Towards Inclusive Education

What is the issue?

The accessibility guidelines for higher education institutions and universities require some modifications.

What is the backdrop of releasing the draft accessibility guidelines?

- The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 guarantees to every disabled person rights and entitlements.
- But the reality that disabled persons confront in their everyday lives is far removed from the law's progressive vision.
- In *Avni Prakash v. National Testing Agency* case, the appellant's answer book during NEET was snatched away and she did not get an hour of extra time to which she was legally entitled.
- The Court had to remind the competent authorities about their duty to provide her reasonable accommodation and inclusive education.
- Against this backdrop, the draft accessibility guidelines and standards for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Universities was released by the University Grants Commission (UGC).

To know about Government efforts for inclusion of Persons with Disabilities, click here

What were the criticisms against the draft guidelines?

- **Access-** The public notice preceding the guidelines was inaccessible to persons with visual disabilities because the notice appears to have been printed and poorly scanned.
- If the document had been a digital document, authenticated by the digital signature of the competent authority, it would have been fully accessible.
- **Ample scope**- The suggestions in the guidelines are ample in scope and breathtaking in ambition.
- What the guidelines ignore is that disabled students are sidelined at worst or grudgingly accepted at best in universities.
- Each chapter of the guidelines should be followed by a checklist which should divide the action items must be immediately implemented progressively.
- The UGC should also be empowered to take disciplinary action against HEIs not complying with the guidelines.
- **Assessment of disability-based needs-** An assessment of the needs of persons with disabilities should be conducted on an annual/ biannual basis by the Equal Opportunity Cell/Enabling Unit to devise and revise the institutional plan for inclusion.
- When a student with a disability joins an HEI, the HEI should conduct an assessment of their disability-based needs.
- Each HEI must maintain data on students with disabilities, on the basis of parameters such as applications, enrolment, retention and participation of students in academic and non-academic activities.

- **Redress mechanism**- The guidelines should provide for a redress mechanism along the lines of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017.
- The UGC can consider instituting a mechanism for affected persons with disabilities to file complaints that must be dealt within the stipulated time.
- If modified suitably, these guidelines can serve as a catalyst to unlock this transformative potential for every student with disability pursuing higher education.

The Government of India launched the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan) to ensure the equal participation and inclusion of persons with disabilities in all activities.

References

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