

Digital inclusion of persons with disabilities is an essential and progressive step - BIF

"MeitY and DePWD's drive to make Aarogya Setu app accessible to persons with disabilities is a great step towards inclusivity, and aligned with the Hon'ble Prime Minister's mission of 'Sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas'" – TV Ramachandran, President, BIF

24th June 2020, New Delhi: Broadband India Forum (BIF), the leading independent Think-Tank and Policy Forum for Digital Communications in the country, stated that measures for inclusion of persons with disabilities (PwDs) is an essential and progressive step towards realising the true vision of Digital India. This becomes especially relevant in the light of the present Covid19 scenario and the consequent challenges for PwDs during this time. The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology's (MeitY) proposal to **make the Aarogya Setu app accessible to persons with disabilities sets a shining example in this regard**. With over nine crore downloads, the Aarogya Setu contact-tracing app has become a pivotal tool to help contain and curb the spread and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in India. BIF also warmly congratulated the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPWD) for championing the cause of PwDs' inclusivity in all governmental efforts in the battle against the pandemic.

BIF President, Mr. TV Ramachandran, stated, *"With a dedicated High-Level Specialist Committee on ICT for Inclusive Ability for PwDs, BIF has always been a strong advocate for greater accessibility incorporated into all information and communications technologies (ICT) available for the Indian citizen. The move to make the Aarogya Setu app accessible for persons with disabilities is highly commendable and aligned with the Hon'ble Prime Minister's mission of 'Sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas'. We recommend accelerating the implementation of the brilliant strategies put forth in the NDCP so that 'Broadband for All' will become the vital tool to reach and uplift all Indians, including the Persons with Disabilities."*

The World Bank estimates that about 4-8% of India's population is challenged with some measure of visual, hearing, speech and loco-motor impairment, mental illness, and other disabilities. BIF's overarching mission has always been to champion equal and non-discriminatory access to digital communications for all Indians, including PwDs. To this end, **BIF has worked closely with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) and submitted elaborate inputs for ICT accessibility for PwDs. Further, BIF has also submitted detailed inputs in this regard to the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) during the formulation of the National Digital Communications Policy (NDCP) of 2018.**

Moreover, BIF's High-Level Specialist Committee on ICT for Inclusive Ability for PwDs focusses on driving greater ICT accessibility and inclusivity in several areas of digital communications including high-quality broadband and internet for all, and accessibility-enabled websites, apps, and technology.

Dr. Nirmita Narasimhan, Chair of BIF's committee on PwD Inclusion, states, *"Persons with disabilities are facing an especially challenging time due to the restrictions placed on human interaction and assistance. If technology also fails them during this time then they are left especially isolated and vulnerable. Access to the information and support provided on the Aarogya Setu app is a critical one and the move on the part of DEPwD and MeitY to ensure that it works for persons using assistive technology is a much needed and welcome one. The Government has already notified accessibility guidelines for websites and mobile apps (GIGW), and we strongly urge this to be widely adopted and implemented by all Government and private agencies going forward."*

BIF recognizes that increased broadband penetration will help alleviate the challenges of not just PwDs, but all underserved and unserved demographics in India, including the elderly and individuals in hard-to-reach rural areas. This will ensure all Indians remain well informed through government notifications/announcements, avail themselves of essential rations, financial relief efforts, and be able to access medical resources when needed. Children with disabilities will be able to join their able-bodied and urban contemporaries in accessing educational opportunities online. Where applicable, adult PwDs and their caregivers will be able to work from home with quality broadband. All these efforts will only result in GDP growth and overall progress for all Indians, including PwDs.

About Broadband India Forum

Broadband India Forum (BIF) functions as a policy forum and think-tank that works for the development & enhancement of the entire broadband ecosystem in a holistic, technology-neutral and service-neutral manner. BIF has established itself as a thought leader and a credible and effective voice, to help propel the nation to achieve the country's ambitious vision of creating a Digital India. To achieve this, BIF works to promote the rapid development of policies, so as to facilitate affordable and high-speed ubiquitous broadband throughout the country.

Formed in October 2015, BIF is a dedicated forum with participation from all stakeholders, including Technology Providers, Telecom Operators, Internet Service Providers, Value-Added Service Providers, Satellite Operators and service providers, MSOs, startups and professional entities, as well as seasoned Industry professionals who are familiar with different technologies, operations, regulations and policies.

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