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The Unequal Battle: Loopholes in Scribe Policies and Their Impact on Genuine Visually Impaired Candidates

In competitive examinations like UGC NET-JRF , SSC CGL, UPSC CSE and so on, visually impaired (VI) candidates are entitled to scribe facilities to ensure a level playing field. However, while these provisions are meant to empower, systemic loopholes have introduced an unintended disparity. The issue doesn't merely influence cutoff trends or competition across disability categories—it strikes at the heart of the VI category itself. Genuine candidates adhering to prescribed guidelines are left disadvantaged as others exploit the system through unchecked scribe misuse.

INSIGHTS

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In a crowded examination hall, a visually impaired student dictates their answers to a scribe, meticulously navigating the hurdles of a highly competitive test. For many, this scene symbolizes progress in inclusivity and equal opportunities. But for those aware of the underlying dynamics, it raises a stark concern: Are all visually impaired candidates truly competing on equal terms? In competitive examinations like UGC NET-JRF, SSC CGL, UPSC CSE, and so on, visually impaired (VI) candidates are entitled to scribe facilities to ensure a level playing field. However, while these provisions are meant to empower, systemic loopholes have introduced an unintended disparity. The issue doesn't merely influence cutoff trends or competition across disability categories—it strikes at the heart of the VI category itself. Genuine candidates adhering to prescribed guidelines are left disadvantaged as others exploit the system through unchecked scribe misuse.

A Disproportionate Burden on Genuine VI Candidates

The cutoff trends reveal a stark reality: the visually impaired category in exams like UGC NET-JRF, SSC CGL consistently sees higher cutoffs compared to other Persons with Disabilities (PWD) categories. This trend might appear as a testament to the competence of VI candidates. However, a deeper analysis exposes a troubling undercurrent: the misuse of the scribe facility by some candidates, resulting in unfair advantages. For genuine visually impaired candidates, those who rely on agency provided scribes or bring scribes in strict compliance with the guidelines, this trend represents a significant hurdle. Unlike candidates in other disability categories, their competition is increasingly skewed by the presence of those who circumvent the rules.

The Loophole: Unverified Scribe Qualifications

The crux of the issue lies in the unchecked educational qualifications of scribes. Current guidelines by exam-conducting bodies like the National Testing Agency (NTA) mandate that scribes should not possess educational qualifications higher than the exam's requirements. Yet, there is little to no mechanism to verify this compliance. This gap allows some candidates to engage scribes with advanced qualifications like individuals who may have cleared the UPSC Mains or already possess a NET-JRF or have substantial expertise in the subject matter. These scribes not only write answers but also potentially provide intellectual assistance, knowingly or unknowingly, thus compromising the integrity of the examination.

A Market for Unchecked Scribe Services

Adding to the challenge is the rise of a shadowy market for scribes offering their services. Anecdotal evidence points to a burgeoning industry where candidates can "hire" scribes with impeccable qualifications, effectively turning the facility into an unfair advantage. This commercialization is particularly detrimental to genuine visually impaired candidates, who often rely on agency provided scribes or bring scribes based on ethical considerations. The growing prevalence of paid, highly qualified scribes creates an uneven playing field within the VI category itself, leaving genuine candidates struggling to compete.

The Unique Disadvantage for VI Candidates

Unlike other disability categories, visually impaired candidates are uniquely reliant on their scribes. While candidates with other disabilities might manage to demonstrate their abilities independently, VI candidates depend entirely on their scribes for interpreting questions and recording answers. This dependence amplifies the disparity caused by scribe misuse. A genuine candidate working with a rule compliant scribe faces not only the challenges of the exam but also the added disadvantage of competing against those who exploit the system. This is not an issue of merit but of systemic oversight, and it disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable within the VI category.

Ethical and Social Implications

This issue is not just a procedural lapse, it is a violation of the principles of fairness, equity, and disability rights. For visually impaired candidates adhering to the guidelines, the scribe facility is a necessity, not a privilege. Misuse of this provision undermines their efforts, erodes trust in the examination process and perpetuates systemic inequalities. Furthermore, the lack of oversight contradicts India's commitments to disability inclusion as outlined in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. True inclusion requires not only access but also fairness, ensuring that accommodations genuinely level the playing field without being exploited.

Recommendations for Reform

To address these challenges and restore equity, examination authorities must take immediate and decisive action. The following measures are critical:

1. Centralized Scribe Verification

Examination bodies should create a centralized database of approved scribes. Candidates choosing their own scribes must have them pre-verified to ensure compliance with qualification guidelines.

2. Dedicated Panels of Agency-Provided Scribes

For greater fairness, agencies like NTA and UPSC should maintain trained scribe panels. Candidates relying on such scribes would benefit from standardization, reducing the scope for misuse.

3. Auditing and Random Scrutiny

During examinations, authorities must randomly audit scribe arrangements to ensure adherence to the guidelines. Such checks would deter malpractice and uphold the integrity of the system.

4. Data Transparency

Post-examination, authorities should publish anonymized details of scribes used by successful VI candidates, including whether the scribe was agency-provided or personally arranged.

5. Awareness and Accountability

Conduct awareness campaigns for candidates, scribes, and examination authorities, emphasizing ethical practices and the consequences of malpractice.

6. Committee for Policy Oversight

A dedicated committee should be established to regularly review and strengthen scribe policies, addressing loopholes and ensuring fairness.

A Fairer Path Forward

The plight of genuine visually impaired candidates is emblematic of the broader challenges faced by persons with disabilities in India. Competitive examinations, which serve as gateways to opportunities, must uphold the highest standards of fairness and equity. Reforming scribe policies is not just about closing loopholes; it is about restoring trust, safeguarding merit, and reaffirming the principles of inclusivity. By ensuring that the scribe facility serves its intended purpose, we can empower visually impaired candidates to compete on their own abilities, free from the shadow of systemic exploitation.

Conclusion: Toward True Inclusivity

For visually impaired candidates, the scribe facility represents a lifeline, a means to bridge the gap between potential and opportunity. But when this lifeline is compromised by systemic flaws, it undermines not only the candidates but also the values of fairness and justice. The time for reform is now. Exam-conducting bodies, policymakers and society at large must come together to address this issue with urgency and resolve. By implementing robust policies, ensuring transparency and promoting accountability, we can create a system where genuine candidates are empowered and merit triumphs over manipulation. Let us not allow the efforts

of genuine visually impaired candidates to be overshadowed by exploitation. Instead, let us build a future where every candidate, regardless of their abilities, competes with dignity, fairness and integrity. Only then can we truly call ourselves an inclusive society.

