

CHANGING LIVES

A little-known government scheme could modernise the world of people with disabilities

The central government's Assistance to Disabled Persons Scheme was revised this April to improve access to modern, electronic devices for people from low-income groups.

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Image of blind person holding a Smartcane

On Tuesday, 50 visually impaired students from five Mumbai colleges were given devices that are likely to make their lives a little easier.

One of the devices was the SmartCane, a sensor-enabled walking stick, developed by the Assistive Technologies Group at the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, which vibrates when it senses an obstacle in its path. The other was the PlexTalk Vachak, a digital reader developed by a Bangalore-based Japanese-Indian company to help the visually challenged read text in all kinds of digital formats, in both English and Hindi.

The devices – priced at Rs 3,000 and Rs 12,000 respectively – were both launched earlier this year and are much cheaper than similar devices available in Western markets. But thanks to a revamped central government scheme, the students received the devices for free.

They were beneficiaries of the Assistance to Disabled Persons Scheme, established by the Department of Disability Affairs under the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 1981. Under the programme, low-income people with disabilities can avail of aids, devices and some basic surgical procedures either free of cost or at subsidised rates.

So far, the list of aids and appliances available under the scheme had largely included basic devices like mechanical wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs, canes and plastic Braille slates for the blind and simple hearing aids.

But this year, after sustained demands from organisations working for the disabled, the ministry introduced a major change to the scheme: its list of aids now goes beyond mechanical devices to include several electronic and digital devices that use modern-day technology. These devices include electronic wheelchairs and tricycles, advanced hearing aids, smart phones and laptops.

For the first time, the scheme covers aids that can be used by leprosy patients, and allocates 1% of its budget to research and development.

Expanding the scope

Modernising the ADIP was something that the current finance minister, Arun Jaitley, **proposed** in his budget for 2014. “I propose to extend the scheme for assistance to disabled persons for purchase of aids and appliances to include contemporary aids and assistive devices,” Jaitley had said. The ADIP revised scheme, however, was actually introduced towards the end of the UPA

government's term and has been applicable across India from April 1, 2014.

“There is a growing demand for modern, high-end devices from people with disabilities, students and non-profit organisations working with them, and we wanted to address this demand,” said Awanish Awasthy, joint secretary at the ministry's department of disability affairs. “International experience has shown us that electronic aids and assistive devices help reduce the effect of one's disability.”

The event at which the Mumbai students received their SmartCanes and PlexTalk Vachak readers was organised by the Xaviers Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged and the Saksham Trust, both non-profit support centres for students with visual disabilities. The National Institute for the Visually Handicapped, a Dehradun-based apex body of different organisations for the blind, has appointed the XRCVC to distribute aids to the visually impaired under the ADIP scheme, and to implement the scheme in Mumbai.

“So far, most people did not even know about the ADIP scheme,” said Sam Taraporevala, director of the XRCVC at St Xaviers College. “Users of those devices, as well as the general population, need to be more aware of how the scheme could help fulfil their potential aspirations.”

Targetting low-income families

According to the 2011 census, there are 2.68 crore people with disabilities in India, a large number of them from low-income groups.

“People from low-income families are keen to use different technologies available for the disabled, but their main problem is the inability to afford them,” said Taraporevala.

Under the revised ADIP scheme, disabled applicants with a family income up to Rs 15,000 a month can get devices worth Rs 12,000 completely free of cost. Those

with an income between Rs 15,000 and Rs 20,000 a month get a 50% subsidy on all devices.

Any registered organisation working in the field of disabilities can sign up with the ministry of social justice and empowerment to distribute these kits and other devices under the ADIP scheme.

“I had not even heard of this scheme earlier, because the government had not spread much awareness about it,” said Ajay Kumar Shukla, 19, a visually impaired media student from Mumbai’s Wilson College who received a SmartCane and a PlexTalk Vachak at Tuesday’s event. “Devices like the PlexTalk reader, which can read in Hindi as well, are very useful, so I am looking forward to other affordable things that I can avail of through the scheme.”