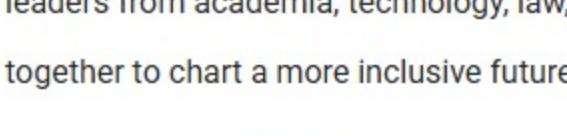# India Leads Charge On Inclusive Media: WAVES 2025 Panel Calls For Accessibility As A Core Design Ethic

By Statetimes_editor — Last updated May 2, 2025

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Vivek Sharma

MUMBAI: As India undergoes a rapid digital transformation, accessibility in media and entertainment is no longer just a moral obligation or regulatory checkbox-it is a vital design philosophy. This was the central message of the panel discussion titled "Accessibility Standards in the Media & Entertainment Sector" at WAVES 2025, where leaders from academia, technology, law, journalism, and the creative industry came together to chart a more inclusive future for content creation and distribution.
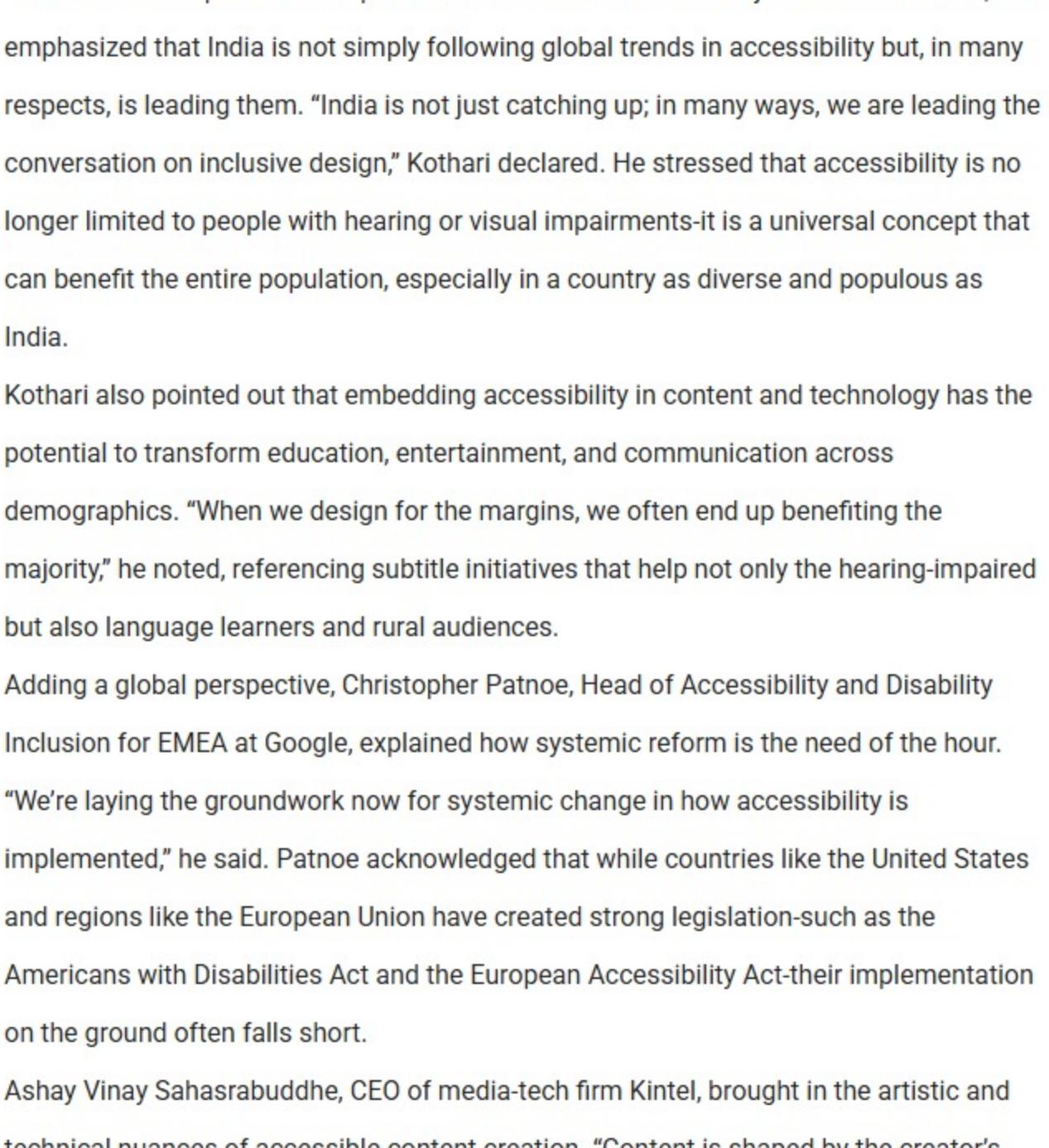
The discussion opened with a powerful statement from Prof. Brij Kothari of IIT Delhi, who emphasized that India is not simply following global trends in accessibility but, in many respects, is leading them. "India is not just catching up; in many ways, we are leading the conversation on inclusive design," Kothari declared. He stressed that accessibility is no longer limited to people with hearing or visual impairments-it is a universal concept that can benefit the entire population, especially in a country as diverse and populous as India.

Kothari also pointed out that embedding accessibility in content and technology has the potential to transform education, entertainment, and communication across demographics. "When we design for the margins, we often end up benefiting the majority," he noted, referencing subtitle initiatives that help not only the hearing-impaired but also language learners and rural audiences.

Adding a global perspective, Christopher Patnoe, Head of Accessibility and Disability Inclusion for EMEA at Google, explained how systemic reform is the need of the hour. "We're laying the groundwork now for systemic change in how accessibility is implemented," he said. Patnoe acknowledged that while countries like the United States and regions like the European Union have created strong legislation-such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the European Accessibility Act-their implementation on the ground often falls short.

Ashay Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, CEO of media-tech firm Kintel, brought in the artistic and technical nuances of accessible content creation. "Content is shaped by the creator's vision. To make it truly accessible, we need to preserve that creative essence, not reduce it with one-size-fits-all automated tools," he said. He highlighted that film and visual storytelling require accessibility tools that align with narrative techniques and artistic intent, such as nuanced audio descriptions or culturally appropriate sign language interpretation.

The role of innovation was discussed by journalist Priti Salian, who showcased how AI is accelerating accessibility efforts in media. "We've launched an AI-based channel that features sign language interpreter avatars. Tasks like creating audio descriptions-which used to take weeks-now take about 30 hours," she said. Despite these breakthroughs, Salian cautioned against over-reliance on technology without systemic backing. "We need government support, funding models, and structured public-private partnerships to ensure accessibility becomes the norm, not the exception," she added.

Legal expert and disability rights advocate Rahul Bajaj addressed the regulatory landscape. He emphasized the importance of updating and enforcing legal frameworks to ensure inclusivity across media platforms. "It's not just about having laws; it's about implementing them through cross-sector collaboration-from content creators and distributors to regulators and accessibility professionals," he said.

Danish Mahajan, Founder of the community radio platform Radio Udaan, emphasized the importance of representation in decision-making. "We need people with disabilities in policymaking and regulatory positions. Only then can we ensure that accessibility is considered from the ground up, rather than added later as an afterthought," he said. Mahajan also called for better monitoring of policy implementation and stronger accountability mechanisms.

As the discussion concluded, the panelists unanimously agreed that accessibility must move beyond compliance and be integrated into the creative and production process from the start. It should be seen not only as a legal or ethical requirement but also as a creative opportunity and a strategic advantage.

With India at the forefront of digital content growth, the panel emphasized that inclusive media is the future-and the time to act is now.

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