

Universal Accessibility for differently-abled: Delhi- Case Study

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Abstract

This paper on universal accessibility focuses on the difficulties faced by a sound number of disabled people in Delhi. The paper is an attempt to emphasize on the basic attempts of the planning which should be perceived from different angles in order to integrate all classes of people in the society. It also includes literature and case research study of regular public places which causes navigation hindrances with maximum disabled people. The paper finally concludes with findings and recommendations which can guide the future course of development and renovation of public buildings for universal accessibility.

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Introduction

It only took a moment for Shivani Gupta's life to change irreparably in 1992. It was a Friday night, and Gupta was dropping a friend back to her hotel. The hospitality graduate had recently started her job as a guest relation executive at the Maurya Sheraton Hotel. While sitting in the back seat of her friend's car, chatting as they drove down a particularly dark strip of road, suddenly, there was a white blur, as an animal darted in front of the car. The driver swerved to avoid it and the vehicle spun out of control. The car rolled over and Gupta was thrown out of the door.

She woke up in a hospital unable to move either of her legs or her right arm. She was told that accident had made her a Tetraplegic and she would never walk again. At the age of 22, she became a wheelchair user. Even after she had become comfortable in a wheelchair following many months of long, painful physical therapy, Gupta was faced with an equally difficult emotional reality: Delhi, which she had once viewed as a land of opportunities, had transformed overnight into an obstacle course that she was incapable of navigating on her own.

Before the accident, she used to live in the second floor of a flat, which she couldn't enter later. Besides, there were other practical aspects which she found out she couldn't handle, like getting into a bank as nearly all of them have one or two steps leading to the entrance; or, entering a teller machine booth as doors are too narrow for

her wheelchair. Nor could she enter most of the markets as most require climbing stairs.

Accidents or illnesses leading to permanent disability can strike anyone at anytime. These accidents can make them physically as well as visually disabled. A person after contracting Retinitis Pigmentosa – a common degenerative eye disease - or Cataract can find themselves dependent on others for nearly everything. These persons, who might have commuted to work using public transport earlier, will require an escort to do small things. Subject of disability can be misleading. Two people having similar disability can have slightly different perceptions of their inconvenience; and may need different solutions. Hence, keeping this in mind, any general solution should be such that a disabled person has opportunity for improvising to suit their specific need.

Visually impaired people face equally difficult challenges while venturing out on their own. When they try to navigate in a city like Delhi without any assistance, the uneven terrains and unfriendly pedestrian crossings make it very difficult for them to successfully do it. As much as a matter of inaccessibility, it is also a denial of their inalienable Human Rights to lead an independent life.

Demographics

The Disability Act of 1995 clearly stipulates that barrier free environment should be ensured in public places. It has only been in the late 1900s that accessibility features were made mandatory for public buildings

in India. Office of The Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities is a body under The Ministry of Social Justice, Government of India. It has been mandated to take steps to safeguard the rights of the persons with disabilities. This office can be approached by filing complaint in person, through representatives, by email, fax or phone to the Chief Commissioner of Persons with Disability, New Delhi.

The issue of accessibility is not just limited to a disabled people; it can affect anyone with old age. That's all of us. A 2012 report by the United Nations population division estimated that by 2050, roughly one-fifth of India's population will be over the age of 60, representing a total of 323 million people.*

As more Indians age with higher life expectancy, the number of people adversely affected by poor urban planning will spike. Disability is not because of one's limitations. It is the inaccessibility that truly makes one disabled. A 2007 World Bank study estimated that 4-8% of India's population, or about 40-80 million people are disabled.* According to a census in 2001, 2.13% people are disabled in New Delhi.*

Delhi constitutes a distinct urban area, but contiguous with the walled Mughal city of Delhi (sometimes referred to as Old Delhi or Shahjahanabad) and forms a significant part of the larger Delhi metropolitan area. The heart of New Delhi, as many downtowns in India, experienced a boom in utilitarian high-rise construction in the 60s and 70s. New Delhi has not been immune from the massive population explosion that has caused Greater Delhi to become one of the

largest urban conglomerates in the world, but its separate urban history and the responsibilities of being the capital of the world's largest democracy have resulted in greater planning regulation than elsewhere in the metropolitan area.

As Delhi has grown to the south, west and east of New Delhi, the capital area has become the true centre of a vast city-region. Delhi has changed a lot since the colonial masters handed it over to the administration of the newly created democratic Republic of India.

Analysis and Discussion

In a span of about six decades it has experienced rapid expansion in infrastructure and population. Also has experienced an increase in its disabled population. Delhi also inherited a number of gigantic buildings of colonial period adding to the city's cultural heritage and also ornamenting as landmarks. These buildings mostly house Government offices like Post offices, Banks, Schools, Colleges and few have also been renovated and converted into heritage hotels. Accessibility is still a major concern in these buildings as the issue has still not figured high on India's priorities.

Case Study

Connaught Place is one such place which resembles many central business districts inspired by the Garden City model in its single-use, automobile-oriented, non-residential character. Outside the Central Circus, many of the original colonial buildings have survived, as have large

pockets of Public Works Department bungalows from the 1930s. However, with the changing scenario Delhi Government has taken up a project to beautify Cannaught Place and make it barrier free. Cannaught Place is the main market place in New Delhi where most of the employment facilities are generated due to the presence of many commercial buildings. It is one of the biggest commercial centres in India. This project has been taken up in collaboration with the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People and the Council of Architecture.

It is, therefore, fitting that the city was the host of 2012 International Transed Conference, which meets annually to discuss the accessibility and mobility challenges faced by the growing number of elderly and disabled people across the globe to showcase new technologies and research solutions.

Delhi Transport Corporation has also taken a lead in the field of construction of Bus Queue Shelter made with a user-friendly approach for disabled people. They have provided with ramps on both sides of the bus queue and the height of the shelter has been so designed that its low height has been kept parallel to the low floor of the buses. This allows people with wheelchair to commute without any assistance. Keeping in mind the accessibility by all, the Metros have been designed to be barrier free for any kind of disability. The Metro is one of the prime public transport systems of Delhi as it is well spread throughout the city and is well connected to every major destination.

There are Government organisations and also private non-profit NGOs which have been working to make a difference in the society for the disabled people. SVAYAM is such an initiative of S. J. Charitable Trust has been working towards providing independence and dignity to people with reduced mobility. It has been engaged with Government of Delhi in making various public places accessible to all especially the elderly and the disabled. For example, Qutab Minar and Red Fort, the two world heritage sites in Delhi are modified with wooden ramps. These sites are now accessible to all.

Another such organisation working for people with disability to provide them technical assistance and research on countering disabilities in daily life is SAMARTHYAM. It has undertaken a project entitled, "National Centre for Accessible Environments" wherein it evaluates, develops, and promotes universally accessible design in built and outdoor environments, transportation systems and public services. It is a non-governmental organisation that collaborates with governmental organisations to make the city barrier free. SAMARTHYAM's prime goal is to promote "Inclusive Society and Universal Design in the Built Environment and Transportation". Its mission is supported by a team of professionals (architects & engineers), academicians, researchers, scientists, Civil Service Organizations (CSO) and Disabled Persons Organizations (DPOs). They are taking the initiative to bring in a change in the society and empower people with disabilities. Samarthyam has been working on the

Accessible Delhi campaign with several government and non government organizations. As a result of Samarthyam's partnership Connaught Place, New Delhi Railway Station, Nizamuddin Station, Anand Vihar Railway Station, Sarai Kale Khan Bus Terminal and pedestrian infrastructure have universal accessible features.

Hence, it may be said that the Delhi Administration today is not entirely without a conscience for the disabled and their lot. Only, it is not enough. Much more needs to be done – on many fronts. Before we delve into the specifics about the solution to Delhi's 'accessibility' problems, the nature of the concept of disability needs to be discussed for clarity and furthering our discussion in attempting to find solutions.

Understanding the Core

The basic issue is not about laws; it is about lack of awareness and sensibility in the society. It is very important to raise people's awareness about the Right to Live. The Government can take the initiative which may be carried forward by NGOs through empowerment of disabled persons in schools, colleges and public institutions. "Universal Access" can only be achieved by awareness and acceptance of the rights of differently able people in the society.

The Constitution of the Republic of India guarantees personal liberty to every citizen of India. Article 21(a) of Constitution of India, popularly called "Right to Live", provides that no person can be deprived of his liberty (except according to law).

Conclusion

The solution can start with the basics like developing the sidewalks, with textured tiles. In-laying of textured tiles with metallic finishes will allow the walker to get a sense of direction, railings for support while walking and proper Braille signage on crossings are inevitable for a city to become accessible in the true sense.

The old shopping complexes and markets like SAROJINI NAGAR, JANPATH, DELHI HAAT have been premier tourist spots as well as attraction zones. These places are culturally and commercially as appealing to the general public as they are inaccessible to the physically challenged - 3% of Delhi's citizens still cannot access it.

Recommendations:

Private NGOs and Office of The Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities (CCPD) a Government organization have complaint forums which look into these matter and work towards making the city a better place to live.

Possibilities to make these zones accessible can be achieved with two different approaches:

Firstly, a private non-profit NGO working for the empowerment of disabled people like SAMARTHAYAM (which has its own team of architects and engineers) in collaboration with Government bodies can take charge of making these places accessible. This can be achieved by providing ramps with steps to enter the main market area. Then they may provide

railings throughout the market area for support while walking. This will be used not just by disabled people but also by toddlers, the old and the pregnant.

Secondly approach to the solution can be that the shop owners are notified by the Government (CCPD) to make their shops universally accessible in return for fiscal and monetary incentives. Providing 'accessible' toilets and ATMs is also a major responsibility in development of these market zones. Either wall embedded ATMs should be provided at a friendly height for a wheelchair user or they can provide wide enough doors in the ATMs for a wheelchair to enter.

Universal accessibility in these places can only be achieved by co-ordinated action by everybody. The private shop owners can develop their respective portions and the Government, the common areas. This approach will be faster, easier and without much effort.

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About Author

Shefali Nayak is a Research Scholar and has done graduation in Architecture. Her area of interest for research includes Barrier-free design, Architectural heritage conservation and Architecture Journalism. Her activity interests include Classical dancing(Odissi), Dramatics, Graphic design, Travelling, Reading and has also undergone formal dance training for Odissi and Jazz. She has been a semifinalist in "Berkeley Prize essay competition 2012" (conducted by University of Berkeley) for writing on "Universal Cities". She has successfully attended summer school program at University of Lincoln, United Kingdom. And she has been organizing seminars and workshops in the area of Green building design at institutes like IITs and AMU. She is actively working with reputed architectural design and planning firms based in Odisha and New Delhi, India.