures that buildings and facilities like ramps, elevators, tactile paths, and washrooms that enable independent mobility and safety.[9] [10]
- **Digital accessibility** makes technology usable for all through assistive-tech-compatible platforms, high-contrast visuals, and captioned media, improving clarity and efficiency for everyone.[11]
- **Communication accessibility** guarantees information in multiple formats like sign language, easy-read content, captions so all employees can engage equally.[12] [13]
- **Attitudinal accessibility** builds a culture that challenges bias and normalises inclusion, ensuring policies translate into daily practice.[14]



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9 https://docs.google.com/document/d/1JVh_G-qpQy38j5vY6ZyZ7mWwGn_kxNXE2b_czku7BhY/edit?tab=t.8nh3z21fwfwu

10 https://www.theknowledgeacademy.com/blog/workplace-accessibility

11 https://www.section508.gov/manage/benefits-of-accessibility/

12 Creating accessible and inclusive communications

13 https://www.poppulo.com/blog/making-communications-more-accessible-for-colleagues-with-disabilities

14 https://askearn.org/page/attitudinal-awareness

A gap in any one pillar can undermine the rest. A ramp means little if HR systems are inaccessible or if workplace culture is unwelcoming. True inclusion requires addressing all four together.

This paper analyses these pillars across four dimensions: **Policy** (laws and regulations), **Expert Opinion** (best practices), **Reality** (on-ground challenges), and **Expectations** (experiences of PwDs and the wider workforce). This approach highlights the gap between intent and practice, offering insight for meaningful change.

1.4 Study Objectives and Focus

This white paper offers a practical, evidence-based roadmap to strengthen accessibility in Indian corporate workplaces. It identifies barriers across physical, digital, communication, and cultural domains, aligning workplace practices with national and global standards.

The study aims to **critically assess current policies and practices** that shape accessibility in corporate India, examining how organisations interpret and implement the four pillars of accessibility and where policy-to-practice gaps persist. It also seeks to **document real-life narratives** of persons with disabilities (PwDs) through qualitative interviews, capturing their everyday barriers, resilience, and ideas for change within corporate environments. Finally, it strives to **generate actionable insights** by synthesising expert recommendations and employee testimonies into a practical roadmap for organisations seeking to move from compliance-based accessibility to a culture of inclusion.

1.5 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach to understand accessibility within Indian corporate workplaces. The research is grounded in semi-structured interviews, policy analysis, and expert consultation.

Participant Selection:
A purposive sampling method was used to ensure diverse perspectives across industries, roles, and disability types. Participants included employees with disabilities, HR professionals, accessibility consultants, architects, and diversity and inclusion officers from medium and large corporations, as well as independent accessibility experts. This approach captured both organisational and individual viewpoints on workplace accessibility.

1.6 Who This Paper is For

This paper is for people interested in disability inclusion in the workplace and who want to understand the accessibility landscape of urban office complexes.

1.7 Why I Wrote This Paper

This work began with a simple question: *What does accessibility look like behind the glass doors of India's corporate offices?* Over time, the research revealed that barriers extend far beyond ramps or elevators. They lie in how meetings are run, how information moves, and how people with disabilities are perceived or ignored. Exclusion, we found, is often cultural. Accessibility is therefore not only about infrastructure. It is about belonging, about whether someone feels seen, supported, and understood at work. Creating accessible workplaces is not a technical fix but a collective effort to ensure full and confident participation for all.

1.8 Limitations

This report focuses on medium and large corporate offices in urban India and may not reflect conditions in small enterprises, rural areas, or the informal sector. This study is exploratory and aims to uncover new dimensions of workplace accessibility. As a qualitative study, it draws insights from a diverse group of stakeholders but is not statistically representative. Therefore, its findings cannot be generalised. Time and access constraints also limit the ability to directly audit all physical, digital, communication, and cultural aspects of the workplaces discussed. Much of the on-the-ground picture is drawn from stakeholder testimony, publicly available reports, and documented case studies rather than independent verification.

2. Policies, Laws, Codes and International Standards

Reading Accessibility Through Policy

To understand how accessibility is defined and governed in India, we reviewed the legal and policy landscape, starting with the international convention United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, adopted 13 December 2006; India ratified 1 October 2007), and examining how it flows into national frameworks such as the Companies Act, 2013 (enacted 29 August 2013) and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act, enacted 27 December 2016), as well as how the vision of the RPwD Act is reflected in guidelines and standards such as the Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India (issued by Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2021), IS 17802 (published by Bureau of Indian Standards, Part 1: 2021; Part 2: 2022), Guidelines for Indian Government Websites (GIGW, first released by National Informatics Centre, February 2009), and others. Each law or code interprets accessibility, what domains it covers, and where gaps remain. What we found is that India's accessibility ecosystem is rich but uneven. The legal architecture around **physical accessibility** is extensive, technical, and enforceable, but the frameworks supporting **digital, communication, and attitudinal accessibility** are far thinner and more fragmented. While digital accessibility has begun to find structure through the BIS standard (IS 17802) and the RPwD Act's ICT provisions, communication and attitudinal accessibility remain largely aspirational, rarely operationalised or audited. The intangible infrastructures of how people communicate, design, and interact still rely on voluntary action and organisational culture, rather than legal enforcement.

This observation shaped the argument of our paper. **Physical accessibility is foundational**, but true inclusion depends on the other three layers: the **digital**, **communicational**, and **attitudinal**. These domains build on physical access to go deeper into everyday systems and mindsets. Accessibility in the workplace, therefore, must be understood not as an architectural project but as a cultural one.

The table below summarises the major laws, standards, and codes that together define accessibility in India from the most visible physical requirements to the more intangible, human ones that determine whether inclusion truly works.

Key International and National Accessibility Frameworks

Framework / Convention / Code	Issued By / Authority	Scope & Focus	Accessibility Domains Covered	Relevance to Corporate Workplaces
UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), 2006	United Nations	Establishes accessibility as a fundamental human right and requires countries to ensure equality, inclusion, and reasonable accommodation across all systems. Articles 9 and 21 specifically address access to physical environments, information, and communication.	All – Physical, Digital, Communication, Attitudinal	Ratified by India in 2007. Forms the foundation of all national laws on accessibility, influencing corporate norms and inclusion policies.
ISO 21542: Building Construction — Accessibility and Usability of the Built Environment	International Organization for Standardization (ISO)	Provides technical standards for the design of accessible buildings and environments globally.	Physical	Serves as a global benchmark and reference for national building codes, including India's NBC.
Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016	Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Government of India	Primary Indian law guaranteeing accessibility, non-discrimination, and reasonable accommodation in employment, education, and services.	Physical, Digital, Communication, Attitudinal	Legally binding on public and many private establishments. Requires accessibility audits, equal opportunity policies, and internal grievance redressal systems.
Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017	Government of India	Operational rules implementing the RPwD Act. Provide mechanisms for compliance monitoring, reporting, and penalties.	Physical, Digital, Communication	Guides HR and compliance teams in developing accessible policies and procedures.

Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility (2021)	Central Public Works Department (CPWD), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs	Technical framework detailing accessibility standards for built environments, transportation, and ICT systems; grounded in Universal Design.	Physical, Digital, Communication	Reference guide for architects, facility managers, and corporate offices implementing accessibility retrofits or new designs.
National Building Code (NBC) 2016 – Annex D	Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)	Legally enforceable building standards including accessibility requirements for construction, signage, and safety.	Physical	Applies to all new construction and renovations; referenced in state building bylaws.
Model Building Bye-Laws (2016)	Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs	Guides state and municipal authorities to include accessibility in construction and occupancy permissions.	Physical	Influences compliance for leased or newly constructed corporate offices.
IS 17802 (BIS Digital Accessibility Standard)	Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)	National standard aligned with WCAG; defines testable digital accessibility criteria for websites, applications, and ICT tools.	Digital	Provides measurable checklists for developers and compliance teams; expected to guide corporate audits and vendor contracts.
Guidelines for Indian Government Websites (GIGW 3.0, 2023)	Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (MeitY)	Prescribes digital accessibility norms for public websites, e-services, and documents, based on WCAG 2.1.	Digital, Communication	Benchmark for corporate digital platforms (HR portals, intranets, LMS); widely adopted as a reference by private companies.
Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, 2015–present)	Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD)	National mission promoting accessibility across infrastructure, transport, and ICT.	Physical, Digital, Communication	Encourages voluntary corporate audits and partnerships for accessibility improvements.
Companies Act, 2013 (Schedule VII – CSR)	Ministry of Corporate Affairs, Government of India	Enables companies to fund disability inclusion and accessibility initiatives under CSR.	Communication, Attitudinal	Encourages corporates to support accessible infrastructure, inclusive education, and awareness campaigns as part of CSR obligations.

Information Technology Act, 2000	Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (MeitY)	Regulates data protection and digital security; forms the baseline for responsible handling of personal information.	Digital	Relevant for assistive technologies that process personal data; intersects with accessibility tools and privacy rights.
Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP), 2023	Government of India	Establishes legal obligations around consent, data minimisation, and secure processing of personal data, including assistive tech usage.	Digital	Ensures accessibility interventions protect user privacy and comply with data-handling norms.
Sectoral Enforcement by SEBI (2025 Circular)	Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)	Mandates regulated entities to audit and remediate accessibility gaps across digital platforms and appoint nodal officers.	Digital, Attitudinal	Marks a shift from voluntary to mandatory compliance; a model that other regulators may follow.
Companies (CSR Policy) Rules, 2014 (amended)	Ministry of Corporate Affairs	Specifies reporting and transparency requirements for CSR spending.	Attitudinal	Encourages inclusion-focused CSR disclosures and projects aligned with disability rights.

3. Global Practices

Across the world, accessibility has moved from being an afterthought in building codes to being understood as a human right. The most influential global frameworks - the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), and the WHO's World Report on Disability (2011) share one starting point: people, not infrastructure. Each arose from the lived experiences of disabled individuals who were excluded from work, school, and public life and demanded change.

> *"Over the years, I have struggled to find an inclusive environment—whether it is a workplace or a public place."* - Danesh Kangaraj, Aclude foundation

This is the reality that prompted the UNCRPD's Article 9 on Accessibility: it obligates countries to ensure persons with disabilities have equal access to buildings, transportation, ICT, and other services open to the public. But the convention's real innovation is not only legal, it shifts the lens from charity to rights. It treats the lack of ramps or captions as a violation of dignity, not a minor inconvenience.

From Laws to Everyday Practice

The ADA in the United States showed the world that legislation could transform everyday life. It banned discrimination in employment and required "reasonable accommodation," but also changed how architects, transport planners, and HR departments worked. Likewise, Europe's Web Accessibility Directive 2016 (modeled on ISO/IEC 40500 and WCAG 2.0) has normalised digital accessibility so that public websites must be usable by everyone. These laws frame accessibility as a baseline for participation in civic and economic life, just as fire safety or building permits are. These legal frameworks go beyond mere guidelines, establishing a robust system where accountability is key. In both the US and Europe, there are clear avenues for recourse: a person facing discrimination can file a complaint with a government agency, and under the EU Web Accessibility Directive, users can utilize a designated feedback mechanism on public websites. If a website is found to be non-compliant, national authorities can mandate corrective measures and enforce "effective, proportionate and dissuasive" penalties, which are determined by each Member State. This multi-layered structure ensures that accessibility is not a voluntary standard but a mandatory and enforceable right, with specific redressal mechanisms available through national bodies and the potential for legal action if issues are not resolved.

Regional Movements and Metrics

In Asia-Pacific, the Incheon Strategy to "Make the Right Real" (2013–2022) gave countries their first time-bound, measurable targets for accessibility. Even though many states fell short of their targets, the Incheon Strategy introduced a new culture of measurement: number of accessible buses, number of trained auditors, percentage of compliant public buildings, and so on. India's Accessible India Campaign was launched in part to meet those commitments, fundamentally shifting the domestic approach from vague welfare intent to precise inventory tracking. For the first time, the campaign operationalized specific national

metrics, such as requiring 50% of government buildings in capital cities to be retrofitted, targeting 10% of government bus fleets for accessibility, and mandating that 50% of official websites meet global compliance standards. This shift necessitated a new infrastructure for accountability, including the empanelment of professional Access Auditors and the creation of a Management Information System (MIS) to track these "pass/fail" statistics. This evidence-driven approach has since informed the Jakarta Declaration (2023–2032) and national programmes in countries like Thailand and the Philippines.

Technical Standards as Enablers, Not Ends

Global technical standards – ISO 21542 on the built environment, ISO 21801 on cognitive accessibility, and ISO/IEC 40500 for digital content have quietly harmonised what "good" looks like. They specify everything from ramp gradients to tactile paving patterns, from captioning requirements to easy-to-read formats. But their human purpose is clear: to make sure a wheelchair user in Lagos, a blind commuter in Delhi, or an employee with dyslexia in Berlin can all navigate, work and contribute without unnecessary barriers. Critics rightly note that even these standards have historically focused on mobility, vision and hearing, and that the next frontier is cognitive accessibility - plain language, predictable layouts, quiet zones and flexible schedules.

Global Finance and Events as Catalysts

Sometimes the most powerful drivers are not laws but leverage. The World Bank and regional development banks now require universal design in funded infrastructure, meaning a metro station or government complex built with Bank money must be accessible or risk losing funding. Likewise, the Paralympic Games' host city contracts have forced cities from Beijing to Rio to upgrade transport and venues, leaving legacies far beyond the games.

Tools and Networks

Non-state actors fill the gaps where treaties stop. The Global Alliance on Accessible Technologies and Environments (GAATES) and G3ict's "Smart Cities for All" toolkit help city planners integrate accessibility into procurement, tech and urban design. UN-Habitat's guidance on "Accessibility of Urban Environments" urges universal design in housing and slum upgrading. WHO's QualityRights initiative brings mental-health and cognitive accessibility into hospital design. These toolkits translate lofty principles into checklists that local engineers, designers and HR teams can actually use.

Enforcement and Inclusion of the Whole Spectrum

Despite robust frameworks, compliance is uneven. The UNCRPD Committee has no punitive powers beyond reporting and "naming and shaming." Low-income and conflict-affected countries struggle to prioritise accessibility. Even in high-income nations, neurodivergence, mental-health and invisible disabilities remain under-served: ISO 21542 still mainly addresses physical access; the ADA's mental-health provisions are under-utilised; and global indicators rarely capture cognitive accessibility. Yet the trend line is clear:

accessibility is now a recognised international norm, and countries face peer pressure and civil-society scrutiny if they lag behind.

Why This Matters for Indian Workplaces

India's RPwD Act, the National Building Code 2016 and the Harmonised Guidelines 2021 all draw directly from these global norms. Ratifying the UNCRPD spurred our own shift from a medical to a social model of disability and expanded legal recognition to 21 categories, including autism spectrum disorder, intellectual disabilities and mental illness. Global practice shows that when accessibility is treated as a human right, not an afterthought, employers gain talent and innovation. It also shows that standards must evolve beyond ramps and captions to embrace cognitive, sensory and mental-health inclusion.

A "human-first" reading of global practices therefore offers three lessons for Indian corporates:

1. Rights, Not Favors. Accessibility is a baseline expectation, like fire safety.

2. Beyond the Visible. Policies and spaces must serve the full spectrum including neurodivergence and mental health, not just mobility or sensory disabilities.

3. Measure and Mainstream. Adopt global metrics and toolkits to audit, track and normalise inclusion rather than treat it as CSR.

4. How We Experience Accessibility - And How We Shouldn't

When people talk about accessibility, most think of ramps, elevators, or wide corridors. Physical accessibility is visible, measurable, and therefore the easiest to audit and regulate. It is also the most photographed. In many corporate buildings, displaying accessibility is an important sign of displaying compliance to legal norms, as well as aspiration to a more inclusive standard of culture.

But through the interviews for this study, one pattern was impossible to ignore: **physical accessibility dominates conversations because it is the only kind that is tangible**, yet even here, it is rarely complete. The accessibility most organisations build for is designed for people with locomotor disabilities, not for the wide spectrum of experiences that disability actually covers.

4.1 Physical Access Still Begins and Often Ends with the Ramp

Participants repeatedly described the effects of this narrow imagination. For wheelchair users, a ramp is fundamental, but for many others, physical accessibility has different needs. For persons with chronic pain or hearing impairments, "accessibility" could mean ergonomic seating, reduced background noise, or a quieter work zone, rather than a ramp.

> "I requested the HR and team leaders to install tactile pavings on the 11th floor so that I could independently move around while they were renovating it, but my request was pushed away. They said the tactile paving wouldn't fit into the aesthetic."
> - *An employee with a real estate company in Mumbai*

Aesthetics became a recurring area of conflict in these stories. The idea of "beautiful offices" frequently overpowered the idea of functional ones. Pranali's experience is not isolated; it reflects a pattern where accessibility is negotiated against brand identity or visual design.

Namrata Naomi Gautam, therapist with lived and professional experience in chronic illness, pain, neurodivergence, and complex trauma, put this contradiction plainly:

> "Cluttered and aesthetic spaces also *feel* a certain way. They can be overwhelming or triggering. Accessibility is about how a space feels, not just how it looks."

Several respondents echoed similar discomfort. Aalap Deboor, who identifies as neurodivergent, described sensory fatigue from a different lens:

> "White is a very triggering colour. I can't look at it for too long. The lights reflect, the surfaces glare, it's exhausting."

These comments reveal that **physical accessibility isn't only about movement, it's also about perception and emotion.** It underscores how light, sound, temperature, and spatial clutter affect concentration, anxiety, or fatigue.

4.2 The Limits of What Is Seen

Our interviews revealed that visibility itself has become a filter through which inclusion is judged. Accessibility features that can be showcased like signage, lifts, wide entrances, receive funding and attention. Those that rely on slower, behavioural change—digital access, inclusive communication, or attitudinal shifts remain invisible and therefore optional.

One accessibility consultant summed it up wryly during her interview:

> "Accessibility is what the camera can see. The rest of it depends on whether anyone's watching."

The dominance of physical accessibility, therefore, is not accidental. It reflects the deeper structure of corporate accountability. What can be built and certified becomes the bar of achievement. But the interviews also showed that **employees live and work in the gaps between compliance and comfort** between the office that looks accessible, and the one that actually feels usable.

Several experts described how **accessibility gets "stuck" in the admin or facilities team,** treated as a design checklist rather than a cultural value. This compartmentalisation means that HR, IT, and communication teams often see it as "someone else's job."

As Puneet Singh Singhal, a disability inclusion trainer working in Billion Strong said, "We can retrofit a building, but we can't retrofit behaviour. That's where the work now needs to happen."

Many interviewees noted that accessibility policies often forget people who *don't look disabled*. Those living with chronic illnesses, neurodivergence, or temporary injuries rarely qualify for accommodations under standard HR systems. As one Neurodivergent respondent who recently joined the corporate workforce said, quietly, "It's like you need a medical certificate to be believed."

The experiences of people with invisible disabilities reinforces the argument that **physical accessibility alone cannot create inclusion**. It needs to be accompanied by psychological safety, communication support, and flexibility in how people participate.

4.3 Here's what we can do

From the stories and suggestions shared by participants, a few honest, practical takeaways emerged. These are not policies or prescriptions, but *habits* and small shifts that can make a big difference if done with intention:

1. Design with users, not for them.
   Involve employees with disabilities in renovation and procurement decisions. Lived experience prevents tokenism.

2. Aesthetic ≠ accessible.
   Minimalist, white, or glass-heavy designs often alienate. Choose textures, contrasts, and layouts that reduce glare, echo, and confusion.

3. Expand the definition of "access."
   Physical accessibility is not only for wheelchair users. Consider sensory comfort, chronic pain, anxiety, and neurodivergent processing needs.

4. Prioritise predictability.
   Simple layouts, consistent signage, and stable furniture placement matter more than fancy design. Predictable spaces foster independence.

5. Audit the invisible.
   Run periodic accessibility checks not just for ramps and lifts, but also for digital platforms, communication formats, and team culture.

6. Make empathy procedural.
   Train teams not through one-off workshops but by embedding accessibility into daily workflows—meeting structures, document sharing, and communication etiquette.

7. Ensure representation.
   Inclusion begins to work when people with disabilities are in leadership roles and decision-making spaces.

These suggestions mirror what many respondents said indirectly, that accessibility is an everyday ethic, not a feature.

4.4 Conclusion

Physical accessibility opens the door. The rest of accessibility decides who gets to walk through it and stay. This chapter closes the loop on physical accessibility not to dismiss its importance, but to clarify its limits. The interviews confirm that while India's regulatory framework for physical access is comparatively strong, the *social and sensory experience* of accessibility remains underdeveloped.

If physical accessibility forms the outer shell of inclusion, the other three pillars—digital, communicational, and attitudinal form its interior architecture. Together, they define how and whether people with disabilities can not only enter a workplace but also thrive within the workplace once they've entered it.

5. Expert Recommendations

This chapter draws directly from the voices of accessibility consultants, disability rights activists, and professionals with disabilities who were interviewed during this study. Their perspectives highlight the gap between legal mandates and practical action in Indian workplaces. Rather than focusing on theoretical models, the experts in these interviews offered practical solutions and tested strategies they have implemented or observed.

For example, accessibility auditors emphasized that compliance must be grounded in user-led audits where persons with disabilities themselves test, shape, and feel design. A prominent illustration of this approach occurred in India through the Association of People with Disabilities (APD), which orchestrated one of the country's largest community-led accessibility audits on IDPD 2025. Mobilizing 507 volunteers including persons with disabilities from APD's programs in early intervention, inclusive education, livelihoods, and advocacy, the initiative used the Yes to Access (YTA) app for structured, on-the-ground assessments of physical access, safety, signage, and service usability across 2,514 public sites (such as transportation hubs, schools, workplaces, health centers, and community facilities) in 33 districts spanning five states, alongside 1,243 website audits conducted by APD staff. These audits not only identified systemic barriers but also empowered disabled participants to generate actionable evidence for advocating infrastructure upgrades and policy compliance, fostering measurable progress toward disability-inclusive societies. Similarly, technology consultants and digital accessibility activists also drew attention to the absence of accessibility-first digital pipelines: companies may correct mistakes, but almost always after exclusion had already occurred.

The recommendations that follow are not abstract ideals. Each recommendation emerges from the first-hand experiences and testimonies. The experts we interviewed detailed what has worked in their experience, what fails in practice, and what they recommend companies do in order to prepare for a more inclusive future.

5.1 Digital Accessibility

In a post-pandemic workplace, accessibility begins at the login screen. From recruitment portals to appraisal dashboards, digital spaces now define participation. Yet, experts agreed that digital accessibility remains one of the most underestimated gaps in Indian workplaces.

> "Companies spend lakhs on HR portals and learning software, but when you ask whether it works with screen readers or if videos have captions, the answer is silence. Accessibility comes up only after a complaint. By then, exclusion has already happened."
> — *Samara Thekkan, Accessibility Consultant, Incluzza*

> "Digital accessibility is not a luxury. It's the modern doorway to jobs, promotions, and knowledge. If an HR portal is inaccessible, that employee is

> locked out of leave, appraisals, and medical claims. It's no different from saying you can't enter the office."
> — *Navya Vinod Varma, Compass Group*

At Orchvate, a neurodiversity-focused organisation, Geethanjali Ganapathy described how digital accessibility goes beyond screen-reader compliance:

> "Digital accessibility can either be a great equaliser or a silent barrier. For many neurodivergent professionals, the issue isn't technology—it's unpredictability. Structured channels, clear labels, demo videos, and checklists reduce anxiety. Accessibility is not about adding features; it's about reducing cognitive load."

Experts emphasised that accessibility must be built into software procurement and workplace design, not added as a patch. Srividya Kripakar, a DEIB consultant, cautioned that post-COVID digitalisation has reshaped accessibility itself:

> "The same digital shift that was meant to create flexibility has also created an 'always-on' culture. What began as freedom now traps many—especially women juggling multiple roles. Accessibility must now include the right to disconnect."

Digital accessibility, therefore, is not just about compatibility with assistive devices. It is also about respecting human limits and cognitive diversity. The experts agreed that accessible design is good design: clarity, consistency, and predictability benefit everyone, not only disabled users.

5.2 Communication Accessibility

Communication accessibility determines whether employees can *participate* once they enter the workspace. Experts agreed that even when physical and digital access are achieved, communication remains the most consistent source of exclusion.

> "A Deaf employee sitting in a town hall without an interpreter is not really present. A visually impaired employee getting PDF policies that a screen reader can't read is not really included. Communication is the bloodstream of an organisation—if it isn't accessible, nothing else works."
> — *Accessibility Activist and Corporate Trainer*

At Orchvate, Geethanjali Ganapathy explained how inclusive communication requires *clarity as kindness*:

> "We avoid vague phrases like 'ASAP' or 'Can you handle this?' and instead specify exact timelines and deliverables. We also encourage visual aids and written follow-ups. Compliance isn't agreement—listen to what is left unsaid."

This precision isn't bureaucratic, it is inclusive. For employees with ADHD or anxiety, unstructured and fast-paced meetings can be exclusionary.

Nupur Joshi, a social worker and disability advocate, added that attitudinal discomfort often bleeds into communication barriers:

> "People used to be scared to talk to me. I had to start every conversation first. We should organise small circles, like 'Chai pe charcha' sessions, where employees can ask questions freely and learn how to communicate with persons with disabilities. One-on-one conversations break stereotypes faster than any policy."

Experts also highlighted that representation in media and language shapes internal communication cultures. Multiple Interviewees cited film screenings, discussions, and exposure to positive narratives as informal but powerful learning tools that dismantle pity-driven perceptions. A partial list of the films and media they brought up includes:

- *Sparsh* (1980): A classic Indian feature film that confronts the "pity barrier" directly by following a visually impaired principal who fiercely rejects patronizing charity, forcing others to engage with him on the basis of equal dignity rather than codependency.
- *Margarita with a Straw* (2014): A nuanced Indian drama centering on a young woman with cerebral palsy navigating university life and self-discovery, intentionally subverting traditional Bollywood tropes that reduce disabled characters to passive, tragic figures.
- *Jalsa* (2022): A contemporary Hindi thriller praised for real-life inclusivity by casting an actor who actually has cerebral palsy, portraying his character as a multi-dimensional, ordinary kid rather than an object of sympathy.
- *CODA* (2021): An Academy Award-winning film following a culturally Deaf family that illustrates how systemic communication exclusion occurs when the hearing world fails to adapt to visual and signed languages.
- *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (2020): A critically acclaimed documentary tracking how a summer camp for disabled teenagers catalyzed the foundational civil rights movement, demonstrating how historical advocacy successfully shifted the global narrative from charity to institutional rights

Srividya Kripakar warned that informal communication networks, such as office gossip or closed WhatsApp groups, often reinforce hierarchies of exclusion:

> "The grapevine is never neutral. Decisions are made in side-conversations that many women or disabled employees aren't part of. You can't call a workplace accessible if information flows through invisible corridors."

Her suggestion that inclusion must be built into both formal and informal spaces reminds us that accessibility is fundamental to equity in who gets to speak and be heard.

5.3 Attitudinal Accessibility

All our interviewees agreed that attitudinal accessibility is the deepest and hardest standard to achieve, because it requires changing the very culture that produces exclusion.

Sijo Verghese, a wheelchair user and inclusion advocate, framed it directly:

> "What is more difficult than physical barriers is the lack of understanding about disability itself. Many people compensate out of sympathy or underestimate a person's ability. Real inclusion happens when people stop viewing disability through pity and start seeing capability."

Srividya Kripakar expanded this argument beyond disability, calling attention to how attitudinal barriers operate across gender and hierarchy:

> "Attitude isn't just individual behaviour—it's how systems enable harm. I've seen women penalised for pregnancy or caregiving. On paper, the company looked inclusive. In practice, benefits never reached the last person."

Her framing turns attitude into structure: prejudice is not only personal bias but also institutional design.

Geethanjali Ganapathy emphasised that the foundation of attitudinal change lies in leadership humility:

> "No amount of training or technology can fix a culture that doesn't respect difference. Accessibility is not charity; it's an investment in talent. It starts when leaders ask, 'What helps you work best?' instead of assuming expertise."

Experts proposed concrete practices that make attitudinal change visible: continuous sensitisation led by persons with disabilities, leadership accountability tied to accessibility outcomes, and the creation of safe spaces for conversation.

Nupur Joshi again offered a grounded model:

> "When people get to ask their curiosities freely, fear reduces. Accessibility workshops should feel like conversations, not lectures."

Together, these voices underline that attitudinal accessibility is not a soft value—it is structural reform. Without it, physical and digital accessibility remain cosmetic.

5.4 Conclusion

Here's what these expert interviews gave us:

1. Accessibility must move beyond buildings into systems.
   Experts repeatedly stressed that the true test of inclusion lies in invisible structures—HR processes, team communication, and leadership culture not in ramps or signage.

2. Digital, communicational, and attitudinal barriers intertwine.
   The interviews revealed that exclusion often hides in the small things: a missing caption, an unclear meeting invite, an assumption of incompetence. Accessibility

must address these subtle, everyday points of friction.

3. Accessibility is cultural infrastructure.
   As Srividya Kripakar put it, "Design for dignity, not just disability." The experts remind us that accessibility must be seen as a philosophy of participation, not compliance.

4. Training and leadership are non-negotiable.
   Every expert argued that change must begin with leadership accountability and be sustained through regular, participatory sensitisation led by people with lived experience.

5. Accessibility benefits everyone.
   Whether it is clear instructions that help neurodivergent employees or flexible work modes that support caregivers, universal design makes the workplace humane for all.

6. Inclusion is not an event; it is an ethic.
   As Nupur Joshi put it, "Conversations, not checklists, create inclusion."

The expert interviews in this study were a turning point in our understanding of accessibility in contemporary India. The workplace exists as much in screens and systems as in buildings, so digital accessibility is fundamental to inclusion. Communication accessibility reminds us that inclusion is not just about entering the room but being able to speak, listen, and be understood within it. Attitudinal accessibility shows that even perfect infrastructure will fail if the culture remains shaped by pity, fear, or ignorance.

We advocate, collectively, for a *systems view of accessibility*:

- one where technology, communication, and culture reinforce one another;
- where accessibility is designed into workflows and not outsourced to diversity cells;
- and where inclusion is understood as a measure of organisational health, not charity.

Experts urge us to see accessibility as *cultural infrastructure*, an essential to productivity and ethics as broadband or electricity.

Srividya Kripakar noted: "Accessibility should move out of Facilities and sit under Organisational Design." The idea urges us to reconsider structural support for accessibility in corporate spaces, so that organisations can stop asking, *"What do we need to add?"* and start asking, *"What are we assuming?"*

Accessibility begins when that question is asked and acted upon.

6. Ground realities

6.1 Introduction

This chapter grew out of long, patient conversations with persons with disabilities across different sectors corporate offices, logistics firms, retail units, and consultancies. It exists because numbers and policies, while necessary, cannot capture the texture of everyday life. The experts in the previous chapter told us what *should* happen; the people in this one tell us what *does*.

To build out this picture, we made the effort to listen to stories and small moments that reveal how inclusion actually unfolds (or fails to). These lived experiences are a kind of evidence too: qualitative, embodied, and often overlooked in official reports. They remind us that accessibility is not an abstract checklist but a daily negotiation between people, places, and power.

Drawing from primary interviews and publicly available datasets on employment and education among persons with disabilities, this chapter situates individual voices within a larger context. The 2011 Census and the 2021 NSSO data show that only about **36% of persons with disabilities in India are literate**, compared to over **74% of the general population**. Employment rates remain equally stark – just **23% of persons with disabilities participate in the labour force**, compared to **over 50% among non-disabled people**. These figures are not only about economics; they are about systemic inaccessibility that keeps millions from meaningful participation in their societies and markets.

The narratives that follow uncover that systemic gap. Yet, alongside frustration, these stories also hold insight: workers with disabilities identify small but concrete practices that can change cultures of exclusion. Their lived realities offer us a blueprint for action.

6.2 Communication and Attitudinal Accessibility: Deepak's Story

Deepak Sawant works as a security guard in a corporate office in Lower Parel. He has a speech impairment caused by a high fever in childhood. An interview with him, conducted through slow and written communication, reveals how *attitudinal barriers* often wound more deeply than physical ones.

> "People make faces when I talk… Some laugh, some walk away. That time my chest feels tight."

In corporate accessibility efforts, communication differences are interpreted through moral judgment rather than empathy. Deepak told us that his speech impairment is mistaken for drunkenness or laziness, shaping how others see his intelligence and worth.

> "Once a visitor complained to my supervisor that I sound drunk. That day I cried. My speech is bad because of fever, not drink. But people don't understand."

The workplace becomes a site where he must constantly prove not just competence, but innocence. His story complicates how we think about "accessibility" not as ramps or training modules, but as social imagination.

When asked about growth opportunities, Deepak reflected:

> "They don't give me reception or phone duty. Always gate only. Promotion only for those who can talk well. I will retire from this same post, maybe."

The organisational hierarchy mirrors a hierarchy of speech. In an industry where communication is equated with capacity, Deepak's slowed speech restricts his professional movement. Yet, in our dialogue, he demonstrated both insight and resilience in how he adapts:

> "I can't talk fast, but I can work properly. I stay alert, I do my duty well. That is my strength."

His account of emergencies shows how inaccessibility can become life-threatening:

> "Once, fire alarm rang. I was waving, shouting—but my voice doesn't come loud. People didn't understand me… If there were light signals, boards, or training, maybe I could have done better."

From a qualitative lens, Deepak's story reveals a problem that must be solved at the intersection of communication, attitudinal, and safety accessibility. Workplaces that depend on verbal command structures fail to account for communicative diversity. His recommendations are simple but profound:

> "Training people to understand different disabilities. If staff knew how to talk with us, half the problem goes… But mainly, just a bit of respect. Patience. That's all."

This statement condenses what many policies miss: that accessibility begins with empathy and ends with shared responsibility.

6.3 Digital and Communication Accessibility: Anmol's Story

In contrast, Anmol Sonthalia, a corporate professional who uses hearing aids, illustrates the subtler forms of digital and communicational exclusion that persist even in modern workplaces. His narrative reveals that "quiet" exclusion can exist even in polished corporate spaces that consider themselves inclusive.

> "When I'm in a meeting with more than three people talking, it gets difficult for me to keep up. Often, I need to check with one person afterward to make sure I didn't miss tasks or instructions."

Here, exclusion is not visible. It hides in overlapping conversations, background noise, and uncaptioned screens — what he calls the "70–80% participation problem." The difference between full inclusion and partial understanding is often decided by simple spatial or technological design choices.

> "A quiet environment makes a big difference… A round-table setup is much easier because I can see everyone's faces."

Anmol's insights function as practical design recommendations, including **acoustic sensitivity, seating redesign, and the use of live captions in all meetings**. His testimony reframes accessibility not as a special arrangement but as better communication for everyone.

He also captures a common psychological barrier among employees with invisible disabilities: hesitation to ask for accommodations.

> "Yes, I have sometimes felt hesitant to ask for accommodations because I didn't want colleagues to see me as difficult or demanding extra support."

This points to a deeper issue: **the emotional labour of inclusion**. The onus of education, adjustment, and disclosure often falls entirely on the person with the disability. For inclusion to be authentic, the burden must shift to institutions.

Anmol's words echo this call for shared responsibility:

> "What helps most is when people are mindful, supportive, and make small adjustments so that I can be included in those moments too."

Communication accessibility, in his view, is less about policy and more about everyday awareness.

6.4 Structural and Cultural Accessibility: Pratik's Story

While Deepak and Anmol speak from their individual work contexts, **Pratik Ingle**, a visually impaired researcher and founder of the Dare Foundation, offers a perspective that bridges lived experience and policy critique.

> "Blind students are not taught mathematics in school. Because they are not taught advanced maths, their career options get reduced by 90%. Everyone knows about this, but nothing is on paper."

Pratik identifies how *educational exclusion* cascades into *employment exclusion*. His organisation now documents these systemic gaps, working with the Department of

Disability Studies at Pune University to map what he calls the "unwritten barriers" in finance, technology, and self-esteem among visually impaired candidates.

> "We are putting everything on paper—what are the challenges, what are the gaps, how gender and urban-rural differences play out—so we can build specific interventions."

His work embodies a transition from personal exclusion to collective advocacy. But he also offers a sobering view of workplace culture.

> "Companies write in their job descriptions that they are equal opportunity employers, but when you go to their offices, they are not accessible at all. Even if the management is welcoming, the whole environment is not."

Pratik's critique highlights the gap between linguistic inclusion and material exclusion. He cites low retention rates among employees with disabilities as a key concern, identifying it as a cultural rather than logistical failure:

> "People with disabilities are getting into the workforce, but they are not retaining there… They're not getting safe spaces where they can grow. Even if the infrastructure is there, the culture and attitude don't support it."

His vision of accessibility extends beyond compliance. It's about narrative change of replacing sympathy with solidarity:

> "We don't want old-school sympathy. We want to change the narrative—move from pity to possibility."

Pratik's view underscores that accessibility must be both *practiced and narrated differently*. Policy reform, training, and leadership accountability must be accompanied by new public stories about disability, stories that foreground expertise, creativity, and leadership.

6.5 Conclusion

Laws exist, guidelines are written, and experts provide clear recommendations, but these commitments often dissolve when confronted with everyday realities. The accounts of these workers with disabilities contradict the comfortable assumptions many of us make in corporate spaces. On paper, India's corporate sector appears aligned with global standards of accessibility and inclusion. Yet, in practice, employees continue to navigate unsafe, inaccessible, and prejudiced environments. Accessibility exists at the level of compliance and optics, but not as a lived ethic of care. For this transformation to occur, the culture of accessibility must be built into everyday practices, tested in real workplaces, and measured not by the presence of ramps or captions, but by the dignity and equity experienced by employees. The voices of workers remind us that inclusion is not about symbolic gestures. It is about whether they can work, grow, and belong without having to fight daily battles for the basics. This chapter makes clear that the gap between promise and practice is wide.

7. What PwDs truly want

7.1 Introduction

This chapter turns from barriers to aspirations, asking persons with disabilities what they truly seek from workplaces and society. The responses, drawn from extensive interviews, were striking in their clarity: PwDs are not asking for charity or special concessions, but for ordinary equality. Their wants are simple but urgent, unbroken mobility, accessible digital tools, conversations they can participate in, and respect without pity.

Across the interviews, participants consistently framed their needs in terms of the four accessibility pillars. Wheelchair users spoke of wanting to move from home to office without depending on others at every step. Visually impaired and Deaf participants described wanting digital and communicational infrastructures screen-reader-friendly systems, captions, interpreters that allow them to belong in the same spaces as everyone else. Those with speech or cognitive disabilities asked not for special provisions, but for patience, plain language, and workplaces where listening is valued as much as speaking.

By centering these aspirations, this chapter reframes inclusion as something PwDs want.

7.2 Physical Accessibility: Beyond Ramps and Aesthetics

Design that Works, Not Just Looks

Many participants agreed that Indian workplaces often treat accessibility as a checklist. Ramps, accessible toilets, and elevators are installed — but without real usability.
As Pranali, a visually impaired employee in a Mumbai-based corporate firm, shared,

> "When they renovated our floor, I asked HR to include tactile paving so I could move independently. They said it would ruin the 'aesthetic.' They didn't understand that design is about function, not beauty."

This "aesthetic over access" mindset came up repeatedly. Danesh Kanagaraj from Aclude Foundation explained,

> "Parking is also huge. A lot of people park their vehicles far off from the entrances and they have to walk a far distance just to maintain the aesthetics of the entrance. They don't want any car parking or a bike parking near the entrance. How can People with Locomotor disabilities reach to the main entrance from these far parkings?"

Their reflections highlight a core issue: physical accessibility in workplaces continues to serve appearances rather than purpose. Participants emphasised the need for design audits led by people with disabilities themselves, ensuring spaces evolve through lived feedback rather than top-down compliance.

Sensory and Neurodivergent Inclusion

Several neurodivergent participants pointed out that "physical accessibility" isn't only about ramps and elevators — it's also about sensory comfort. A participant who works as Inclusive Designer in Mumbai, who has worked for Neurodivergent training, said,

> "An ideal workplace... should have need-based spaces. Apart from department-based seating, employees can choose to work in various zones - silent nook, brainstorming corner, huddle spaces, calming zones, etc. It can have a subtle impact on employees with neurodivergence and those who require sensory-friendly environments. For offices with space constraints, work flexibility can be offered. The option to work from home... and their preferred hours... When a workplace conveys care through tangible or intangible elements, employees experience a sense of belonging."

Globally, companies such as SAP's Autism at Work and Microsoft's Inclusive Design program have redefined accessible workplaces through quieter zones, predictable lighting, and flexible seating. Interviewees in this study imagined similar adjustments in India: dimmable lights, textured cues for orientation, rest areas, and universal toilet design.

Mobility and Navigation in Large Campuses

Several employees with limited mobility shared that *distance itself* often becomes an accessibility barrier in sprawling corporate campuses. Mehul, a wheelchair user employed in a multinational firm, explained,

> "Our office has ramps and wide corridors, but everything is far apart — the cafeteria, meeting rooms, HR cabin. By the time I reach a meeting, I'm already exhausted. Accessibility is not just about entry, it's about how the whole space flows."

Namrata, who lives with chronic fatigue syndrome, added,

> "People assume I can walk, so they don't see the problem. But walking across huge offices every few hours drains me completely. Even a small thing like having closer rest areas or accessible seating near key points would make a huge difference."

Their words remind us that *distance, layout, and circulation* are as critical as ramps or elevators. A workplace can technically comply with accessibility codes yet still be unlivable for those who move differently or need frequent rest.

Beyond Infrastructure: Culture of Maintenance and Use

Many participants also pointed out that accessibility often stops at construction. a corporate consultant with locomotor disability working in Mumbai, shared,

> "I work from the office few days a month and whenever I go, it is a struggle for me to use the washroom. Our office has an accessible washroom, but it's always

> used for storage. When I complain, they say the key is with housekeeping. What's the point of accessible design if I need permission every time?"

Another interviewee, a friend of mine working in Reliance, Ghansoli shared his observation:

> "They built ramps in our campus, but during events they cover them with banners and decor. It's like accessibility is optional when the guests arrive."

Their experiences show that accessibility is not a one-time investment but an *everyday responsibility*. Physical infrastructure only matters when it is maintained, respected, and accessible at all times, not when it suits convenience.

What They Want

- Inclusive infrastructure audits co-led by persons with disabilities.
- Sensory-friendly design as part of physical accessibility standards.
- Accessibility beyond entry points - include break rooms, emergency exits, and staff areas.
- Aesthetics that include, not exclude - design should never prioritise visual appeal over function.
- Compact planning and accessible routes between essential spaces like washrooms, cafeterias, and meeting areas.
- Seating and rest spots every 50-100 meters for those with fatigue or limited mobility.
- Shuttle or mobility assistance within large campuses - small, human-scale changes that reduce effort without reducing independence.
- Regular audits of usability, not just compliance.
- Accessible spaces kept functional and not as storage or locked facilities.
- Accessibility integrated into event planning and daily maintenance.

7.3 Digital Accessibility

Technology as Gatekeeper

The first thing many employees encounter at work is often not a driveway or door, but a login screen. For many persons with disabilities, this screen is as exclusionary as a locked gate. Across the interviews, digital inaccessibility emerged as one of the most consistent and invisible barriers in corporate life.

Pratik, a visually impaired IT professional, explained:

> "All our HR portals are in PDF format. My screen reader can't read half of them. Even my performance review is inaccessible. Imagine asking someone else to read your appraisal aloud."

His story captures a loss of dignity that goes beyond inconvenience. Digital tools meant to empower employees can become mechanisms of dependency, forcing them to disclose private information or rely on colleagues for basic tasks. What seems like convenience and improved accessibility becomes a disguised form of humiliation.

A logistics worker at a large e-commerce company with its head office in Mumbai shared a different version of the same exclusion:

> "Our payslips and leave forms come only on an app that doesn't work on older phones. When I asked HR for help, they said check online. It's like the company exists in a space I can't reach. It is not like my HR is not sensitive, they just don't know that the app is not correctly built, keeping people like me in mind."

This kind of exclusion is rarely seen or measured, because it affects those who are already invisible — contractual, low-income, or blue-collar employees with disabilities who may not even be counted in digital audits.

What They Want

- All internal software and portals tested for screen reader, keyboard, and captioning compatibility before deployment.
- Offline or alternate access options for essential HR and payroll functions.
- Accessibility to be built in from the design stage, not patched in after complaints.

Privacy and Dignity in Digital Processes

Accessibility is not only about entry but about privacy. Paavan, My colleague stated in a conversation about this barrier,

> "To upload my medical bills and insurance files, I have to take help from a colleague because the portal isn't accessible. That means sharing my health details with someone else. It is awkward and feels weird asking for help from your colleagues for such time taking things"

When digital systems are designed without accessibility in mind, they inadvertently violate confidentiality and autonomy. In accessible design frameworks like WCAG 2.1 and GIGW 3.0, privacy is central to accessibility, because independence in accessing information is part of basic digital rights.

Experts and employees alike emphasised that digital dignity requires more than compliance checklists. It requires empathy in design. Forms, dashboards, and learning platforms must allow every employee to act independently, without needing to request help or reveal personal information.

What will help here

- Data privacy policies that recognise accessibility dependence as a potential point of vulnerability.
- Dedicated accessibility officers or internal helpdesks to support assistive tech users confidentially.

Neurodivergent and Cognitive Accessibility

For employees with invisible or neurodivergent disabilities, digital spaces can overwhelm in subtler but equally harmful ways. Pranav, who identifies as autistic, described the issue:

> "Our internal communication app keeps pinging every few minutes. I lose track of what's urgent. The colours, flashing notifications, constant updates, it's too much sensory input."

Similarly, Utkarsh, an employee with ADHD working in WRI, said:

> "We have ten different dashboards, one for HR, one for projects, one for time tracking. I can't keep switching tabs. It's not that I'm lazy, I just need one clean interface."

Overstimulation, cluttered design, and constant digital noise can also disable participation. Neurodivergent-friendly interfaces like ALM[15] layouts, predictable navigation, and reduced visual clutter benefit everyone by enabling clarity and focus.

What They Want

- Low-sensory, distraction-free modes on all internal apps and dashboards. Eg. https://goblin.tools/
- Options to customise notifications, colour schemes, and text sizes.
- Simple, unified systems rather than fragmented digital tools.

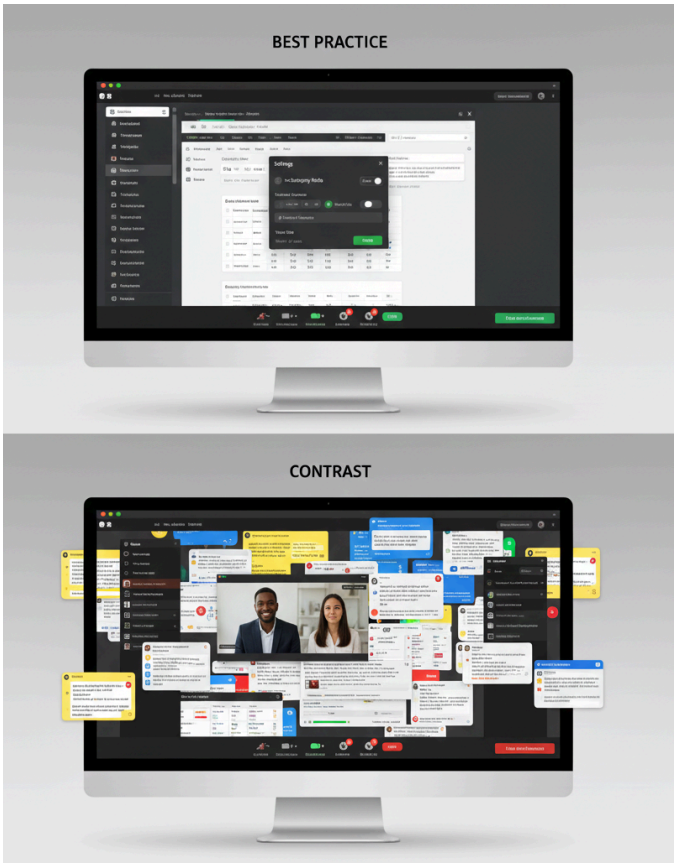
Inclusive Learning and Collaboration Tools

Many workplaces pride themselves on offering digital learning platforms and video-based trainings. Yet several Deaf and hard-of-hearing employees described how these initiatives exclude them by default. Anmol, our colleague who uses cochlear implants, said,

> "All events in our office have sign language interpreters, but they assume that I know sign language. I am hard of hearing, but I have always used implants and never learnt the sign language. Closed captions are what I appreciate more because it makes my understanding easy."

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[15] "ALM" primarily refers to Aided Language Modeling, an intervention strategy used in augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to support language learning for individuals with disabilities like autism



Anmol continued:

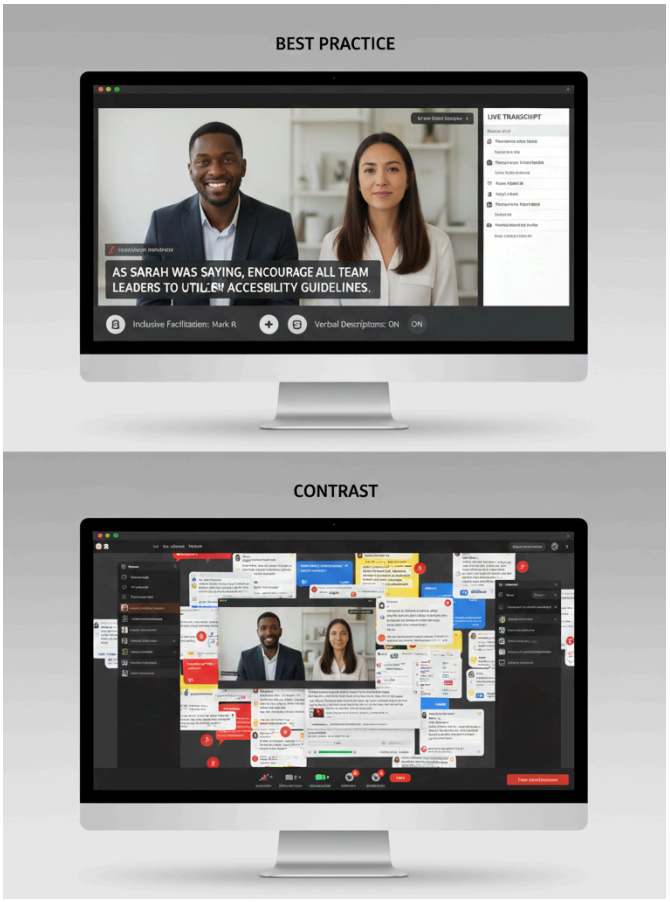
> "During team calls, multiple people talk at the same time and it gets very difficult for me to capture what everyone is saying. I sit through the whole meetings not knowing what's going on sometimes."

Accessibility features like live captions, transcripts, and audio descriptions already exist on mainstream platforms such as Zoom, Teams, and Meet. But as Samara Thekkan, an accessibility Auditor at Incluzza, put it:

> "The problem is not technology. It's that no one switches the features on. Accessibility is already built in; empathy isn't."

What They Want

- All corporate trainings and webinars to include live captions and transcripts.
- Visual content to be accompanied by verbal descriptions.
  Meeting protocols that assign responsibility for inclusive facilitation (for instance, ensuring captions are on, slides are described, and speakers don't talk over each other).



From Compliance to Culture

Digital accessibility cannot survive on audits alone. It needs a culture that values inclusive design as a sign of professionalism, not charity. As Samara, the accessibility trainer, explained,

> "Companies think accessibility is an expensive add-on. But it's cheaper to build it right the first time than to retrofit it after exclusion has already happened."

Globally, companies like Microsoft, SAP, and Accenture have built accessibility into their design pipelines by default — not as a corporate social responsibility task, but as a usability standard. Indian corporates, interviewees suggested, must learn from these models and integrate accessibility into procurement and vendor contracts so that every new tool or upgrade undergoes an accessibility check.

What They Want

- Accessibility-first procurement policies and vendor accountability.
- Periodic internal accessibility audits conducted with persons with disabilities.
- Mandatory training for HR, IT, and design teams on assistive technologies.

7.4 Communication Accessibility

When communication is inaccessible, people don't simply miss information: they miss connection. Communication accessibility is about language, but language influences and is influenced by culture, emotion and belonging. So accessibility is also about how people feel when they are spoken to, how they are listened to, and how they are included in the everyday rhythms of a workplace.

Across interviews, this was one of the most emotionally charged topics we brought up. Respondents paused often, laughed nervously, and many chose to keep their answers anonymous. Some said they weren't sure whether what they experienced "counted" as an accessibility issue. We propose that this very hesitation tells us something crucial. Communication barriers are so normalised that people learn to work around them quietly.

Unlike physical or digital barriers, communication inaccessibility hides in tone, impatience, and silence. It appears when someone is interrupted mid-sentence, when a meeting moves too fast for captions to catch up, or when a person's contribution is ignored because of how they speak. It is deeply tied to dignity. As one participant shared off the record: *"It's not what people say, it's how they make you feel small while saying it."* This chapter specifically is very close to my heart, because these experiences resonated deeply with me at points of my own corporate journey.

The Everyday Language of Exclusion

Participants repeatedly pointed out that communication barriers in spoken, written, and behavioural remain among the biggest gaps in inclusion.

Anmol my colleague again stated:

> "In some meetings, there's no interpreter and no captions. Everyone talks fast, jokes, decides things. I sit smiling but lost."

Paavan, my colleague with vision impairment explained:

> "Circulars are sometimes sent as image-based PDFs. My screen reader can't read them. It is one of the most frustrating things. I depend on others to tell me what's new. "

These testimonies show that exclusion often happens not in policies but in the everyday flow of communication. Even tools like Zoom or Teams, which offer captions, are underused.

Neurodiversity and Communication Styles

Invisible disabilities often collide with unspoken expectations around communication. Utkarsh, a research consultant with ADHD who works in Mumbai, said:

> "I was diagnosed recently, and suddenly everyone thinks I'm careless or disorganised. I just need clarity and structure, not judgement. Communication should adjust to people, not the other way around."

Inclusive communication isabout the *culture* of interaction. Workplaces that train teams in disability etiquette, plain language, and neurodiverse-friendly communication foster more authentic collaboration.

What They Want

- Captions, interpreters, and accessible documents as standard practice.
- Inclusive meeting protocols (structured turn-taking, slower pacing, description of visuals).
- Awareness training on neurodiverse communication and listening practices.
  Accessible safety communication - critical updates should reach everyone, in multiple formats.

One of the strongest voices in the interviews captured it perfectly:

> "People assume we are difficult to communicate with. But the truth is, we just need people to stop assuming what we can or can't understand."

The way colleagues listen, pause, or make space for others determines who feels included and who is left out.

Clear and Multiple Modes of Communication

A body of academic research has shown that people have different ways to process information. Some do it through speech; others through visuals, captions, written notes, or tactile cues. For many employees with disabilities, the issue is not lack of technology but lack of consistent, inclusive use.

One Neurodivergent participant who works in New Delhi as an analyst explained:

> "Sometimes, all I need is a written note of what was said in the meeting. Everyone else gets to rely on memory, but I can't."

Small, thoughtful measures like sending follow-up notes, enabling captions in virtual meetings, or describing visuals aloud bridge enormous gaps. Companies such as Microsoft and IBM already integrate inclusive communication toolkits into their workflows, making transcripts, captioning, and quiet communication spaces a routine part of meetings, not an exception.

These measures don't only support persons with disabilities, they improve retention and understanding for everyone.

The Tone and Patience of Communication

Communication is also about how things are said. A person might not ask twice if they've been ignored once. Many interviewees spoke about how tone, impatience, or casual dismissal can create quiet exclusion.

One participant said:

> "When someone tells me 'never mind, it's okay' instead of explaining again, I immediately know I'm not part of that circle."

This subtle exclusion builds up over time, especially for employees with hearing or cognitive disabilities who need an extra moment to process instructions. Neurodivergent participants spoke about feeling rushed or dismissed simply because their thinking pace or style didn't fit the norm.

Inclusive workplaces train their teams to slow down using plain, respectful language, avoiding interruptions, and giving every speaker time to express themselves. Patience, as many participants said, is the simplest and most transformative accessibility tool.

Communication Accessibility for Invisible Disabilities

Invisible disabilities such as ADHD, autism, or anxiety often reveal how little workplace communication norms account for cognitive diversity. One respondent described the experience vividly:

> "Meetings with ten people talking over each other make it impossible for me to follow. I need a structure. One person speaks at a time, or else I just shut down."

This insight echoes global research from the Job Accommodation Network, which shows that structured communication (like defined turn-taking and clear agendas) reduces anxiety and increases participation for neurodivergent employees.

It's also a reminder that in accessible communication design, technology is a tool for ensuring rhythm, predictability, and filtering out signal from the noise. These structures can help create psychological safety, especially for people managing sensory overload or processing differences.

Feedback, Consent, and Psychological Safety

True communication accessibility includes the right to ask for clarity without fear. Employees with disabilities often hesitate to request adjustments because they don't want to be seen as demanding. One participant summed it up powerfully:

> "If I have to explain my access needs every week, it means the system isn't learning."

Inclusive workplaces address this by building feedback loops into their systems - anonymous check-ins, pre-meeting preference forms, or short access surveys that allow

employees to share how they best receive information. Organizations like the BBC use "access riders"[16] for all employees, not just those who identify as disabled. These small institutional habits shift the burden from individuals to systems.

When communication becomes predictable, safe, and respectful, it not only includes more people. It strengthens the collective rhythm of a workplace.

What They Want

The lived experiences in these interviews offer a clear checklist for what inclusive communication should look like in practice:

- Multiple modes of communication: All meetings, notices, and training materials should be available in text, caption, and audio form.
  Respectful tone and pacing: Teams should adopt slower, more deliberate conversation rhythms and avoid casual dismissals like "never mind."
- Structured conversations: Meetings should follow clear agendas and turn-taking norms to reduce sensory and cognitive overload.
- Built-in accessibility tools: Captions, interpreters, transcripts, and quiet zones should be integrated, not requested.
- System learning: Access preferences should be recorded and remembered, so employees don't have to restate their needs repeatedly.

7.5 Attitudinal Accessibility

If physical accessibility builds entry and digital accessibility ensures participation, attitudinal accessibility decides whether people truly belong. It cannot be measured in ramps or captions. Attitudinal accessibility is about the quiet, daily ways people are treated and in the tone of a manager's voice, the assumptions colleagues make, the invisible hierarchies that decide whose competence is trusted and whose is questioned.

Across interviews, this was the hardest subject for participants to talk about. Many paused before answering or simply said, *"This is difficult to explain."* Unlike a broken elevator or an inaccessible PDF, an attitude isn't a thing that can be fixed, it's a culture that must be unlearned. Some participants even asked to stay anonymous here, saying they feared being misunderstood or labelled "too sensitive." Stigma doesn't always shout; it often hides

[16] An access rider, such as those used at the BBC, is a document for outlining a person's individual access needs and preferences in the workplace. It is a communication tool designed to help the employer provide necessary adjustments and remove barriers for everyone, whether or not they identify as disabled. Employees can choose how much or how little they want to disclose, and they are not required to share specific medical diagnoses; instead, they can focus on the impact and the required adjustments.

behind politeness. This chapter was built through many casual conversations with communities and people who truly care about inclusion.

Attitudinal accessibility, as participants described, is about moving from sympathy to respect, from tolerance to acceptance. It asks workplaces and every community places to move beyond diversity checklists and toward genuine behavioural change. One that sees persons with disabilities as professionals first, not as exceptions or symbols of inclusion.

Beyond Pity: The Demand for Professional Respect

> "When I do well, people call me inspiring. When I make a mistake, they say it's because of my disability. Either way, I'm never just a colleague. I'm a story."

This statement by a 32 year blue collar male who has intellectual disability working in Mumbai captures a recurring theme across interviews: the constant framing of persons with disabilities as "inspiring" or "brave," rather than as skilled professionals. Several participants noted how this kind of emotional response, while seemingly positive, reduces them to symbols rather than peers. As one consultant put it, *"We don't want to be celebrated for existing—we want to be recognised for contributing."*

Attitudinal accessibility begins with dismantling the culture of pity. It requires that organisations train managers and teams not in empathy workshops that evoke sympathy, but in disability etiquette and professional equity of treating accommodation not as charity, but as a matter of rights and design.

The Hidden Bias in "Care"

Participants also spoke about how care can turn into control. One professional with a locomotor disability recalled:

> "My manager said I shouldn't travel for client work because it might exhaust me. He thought he was being considerate. I lost two years of career growth because of that."

Such stories reveal how bias often hides behind protection. Well-intentioned managers make unilateral decisions about what is "best" for employees with disabilities, assuming incapacity instead of asking. A visually impaired respondent put it bluntly:

> "If you care, you ask me what I need. You don't decide for me."

Experts emphasised that attitudinal accessibility means shifting this mindset from *"helping"* to *"enabling."* Training modules and HR policies can formalise that shift, but it begins with everyday awareness and the willingness to listen and co-design accommodations instead of prescribing them.

Invisible Disabilities and the Burden of Proving

For employees with invisible or neurodivergent conditions, attitudinal barriers show up as disbelief. A woman with chronic illness explained:

> "When I say I need flexibility, people ask, 'But you don't look sick.' Every request needs justification."

Another participant, recently diagnosed with ADHD, described how disclosure backfired:

> "After I told my manager, he started checking in twice a day like I couldn't manage my work. I needed structure, not surveillance."

These stories underline how attitudinal accessibility requires awareness that disability is not always visible. The demand for constant proof drains emotional energy and creates mistrust. Experts recommended normalising flexible policies like remote work, quiet zones, mental health leave not as exceptions but as options for everyone. This universal design approach reduces stigma while improving productivity across the board.

Stereotypes, Silence, and the Unspoken Hierarchies

Many participants described how attitudinal bias creates an invisible ceiling.

"When I applied for a leadership role, my boss said clients might be uncomfortable. He said it softly, like it was for my good. That's how bias works right, it hides in kindness."

Such "soft" discrimination is the most difficult to challenge. It rarely appears in policy documents but defines who gets promoted, who gets mentored, and who stays invisible. A young employee with low vision summed it up:

> "Accessibility isn't just about how we enter the building, it's about whether we're allowed to rise inside it."

This insight captures why attitudinal change is fundamental. Without it, even the most accessible physical or digital environments remain performative. Inclusion cannot stop at the door; it must live in power dynamics, decision-making, and trust.

Building Attitudinal Accessibility: What Can Be Done

While participants struggled to describe attitudes, they were clear about what needs to change. Their suggestions echoed what international frameworks like the UNCRPD and the ILO's Global Business and Disability Network identify as essential to inclusive workplace culture: sustained awareness, accountability, and representation.

From the interviews, four actionable principles emerged:

- Representation, not tokenism: Persons with disabilities must be part of leadership, not just campaigns. Visibility should come with authority.
- Accountability in feedback: Anonymous feedback mechanisms can surface bias in performance reviews, promotion processes, and interpersonal behaviour.

- Continuous learning: Regular training on disability etiquette, unconscious bias, and intersectionality not one-time workshops help normalise inclusion.
- Language as culture: Encouraging people-first language ("employee with a disability" rather than "disabled employee") signals respect and reshapes culture.

Attitudinal accessibility is an an organisational philosophy. It requires empathy balanced with equity, compassion guided by consultation, and policies grounded in trust rather than protection.

Conclusion From Intention to Culture

In the end, attitudinal accessibility is the thread that ties every other form of accessibility together. Physical ramps or digital captions can be built, but they remain unused if the culture of the workplace still doubts, pities, or patronises those who need them. What this chapter reveals through both words and silences is that inclusion must be embodied.

One respondent captured it best:

> "Accessibility is not about making space for us. It's about changing the way you think about space itself."

True inclusion will come not when persons with disabilities are treated as exceptions to be accommodated, but as equals to be expected.

Conclusion

Accessibility is not a favor. It is a right. When we began writing this paper, our analysis leaned heavily on laws, policies, and global standards: numbers that laid bare the gaps in India's workplaces. Yet, as the research deepened, what reshaped this paper were the voices of experts and persons with disabilities themselves. Their stories moved the discussion from compliance to culture, from checklists to lived dignity.

The experts' recommendations reminded us that accessibility must be systemic woven into universal design, user-led audits, inclusive procurement, and everyday practices. The ground realities revealed how steep ramps, silent meetings, inaccessible portals, and dismissive attitudes fracture inclusion. And when asked what they truly want, persons with disabilities did not demand extravagance. They asked for something far more profound: independence, dignity, equal participation, and the chance to be valued as professionals first, not defined by their disability.

What these narratives reveal is that the gap in India is not capacity, but will. The will to enforce laws, to normalize accessibility, and to listen to those most affected. Accessibility is not a one-time retrofit, nor a CSR performance. It is an ecosystem: of physical spaces that enable freedom, digital tools that empower, communication practices that include, and attitudes that respect. Above all, it is an ongoing dialogue, co-created with persons with disabilities themselves.

If Indian workplaces can embrace this holistic vision, the transformation will extend beyond disability inclusion. It will reimagine offices as more humane, resilient, and innovative spaces for everyone. The path forward demands courage, accountability, and imagination but it is also filled with hope. Despite frustrations, the voices we heard carried remarkable optimism. As one participant put it:

"I don't want to be treated as different. I want to live in a world where accessibility is so normal that nobody notices it anymore."

That world is within reach. We must choose to build it.

This paper grew from noticing small, everyday moments in workplaces — who is considered, who adjusts, and who is left to adapt in silence. Across policies, spaces, and systems, accessibility often exists as an intention, but rarely as a lived reality. What becomes clear is that exclusion is usually not deliberate. It is built into routines, designs, and assumptions that feel normal because they have always been there. When these go unquestioned, they quietly decide who belongs and who does not.

Accessibility is not about fixing individuals. It is about rethinking environments, listening to lived experiences, and making everyday choices with care. When inclusion is treated as a practice rather than a promise, workplaces begin to change in ways that truly matter.

This paper was researched, written and designed by **Pushnami Kasture** for the Godrej DEI Lab.

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