

## **Rights Activists Want ICT to Be Made More Inclusive for Persons with Disabilities**

**BY GAURAV VIVEK BHATNAGAR ON 26/01/2018 • LEAVE A COMMENT, THD WIRE**

Submissions made to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India seek stringent, legally-binding provisions covering all players in the sector.

The need of the hour is promoting digital inclusion. Credit: Reuters

**New Delhi:** Disability rights activists have called for a stringent policy to ensure persons with disabilities are able to access with ease both the software and hardware when it comes using information and communication technology (ICT).

With the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) issuing a consultation paper on 'Making ICT Accessible for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs)' on December 20, 2017, and seeking comments from the stakeholders by January 22, 2018, a number of disability rights groups have made their submissions.

"For achieving a truly inclusive information society, persons with disabilities must be able to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) with equal ease. This can be made possible only if the accessibility of ICTs is on the top of the agenda of manufacturers and service providers. Though it makes business sense to attract persons with disabilities with ICTs having accessibility features, manufacturers failed to tap this opportunity. Hence, a stringent policy is required to ensure persons with disabilities get what they need," said noted disability rights activist and director of Svayam, Subhash Chandra Vashishth. Incidentally, the World Bank Report (2007) titled 'People with disabilities in India: from commitments to outcomes' had stated that "there is growing evidence that people with disabilities comprise between 4 and 8 percent of the Indian population". Further, the population of senior citizens in the country ranges between 10-12%. Put together, these aspects raise the need for making ICT inclusive for improving the quality of life of the PwDs.

### **Both software, hardware not complying with guidelines**

In its submission to TRAI, Svayam has noted that often the websites, software and mobile apps from vendors and service providers do not comply with accessibility guidelines. This makes them inaccessible for visually impaired persons who make use of assistive technologies like screen reading software, braille displays, etc.

It has also pointed out that "most electronic hardware products like Set-Top-Box (STB), smart home solutions, etc. are not usable for persons with disabilities as they don't comply with international accessibility standards e.g. the buttons on most of these devices do not possess any tactile notations and audio feedback to allow visually impaired users to interact with them.

### **Policies lack budgeting support**

Most policies are simple guidelines and often lack appropriate budgetary or funding support for implementation and penalty for non-adherence. This leads to lesser efforts towards compliance, the organisation noted.

Moreover, it said, most guidelines are made applicable only for government entities and not to all establishments. "However, needs of persons with disabilities in their day-to-day lives span beyond services and products offered by government entities."

As for the financial support for maturity and survival of products that benefit PwDs, it said either such mechanisms "do not exist or are very low and ineffective."

Stating that "a comprehensive plan is needed to adopt an accessible operating system for product development and service divisions to include everyone," Vashishth said issuing of the consultation paper was a step in the right direction.

As for telecom regulator TRAI, he said, it has highlighted in the paper that an equal and inclusive society involves providing equal opportunities to all sections of society irrespective of their physical, economic, social or religious identity in all spheres of life and this covers education, skill development, economic empowerment and ensuring full participation of all persons including PwDs.

While programmes such as 'Digital India' envisage inclusive growth and a digitally empowered society, the benefits of ICT have not reached all the sections so far. At a time when mobile phones are also being used to access information, avail of various services, the need of the hour is promoting digital inclusion for enabling PwDs to lead independent and dignified lives.

With the new Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 raising the disability categories from seven to 21, "this presents an opportunity for all the stakeholders (disability/accessibility activists, NGOs, etc.) to mull over the concern areas and help the government on how to make ICT accessible for persons with disabilities," said Vashishth.

### **'Include user groups in research, product development'**

Founder-chairperson of Svayam, Sminu Jindal, said "there is a massive lack of awareness among the stakeholders as well as credible research on ICT for persons with disabilities. Non-inclusion of user groups in research and product development is another issue which should be addressed. We also need aggressive public campaigns for awareness and sustained advocacy to enforce stringent accessible ICT policies."

On the key areas of concern, Svayam has noted among other things that there is an absence of periodic stakeholder coordination; lack of harmony between policies and the regulation across the world to adhere to uniform standards; lack of research and development, lack of aggressive campaigning for accessible ICTs, lack of direct involvement of PwDs in product development; high cost of specialised assistive technology; high import taxes and no subsidy or incentives being provided to the manufacturers from the government.

It has, therefore, suggested that "all establishments" should be covered by all the provisions in the policies concerning access to PwDs; the provisions should be made "mandatory" and legally binding instead of remaining mere guidelines; clauses specifying substantial penalties for non-adherence should be incorporated; definition of "everyday use products" should be clearly defined and detailed to cover products used for personal use, at home, office and in public infrastructure.

### **TRAI should set up a helpline for complaints**

It has also suggested that TRAI set up a helpline where only complaints regarding accessibility can be received. "The data of complaints and action taken should be made available on TRAI portal as such data can help frame and reform policies in larger interest." For making it easier for all PwDs to access ICT products, the group has also suggested that all products that have a display screen and interactive touch screen should be made accessible. "This includes set top box, point of sale (POS) machines, scanners, everyday use products such as washing machines, microwave, air conditioners, refrigerators, all types of vending machines, self-service public devices used in shopping malls, airports, railway ticketing, printers including 3D printers, scanners, lifts, elevators, and musical instruments."

**Focus on regional languages as well**

With India being culturally and linguistically diverse, the organisation has also demanded that ICT services in regional language be started for wider reach as at present most of the assistive technology and software is not available in them.

It has also called for funding "futuristic technologies". "Recently, Microsoft was granted a patent for a brain control device that can give users mind control powers to operate apps with just their brains, without any movement. Using sensor-equipped head bands, the device could ideally interpret neurological data to have users open and use apps with thoughts instead of gestures," it pointed out.

Stating that "accessible ICTs are very much possible, and have the potential to significantly touch many lives enhancing their productivity," Jindal said if necessary steps are taken now, it would "enable persons with disabilities to contribute to the GDP and live a dignified and happy life."

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