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### Accessible Library: A Window to Studying Literature for Persons with Visual Disabilities

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#### Abstract

A vast repository of miscellaneous books, the library functions as the institutional example of pure literary knowledge. According to the Right to Equality a fundamental right consecrated in the Constitution of independent India, every citizen has an equal right to pursue knowledge from this establishment. Besides, S.R. Ranganathan, the father of Library Science, accentuated in his "Five Laws of Library Science" that libraries must be accessible to all readers.

In spite of these principles, people with visual disabilities inevitably come across certain difficulties when accessing knowledge within these places. The two legislative acts passed in 1995 and 2016 concerning people with disabilities explicitly advocate for education and the making of accessible learning environs.

This research paper studies the legitimate contexts established in post-independence India to make the landscape of library education further inclusive. Moreover, it deeds to examine through precise examples the extent to which the field of library science has become truly accessible to people with seeing disabilities in light of these statutory provisions.

**Key words:** Literature, Accessible Library, visual disability

Literature stimulates human thoughts and unties the windows of the mind. For the people with seeing disabilities, captivating with literature is not just a form of pleasure; it is a influential medium for understanding the globe. The Braille System developed by Louis Braille, this system revolutionized literary involvement or engagement. The sensation of letters through touch connects the people with seeing disabilities to the mainstream of literary world. In the contemporary technological era, audiobooks have produced literature much more accessible. By way of Text-to-Speech software or professional voice artists, they can admire the essence or spirit of poetry, essays or novels. Today, many people with seeing disabilities are not just readers but have well-known themselves as authors.

A library is an epitome of knowledge. However, a traditional library only becomes significant to a person with seeing disability when it is ready to fulfill their particular necessities. It is indispensable for libraries to house huge set of Braille books. Moreover,

digital and e-library services permit users to read literature effortlessly with computers. Nowadays libraries ought to be prepared with computers featuring Text-to-Speech or Screen Reading Software (for examples JAWS and NVDA). Furthermore, Reading Machines can scan standard printed literature and convert them into audible format. A library is more than just a space to read; it is a recreation or social center. By arranging literary discussions and meeting, libraries offer people with seeing disabilities the opportunity to integrate with social mainstream of society.

Despite these possibilities, some difficulties persist. The high price of various assistive aids and appliances or software keeps them out of reach. In this respect, private and government subsidies are crucial. It is essential to raise awareness among the general people so they recognize the abilities of the people with seeing disabilities and secure their access to educational establishment or libraries. When a person with seeing disability reads literature, they surpass their physical constraints and become inhabitants of a boundless world. If libraries come to be much more cognizant and assistive technology becomes further accessible, the path to literary involvement will widen expressively.

In 1931 S.R. Ranganathan, the father of Library Science in India, released his "Five Laws of Library Science". These five principles, explicitly and implicitly, endorse for creating libraries totally accessible by surpassing all forms of obstacles. When conversing universality, the inclusion of people with disabilities is really a matter of justice. In Article 21A of the Constitution of India, the right to education is a general fundamental right for all children. Besides, the acts passed in 1995 and 2016 for the benefit of persons with disabilities ensure the principles of equality, inclusion, education, and accessibility. These Acts and articles focused explicitly and implicitly on the library environment. The input of assistive technology is vital in implementing the concept of an accessible library. This article will provide a detailed analysis of how the use of technology fosters an inclusive educational environment for the visually impaired. In drafting this paper, interviews have been utilized as primary sources, while various books and publications serve as secondary sources. The discussion will be systematically analyzed through various illustrative examples.

First, let us discuss about the various definitions of disabilities and identify who includes the visually disabled population. In English, several terms are used to define disability, such as impairment, disability, and handicap. The World Health Organization (WHO) has given detailed definitions for each of these terms<sup>1</sup>. It is necessary to present those definitions here.

Impairment: "In the context of health experience, an impairment is any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.

Disability: "... A restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a normal manner.

Handicap: "...A disadvantage that limits or prevents an individual from fulfilling a normal role."

Keeping these definitions in mind, various laws in India have defined different types of disabilities. In the interest of persons with disabilities, two laws passed by the Indian Parliament in 1995 and 2016 have primarily categorized visual impairment into two types: blindness and low vision. According to the 1995 Act, blindness refers to a condition in which a person suffers from any one of the following, namely:

- (i) 'Total absence of sight. Or
- (ii) Visual acuity not exceeding 6/60 or 20/200 (Snellen) in the better eye with correcting lenses; or
- (iii) Limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of 20 degree or worse'<sup>ii</sup>

"According to the 2016 Act, low vision refers to a condition in which a person has any one of the following, namely:"

- (i) 'Visual acuity not exceeding 6/18 or less than 20/60 upto 3/60 or upto 10/200 (Snellen) in the better eye with best possible corrections: or
- (ii) limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of less than 40 degrees up to 10 degree.'<sup>iii</sup>

These Acts did not merely define persons with disabilities; they also recommended various supportive rules and policies to create opportunities for their proper education. These will be discussed as the discussion progresses.

Now, let us look at the statistical scenario of persons with disabilities in India. Although earlier censuses in post-independence India did not present well-organized data on persons with disabilities, more systematic statistics became available in the 21st century, particularly in the Census of 2011. According to the 2011 Census, the population of India was 1.2108 billion, and the number of persons with disabilities was 26.8 million, which constituted 2.21 percent of the total population. Among these 26.8 million persons with disabilities, 5.03 million were affected by visual impairment. However, it is difficult to obtain the exact statistics of persons with disabilities in any country or society. Still, the 2011 Census provides a useful estimate. Of the 5.03 million visually impaired individuals, 2.64 million were male and 2.39 million were female.<sup>iv</sup>

Therefore, in order to deliver library services to such a large number of persons with visual disabilities the scientific approach must be imposed and planned the infrastructure development with keeping mind the Five Laws of Library Science of S. R. Ranganathan, father of Library Science in India.

Five Laws of Library Science are

- (i) Books are for use,
- (ii) Every reader his book,
- (iii) Every book its reader,
- (iv) Save the time of the reader,
- (v) Library is growing organism.<sup>v</sup>

These five laws, either directly or indirectly, address the issue of accessibility in libraries. Furthermore, according to the preamble of the Indian Constitution, all citizens of India are entitled to equality. People with disabilities are also an integral part of Indian society. Therefore, their right to equal access to education is inherently justified. In addition to the Preamble of the Constitution of India, two Acts<sup>vi</sup> have been passed by the Indian Parliament to safeguard the interests of individuals with disabilities. These Acts provide legal recognition to the principles of equal opportunities, full participation in various sectors, and the protection of rights for individual with disabilities.

Chapter 5 named 'Education', of the PWD Act, 1995, states in Section 27(f): It mandates the provision of special books and equipment, free of charge, to every child with a disability to support their education. And Section 28 mandates the relevant governments

are required to initiate, or facilitate the initiation of, research by both governmental and non-governmental organizations aimed at designing and developing new assistive devices, teaching aids, special educational materials, or other resources necessary to ensure equal educational opportunities for children with disabilities.<sup>vii</sup> Since then, it can be said that there has been a surge in the world of assistive technology suitable for persons with blindness in India, as evidenced by a guide book (published in the year 2000)<sup>viii</sup> of National Association for the Blind on assistive aids and appliances.

**Available Assistive Accessories in India for the Individuals with Seeing Disabilities**

Classifications of Assistive Accessories	Specific Items
1.Braille writings aids, Braille printing equipment & tactile graphics	Braille Slate, Interpoint Braille Slate, Four Line Pocket Writing Frame, Pocket Braille Writing Frame, Shorthand Pocket Frame, Four Line Large Writing Frame, Thermoform Paper, Braille Paper, Braille Sheets, Pen - Pencil Writing Frame, Stylus, Asian Stylus (Folding), Stylus (Rigide), Metallic Safety Stylus, Safety Stylus with Eraser, Braille volumes, Asian Braille Creasing Machine, Asian Braille Printing Box, Asian Braille Typewriter, Asian Braille Stereotyper, Braille Shorthand Machine & Mini Braille Shorthand Machine, Asian Braille Xerox Machine, Asian Paper Stitching Machine, Braille Thermoforming Machine, Rainbow Aria Braille Operated Portable Talking Computer, Mountbatten Talking Electronic Brailier, Computerized Braille Transcription System, Picture Braille Software, OBR Software, Duxbury Braille Translation Software, TAG Design Software for Windows, Index, Acoustic Cabinet, 4 X 4 Professional, Jaws Screen Reading Software, Text Reading Machine,, Galileo Text Reading System. .
2. Aids for recording	Tape Recorder, Cassettes, Daisy Player/ Walkman, .
3. Kits for Independent Mobility in Library premises	Aluminium Long Cane, Folding Cane (Deluxe), Folding Cane (White), Metal Folding Cane, Mobility Long cane, White Cane, Collapsible Walking Stick, Folding Stick, Electronic Guide Stick, Columbus Talking Compass.
4. Assurances for Library user with Low Vision	Binoculars, Half Field of Vision Devices, Directory Reader, MAX EVS Low Vision Reader, Chest Resting Magnifier, Cutaway Stand Magnifier, Folding Magnifiers, Fresnel Magnifier, Tripod Stand Magnifier, Map Eyes, TV Filter cum Magnifier, Clip-on Magnifying Lens, Magni-focuser, Monoculars, Field Expansion Devices, Aspheric Magnifiers & Spectacles, Fresnel Book Magnifier, MAGic Magnification Software, Mini Light Box, Nite writer, Xenon 20:20, 3M Anti-glare Filter.
5. Other accessible audio, digital aids & appliances	Adjustable High-Power Optical Lens Spectacles. Special Keyboard, Magnifier Mouse. Seika Cell Braille Display, Supernova, Readit Wand, Talking Typing, Daisy Book Reader, NonVisual Desktop Access (NVDA) for Microsoft Windows, has launched on 2006. It has been working on 62 languages. It has been large acceptance for its free and open-source portability.

Source: Prepared by present scholar from collecting data from India Guide to Aids and Appliances for the Blind by Hema Upendra & Veena Rangnekar,<sup>ix</sup> & Inclusive Library Services (Indian Prospective) by Shakti Prasad das & Parthasarathi Mukhopadhyay (eds.).<sup>x</sup>

A table of all the assistant appliances available in a very small number of libraries at various times in independent India is given above. However, if the advancements in science and technology are applied with practical sense to make libraries accessible, it will open a new window for a Sugamya Bharat Movement.

Among the institutions working at the national level for people with disabilities in India, a few have succeeded in creating accessible library infrastructure by utilizing various assistive appliances and internet services. NAB in Mumbai and National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities (NIEPVD)<sup>xi</sup> in Dehradun are among them.

At NIEPVD, the National Accessible Library was formerly called the National Library for the Print Handicapped, and there was also a separate Talking Book Library. After merging these two libraries in 2016-17, the National Accessible Library<sup>xii</sup> service was established. Additionally, on January 4th, 2012, NIEPVD launched the country's first online library.<sup>xiii</sup> With the supervision of NIEPVD in 2016 Sugamya Pustakalaya<sup>xiv</sup> was launched by Ravi Shankar Prasad, Honorable Minister of Law and Justice, Information Technology, Government of India.

Md. Eshoq Nobil, Office in Charge, NIEPVD-RC, Kolkata stated in an interview<sup>xv</sup> that the successful joint venture has embellished and released a very important aspect of 'Sugamya Bharat Movement'<sup>xvi</sup> of Government of India. The online library has provided 23445 visually impaired members with access to 340,200 titles in accessible formats. Additionally, 62 libraries have registered with Sugamya Pustakalaya<sup>xvii</sup> to offer online literature access. Bookshare, the largest international online library for individuals with print disabilities, is integrated into Sugamya Pustakalaya, enabling users in India to search and download all available titles from the Bookshare library.<sup>xviii</sup>

A seminar was organized by National Institute for Locomotor Disabilities (NILD), Kolkata on 'INCLUSIVE LIBRARY SERVICES Indian Perspective' was held on 16-17 November, 2019<sup>xix</sup>, and personal interviews with most of the librarians present in the seminar, revealed that the government's inadequate budget allocation for making libraries accessible led to libraries not being made accessible. Dipankar Halder, Librarian of Chowberia Dinabandhu Vidyalyaya and Munmun Roy, Professional Trainee (Library), NILD, Kolkata have argued, 'Almost 90 years ago the thoughts of Ranganathan imposed on the library were not fully implemented today. The practical application of the laws is not yet fully possible. As a result, it is not possible to provide library services to the persons with disabilities in that sense. Moreover, the apathy of the Government and the library authority is clearly seen. Favorable infrastructure for serving people with disabilities was not developed that way. The budget allocation for the library service has not been increased. As a result, the future can predict when the library will be implemented for all.'<sup>xx</sup>

If all libraries in India, including those in schools, colleges, universities, and other public institutions such as the NIEPVD library, provide essential services for users with visual disabilities, it would add a distinctive dimension to the *Sugamya Bharat Movement* and

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Viksit-Bharat campaigns. Historically, in independent India, the NIEPVD has played a pioneering role in promoting inclusive education by ensuring accessibility of library for individuals with seeing disabilities. This development represents a significant paradigm shift in the truest sense.

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- <sup>i</sup> International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps, A manual of classification relating to the consequences of disease, Geneva, World Health Organization, 1980, pp. 47, 142, 183..
- <sup>ii</sup> 'The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995' (PWD Act), *The Extraordinary Gazette of India, part II, Section 1*, Ministry of Law, Justice and Company Affairs (Legislative Department), New Delhi, 1<sup>st</sup> Jan. 1996.
- <sup>iii</sup> The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act),
- <sup>iv</sup> Derived from - <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/43469>. (accessed on 23 May, 2025)
- <sup>v</sup> Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan, *The Five Laws of Library Science*, Zurich, Asia Publishing House, 1963, pp. 7-8.
- <sup>vi</sup> One is 'PWD Act 1995, The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995', and the another Act is 'The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016'.
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://niepmd.tn.nic.in/documents/PWD%20ACT.pdf> (accessed on 30/08/2024).
- <sup>viii</sup> *Indian Guide to Aids and Appliances for the Blind* was compiled and edited by Hema Upendra & Veena Rangnekar.
- <sup>ix</sup> Hema Upendra & Veena Rangnekar (ed.), *Indian Guide to Aids and Appliances for the Blind*, Mumbai, NAB Luise Braille Memorial Research Centre, 2000, pp. 6-17.
- <sup>x</sup> Shakti Prasad das & Parthasarathi Mukhopadhyay et al. (eds) *Inclusive Library Services (Indian Perspectives)*, Proceedings of the Two-day Nation Seminar organized by NILD, Kolkata, Nov. 16-17, 2019.
- <sup>xi</sup> It was previously known as the National Institute for the Visually handicapped (NIVH).
- <sup>xii</sup> It is the largest library of its kind in the country. It sends accessible literature in the form of Braille Books, Large Print Books, Audio Books and E-books on a loan basis. The library has a total of 1,33,265 Braille volumes 19292 prints books and 6180 audio titles on its shelves.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Md. Eshoq Nobil, 'The Role of NIEPVD, Dehradun for Build up Sugamya Pustakalaya: Online Library Services for Visually Impaired User', Parthasarathi Mukhopadhyay Et al (eds.), *Inclusive Library Services Indian Perspectives*, New Delhi, New Delhi Publishers, 2019, pp. 97-105.
- <sup>xiv</sup> This project (Sugamya Pustakalay) is a joint venture of NIEPVD, Dehradun and Daisy Forum of India.
- <sup>xv</sup> Interviewed Md. Eshoq Nobil on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 in Kolkata, at NILD.
- <sup>xvi</sup> An initiative for making India accessible for every citizen.
- <sup>xvii</sup> <https://www.sugamyapustakalaya.org.in/welcomeLink.action> (accessed on 30/08/2018).
- <sup>xviii</sup> Md. Eshoq Nobil, op. cit., pp.97-105.
- <sup>xix</sup> Present scholar had participated in this Seminar as a resource person (panelist) and taken interviewed of some eminent Librarians of various institutes of India.
- <sup>xx</sup> Dipankar Halder & Munmun Roy, Provisions of Ranganathan's Five laws of Library Science for the Persons with Disabilities, Parthasarathi Mukhopadhyay et al. (eds.), *Inclusive Library Services Indian Perspectives*, New Delhi: New Delhi Publishers, 2019, pp. 117-121.