TECH mahindra FOUNDATION

14th Edition

SAAJHI SAMAJH

Inclusive Intelligence: Shaping a Compassionate, Tech-Enabled Future

EVENT REPORT

FRIDAY, 27 JUNE 2025

A Tech Mahindra Foundation Initiative

About Tech Mahindra Foundation

We are the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) arm of Tech Mahindra Limited, a Mahindra Group Company. Since 2006, guided by the vision of Empowerment through Education, the Foundation drives impactful initiatives in education and employability, with a strong focus on empowering women and persons with disabilities. Operating across 20 locations in India and collaborating with over 90 partners, our initiatives are creating meaningful and inclusive opportunities for all.

Since FY 2012-13, the Foundation has impacted 6,64,898* beneficiaries through initiatives across 20 locations in India.

*As on 31 March 2025.

Our Focus Areas

EMPLOYABILITY

SMART (Skills-for-Market Training) is the Foundation's flagship employability program to empower youth from under-served urban communities with promising career opportunities. This program has been able to successfully bridge the gap between the demand and supply in various manufacturing as well as service industries. The program strongly focuses on bringing gender parity in the workforce by training more women. SMART+ also focuses on bringing more persons with disabilities under the ambit of the program.

EDUCATION

The Foundation is committed to creating inclusive learning opportunities through its Shikshantaar and ARISE+ programs. Our key focus areas include enhancing school governance, enriching children's learning experiences, and facilitating the continuous professional development of school stakeholders. By addressing the needs of children with disabilities at every stage from early detection of disabilities, integration of assistive technology, tailored interventions, and parent counseling, we aim to create an empowering learning environment.

VOLUNTEERING

Corporate Volunteering is at the heart of Tech Mahindra's ethos where Individual Social Responsibilities (ISR) is a way of life. TechM associates volunteer and contribute to driving positive social change while simultaneously enhancing their capacities for empathy and compassion. This is how we #Rise and find our joy in giving back to society!

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Keynote Speaker:

Smt. Manmeet Kaur Nanda, I.A.S.
Additional Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities
Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India

Panelists:

Mr. Parth Lawate
Chief Executive Officer, Co-founder, Tekdi Technologies

Mr. U Sanyasi Rao
SVP & Chief Technology Officer, Engineering Services, Tech Mahindra Limited

Ms. Pooja Sharma
Founder & Chief Executive Officer, The Sarvodya Collective

Mr. Kartik Sawhney
Co-Founder, I-Stem, Disability Advocate & Technologist

Featured Guest

Mr. Divyanshu Ganatra
Founder, Adventures Beyond Barriers Foundation (ABBF)

Moderator

Ms. Deepika Mogilishetty
Chief of Policy & Partnerships
EkStep Foundation

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Introduction:

Saajhi Samajh - The Fourteenth Edition

Saajhi Samajh (or Shared Understanding), is Tech Mahindra Foundation's attempt towards creating a platform for advocacy through discussion on issues related and relevant to the development sector in India. In the past, Tech Mahindra Foundation has hosted discussions focusing on areas such as Empowerment of caregivers of PwDs, Importance of eye health for children, Role of teachers in first aid in schools and so on. The conference brings together an array of experts and specialists to participate in the conference.

Saajhi Samajh 14 was an online event held on 27th June and it explored how technology can drive meaningful inclusion and equip PwDs for a rapidly evolving, tech-enabled future. Helen Keller - a historical icon who redefined the boundaries of disability was honoured during the event as it was her birth anniversary. The discussion also spotlighted the powerful convergence of emotional and artificial intelligence emphasizing the need for compassion in an increasingly digital world.

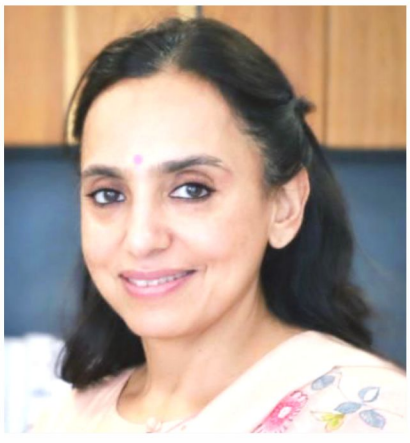
The Discussion aimed to answer the following:

1. The evolution of assistive and inclusive technologies.
2. Emerging tech-abled solutions in education and employment for PwDs.
3. Inclusive intelligence and possibilities it can open for PwDs and their caregivers.
4. The ethical challenges of using these technologies for PwDs.

Saajhi Samajh 14: Inclusive Intelligence: Shaping a Compassionate, Tech-Enabled Future

The session started with keynote Address by Smt. Manmeet Kaur Nanda, IAS, Additional Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. She started her address by commemorating Helen Keller. She drew inspiration from Helen Keller's legacy—her resilience and belief in human potential—which aligns with the broader purpose of the event: to explore inclusive innovations that can empower individuals with disabilities. Smt. Nanda underscored that the assistive technology landscape is rapidly evolving, and the Government of India is actively collaborating with startups and tech partners to enhance service delivery and accessibility for PwDs.

Keynote Address



Smt. Manmeet Kaur Nanda, I.A.S.

Additional Secretary, Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities
Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Govt. of India

> *AI must always be blended with emotional intelligence and human values. It should be used to amplify inclusion—not widen the gap between human touch and technological solutions.*

Key Highlights:

Emphasizing this philosophy, Smt. Manmeet Kaur Nanda pointed to AI-powered tools such as real-time transcription, adaptive learning platforms, text-to-speech software, and navigation aids that are already beginning to dismantle long-standing barriers to access. She also spoke about AI-driven job matching platforms and skilling initiatives under the PM-DAKSH (PMDU) programme that are enabling PwDs to participate in the workforce with dignity. She acknowledged innovations like smart wheelchairs and haptic-feedback navigation apps that foster greater independence—particularly in urban spaces—while also cautioning that significant work remains, especially in rural India. Highlighting voice-activated assistants and wearable health monitors, she reiterated AI's growing role in improving daily life and safety.

Smt. Manmeet Kaur Nanda shared the government's continued outreach through certain initiatives has enabled the Department to engage with over 50 assistive technology solution providers. Citing a recent AI conference in Bengaluru, she praised emerging tools like Ava, Otter, and the anticipated Meta smart vision glasses, while asserting that affordability and accessibility must remain core pillars of adoption.

She also placed strong emphasis on the ethical use of AI, including the need for data privacy, cybersecurity, and ensuring certified platforms are used to protect vulnerable users. Smt. Nanda stressed the importance of increasing digital literacy among PwDs and caregivers, empowering them to identify trustworthy technologies and use AI tools with confidence.

Importantly, Smt. Nanda emphasized that AI must be developed not just for functionality, but with compassion embedded in its design. She cited AI chatbots supporting mental health for individuals with intellectual disabilities, noting that such tools should only complement—not replace—human therapists.

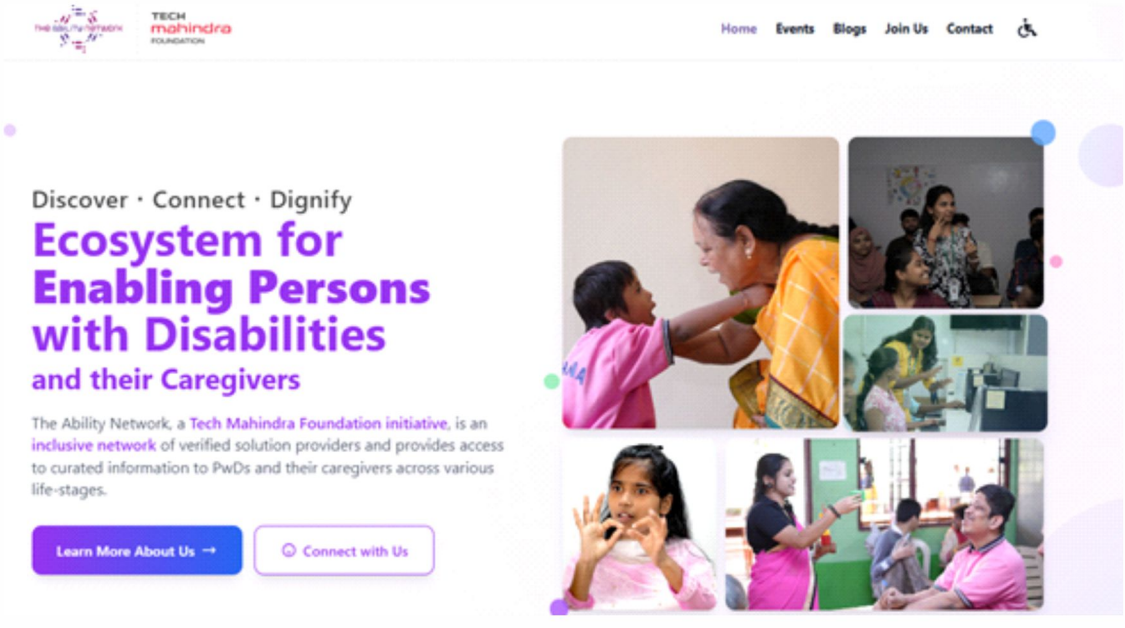
In closing, Smt. Nanda acknowledged the work of The Ability Network, Tech Mahindra Foundation, and civil society groups like I-Stem and Sarvodya Collective for their role in amplifying grassroots voices and co-creating inclusive solutions. She reiterated that while the Accessible India Campaign has laid the foundation, real progress lies in ***sustained partnerships between the government, corporates, and the community.***

The Ability Network (TAN) website launched

During the conference, we also unveiled the website of **The Ability Network (TAN)** was a key milestone of the event. TAN aims to bring together a coalition of solution providers, practitioners, and people, all working together to enable a life of dignity for every person with disability. It is built to be a dynamic, human-centric, and accessible ecosystem, built around a strong digital core. It is designed to connect persons with disabilities and their caregivers to individualized, curated services across all stages of life.

The website was unveiled by Mr. Chetan Kapoor and Smt. Manmeet Kaur Nanda. The TAN platform is a digital gateway designed to connect persons with disabilities and caregivers to verified, accessible services—ranging from education and health to employment and legal aid.

The website features sections on events, community partners, and an onboarding form that allows service providers to contribute to the network. The platform was praised as a practical step toward building a collaborative and trustworthy accessibility ecosystem in India. As a pilot, TAN will be implemented in Telangana and Bengaluru, with the support of partners like Enable India, EP Foundation, Disha Impact Advisors, and Pacta.



Scan here to know more

User Experience Section

Mr. Divyanshu Ganatra

Founder. Adventures Beyond Barriers Foundation (ABBF)

> *Disability is not always about the person; it is about how that person interacts with the environment. Tech helps bridge that gap.*

Key Highlights:

In conversation, Mr. Divyanshu Ganatra emphasized that technology has been a massive enabler in his life. From his ability to live independently to working alongside top professionals, he credited technology with leveling the playing field. He highlighted the difference between medical and social models of disability and shared that accessibility tools, like spectacles for sighted people, should be normalized as assistive aids for all.

Mr. Divyanshu Ganatra credited his intense curiosity as a driving force in adapting to rapidly changing technologies. He stressed that upskilling is no longer optional, especially with AI tools becoming more mainstream. Citing tools like the "Be My Eyes" app and image recognition advancements, he explained how AI has started to make the previously inaccessible world visible for the blind—a massive leap in independence and empowerment.

While optimistic about AI, Mr. Ganatra also pointed to the growing digital divide. He acknowledged his own privilege in having early access to technology and emphasized that without affordability, accessibility remains a hollow promise. He warned of a future where technological literacy may become the new class divide, urging stakeholders to design inclusive, affordable tech solutions.

Discussing the intersection of AI and human intuition, Mr. Ganatra posed profound questions: "What does it mean to be human in the age of AI?" He noted how even emotional intelligence is now being outperformed by machines in some tests. However, he believes that wisdom—the crystallized form of knowledge—may remain uniquely human, at least for now. He predicted that by 2029, we may reach a point of singularity where the line between man and machine blurs entirely. Looking ahead, Mr. Ganatra shared a provocative thought: that in the near future, disability may become a choice due to gene-editing technologies and augmented capabilities. He pointed out how enhanced sight via infrared or thermal imaging might redefine what it means to be "disabled." This shift raises urgent ethical questions about identity, inclusion, and the future of human evolution.

Mr. Ganatra cautioned about the inherent biases in AI, especially when data is trained on flawed or prejudiced human inputs. He gave the example of resume screening algorithms potentially excluding candidates with disabilities due to hidden biases. He called for urgent regulation, transparent programming, and the inclusion of ethical guardrails to prevent AI from perpetuating existing social injustices.

Despite the risks, Mr. Ganatra ended on a hopeful note. He celebrated the democratization of education and the ability of people with disabilities to learn and grow independently through AI-powered tools. He encouraged everyone to embrace this new era, describing it as a "brand new day" for persons with disabilities. His final message was a call to act now, learn fearlessly, and co-create a future that is inclusive, equitable, and tech-enabled.

Panel Discussions

Inclusive Intelligence: Shaping a Compassionate, Tech-Enabled Future

Key takeaways from the panel discussion

Ms. Pooja Sharma

Founder & Chief Executive Officer, The Sarvodya Collective

> *We talk about universal design for learning, but what if AI finally allows us to actually implement it at scale?*

Key Highlights:

Ms. Pooja Sharma delivered a passionate and pragmatic perspective, rooting the idea of inclusion in the everyday realities of classrooms and school systems. She began by emphasizing that if we want to see inclusive mindsets in society, we must start by shaping them in schools. "The school is the most critical starting point—because it's where children learn what's normal and what's not," she said.

She spoke about the urgent need to normalize difference in school settings, advocating for the early introduction of children with and without disabilities learning together. Inclusion, she argued, cannot be a side module or chapter; it must be part of how every child learns from the beginning. AI and technology, she added, are powerful allies in making this possible.

Ms. Sharma explained how tools driven by AI—such as text-to-speech, voice typing, or content customization—can help teachers reach diverse learners, including children with disabilities. But, she said, many of these tools are either underused or unknown in schools. She lamented the gaps between policy, product, and practice: "We have the tools. We just don't have enough people who know they exist, or how to use them effectively."

She emphasized that teachers need not just training in operating tools, but a mindset shift—believing that inclusion is part of their role. Citing her experience at Teach for India, she noted that empowering teachers to use AI for administrative tasks (like grading or report-making) can free up time for more meaningful instructional interaction.

During the Q&A, Puja responded to concerns about resistance from schools by sharing examples of simple but impactful changes. “Sometimes inclusion starts with rearranging a classroom or rethinking an exam—not with buying expensive equipment,” she said. She also argued that AI presents a chance to rethink assessments altogether. “Why do all children have to answer in writing? If a child can speak the answer and AI can transcribe it, is that any less valid?”

She concluded with a challenge to the ecosystem: build inclusive thinking into teacher education, school policies, and AI design itself. "It is our responsibility to make sure inclusion is not an occasional accommodation—it must become the default."

Mr. Kartik Sawhney

Co-Founder, I-Stem, Disability Advocate & Technologist

> *Technology makes life efficient for many, but for people with disabilities, it often makes life possible.*

Key Highlights:

Mr. Kartik Sawhney began his talk by sharing how AI has evolved from something he once read about in science fiction to something that now fundamentally transforms his daily life. He spoke about the pivotal role AI-powered tools play for people with disabilities, particularly those who are blind or low vision. "If I can access an image, understand a graph, or read what's on a screen—it's because AI is translating it into something I can use," he said. He referenced tools like image description software, real-time screen readers, and voice-controlled interfaces that have opened doors that were previously shut.

He emphasized, "Technology makes life efficient for many, but for people with disabilities, it often makes life possible," underscoring how these advancements aren't luxuries for people with disabilities—they're necessities. He shared that without accessible technology, even the most basic things like applying for a job, reading the news, or joining a virtual meeting would remain out of reach.

Reflecting on the broader industry, Mr. Sawhney critiqued how many mainstream digital platforms remain fundamentally inaccessible, either through poor design or lack of foresight. He specifically mentioned the persistence of inaccessible CAPTCHA tests and apps that don't integrate with screen readers. "If your app doesn't speak to me, it doesn't exist for me," he said frankly.

In the panel's Q&A session, Mr. Sawhney spoke about digital privacy and the complex realities of shared-device usage in low-resource settings. He explained how, in many families, a smartphone is shared by multiple users, including children and adults with disabilities. This makes it difficult to personalize technology or keep sensitive information private. He urged developers and policymakers to consider these real-world contexts while designing AI-powered solutions.

He concluded with a call to action for inclusive design. He said it's not just the product that needs to be inclusive—but the datasets it's trained on, the teams that build it, and the infrastructure that supports its use.

Mr. Parth Lawate

Chief Executive Officer, Co-founder, Tekdi Technologies

> *Empathy is not enough. Lived experience must sit at the design table, not outside it.*

Key Highlights:

Mr. Parth Lawate brought sharp clarity to a subject often treated with ambiguity—the intersection of empathy, design, and power in tech development. He urged designers, developers, and funders to move beyond performative inclusion and instead embed people with disabilities in every phase of the product lifecycle.

He critiqued the common practice of consulting people with disabilities late in the process, typically only as beta testers. "By then, the decisions are already made. You've coded in exclusion," he warned. Instead, he called for co-creation models—where users are part of the first whiteboard sessions and continue to influence iterations. Mr. Lawate emphasized that inclusive design isn't just good ethics; it leads to better products.

Reflecting on his earlier work, he spoke about how even well-intentioned nonprofits and NGOs can carry bias. "They often assume what people need without asking them," he said. He encouraged replacing the word "beneficiaries" with "users" or "customers," which affirms dignity and signals that products must meet real needs, not charitable assumptions.

During the discussion, a participant asked how early-stage startups with tight budgets can afford inclusive design. Mr. Lawate responded practically: "Hire one person with a disability. Create one advisory group. Start with one inclusive use case. It's not about scale—it's about intent." He also mentioned that funders have a big role to play. "Ask your grantees what their inclusion plan is. Make it a line item in the budget. Inclusion should be non-negotiable," he said.

Mr. Lawate closed by saying that the best innovations don't come from inspiration, but from deep listening. "And the best place to listen is at the design table".

Mr. U Sanyasi Rao

SVP & Chief Technology Officer, Engineering Services, Tech Mahindra Limited

> *Inclusion has to sit on the business balance sheet, not just the CSR report.*

Key Highlights:

Mr. U Sanyasi Rao offered a bold and business-minded take on inclusion. He started with a direct statement: "We need to stop thinking of inclusion as CSR. It belongs in the boardroom, not just the foundation." He explained that if inclusion is framed only as charity, it gets sidelined when budgets tighten. But if it is tied to productivity, innovation, and customer expansion, it becomes integral to business growth.

Mr. U Sanyasi Rao walked the audience through Tech Mahindra's internal approach—where inclusion is measured, monitored, and funded like any other key performance area. "We include diversity in our engineering metrics. We review it at leadership meetings. That's the kind of seriousness inclusion deserves."

He spoke about practical AI tools that enhance accessibility for all—not just people with disabilities. These include voice assistants for multitasking workers, transcription tools for meeting notes, and AI testing systems that mimic real-world user scenarios, including low-vision navigation. "When we design for accessibility, we actually create better products for everyone," he said.

In the Q&A, Mr. Rao was asked how to get buy-in from tech teams that are focused on delivery speed and efficiency. He replied, "Inclusive design is not a delay—it's a quality marker. You either fix it now or you patch it later. And patching is always more expensive."

He also encouraged companies to make inclusion part of their hiring language. "The way we write job descriptions affects who applies. Use neutral language. Don't let an algorithm filter out talent because your phrasing was biased." He ended by calling for cross-sector partnerships. "Corporates have scale. NGOs have grassroots knowledge. If we collaborate, we can move much faster toward accessible innovation."

Conclusion:

The 14th edition of Saajhi Samajh brought together leaders from technology, education, social impact, and business to explore how artificial intelligence (AI) can foster inclusion—especially for persons with disabilities (PwDs). The central idea of "inclusive intelligence" was explored through personal insights, practical solutions, and critical reflections.

Speakers highlighted how AI is enabling accessibility in real-time—from screen readers and image description tools to personalized learning in classrooms and automated assistive features in the workplace. But alongside these breakthroughs, they raised caution about persistent design flaws, algorithmic bias, and the digital divide.

The event emphasized:

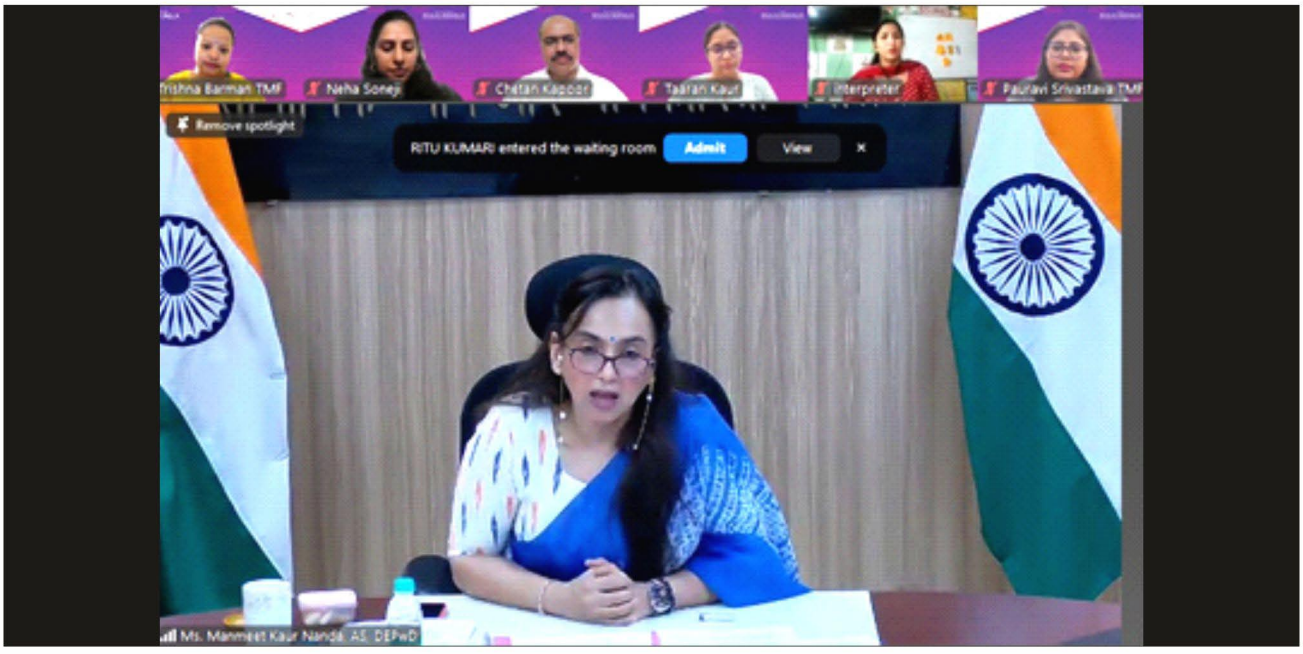
- The power of co-creation: involving PwDs at every stage of product development.
- The importance of inclusive education systems that use AI to customize learning for diverse needs.
- The need to shift from empathy to structural inclusion in tech design and policy.
- The responsibility of the corporate sector to treat inclusion as a core business metric, not just a CSR goal.

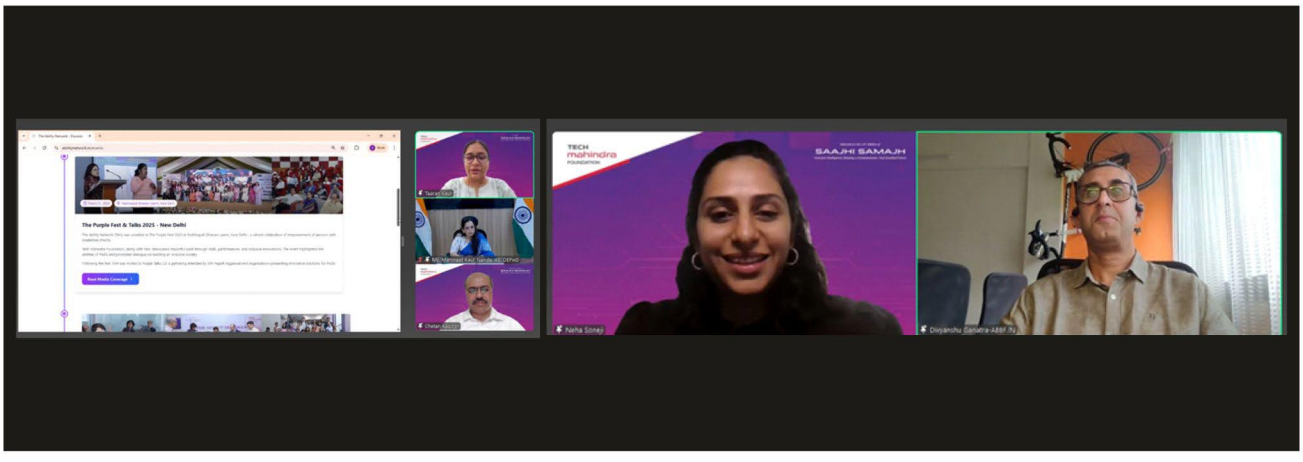
The dialogue called for intentional design, cross-sector collaboration, and embedding inclusion into the DNA of technology. It moved the conversation from accessibility as an add-on to inclusion as a foundational value.

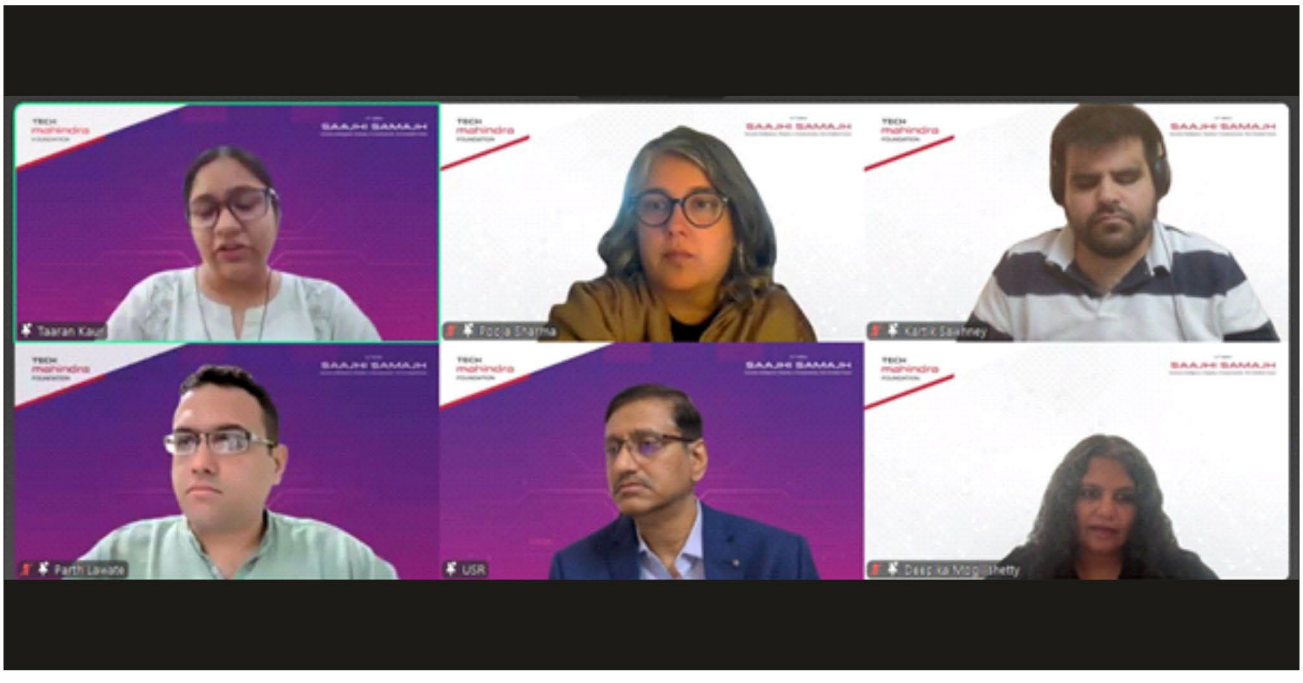
Key Message:

Inclusion isn't just about tools—it's about values, design, and shared responsibility. To shape a compassionate, tech-enabled future, we must stop building for people and start building with them.

Glimpses of the Event







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