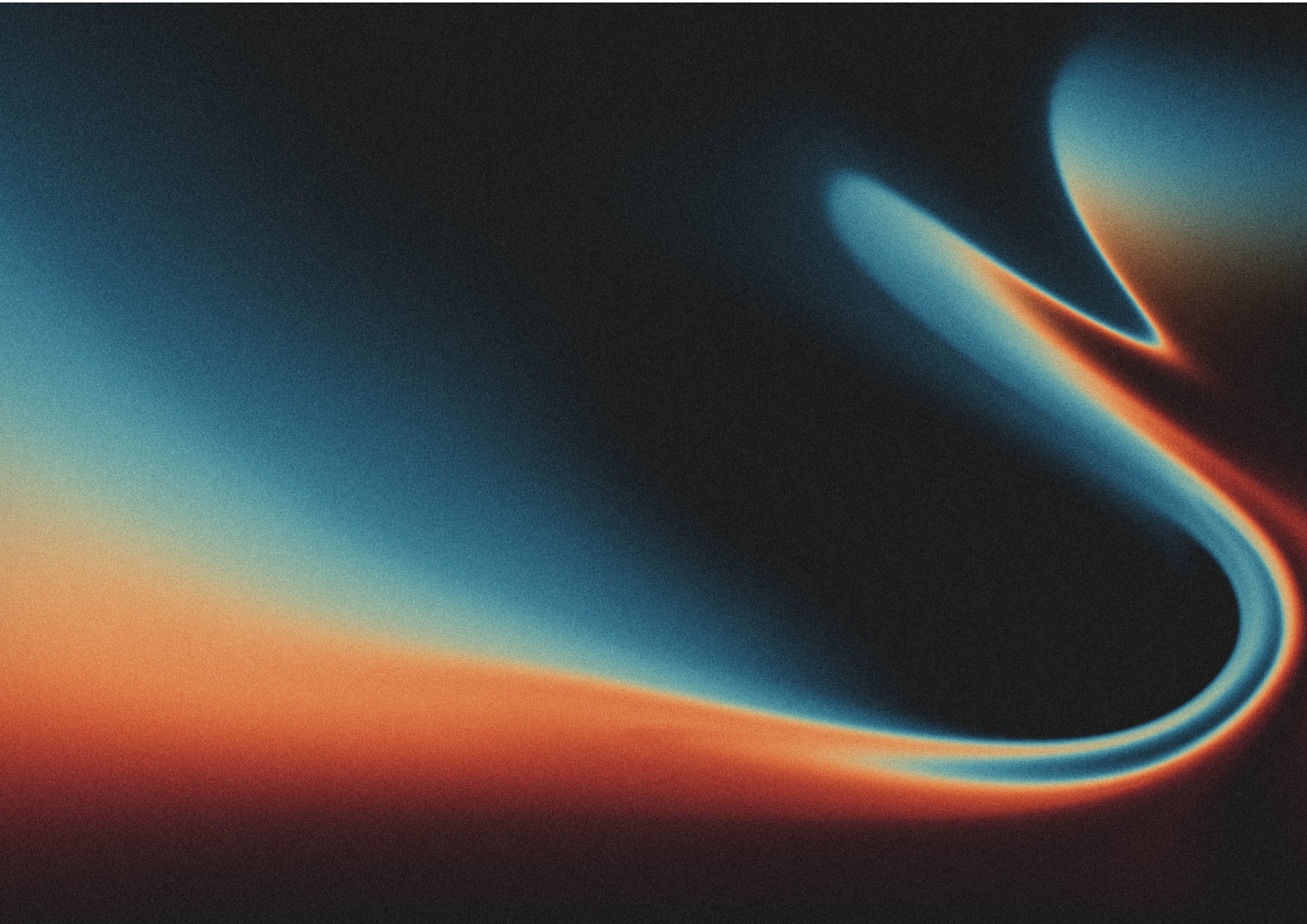


EQUITY ECHO

OUR JOURNEY IN INCLUSION



Foreword



We often think of inclusion as an afterthought. As something that needs to be worked on after a certain system has already been set. When we think about it in retrospect, it has already become too tall a task to execute.

We first create a stadium, a restaurant, a school and later think about how we that place will accommodate someone who uses a wheelchair, or has vision impairment, or is in pain, or is deaf. Instead, we should have begun by assuming that all possible manner of diverse individuals need to use these facilities.

This edition invites readers to think about inclusion not as a one-time intervention, but as a continuing process of recognising barriers and changing the conditions that create them. It also asks us to move beyond narrow or charitable understandings of disability and see it instead as part of human diversity.

In our conversation with Arman Ali, Executive Director of NCPEDP, this shift comes through clearly. He reflects on the need to mainstream disability across policy, infrastructure, employment, transport, technology and public life. His insights remind us that an accessible workplace alone is not enough if the journey to it, the systems within it or the opportunities around it remain inaccessible.

This edition also introduces Notes on Inclusion, a new segment that looks at the histories, ideas and practices that have shaped how communities understand belonging. The first piece explores communities in Alipur, the Naga Hills and Martha's Vineyard, where Deaf and hearing residents used shared sign languages. These examples show that inclusion can emerge when communities adapt themselves, rather than expecting individuals to overcome barriers alone.

These perspectives let us explore the need for creating systems flexible enough to recognise difference, respond to individual needs and allow everyone to participate with dignity, autonomy and equal opportunity.

Warm regards,
Sharmistha Ghosh Solomon

Voices that Matter



Arman Ali

Executive Director, NCPEDP

Arman Ali is Executive Director of the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP). He works to advance disability rights through policy advocacy, accessibility initiatives and leadership opportunities for persons with disabilities.

#01

What has your professional journey been like, and what is your motivation for choosing to work with persons with disabilities?

In 1999, I received the National Award for Best Self-Employed Youth with Disability and met the late Javed Abidi. Until then, I had largely understood disability as an individual medical issue. That exposure helped me recognise it as a rights issue shaped by social and institutional barriers.

When I returned to Guwahati, I began volunteering with Shishu Sarothi, which worked with children with cerebral palsy. Through this experience, I became more aware of the gaps in accessibility, education and employment. I later worked on advocacy to implement the Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995.

Over the years, I have worked towards including disability in mainstream agendas. In 2018, I moved to Delhi as Executive Director of NCPEDP. What keeps me motivated is that this work is both personal and collective. By advocating for inclusive policies, we are representing millions of people whose concerns are still not adequately heard.

#02

Beyond accessibility, what are the major gaps that continue to affect persons with disabilities?

Accessibility remains the core issue, whether it concerns physical spaces, transport, digital infrastructure, information, products or services. However, the deeper gap is the lack of awareness about disability.

When disability is understood only through a medical or charitable lens, inclusion becomes an afterthought. We need to recognise disability as part of human diversity and adopt a lifespan approach, because disability can become part of anyone's life at any stage. India has invested in major public awareness campaigns on several social issues, but we have not seen a comparable campaign on disability. Without awareness, we will continue retrofitting solutions instead of designing systems inclusively from the beginning.

#03

Why is it important to understand disability as a spectrum?

Disability cannot be represented by a single image, such as a person using a wheelchair. Even among wheelchair users, some can walk short distances but not for long periods, while others require crutches, walkers, service animals, or mobility assistance in particular situations.

When this diversity is not understood, infrastructure is designed for an imagined "average" user, excluding many others. For example, recognising walking as a right is not enough unless pavements are also usable by people with different mobility and sensory needs. We need to talk more openly about the full spectrum of disability, because unless people understand these realities, inclusive infrastructure will not be created.

#04

What should workplaces do differently to become genuinely inclusive?

Workplace inclusion requires the wider ecosystem to support it. Accessibility should be built into procurement policies, infrastructure, technology and operations from the outset. However, inclusion cannot stop at the office door. An accessible workplace is of limited use if employees cannot reach it because public transport or last-mile connectivity remains inaccessible. If someone must hire a cab, purchase a vehicle or employ a driver simply to reach work, they are not participating on an equal basis.

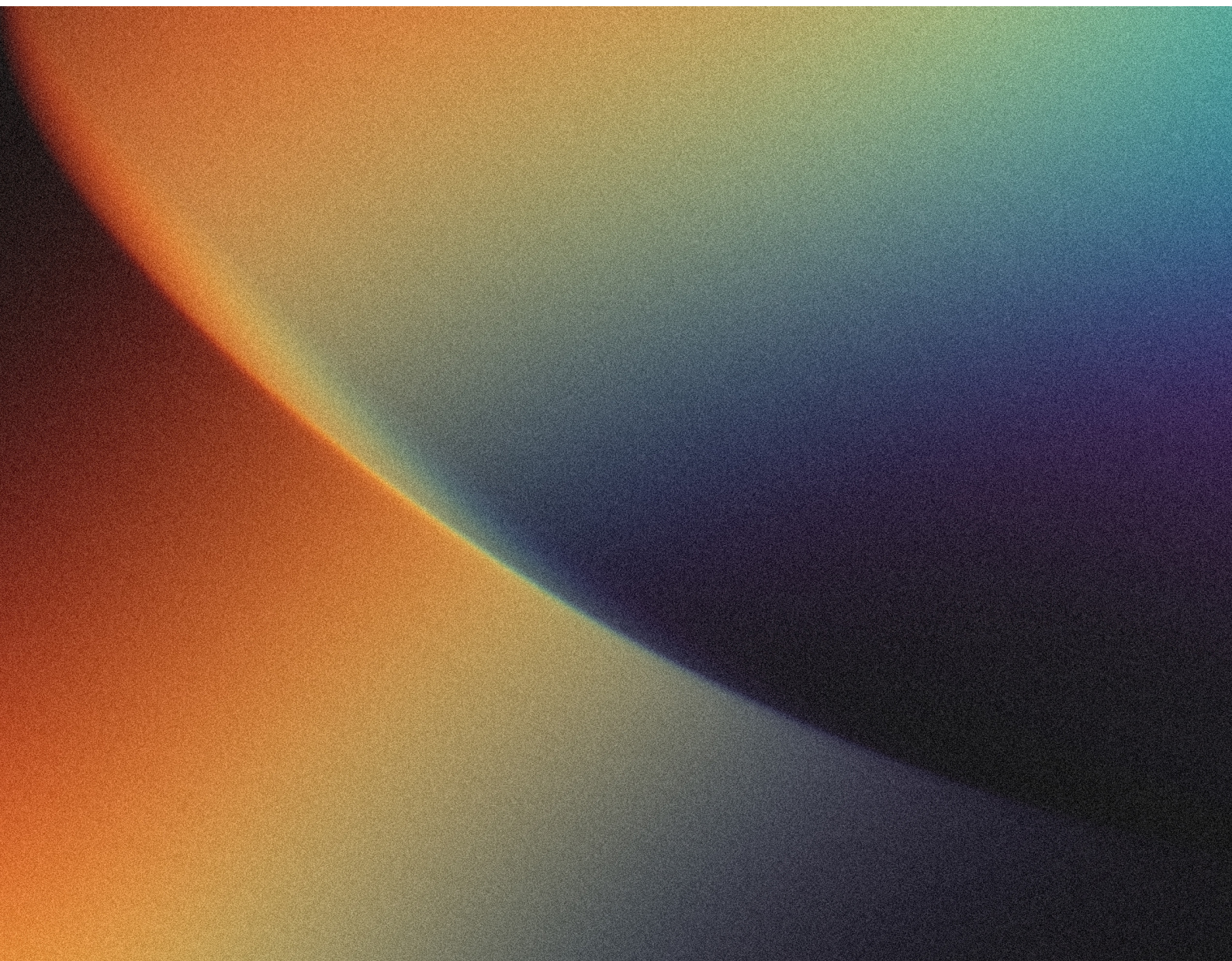
Businesses must also consider whether its products can be accessed by persons with disabilities, both as customers and as employees.

#05

What is NCPEDP doing to advance disability rights?

NCPEDP is a cross-disability organisation that runs the National Disability Network, one of India's largest networks of organisations of persons with disabilities. Our initiatives include a fellowship for young persons with disabilities, scholarships for students pursuing higher education, the Universal Design Awards, the Helen Keller Awards and an assistive technology hub supporting over 42 start-ups.

Current advocacy priorities include insurance coverage for persons with disabilities under Ayushman Bharat, accurate inclusion in the census, and greater political participation and representation. Across health, education, employment and elections, our effort is to ensure disability becomes part of every mainstream conversation.



DEI Deep Dive

Reasonable Accommodation

Reasonable accommodation refers to changes made to policies, processes, environments or ways of working so that an individual can participate equitably. In disability-rights law, it has a specific meaning: necessary and appropriate adjustments must be provided to persons with disabilities, unless doing so would impose a disproportionate or undue burden.

India's Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 defines reasonable accommodation as modifications and adjustments that enable persons with disabilities to exercise their rights equally with others, without imposing a disproportionate or undue burden in a particular case. The Act requires the government to take steps to ensure reasonable accommodation, while government establishments must provide it to employees with disabilities.

Examples include accessible technology, flexible working arrangements, modified recruitment processes, additional breaks, sign language interpretation, accessible learning materials, or changes to physical spaces. These adjustments should respond to the individual's stated needs rather than assumptions about what support they require.

Within the broader DEI context, organisations may also provide accommodations for people facing barriers linked to pregnancy, caregiving responsibilities, religion, age, health conditions or other circumstances. These may take different legal or policy forms, depending on the context. Reasonable accommodation is therefore both a disability-rights obligation and part of a wider inclusion practice. It recognises that treating people according to their needs is ensuring their rights rather than preferential treatment. The aim is to create fair access, meaningful participation and dignity by adapting systems that were not designed with everyone in mind.



Notes on Inclusion

When accessibility becomes a shared language

Inclusion is often discussed as a modern idea, shaped by disability-rights laws and concepts such as accessibility and reasonable accommodation. Yet history offers examples of communities that adapted themselves to include persons with disabilities long before this terminology existed.

In Alipur, Karnataka, an indigenous village sign language developed within a community with a significant Deaf population. Known as Alipur Sign Language, it has been used by residents, with and without hearing impairment. Because signing extended beyond Deaf households, communication was not treated solely as the responsibility of Deaf individuals. Neighbours, relatives and other community members participated in creating a more accessible social environment.

A similar practice was historically recorded among Angami Naga communities in the Naga Hills. Early twentieth-century accounts describe a local sign language used by both Deaf and hearing community members. Although documentation is limited and the language was last reported in 1921, its existence suggests that communities developed shared communication systems in response to the people living within them.

One of the better-known examples is from Martha's Vineyard, an island in Massachusetts in the United States. From the eighteenth century onwards, hereditary deafness was relatively common in parts of the island. Martha's Vineyard Sign Language consequently became widely used by hearing and Deaf residents alike. Deaf islanders participated in work, family, religious and community life without communication constantly separating them from their hearing neighbours.

These histories offer an important lesson: inclusion becomes possible when the wider community adapts. Rather than asking individuals to overcome every barrier themselves, these communities made communication a collective practice. Their histories remind us that accessibility is not something contrived, but a part of how entire communities live, communicate and belong.



DEI IN THE NEWS



India's diversity hiring rises 21% – India's diversity hiring increased 21% year-on-year in May 2026, despite an overall slowdown in white-collar recruitment. Women accounted for 56% of diversity hires, while the representation of persons with disabilities reached 12%, tripling over two years. LGBTQIA+ and neurodiverse talent comprised 32%, with IT, consulting, BFSI and startups driving growth. [Read More](#)



Photo: SURESH K PANDEY

Delhi's trans shelters face growing uncertainty – Residents of a Delhi Garima Greh fear proposed Trans Act amendments could restrict self-identification, access to welfare and community-based support. Chronic underfunding and limited shelter capacity already weaken care networks. The report highlights how chosen families continue providing emotional and practical support as residents confront growing insecurity over housing, recognition and safety. [Read More](#)



Motherhood and ambition should not be competing choices – The controversy over Japanese mayor Shoko Kawata taking maternity leave exposes persistent bias against working mothers. The article examines the motherhood penalty, inadequate childcare and inflexible workplaces, arguing that pregnancy and caregiving require structural support. It calls for flexible work, stronger maternity provisions and shared parental leave to ensure women are not forced to choose between leadership and motherhood. [Read More](#)



US data shows DEI is evolving, not disappearing – New US-based Catalyst research challenges claims that workplace inclusion is declining. While 55% of organisations publicly signalled a retreat from DEI, only 34% reduced their efforts. Eighty per cent remain committed, with many reporting gains in innovation, efficiency and financial performance despite political and legal pressures. [Read More](#)



Supreme Court reinforces disability rights in public employment – The Supreme Court directed authorities to consider two candidates with disabilities for suitable government posts under updated disability rules. It held that outdated job classifications cannot override evolving legal protections. Where advertised positions are filled, supernumerary posts may be created, reinforcing the State's duty to align recruitment with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act. [Read More](#)



Credit: X/@S_PrakashPatil

Karnataka announces inclusive job fair for persons with disabilities – Karnataka will host the Adidvara job fair in Bengaluru this August, bringing together over 3,000 jobseekers with disabilities, employers, training partners and assistive-technology start-ups. The event will offer direct recruitment, career guidance, skilling pathways and technology showcases across sectors including IT, manufacturing, retail, BFSI, hospitality and services. [Read More](#)

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