ASTHA

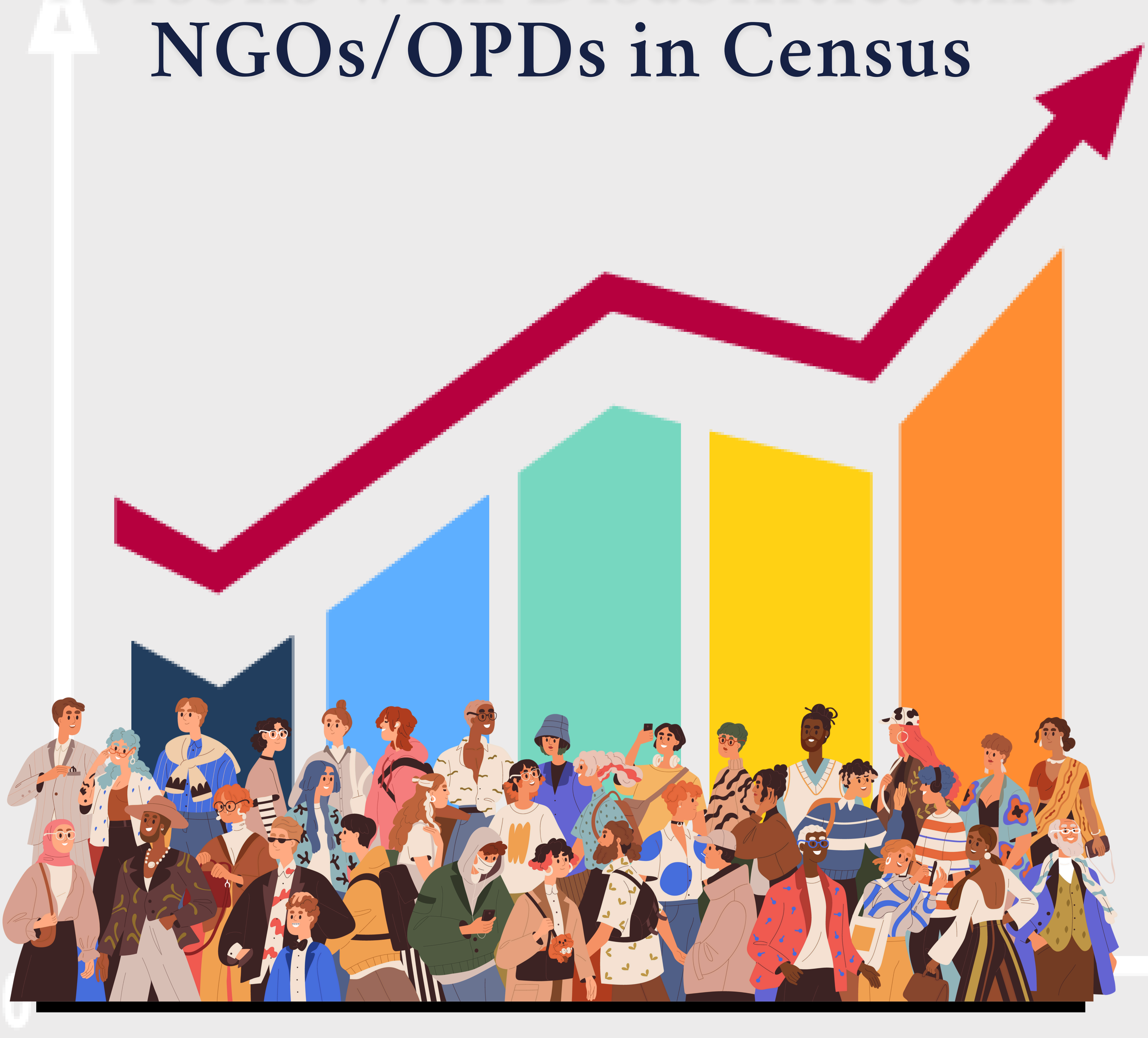
POLITICS & DISABILITY FORUM

Webinar 2.0 Report

6th Sept 2025

CENSUS 2027

Understanding the role of Persons with Disabilities and NGOs/OPDs in Census



Background

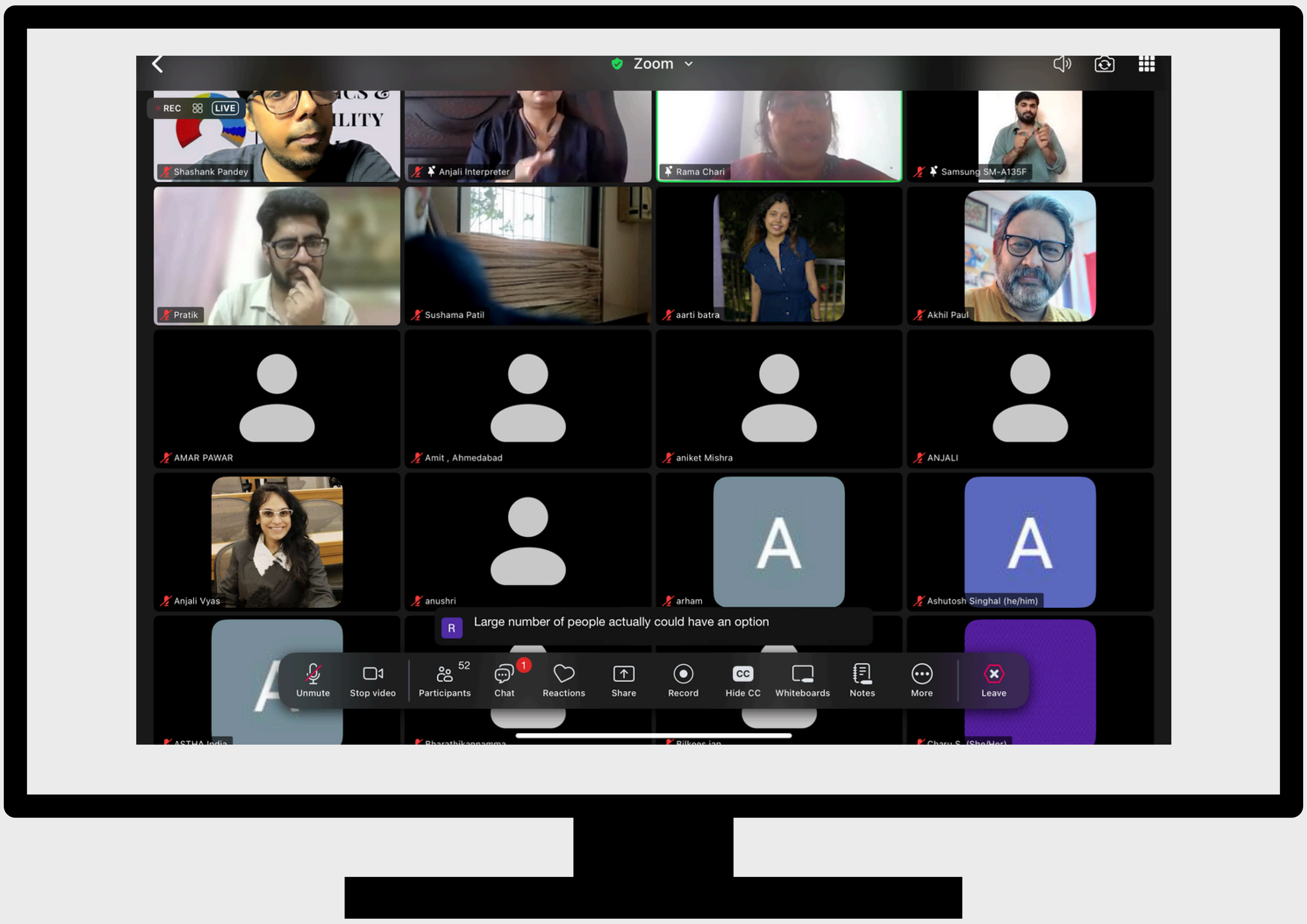
On September 6, 2025, ASTHA and the Politics & Disability Forum co-hosted a national webinar on Census 2027 and the Disability Sector. The session brought together leaders and practitioners from across the disability rights movement to reflect on the upcoming census, its implications for persons with disabilities (PwDs), and strategies for collective action.

The discussion is timely. India faces its longest-ever gap between two census exercises — 2011 to 2027. Accurate disability data is central to budget allocations, welfare policy design, and political representation. Yet, disability enumeration in past censuses has been marred by undercounting, stigma, poor question design, and lack of political priority. The 2027 Census, with its new digital features, presents both opportunities and risks for the disability sector.

SETTING THE STAGE

Pratik (ASTHA) opened the discussion, emphasizing the need to learn from past census experiences and prepare collectively. He noted that while technical procedures are evolving, the lived realities of PwDs, NGOs, and Disabled People’s Organizations (DPOs) must be at the center of advocacy and awareness

SNAPSHOT OF A SESSION



Large number of people actually could have an option

OVERVIEW OF THE CENSUS

Govt notified the census process start on 16th June 2025 in Gazette of India.

A pre test of the census is beginning in Oct and Nov to check processes.

Household listing process which is the first stage to start from 1st April 2026.

Population Enumeration to be conducted in the last two months of Feb 2027

Shashank Pandey (Politics & Disability Forum) provided a structured overview:

Learning from History: 2001 and 2011

Ms. Rama drew on her experience from earlier census advocacy campaigns:

- Colonial Era (1881–1931): Disability was counted in four categories (leprosy, blindness, locomotor disability, and deafness). Dropped in 1931 due to poor data quality.
- Post-Independence: Disability included only in 1981(three categories), excluded again in 1991.
- 2001 Census: After a vigorous national campaign led by NCPEDP and Javed Abidi, disability was included in five categories. This marked the first real disability data in independent India.
- 2011 Census: Expanded to more categories and introduced “Any Other.” Advocacy was more collaborative, but challenges persisted:
    - Enumerators skipped disability questions.
    - Families often hesitated to disclose disabilities.
    - Awareness campaigns (TV spots, rallies, training modules) were resource-intensive but necessary.

Grassroots Engagement and Advocacy

Smitha Sadasivan stressed the need for a movement approach:

- **Enumerator Challenges**: Target-driven field staff often rush through questions, skipping disability-related entries.
- **Stigma**: In some areas, enumerators faced hostility when asking about disabilities.
- **Political Will**: Despite legal mandates, disability data often receives low priority (e.g., disability questions were excluded from NFHS-6).
- **Recommendations**:

1. Break stigma through awareness campaigns (invoking Section 39 of RPWD Act on awareness-raising).
2. Build political visibility by engaging MPs, MLAs, and leaders to champion the cause.
3. Strengthen local-level ownership: involve PwDs directly in district-level census coordination.
4. Treat disability enumeration as a national movementwith active participation across all disability groups.

Invisible Disabilities and Stigma

Nikita Sarah (The Leprosy Mission Trust India) highlighted gaps in capturing invisible disabilities and conditions with high stigma (e.g., leprosy, mental illness, autism):

- Issues:
    - Families hide conditions due to discrimination.
    - Enumerators lack empathy and training to handle sensitive disclosures.
    - Proxy reporting worsens undercount.
- Recommendations:
    - Train enumerators to approach sensitive questions with confidentiality and empathy.
    - Use functional, non-stigmatizing language (e.g., "loss of sensation" instead of "leprosy").
    - Leverage NGOs and self-help groups to support community-led enumeration.
    - Ensure "Any Other" remains in the disability section to capture emerging/uncategorized conditions.
    - Run parallel awareness campaigns to normalize disability as part of human diversity.

AUDIENCE INPUTS

Participants raised several concerns:

- **Homeless & Document-less PwDs**: Census is a declaratory exercise, not validation-based — such persons will be included.
- **NGO–Government Collaboration**: Past (2011) examples show NGOs can partner in training and awareness; this should be expanded in 2027.
- **Digital Access Barriers**: Self-enumeration requires email IDs and OTPs, potentially excluding rural and tribal populations.
- **Tribal Areas**: Connectivity issues, lack of specialists, and limited awareness may leave many PwDs uncounted.
- **Self-Enumeration Risks**: While it may reduce stigma, poor accessibility design could undermine its effectiveness.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

1. Policy-Level Advocacy

○ Push for inclusion of all 21 disabilities plus "Any Other."

○ Engage with the Ministry of Home Affairs and Registrar General before final questionnaire finalization.

2. Enumerator Training and Sensitization

○ Develop standard disability modules for all levels of trainers.

○ Include practical guidance on stigma, confidentiality, and functional questioning.

3. Digital Census and Accessibility

○ Ensure census apps are accessible, multilingual, and inclusive.

○ Provide assisted digital entry for those without smartphones or literacy.

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4. Awareness and Stigma Reduction

○ Large-scale campaigns involving political leaders, media, and community influencers.

○ Use accessible formats (TV spots, social media, community radio).

5. Civil Society Engagement

○ NGOs and OPDs to act as trust-builders with communities.

○ Support community-led enumeration, awareness workshops, and handholding during self-enumeration.

6. Sector-Wide Mobilization

○ Treat accurate disability enumeration as a collective priority.

○ Build cross-disability coalitions at national, state, and district levels.

What's next...?

Census 2027 is not merely a data collection exercise; it is a political and developmental opportunity for India's disability sector. The accuracy of disability enumeration will directly affect budget allocations, policy design, and political representation for the next 15 years.

The sector's experience shows that undercounting is not inevitable and it can be addressed through unity, advocacy, awareness, and grassroots mobilization. As speakers and participants agreed, the time to act is now: to push for inclusive questions, prepare communities, and ensure every person with a disability is counted.

WE WILL BE AT THE PURPLE FEST TO DISCUSS CENSUS 2027 AND DISABILITY

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