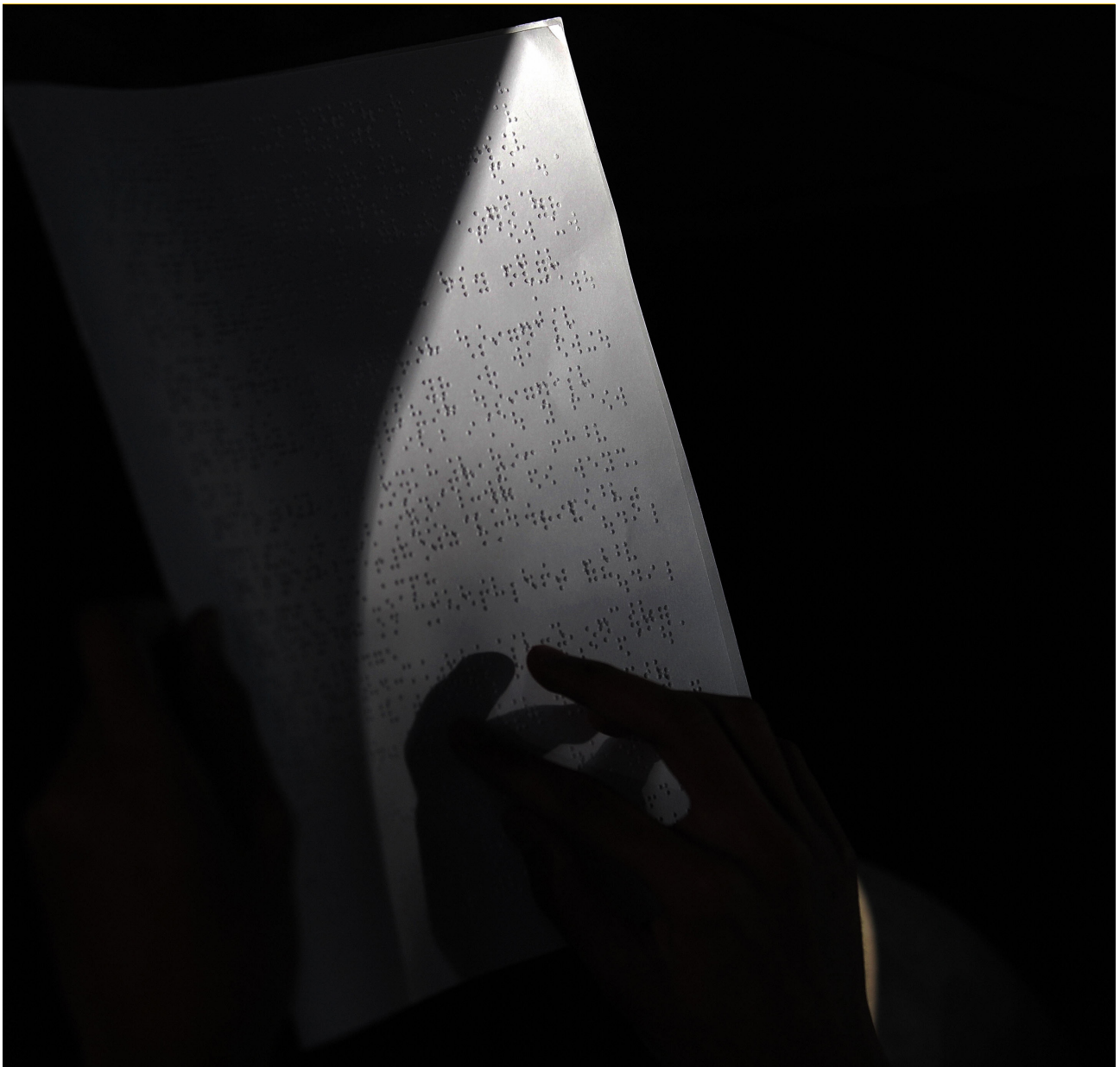


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Leaving No One Behind: Strategies for Disability Inclusion in India

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Introduction

An estimated 1.3 billion people, or 16 percent of the global population, live with disabilities, constituting the world's largest minority group. Disability rates are higher among vulnerable populations, with 80 percent of persons with disabilities (PwDs) living in developing countries, where poverty, gender inequities, and the challenges of ageing further increase prevalence.¹

The goal of ensuring full and effective participation of PwDs in society was first enunciated under the World Programme of Action

(WPA) Concerning Disabled Persons, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1982. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), adopted in 2006, has now been ratified by over 150 nations.² India was among the first countries to sign the Convention in 2007.

Estimates on the prevalence of disability in India vary. Government data puts the figure at 21 million, or over 2 percent of the population.³ However, a World Bank report from 2009 suggests that this is an underestimate, indicating that 55 to 90 million people—5 percent to 8 percent of the population—live with disabilities.⁴ As in many other countries, persons with disabilities in India have historically faced marginalisation and exclusion.

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In 2016, India introduced the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, expanding the recognised categories of disabilities from seven to 21 to include physical, visible, invisible, and cognitive conditions.⁵ The Act marked a critical shift for ensuring that PwDs can live with dignity, without discrimination, and with equal opportunities.

Disability inclusion is critical to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda, embedded in the principle of “leaving no one behind”, has key indicators to ensure the inclusion of PwDs. In 2023, the theme for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD)^a was “United in action to rescue and achieve the SDGs for, with and by persons with disabilities”. Indeed, reports indicate the world is off-track in meeting most SDGs for PwDs. To commemorate IDPD that year, Observer Research Foundation, in collaboration with the ChangeInkk Foundation, hosted a day-long event in New Delhi, titled, “Empowering People with Disabilities: Innovations and Policies for Inclusion”. The panel discussions held during that day focused on three key themes:

1. Championing disability inclusion to position India as a growth and innovation powerhouse.
2. Legal and policy frameworks to promote the inclusion of individuals with disabilities.
3. Assistive technology to unlock opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

The discussions covered critical gaps and enablers in policy and legal frameworks to empower PwDs, the role of the private sector in promoting innovation and inclusion, and the role of technology in harnessing the potential of PwDs. Participants underlined the need for addressing attitudes and mindsets, alongside fostering greater awareness and understanding of disability-related issues.

The following sections build on the themes and insights shared during the discussions.

a An annual event marked on 3 December.

Role of the Private Sector in Promoting Inclusion and Innovation

Persons with disabilities face barriers in all domains of life, including in education and productive economic activities—whether formal or informal employment, or self-employment. Globally, they are 50 percent more likely to be unemployed.⁶ In India, government data indicates that only 36 percent of 26 million PwDs are employed. Among them, men are more likely to be employed than women, with 47 percent of men securing jobs versus 23 percent of women.⁷

The exclusion of PwDs imposes economic burdens on individuals and their families while exacting costs for societies. Emerging data

suggests that nations globally lose up to 7 percent of their GDP due to the exclusion of PwDs.⁸ There is a strong business case for hiring PwDs. Since the COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread adoption of technology, there has been growing emphasis on the importance of diverse workforces. With disability inclusion, companies tap into an underutilised talent pool. Indeed, according to research by the World Economic Forum, more inclusive companies achieve higher economic profit margins.⁹

The private sector plays a crucial role in promoting disability inclusion, as it is geared for finding the most cost-effective solutions at scale. As diversity and inclusivity become more crucial, more businesses are recognising the importance of purposeful investment and the vast potential of the overlooked disability market. This market is notable: persons with disabilities, and their families, have over US\$13 trillion in annual disposable income.¹⁰ A widely cited statistic suggests that 40 percent of the world’s self-made millionaires have a learning disability like dyslexia. According to unofficial estimates, India’s PwD population could contribute US\$1 trillion to the country’s economy by 2047.¹¹

The RPwD Act does not mandate private sector employers to employ disabled persons, though it provides incentives for establishments with 5 percent of their workforce comprising PwDs. It also mandates employers to maintain a database on employees with disabilities. According to the Act, “Every establishment shall maintain records of the persons with disabilities in relation to the matter of employment, facilities provided, and other necessary information in compliance with the provisions of this Chapter in such form and manner as may be prescribed by the Central

Government.” This becomes important for monitoring and for planning affirmative action programmes. There is a need, however, for more effective implementation of the law through stricter monitoring mechanisms.

There is enormous scope for improvement. A 2023 analysis showed that India’s top corporations have only three PwDs for every 1,000 employees.¹² The same report tracked workforce data from Nifty 50 companies, and found that only five of them—four from the public sector—have more than 1 percent PwDs on their rolls. However, a number of organisations across sectors like technology, healthcare, hospitality, retail, and education, are leading the way by skilling and creating employment opportunities and having more frequent accessibility audits on their infrastructure and services.

Beyond affirmative action, hiring PwDs offers clear benefits, including increased productivity and efficiency. Studies show that PwDs have a higher motivation to work.¹³ The private sector can contribute investments, capital, and support for disability inclusion as a guiding principle, rather than merely as legislative compliance.

Key Takeaways

- To create inclusive environments for PwDs, a first step for the private sector is to have proactive hiring practices. Workplaces should have disability-friendly infrastructure and services, while also working to enhance digital accessibility for PwDs.
- The private sector can lead in creating market-driven solutions for PwDs, developing inclusive models that integrate the wider ecosystem to enable more effective and targeted investments.

Legal and Policy Framework to Promote Disability Inclusion

In recent years, India has experienced transformations in its legal and policy frameworks designed to mainstream PwDs. These shifts reflect a growing awareness of the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, as well as a commitment to ensuring their full participation and equal opportunities across various domains of life.

A key development in this regard is the enactment of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD Act) in 2016.¹⁴ This comprehensive legislation replaced the Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995 and marked a paradigm shift in India's approach to disability rights. The RPwD Act expanded the definition of 'disability' to

include a wider range of impairments and introduced provisions aimed to ensure equal access to education, employment, healthcare, and other essential services. It mandates the creation of barrier-free environments and reasonable accommodations to facilitate the participation of PwDs in all aspects of society.

Overall, efforts to enhance accessibility across various sectors have gained momentum. For example, the Accessible India Campaign¹⁵ was launched in 2015 to improve physical infrastructure, transportation systems, and digital platforms to make them more accessible to PwDs. These efforts are crucial for breaking down barriers and promoting greater inclusion in public spaces, educational institutions, workplaces, and other settings.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020^{16,17} emphasises universal access, equity, and quality in education, with a focus on addressing the diverse needs of learners, including those with disabilities. It advocates for early childhood care and education, foundational literacy and numeracy, and flexible learning pathways to accommodate the unique learning requirements of PwDs. The policy promotes the use of assistive technologies, multi-sensory teaching methods, and inclusive classroom practices to ensure meaningful participation and improved learning outcomes for all students. Moreover, NEP 2020 prioritises the training and professional development of teachers to effectively support students with disabilities and create inclusive learning environments.

Alongside legal reforms and accessibility initiatives, there has been a focus on providing social security measures and support services to individuals with disabilities. Government welfare

schemes offer financial assistance, healthcare benefits, and vocational training to enhance the quality of life of PwDs.¹⁸

Awareness and sensitisation campaigns have also played a vital role in changing societal attitudes towards disability.¹⁹ These campaigns challenge stereotypes, combat discrimination, and promote a culture of empathy and acceptance towards PwDs. By raising awareness about the capabilities and contributions of individuals with disabilities, these initiatives promote inclusivity and create a society where everyone can thrive irrespective of their lack of certain abilities. Overall, the recent shifts in India's legal and policy frameworks underscore a growing commitment to promoting the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities. While progress has been made, much work remains to fully implement and enforce these frameworks and address the remaining challenges and barriers to inclusion.

Policy Mandates for Education, Skill Development, and Employment of PwDs

In India, key policy mandates play a crucial role in advancing the inclusion of PwDs in education, skill development, and employment.²⁰

Education stands as a cornerstone of inclusivity, with the RPwD Act of 2016 serving as a legislative framework for ensuring equal access and non-discrimination in educational institutions. Initiatives promoting inclusive education advocate for the integration of PwDs into mainstream schools, complemented by support services and accommodations tailored to their diverse needs. Furthermore, teacher training programmes are instrumental in equipping educators with the necessary skills to foster inclusive learning

environments conducive to the success of all students.

Transitioning to skill development, India's policies emphasise the importance of equipping PwDs with tools that can help them achieve economic independence. Vocational training programmes, apprenticeships, and job placement services are tailored to provide PwDs with the skills and opportunities to join the workforce. Accessibility provisions within skill development centres, including physical accommodations and assistive technologies, ensure equitable participation and foster a level playing field.

In employment, anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action measures aim to dismantle barriers and promote equal opportunities for PwDs. Policies incentivise employers to hire and retain PwDs, providing workplace accommodations and reasonable adjustments to support their professional growth. Vocational rehabilitation programmes and job placement services further facilitate seamless transitions into employment, empowering PwDs to contribute meaningfully to the workforce.

In India, a lack of awareness about disabilities perpetuates misconceptions and hinders societal inclusion. Despite strides in policy and legislation, the stigma surrounding disability remains widespread, leading to discrimination and marginalisation.²¹ Cultural taboos, myths, and inadequate education about the various forms of disability often fuel these misconceptions. Many still view disability as a ‘punishment’ for past actions or as the result of supernatural forces—these notions compound the challenges faced by PwDs. They create barriers to accessing education, employment, and essential services, while the absence of robust awareness campaigns leaves many uninformed about the rights and needs of PwDs, leading to social isolation and limited opportunities.

Investment in addressing disability needs in India is crucial for promoting inclusivity, enhancing quality of life, and fostering social and economic development.²² Despite legal frameworks and policy mandates, gaps persist in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and employment opportunities for PwDs. Accessible infrastructure, including transportation, public spaces, and buildings, is essential to ensure mobility and independence. Additionally, healthcare services tailored to the diverse needs of PwDs, including rehabilitation and assistive devices, require adequate funding and resources.

Education, a key pathway to empowerment, demands investment in inclusive schools, trained educators, and assistive technologies. Skill development programmes tailored to the abilities of PwDs can enhance their employability and economic independence but require specialised training and support services. Furthermore, fostering inclusive workplaces through reasonable accommodations and combating discrimination is vital for ensuring equal opportunities for PwDs in the workforce.

Essential Policy Changes

Promoting inclusion for individuals with disabilities requires a strong legal and policy framework²³ that safeguards rights, enhances opportunities, and facilitates the full societal participation of individuals with disabilities in society. Education policies should ensure accessibility and inclusivity at all levels, supported by trained teachers, inclusive teaching methods, assistive technologies, and resources such as accessible textbooks for students with disabilities. Employment policies should encourage workforce inclusion through targeted initiatives and accommodations.

Infrastructure and transportation policies must prioritise accessibility by removing architectural barriers in public spaces, ensuring fully accessible transportation, and incorporating ramps, elevators, and accessible signage.

Healthcare facilities should focus on providing comprehensive and affordable services, training healthcare professionals in disability awareness, and ensuring that facilities cater to diverse needs. Finally, there needs to be a focus on promoting awareness and changing societal attitudes towards disability.

Creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students, including those with disabilities, requires recognising that education cannot happen in isolation. It emphasises the interconnectedness of various aspects of life that impact a child's ability to access and benefit from education. The Education Department is responsible for developing and implementing policies and programmes to ensure access to quality education for all children, including those with disabilities. This includes inclusive classrooms, specialised support services, and teacher training on inclusive practices. Collaboration between the Education Department and the Ministry of Social Justice is essential for providing necessary support services and accommodations for children with disabilities.

Further, the Ministry of Transport plays a crucial role in ensuring accessible transportation options for students with disabilities. Collaboration with the Ministry of Roads and Highways ensures that school infrastructure including ramps, sidewalks, and crosswalks, comply with

accessibility standards, as well as ensuring safe and accessible roads for pedestrians with disabilities. Coordination between departments is essential for ensuring a holistic approach in supporting children with disabilities in accessing education.

Recognising and respecting the rights, capabilities, and contributions of individuals with disabilities is both a matter of social justice and a reflection of our shared humanity.^{24,25} Prioritising inclusion and upholding the dignity of every person, regardless of ability, fosters a more equitable, compassionate, and thriving community for all. Inclusion goes beyond physical access; it encompasses the removal of barriers, the promotion of equal opportunities, and the fostering of a culture of respect, empathy, and acceptance. By embracing diversity and honouring the inherent worth of every individual, we enrich our communities and create a world where everyone can live with dignity and achieve their full potential.

Key Takeaways

- Systemic changes are being made to promote disability inclusion in schools, but significant challenges persist in enabling children with disabilities to achieve their full potential. These challenges include insufficient resources, attitudinal barriers, physical/environmental obstacles, and the need for comprehensive teacher training. Addressing these issues requires ongoing efforts in policy reform, resource allocation, attitudinal change, infrastructure improvements, and professional development to create truly inclusive learning environments.
- The NEP facilitates the participation of children with disabilities throughout the schooling process, from early childhood development to higher education. It promotes inclusive education by providing support and accommodations to ensure that children with disabilities have equal access to quality education alongside their peers without disabilities.
- Viewing disability as a development issue is essential for advancing the goals of the 2030 Agenda through disability inclusion. Prioritising disability inclusion ensures that development efforts are truly inclusive, leaving no one behind. This approach involves removing barriers to participation, providing equal access to opportunities and resources, and promoting the rights and well-being of PwDs across all aspects of development initiatives.

The Role of Assistive Technology

Empowering individuals with disabilities involves a strategic blend of policy advocacy, educational reform, and technological innovation to dismantle barriers and promote equality and opportunity. This holistic approach integrates efforts across various sectors to address the rights and needs of disabled persons. Through effective policy frameworks, societies can establish foundational support systems that enhance accessibility in public spaces, education, and employment, ensuring the dignity and potential of every individual, regardless of physical or cognitive abilities.

Transforming educational systems to embrace inclusivity at every level is central to this mission. By adapting curricula, teaching methods, and physical infrastructure, educational institutions can address diverse learning needs and enable students with disabilities to achieve their full potential. Technology plays a crucial role in this transformation, offering tools that can bridge communication gaps, enhance mobility, and facilitate learning. Governments and organisations must prioritise developing and disseminating these technologies, ensuring affordability and accessibility for those who need them most. This concerted effort across policy, education, and technology not only empowers individuals with disabilities but also enriches society by fostering a culture of inclusivity and respect for diversity.

Inclusive Education as a Foundation for Empowerment

Inclusive education serves as a critical framework for empowering individuals with disabilities by ensuring equal access to education alongside their peers. This model requires substantial modifications across educational systems, including the adaptation of physical infrastructure, curricula, and teaching methodologies. Integrating assistive technologies and following principles like the Universal Design for Learning enables educational environments to accommodate diverse learning preferences and needs. This holistic approach not only benefits students with disabilities by providing them with the necessary tools for learning and participation but also enhances the educational experience for all students by fostering diversity and inclusivity.

The shift towards inclusive education demands concerted efforts at multiple levels, from policy formulation to classroom practice. Overcoming barriers such as societal attitudes and institutional resistance is essential for its success. Training

educators, accessible school facilities, and inclusive curricula are fundamental components. Moreover, evidence supports the cost-effectiveness and pedagogical benefits of inclusive education, debunking myths about its feasibility and impact on non-disabled students. The goal of inclusive education is to create a society that values all its members equally, providing every child with the opportunity to thrive within a supportive and diverse learning environment.

The Role of Technology in Accessibility and Independence

Technological advancements are revolutionising the way individuals with disabilities interact with the world. From assistive devices such as screen readers and speech recognition software to advanced prosthetics and mobility aids, technology is breaking down barriers that once restricted access to various aspects of society. These innovations not only enhance personal independence but also enable active participation in community life, education, and employment.

Furthermore, the commitment from both the public and private sectors towards research and development in assistive technology is critical. However, ensuring that these technologies are accessible and affordable remains a key challenge. Policies that encourage innovation in this space, alongside subsidies or financial assistance programmes, are crucial to making these tools available to those who need them most. By prioritising inclusive technologies, we can create a more equitable society where everyone has the opportunity to contribute and thrive.

Economic Empowerment through Employment and Entrepreneurship

Economic empowerment for PwDs is essential for achieving true societal inclusivity. Employment and entrepreneurship offer pathways to financial independence and personal fulfilment, yet accessing these opportunities often requires overcoming significant barriers. Policies and programmes designed to support the hiring of individuals with disabilities are crucial, as they create pathways to meaningful employment while encouraging the businesses to recognise and value diverse talents.

At the same time, fostering entrepreneurship within the disability community can drive innovation and economic diversity. Supportive measures such as access to start-up funding, business development training, and mentorship programmes are vital in enabling aspiring entrepreneurs with disabilities to turn their ideas into successful ventures. By creating an environment that supports economic participation for all, we ensure that individuals with disabilities are not just participants in the economy but also contributors to its growth and diversification.

Creating an Inclusive Society Beyond Accessibility

Building an inclusive society requires more than just removing physical and economic barriers; it necessitates a shift in societal attitudes toward PwDs. Stereotypes and misconceptions can hinder full participation in social, cultural, and civic life. Efforts to combat these stereotypes, through awareness campaigns and inclusive policies, are essential in fostering a culture of acceptance and respect.

Encouraging the involvement of individuals with disabilities in cultural, recreational, and civic activities not only enriches community life but also challenges preconceived notions about disability. Increased visibility and active participation in these

areas promote understanding and appreciation of the diverse abilities and contributions of PwDs. An inclusive society values every individual and ensures they can fully participate in all aspects of life.

Key Takeaways

Empowering individuals with disabilities demands a multifaceted strategy that encompasses policies, education, technology, economic opportunities, and societal attitudes. The insights gathered from the comprehensive review highlight the necessity for robust, actionable recommendations and a visionary conclusion that encapsulate the essence of inclusivity and empowerment for PwDs.

- Governments must not only enact but also stringently enforce policies aimed at the rights and inclusion of PwDs across all aspects of society. Such policies should cover a broad spectrum, ensuring accessibility, equality, and non-discrimination in public spaces, education, employment, and beyond.
- Significant investment in education and technology is crucial. This includes adapting educational environments to be more inclusive and integrating assistive technologies that meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. The emphasis should also be on development, making it available, and ensuring the affordability of such technologies, making sure they reach those in need.
- Economic inclusion can be fostered by creating and supporting programmes that facilitate employment and entrepreneurship for individuals with disabilities. This encompasses providing incentives for businesses to hire PwDs and implementing support structures that encourage entrepreneurship within this community, thus contributing to a diverse and innovative economic landscape.

- Building a truly inclusive society requires initiatives to improve public awareness and understanding of disabilities. These should challenge stereotypes and promote a culture of inclusivity and respect. Encouraging the participation of individuals with disabilities in cultural, recreational, and civic activities is vital in ensuring their visibility and active engagement in community life.

The journey towards empowering persons with disabilities is essential for building a vibrant and

diverse society. By implementing inclusive policies, leveraging technology for accessibility, promoting economic opportunities, and fostering a culture of inclusivity, India can create an environment where persons with disabilities are not merely accommodated but actively included and valued. This requires collaborative efforts from governments, businesses, educational institutions, and the wider community. 

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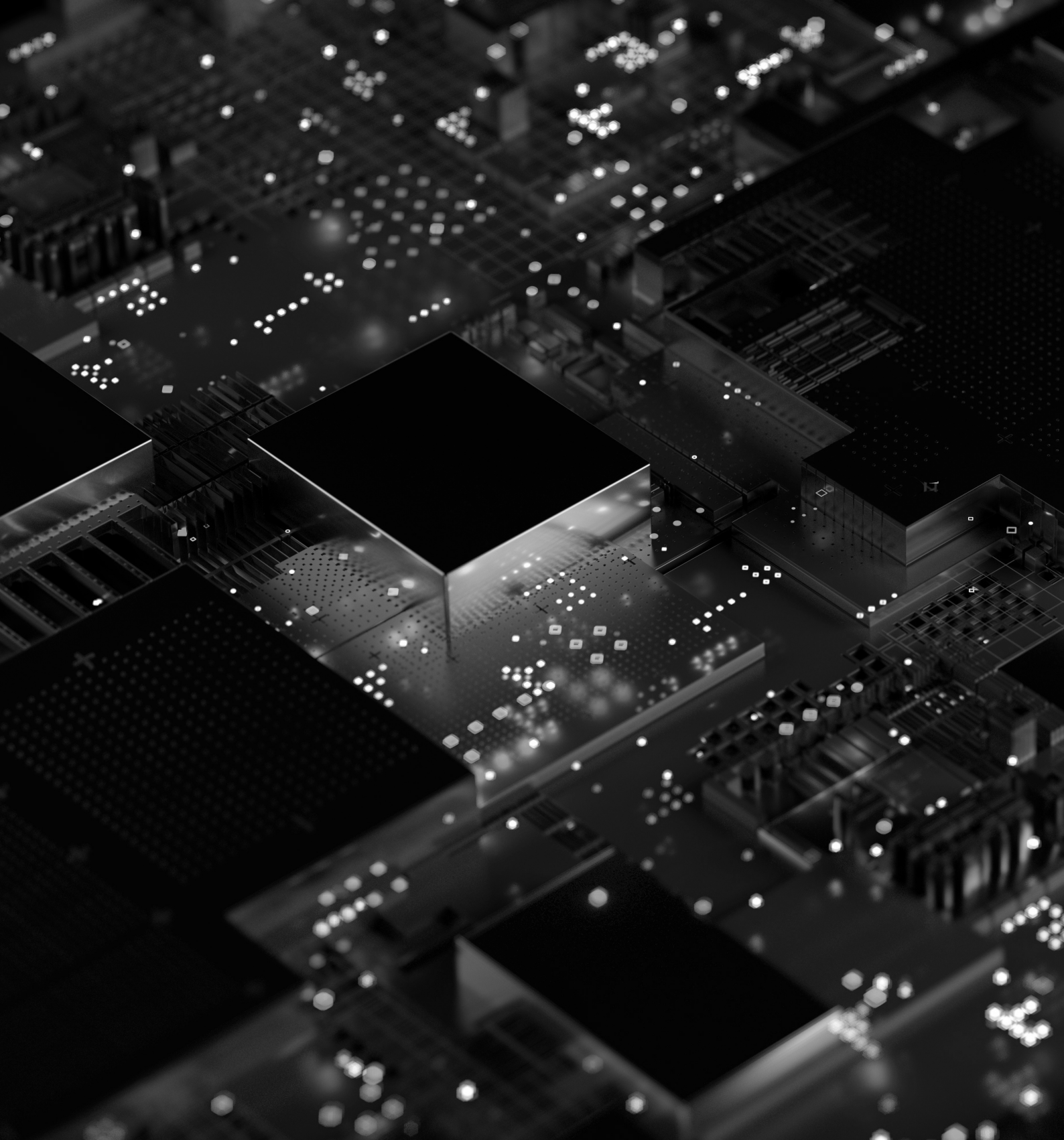
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