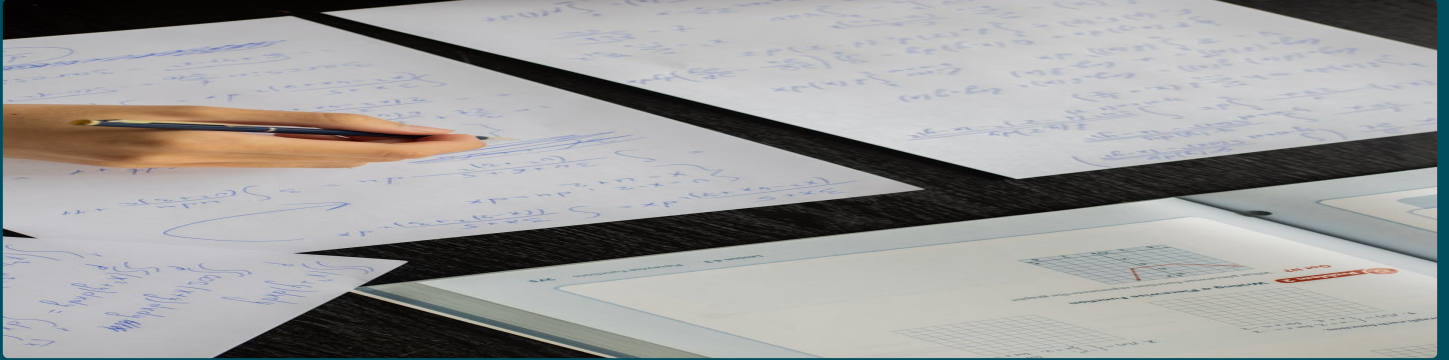




CIVIL

Substantive Equality in Public Examinations: SC Mandates Screen-Reader Facility and Flexible Scribe Regime in Civil Services Exam For PwBD /PwD

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Introduction

In a writ petition propelled by the constitutional ideal of substantive equality, the Supreme Court of India has translated the parchment promise of Articles 14, 16 and 21 into an operational command to the Union Public Service Commission. *Mission Accessibility v. Union of India & Ors.*, Civil Writ Petition No. 206 of 2025 (decided on 3 December 2025; reportable as 2025 INSC 1376), is the latest judicial intervention that relocates disability rights from the periphery of administrative discretion to the core of constitutional mandate. The petitioner, Mission Accessibility, a registered not-for-profit devoted to advancing the rights of persons with disabilities impugned the inflexible scribe-selection timeline and the absence of screen-reader technology in the Civil Services Examination, 2025. The respondents, arrayed as Union of India, UPSC and the Department of Personnel & Training, initially pleaded logistical impossibility but ultimately conceded the moral and legal imperative of accessibility. The Court, while disposing of the petition, has forged a calibrated roadmap that marries technological inclusion with academic integrity. This ruling provides for a screen-reader facility and flexible scribe regime offering ease to many PwD candidates.

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Factual Matrix

The controversy arose when UPSC's Information Bulletin for the CSE-2025 required candidates availing of a scribe to freeze the scribe's particulars at the time of on-line application, weeks before the preliminary examination fixed for 25 May 2025. Visually impaired candidates, who depend on assistive technologies, discovered that the option of using laptops equipped with JAWS or NVDA screen-reader software had not been provided; question papers were to be supplied only in hard-print, rendering the software useless. Anticipating irreversible prejudice, Mission Accessibility invoked the writ jurisdiction of the Supreme Court under Article 32, praying for a mandamus to (i) declare the scribe-freezing clause arbitrary; (ii) permit post-application modification of scribe details; (iii) allow laptops with screen-reader software; and (iv) release question papers in accessible digital formats.

Procedural History

By order dated 6 May 2025 the Court impleaded the Department of Personnel & Training and requested the ASG to coordinate with UPSC counsel. An affidavit filed on 10 May disclosed 27 requests for scribe change; a subsequent press note extended the deadline for such requests to 18 May 2025. On 9 May the Court directed UPSC to decide each request within three working days and to file a fresh affidavit on screen-reader feasibility. The Commission's response that only two blind candidates had expressed interest was met with the petitioner's rejoinder that systemic inaccessibility, not individual apathy, explained the low number. On 31 October 2025 the Court took note of UPSC's additional affidavit dated 12 September 2025, which announced an "in-principle" decision to introduce screen-reader software but cited absence of infrastructure and dependence on State Governments for examination venues.

Rival Submissions

The petitioner, represented by Mr. A.S. Bajaj, Senior Advocate, contended that the scribe-freezing requirement violated the guarantee of reasonable accommodation embedded in Section 3 and Clause (w) of Section 2 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and was hence ultra vires Articles 14 and 21. Denial of screen-reader technology, it was argued, perpetuated indirect discrimination by forcing visually impaired candidates to rely on human scribes whose availability could not

always be synchronised with the examination calendar. The Union and UPSC, through Ms. Archana Pathak Dave, ASG, and Mr. Hrishikesh Baruah, counsel, initially relied upon Rule 15 of the CSE Rules, 2025 and logistical constraints including server capacity, cyber-security and absence of standardized hardware. The respondents, however, conceded that technological inclusion was a constitutional goal and sought time to evolve a phased rollout.

Legal Framework

The Court anchored its analysis in the trio of fundamental-rights provisions—Article 14 (equality before the law), Article 16 (equality of opportunity in public employment) and Article 21 (right to live with human dignity). It read these provisions harmoniously with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ratified by India in 2007) and the RPwD Act, 2016, particularly Sections 3 (non-discrimination), 16 (equality in admission to higher educational institutions) and 40 (identification of posts for reservation).

Court’s Reasoning

The bench, comprising Justice Vikram Nath and Justice Sandeep Mehta, rejected the notion that formal neutrality satisfies constitutional equality. Observing that “the measure of a just and inclusive society lies not merely in the freedoms it proclaims, but in the opportunities it ensures for all its citizens to realize their fullest potential,” the Court held that UPSC’s dependence on external infrastructure could not become a perpetual alibi for denying assistive technology. It distinguished between immediate feasibility and deferred implementation, choosing to fashion a forward-looking mandate that preserves examination integrity while operationalizing accessibility.

Final Mandate

Instead of merely declaring the existing regime invalid, the Court issued a set of affirmative directions:

- Scribe Modification Window:** every examination notification issued by UPSC must hereafter incorporate a clause enabling PwBD candidates to seek replacement of scribe up to seven days before the examination, with the Commission bound to dispose of such requests by a reasoned order within three working days.
- Compliance Affidavit:** within two months from the date of the judgment, UPSC shall file a comprehensive affidavit delineating (a) the action plan for deployment of screen-reader software; (b) the timeline for testing, standardisation and validation; and (c) the identification of nodal examination centres where the facility will be available from the next examination cycle.
- Inter-Agency Coordination:** UPSC shall jointly frame uniform protocols with the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities and the National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities to ensure cyber-secure, standardised assistive technology across venues.
- Governmental Facilitation:** the Union Government, through DoPT and the Ministry of Social Justice, shall coordinate with State Governments to provide requisite administrative and technical support.
- Continued Judicial Oversight:** the matter has been listed on 16 February 2026 to scrutinise the compliance affidavit.

Conclusion

Mission Accessibility is less a culmination and more a constitutional continuum in the Supreme Court’s disability-rights discourse. By converting an “in-principle” assurance into a time-bound, multi-agency mission, the Court has reiterated that reasonable accommodation is not an act of benevolence but a statutory and constitutional obligation. The judgment reminds the Republic’s premier recruiting body that merit cannot be measured by an inaccessible yardstick; fairness in public examination must be calibrated by the ability of every candidate, regardless of physical or sensory limitation, to take the test on an equal and dignified plane. If implemented in letter and spirit, the directions of 3 December 2025 will serve as the template for rendering all competitive examinations in India not only disabled-friendly but equality-centric.

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