

MANIFESTO FOR UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY IN TEMPLES AND PLACES OF WORSHIP

Harmonising Constitutional Morality, Spiritual Traditions, and Human Dignity

I. Preamble: Accessibility as Dharma, Dignity, and Constitutional Duty

India's spiritual traditions have historically recognised human diversity, vulnerability, interdependence, and compassion. The moral foundations of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other faith traditions in India are rooted in the idea that the Divine is accessible to all, irrespective of birth, social status, bodily condition, or economic capacity. Temples and places of worship are not merely architectural structures; they are centres of collective spiritual life, cultural memory, and public participation.

Yet, for millions of persons with disabilities in India, access to temples and sacred spaces continues to remain severely restricted. Physical barriers such as steep staircases, uneven pathways, narrow entrances, inaccessible toilets, absence of tactile indicators, lack of sign language interpretation, inaccessible announcements, overcrowded queues, and insensitive practices effectively deny persons with disabilities the equal right to worship.

This exclusion is not merely an infrastructural problem. It raises a deeper constitutional and moral question: can access to spirituality and worship be reserved only for those whose bodies conform to conventional expectations of mobility, sight, hearing, cognition, or communication?

The Constitution of India answers this question unequivocally in the negative.

The guarantees of equality under Articles 14 and 15, the protection of life and dignity under Article 21, and the constitutional vision of fraternity collectively require that persons with disabilities participate fully in every sphere of social life, including religion and spirituality. The right to worship with dignity is inseparable from the right to live with dignity.

Accessibility is therefore not charity. It is not benevolence. It is not an optional accommodation granted at the discretion of temple authorities. It is a legal entitlement, a constitutional obligation, and a moral imperative.

This manifesto calls upon temple administrations, Devaswom Boards, religious trusts, governments, architects, conservation bodies, priests, devotees, and civil society to collectively create an inclusive spiritual culture in which persons with disabilities are recognised not as passive recipients of sympathy, but as equal participants in religious and community life.

II. Spiritual Traditions and Inclusion: Reclaiming the Ethical Core

Indian religious traditions contain numerous examples of persons with physical and sensory impairments participating meaningfully in spiritual and social life. Ancient texts do not establish a uniform doctrine of exclusion based upon disability. Rather, many traditions emphasise compassion, shared humanity, and the ethical obligation to remove suffering.

The Rigveda refers to the Ashvins providing Queen Vishpala with an iron limb, demonstrating that bodily assistance and mobility support were not viewed as spiritually illegitimate. The Mahabharata, Puranic literature, Bhakti traditions, and Buddhist and Jain narratives contain repeated references to bodily diversity and human vulnerability without reducing spiritual worth.

Bhakti movements across India further transformed the understanding of devotion by emphasising inner sincerity over ritual hierarchy. Saints and poets repeatedly argued that access to the Divine could not be monopolised by birth, status, bodily conformity, or ritual gatekeeping.

The ethical foundations of Dharma therefore support inclusion, compassion, and participation. Excluding persons with disabilities from temples contradicts these foundational values.

At the same time, this manifesto recognises that temples are also governed by long-standing ritual systems, Agamic practices, and heritage concerns. The objective is not to dismiss these traditions, but to harmonise them with constitutional morality and contemporary accessibility principles through respectful, practical, and consultative solutions.

III. Accessibility and the Constitution of India

The Constitution does not permit the exclusion of persons with disabilities from public religious life.

1. Article 14 – Equality Before Law

Every individual is entitled to equal protection of the laws. Denial of temple access due to disability constitutes unequal treatment and exclusion from public participation.

2. Article 15 – Non-Discrimination

The constitutional prohibition against discrimination must be understood in light of contemporary disability jurisprudence, which recognises that structural barriers and inaccessible environments create indirect discrimination.

3. Article 21 – Right to Life and Dignity

The Supreme Court has repeatedly held that dignity is central to Article 21. Spiritual participation, religious freedom, cultural belonging, and community life form part of a dignified existence.

4. Article 25 – Freedom of Religion

Persons with disabilities possess the same right to freely practise religion as every other citizen. This right cannot become illusory because of inaccessible infrastructure or discriminatory practices.

5. Constitutional Morality

The Supreme Court has increasingly emphasised constitutional morality over exclusionary customs where fundamental rights are violated. Accessibility must therefore become an integral part of religious administration in modern India.

IV. International and Statutory Obligations

India ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2007. Article 9 of the Convention mandates accessibility to physical environments, transportation, communication systems, and public services.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 gives domestic effect to these obligations.

Under Sections 2(w) and 2(x), public buildings and public facilities include spaces used for religious and cultural activities. Therefore, temples and places of worship fall squarely within the accessibility framework of the Act.

The RPwD Act recognises accessibility and reasonable accommodation as enforceable rights. Sections 40, 44, 45, and 46 impose obligations relating to accessible infrastructure, retrofitting, and barrier-free environments.

The Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India, 2021, issued by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and incorporated into the RPwD Rules by the Amendment Rules of 2023 (vide G.S.R. 413(E) dated 5 June 2023), now constitute the mandatory statutory standard for all public buildings. Since temples and places of worship are public buildings within the meaning of the Act, compliance with these 2021 Guidelines is legally compelled — not optional.

Further, the Office of the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD), acting under Section 40 of the RPwD Act, issued specific "Guidelines for Making Religious Places Accessible" in January 2019, prepared in partnership with Svayam. These guidelines — which cover ramps, accessible toilets, tactile pathways, seating, and queue management tailored specifically to the religious context — constitute authoritative guidance that temple administrations and Devaswom Boards are expected to follow.

The Supreme Court in *Rajive Raturi v. Union of India* affirmed that accessibility is not merely aspirational but a fundamental and human right. The Court held that accessibility is a prerequisite for the exercise of all other rights and directed the creation of mandatory accessibility standards.

In a landmark judgment delivered on 8 November 2024, the Supreme Court went further and held that Rule 15 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017 is ultra vires the RPwD Act, 2016. The Court found that Rule 15, as framed, created only aspirational guidelines rather than the mandatory non-negotiable floor that the parent Act demanded. Using the Court's own words: "A ceiling without a floor is hardly a sturdy structure." The bench, led by Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, directed the Union Government to frame mandatory accessibility rules within three months, in consultation with all stakeholders, including NALSAR-CDS. This judgment transforms the legal landscape: accessibility for persons with disabilities, including at religious institutions, is now unambiguously an enforceable constitutional and statutory obligation, not a discretionary aspiration.

The distinction drawn by the Supreme Court between accessibility (which mandates universal design for all) and reasonable accommodation (which addresses the specific needs of an individual) is significant. Both are independently required. A temple that provides a ramp only when specifically requested by a wheelchair user may satisfy reasonable accommodation, but not the affirmative accessibility standard. This manifesto demands both.

V. Disability and Accessibility: Beyond Mobility

Temple accessibility must not be confined only to wheelchair access. Disability is diverse, and exclusion operates differently across different impairments.

This manifesto therefore recognises the accessibility requirements of multiple disability groups recognised under the RPwD Act.

The RPwD Act, 2016 recognises 21 categories of disability, including Blindness, Low Vision, Hearing Impairment (deaf and hard of hearing), Locomotor Disability, Dwarfism, Intellectual Disability, Mental Illness, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cerebral Palsy, Muscular Dystrophy, Chronic Neurological Conditions, Specific Learning Disabilities, Multiple Sclerosis, Speech and Language Disability, Thalassaemia, Hemophilia, Sickle Cell Disease, Multiple Disabilities (including deaf-blindness), Acid Attack Survivors, Leprosy-Cured Persons, and Parkinson's Disease. This manifesto speaks on behalf of all these groups, each of whom faces distinct barriers in accessing religious spaces.

1. Persons with Locomotor Disabilities

Barriers include:

- Staircases without ramps
- Slippery surfaces
- Long standing queues

- Lack of seating
- Inaccessible toilets
- Uneven pathways
- Absence of lifts or handrails

2. Persons with Visual Impairments

Barriers include:

- Lack of tactile pathways
- Absence of Braille signage
- Inaccessible temple maps
- Unsafe crowd movement
- Lack of audio announcements
- Poor lighting contrast

Temples should incorporate tactile flooring, Braille signage, accessible digital information, and volunteer assistance systems.

3. Persons with Hearing Impairments

Barriers include:

- Audio-only announcements
- Lack of sign language support
- No visual emergency communication systems

Major temples should provide visual displays and trained personnel familiar with basic Indian Sign Language.

4. Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Persons with autism, intellectual disabilities, psychosocial disabilities, and neurodivergent conditions may experience sensory overload due to noise, crowds, heat, and long waiting periods.

Temples should therefore consider:

- Quiet darshan hours
- Simplified queue systems
- Sensory-sensitive spaces
- Trained volunteers
- Predictable movement routes

5. Persons with Multiple Disabilities and Elderly Devotees

Accessibility measures frequently benefit senior citizens, injured persons, pregnant women, and others with temporary or age-related impairments. Inclusive design strengthens participation for all devotees.

VI. Reconciling Accessibility with Agamas, Vastu, and Heritage Preservation

Concerns regarding ritual purity and architectural preservation are often raised in relation to temple accessibility. These concerns must be addressed respectfully and practically rather than dismissively.

1. Ritual Purity Concerns

Some temple authorities object to external wheelchairs entering sacred precincts because they move through public streets and spaces.

A practical and respectful solution is the provision of dedicated internal temple wheelchairs that remain permanently within temple premises. These wheelchairs may be cleaned and maintained according to temple protocols and used exclusively within sacred areas.

This approach preserves ritual concerns while ensuring access.

Similarly, prosthetic limbs, calipers, crutches, walkers, and assistive devices must be recognised as extensions of the human body and essential mobility supports. Asking devotees to remove them is degrading, medically unsafe, and inconsistent with constitutional dignity.

2. Heritage Preservation

Many ancient temples are architecturally sensitive structures protected by archaeological and conservation laws. Accessibility measures must therefore be carefully designed.

However, heritage preservation cannot become a justification for complete exclusion.

International conservation practices increasingly support reversible and non-destructive accessibility interventions, including:

- Temporary modular ramps
- Wooden overlay ramps
- Rubberised ramps
- Portable lifts
- Non-invasive tactile indicators
- Guided accessible pathways

Accessibility and heritage preservation are not mutually exclusive objectives.

VII. Judicial Developments Supporting Accessibility

Indian courts have increasingly recognised accessibility as a constitutional necessity.

1. Supreme Court – Rajive Raturi v. Union of India (2024)

The Supreme Court affirmed that accessibility is a human and fundamental right and directed the government to create enforceable accessibility standards.

The Court emphasised:

- Universal design
- Accessibility across disabilities
- Assistive technology integration
- Stakeholder consultation
- Retrofitting existing infrastructure

2. Kerala High Court – Vadakkumnathan Temple Matter

In proceedings arising from the denial of entry to a wheelchair user at the Vadakkumnathan Temple, the Kerala High Court reportedly emphasised reasonable accommodation and directed consultation with temple authorities and Thanthris regarding accessibility mechanisms.

This represents an important judicial recognition that temple access cannot be denied merely because accessibility measures require administrative adaptation.

3. Delhi State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities — Religious Places Order (2019)

On 16 October 2019, the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, Delhi, issued a landmark order directing all religious places across Delhi — including mandirs, gurudwaras, masjids, and churches — to provide accessible facilities in a time-bound manner. The order specifically required accessible facilities at the sanctum sanctorum, the points of distribution of prasad, toilet facilities, and parking areas. The financial obligation was placed squarely on the trusts and management committees of the religious institutions concerned. This order is the most directly applicable administrative precedent for the present manifesto's demands.

4. Jagannath Temple Accessibility Proceedings

Litigation relating to accessibility at the Jagannath Temple demonstrated that even historically significant religious institutions are obligated to undertake accessibility measures, including ramps and facilitated darshan systems.

These judicial developments collectively establish that accessibility obligations extend to religious institutions open to the public.

VIII. Action Plan for Inclusive Temples

This manifesto proposes the following measures for immediate implementation.

A. Physical Accessibility

1. Non-Destructive Ramps

Install removable ramps and overlay systems that do not damage heritage structures.

2. Accessible Entrances

At least one dignified accessible entrance must be available.

3. Handrails and Support Systems

Provide railings and resting points.

4. Accessible Toilets

Temples receiving large numbers of devotees must install accessible toilets.

5. Wheelchair Availability

Provide internal wheelchairs and mobility assistance.

6. Priority and Assisted Queues

Create accessible queue systems and seating arrangements.

B. Sensory and Communication Accessibility

1. Braille and Tactile Signage

Install tactile directional indicators and Braille information boards.

2. Audio Guidance

Provide accessible announcements and orientation assistance.

3. Visual Display Systems

Display queue information and emergency communication visually.

4. Sign Language Support

Major temples should develop sign language assistance capacity.

C. Administrative Accessibility

1. Online Accessible Booking Systems

Temple websites and mobile applications must comply with accessibility standards.

2. Dedicated Accessibility Officers

Large temples should appoint nodal officers for disability access.

3. Volunteer and Staff Training

Temple personnel must undergo sensitisation and accessibility training.

4. Grievance Redressal

Establish accessible complaint mechanisms for devotees with disabilities.

D. Inclusive Darshan Policies

1. Quiet Hours and Assisted Darshan

Reserve specific timings where necessary for persons requiring additional assistance.

2. Companion Access

Allow caregivers and support persons to accompany devotees with disabilities.

3. Emergency Evacuation Planning

Prepare accessible evacuation and crowd management protocols.

IX. Accessibility as Collective Social Responsibility

Accessibility cannot be reduced to litigation or regulatory compliance alone. Religious institutions occupy a unique moral position in Indian society. When temples become accessible, they communicate a powerful social message: that dignity and belonging are universal.

An accessible temple is not merely a barrier-free building. It is a declaration that spiritual life belongs equally to every human being.

Temple accessibility must therefore become:

- A governance priority,
- A theological commitment,
- A constitutional responsibility,
- And a collective social ethic.

X. Call to Action

We call upon:

- Temple Trusts,
- Devaswom Boards,
- State Endowment Departments,
- Archaeological Authorities,
- Religious Leaders,
- Architects and Conservation Experts,
- Disability Rights Organisations,
- Civil Society,
- And the Judiciary,

to jointly establish a nationwide framework for universal accessibility in temples and places of worship.

- We further urge governments to:
- Conduct accessibility audits of all major temples,
- Allocate dedicated accessibility funds,
- Develop heritage-sensitive accessibility guidelines,
- Involve persons with disabilities in planning and implementation,
- Adopt and disseminate the CCPD's 2019 "Guidelines for Making Religious Places Accessible" as the minimum standard for all religious institutions receiving state funding or governed by state-administered boards;
- Require compliance with the Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India, 2021, in all temple renovation and reconstruction approvals;
- And ensure strict compliance with the RPwD Act, 2016.

No devotee ought to be denied spiritual participation because of inaccessible infrastructure, administrative indifference, or social prejudice.

The path to the Divine cannot remain physically or socially inaccessible.

A truly inclusive society must ensure that every person — regardless of disability — can enter, participate, worship, and belong with dignity.

Section XI: Accountability and Monitoring

A manifesto without enforcement is a prayer without practice. The history of accessibility legislation in India demonstrates that the distance between statutory obligation and lived reality remains vast. The RPwD Act, 2016 has existed for nearly a decade. The CCPD's Guidelines for Making Religious Places Accessible were issued in 2019. Yet the barriers described in this manifesto persist in temples across the country. The cause is not the absence of law. It is the absence of accountability.

This manifesto therefore holds that a dedicated accountability and monitoring framework is not an optional addendum to the accessibility agenda — it is its backbone.

1. Mandatory Access Audits

Every temple, shrine, or place of worship that receives state funding, is administered by a government-appointed board or trust, or is open to the public at large shall be subject to a mandatory access audit within two years of the adoption of this framework. Access audits shall be conducted by auditors empanelled under the CCPD or the relevant State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities. The audit shall assess compliance with the Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India, 2021, across physical infrastructure, sensory access, communication systems, and administrative practices. Audit reports shall be made publicly available.

2. Time-Bound Compliance Schedules

Following each audit, the concerned temple administration, Devaswom Board, or religious trust shall prepare a time-bound Accessibility Compliance Plan within six months. The Plan shall set out specific remedial measures, responsible officers, cost estimates, and completion timelines. Compliance Plans shall be filed with the relevant State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities and made available for public inspection.

This approach mirrors the framework contemplated under Section 45 of the RPwD Act, which mandates that all existing public buildings be made accessible within five years of notification of accessibility rules. There is no principled reason why places of worship should be exempt from an equivalent obligation.

3. Annual Accessibility Reports

All major temples and religious institutions — particularly those administered by statutory bodies such as Devaswom Boards, Endowment Departments, and Charitable Trust Boards — shall publish annual accessibility reports. These reports shall disclose:

- The status of physical accessibility infrastructure
- Measures taken during the year to improve access
- Complaints received from devotees with disabilities and their resolution
- Expenditure allocated and incurred on accessibility
- Plans for the following year

Annual reports shall be submitted to the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities and published on the temple's official website or notice board.

4. A National Register of Accessible Places of Worship

The Central Government, through the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), shall establish and maintain a publicly searchable National Register of Accessible Places of Worship. The Register shall record the accessibility status of major religious institutions across the country, classified by disability type and category of access. This Register shall serve not only as an accountability tool but as a practical resource enabling persons with disabilities and their families to plan religious visits with confidence and dignity.

5. Grievance Redressal with Teeth

Every temple or religious institution covered under this framework shall designate an Accessibility Nodal Officer whose name and contact information shall be prominently displayed at the entrance and on the institution's website. Any devotee with a disability who is denied access, subjected to an inaccessible condition, or treated with indignity shall have the right to lodge a complaint directly with this officer, with the State Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, or with the CCPD.

Complaints shall be acknowledged within seven days and resolved within sixty days. Where temple administrations fail to act, the State Commissioner shall have the power to direct remedial measures and, where warranted, impose consequences under the RPwD Act.

6. Participation of Persons with Disabilities in Planning

No accessibility audit, Compliance Plan, or retrofitting project shall be finalised without the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities and Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs). The principle of "nothing about us without us" — which animates the UNCRPD and the RPwD Act alike — must govern every stage of planning, implementation, and review.

Temple authorities, conservation bodies, and architects must treat persons with disabilities not as passive beneficiaries of retrofitting decisions, but as essential experts in the design of spaces they inhabit.

7. Dedicated Accessibility Funds

State governments and the Central Government shall create dedicated accessibility funds for the retrofitting of temples and places of worship, particularly in cases where the institution has limited financial capacity. Heritage temples of national and regional significance shall receive priority allocation. Financial constraint shall not be permitted as a ground for indefinite delay in achieving accessibility. Where a temple trust or religious board has sufficient revenues — as many of India's major temples demonstrably do — allocation of a portion of those revenues towards accessibility shall be treated as a mandatory governance obligation.

8. The Benchmark of Compliance

True compliance shall not be measured by the number of ramps installed or the square footage of accessible toilets constructed. It shall be measured by one question alone: can a person with any disability enter this temple, access its sacred spaces, perform worship, and depart — with dignity, without assistance they have not requested, and without experiencing exclusion of any kind?

That is the standard. Everything else is a step toward it.