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This is a critical juncture. Being a digital citizen in the twenty-first century is indispensable for availing e-governance services and basic citizen entitlements. At this point in history it is crucial to evaluate the 'digital-by-design' framework vis-a-vis the scale of digital reach, adoption, and impact in the last mile.

Who constitutes the 'last mile' in India? This question is central to assessing the scale of digital transformation and the ensuing social impact. Owing to India's multifarious diversity, with people hailing from diverse castes, classes, genders and demographics, the last mile constitutes citizens and communities, who are differently positioned in the pyramid of graded social inequalities. This positioning also shapes their status in the digital realm, determining their varied access to connectivity, ICTs, and the digital public infrastructure.

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Several ongoing multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral efforts aim to democratise the digital ecosystem for all citizens. However, the statistics call attention to the stark digital divide in the country. While India's digital economy is skyrocketing, with a projection of a trillion-dollar valuation by 2028, the country struggles to ensure meaningful connectivity, access and adoption that enables the socio-economic empowerment of its citizens. Where are we falling short? To address the same, let us examine one such community in India – Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) – who remain subjected to digital exclusion among other forms of systemic, social, and bureaucratic exclusion.

A pan-India study by Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF), Broadband India Forum (BIF) and Center for Development Policy and Practice (CDPP) presents comprehensive [findings](#) and [recommendations](#), highlighting two key insights – 1) the potential of ICTs in enabling social, economic and community integration of PwDs to become rightful citizens; 2) the gaps in the current design and deployment of the digital public infrastructure that creates a barrier for PwDs in accessing ICTs.

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Meaningful Access to the Internet

Policy discussions often overlook the socio-demographic diversity among PwDs and the types of disabilities. Collecting census data to account for the PwD population and its diversity is a crucial first step in formulating effective policies for ICT accessibility, especially in rural, remote, and underserved regions of India.

Accordingly, ICTs must integrate tailored assistive technologies and accessibility features to ensure meaningful ICT adoption. India took a significant step to ensure web accessibility by legislating the ICT Accessibility Standard IS 17802. This should be enforced among public and private service providers to ensure meaningful access to the internet. The public and private service providers can be pivotal in ensuring meaningful access by leveraging the innovation ecosystem to design and deploy subsidised and low-cost digital infrastructure that enhance ICT reach, accessibility, and efficacy. Strengthening the local digital ecosystem with remote access enabled to avail the services of the physical digital service centers is imperative to achieve widespread ICT adoption among PwDs. Tailored to specific needs in hyperlocal settings, digital literacy curriculum, skill development and capacity-building initiatives must be facilitated for a comprehensive support for availing education and livelihood opportunities.

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The study with 300+ PwD digital changemakers has demonstrated that enhancing ICT accessibility will empower and enable PwDs to live a life with dignity and respect. This measure, however, will be meaningful when we move away from measuring the impact of digital inclusion, often based on a binary divide between the haves and have-nots, whereby the number of ICT users is seen as a milestone for digital adoption. This approach has proven insufficient, especially in addressing the widening digital divide in the country. We must, therefore, envision a digital-by-design framework that is built on a citizen-centric, rather than a consumer-centric model; a model that addresses contextual, evidence-based, and specific digital needs of diverse communities in India. The term 'meaningful' is crucial here for bridging the graded digital inequalities and building digital equity for all.

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