

WORKABILITY ASIA

COLLABORATE TO CREATE JOBS FOR PWDS

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Making every vote matter

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India's elections that kickstarted on April 19th, and went on till June 1st, have one of the largest number of voters at 968.8 million. Among them, 8.84 million people with disability are registered in the electoral roll. Making up the largest minority in India, people with a disability hold considerable influence on who comes to power.

People with disability are often on the receiving end of society, with a variety of systemic barriers preventing them from creating an impact. The election process presents an important opportunity through which people with disability can drive change and participate in society, which otherwise forces them to remain passive observers.

So, what was the experience of people with disability as they exercised their right to vote? Around 50% of EnAble India's staff are people with disability, so we went around the office and asked them!

Voting from home

As the entirety of a civic-conscious India used their leaves to go vote, with some traveling 100 to 1000's of kilometers back to their home states, a section of voters were eligible to vote from their homes. The house voting facility was available for people with above 40% benchmark disability and senior citizens over 85 years of age. As of 13th April 2024, around 12,957 persons with disabilities have opted to vote from home in Karnataka.

This wasn't just a question of accessibility but convenience for one of our staff member with low vision, who is the mother of two young children.

Personnel from BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike) first checked whether she wanted to opt for a house voting facility. Further to her saying yes, she explains, "10 people came in. 1 person with a video camera, 3 government officials, and other security guards." She also notes that a woman was sent to ensure her comfort.

She recounts that they erected a makeshift booth right at her home, where a member read out the list of election candidates and left the space to give her privacy, save for a videographer. Her ballot was secured in a sealed envelope in her presence.

She praises the inclusivity displayed and the guidance she received.

But it's important to keep in mind, that the house voting facility is extended only for people staying in their hometowns. This does not account for the large number of people with disability staying away from their homes, for jobs, families, education, etc. and for whom it could cost quite a large amount to travel back. A 2-3 day journey which also includes the cost of their caretakers and expensive accessible vehicles.



Voting with braille

But what about the people who could afford the expensive trip back to their hometowns from Bengaluru?

A married couple, both staff members of EnAble India, a person with vision disability and low vision, voted on a braille ballot in Andhra Pradesh.

The name, the symbol & the party name, it was all in braille. The staff member explains, "A braille slip was available on request. I went inside the booth, showed my ID proof & voter slip and told them I had my brother as an escort." His brother read out the party names and voted for him.

Ramping up inclusion!

A wheelchair user recounts his experience at the voting booth, "The person in charge of the booth called me up and asked me if I wanted to vote via a postal ballot or come to the booth." As he chose to go in person, officials then checked if he required any assistive aids or transportation services to reach the polling station.

Where there's a will, there are multiple barriers in the way

Information from news media to political campaigns is often aired and shared with hearing people in mind. There are around 63 million Deaf people in India, and while there is no official record, a significant portion of them are registered voters.

But who will they vote for? One of our Deaf staff members explained how information about a candidate's existing policies, backgrounds, future plans, and more is only available for hearing

people. With limited information in ISL, he had to rely on his niece and sister to explain different parties and their agenda.

While there are platforms like ISH (India Signing Hands) and MBM (Mook Badhir Mandal) which provide ISL (Indian Sign Language) interpretation and closed captioning for general news, there's still a lack of information on the Karnataka context and even other specific states.

This doesn't just apply to voting and unravels into a bigger issue. If campaigners are talking about rolling out government schemes for subsidized rations, electricity, or other beneficial provisions, a Deaf person is entirely unaware of it. These further strains their financial burdens.

Our staff member made the journey from Bengaluru to Bagalkot where he found the polling booths simple and easy to get through, despite the lack of ISL accessibility.

While there has been effort put into making voting booths accessible for people with disability, other aspects of the election cycle must be looked at too.

An inclusive election cycle

While significant efforts have been made to cater to the 8.84 million registered voters with disabilities, a more comprehensive system is needed to ensure the entire election cycle is inclusive. For example, more model polling booths with accessible features and better information dissemination in various formats are essential.

Model polling booths are special polling stations with features that are not available in regular ones, like drinking water and pick-and-drop facilities. Some model polling booths were run entirely by women. Others were managed by people with disability, as seen in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu; Mangaluru, Karnataka, and Delhi, thus enabling an equal access opportunity for everybody.

Despite the intention to include all citizens in the democratic process, the exclusion of many persons with disability raises some profound questions about the integrity and inclusiveness of our democratic system. Today as the nation eagerly awaits the mandate of its people, we wonder: How many persons with disability were able to cast their votes? Does the electoral outcome truly represent the voices of this significant minority? Does the largest democracy in the world embrace inclusivity?

There needs to be more facilities, ensuring that barriers are taken down not just for people with disability to vote, but to participate in all areas of the election cycle as the citizens of India exercise their fundamental right to vote.

Board meeting minutes

From the secretariat team:

- A special board meeting was held to discuss the updates on Workability Asia Conference, 2024 via Zoom on April 09, 2024, in the presence of the chairperson, vice chairperson, 4 board members, 3 advisors, 2 secretariat team members and 3 observers.
- Mr. Dipesh mentioned that he had met a senior member of BRAC, an international development organization in Bangladesh, during his Harvard Systems Thinking Course. The member was favorable to the idea of partnering for the conference. However, a final decision would be taken with them after April 20th, 2024.
- Mr. Dipesh also informed the members about the event happening in Jakarta, Indonesia, by The IndUS Entrepreneurs (TiE), where he, as a representative of Workability Asia, will be addressing the gathering on the disability sector.
- Regarding the location of the upcoming Workability Asia Conference, Mr. Dipesh mentioned that as per a poll conducted, they had received equal number of responses in favor of Bangladesh and India. The agreed-upon date was in October. Mr. Sherlo requested monthly updates from the team on the progress of the conference.
- Mr. Sherlo and Ms. Florence expressed their preference for holding a conference in India due to the availability of earlier dates. They were also of the opinion that it would be better for engaging the members.
- If Bangladesh was confirmed, Mr. Dulal mentioned that they would be ready to host the conference after consulting with the organization committee at Bangladesh. Ms. Deborah Wan and Mr. Hiroshi Ueno seconded this decision, with India to be kept as a backup.
- Further Mr. Dipesh clarified that Workability International has not yet confirmed on hosting the International Conference in Bangladesh. He suggested that the hosting of the Workability Asia Conference can be taken forward for now.
- Mr. Dipesh proposed to reconnect with members through a small webinar/ online conference in July or August and suggested the creation of a committee to make the arrangements. Mr. Supornum, Mr. Hiroshi Ayuha & Mr. Hiroshi Ueno also suggested holding an in-person face-to-face meeting of Board members in India. This was set for July.
- All the Board members were requested to connect with other members in their countries to stay updated on any concerns and the conference's progress before the in-person meeting.



**Workability Asia Secretariat team
would like to invite you to:**

- Share any relevant information, knowledge, or experiences with Workability Asia members and our network.
- Send your articles (1-2 pages) with some photos.
- Send your stories to Workability Asia Secretariat Team at secretarygeneral@workabilityasia.org to be part of the next newsletter.

**The deadline for the next submission is
31.08.2024, so hurry up!**