

Delhi: An Accessible City?

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Abstract—A blend of new and old, it is a city not just of past glory but of rich, diverse culture coupled with the influence of modern lifestyle; a city with plethora of ancient monuments and architectural wonders, fascinating museums and art galleries, vivacious eating places ; a city where exists a multi-linguist and multi cultured society as people from all parts of India and all walks of life get attracted to this place with opportunities in abundance; A bustling metropolis of indisputable botanical beauty, spectacular red sandstone ruins, one of the largest tourist destinations in north India and the largest political and economic hub of India...yes we are talking about the capital of India, that is, Delhi.

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a country with the largest democracy of this world. A country, where constitution itself guarantees the fundamental rights to its each and every citizen, first one being the "Right to Equality".

Today our friend in a wheelchair faces a few difficulties sometimes maneuvering through life. Tomorrow we might face few problems not very different from his, maybe because of an injury or shoes or a child in the arms and so on and thus we feel proud to say that our city is striving hard to give us and our friend that right of equality in every condition.

But has that unearned equality actually entered our minds? Or is this right to equality only implemented when we ourselves require it oblivious of the fact that it equally holds good for the rest of the people too ? Have we ever realized how difficult is it to open a jar without the full use of one's hands? How painful is it to walk with a knee injury? How painful even a hairline crack gets ? Is getting into a car always simple, or could it take more planning for someone with an injured back? And these questions make us ponder over the issue of an accessible city for all!

Residing in India, a nation still on the road to development; we have cities that are witnessing accelerated development and progress in terms of architecture and construction. There are cities which have come up in a few years, witnessing rapid urban agglomeration and vertical scaling, from just having unplanned abodes on vast stretches of unattended land. As is evident, India is undoubtedly undergoing an architectural revolution. But, to our dismay, the choice of universally

accessible cities to pick from, is painfully limited, if not non-existent. However, here is a city that fails to disappoint.

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Widely known as “Dilwaalon ka Sheher” (the city of the large-hearted), Delhi justifies its title, as it is the only city in the whole country to have taken an initiative to cater to the needs of all by being accessible to everyone, including people with physical disabilities and those with special needs. Although the steps taken are not sufficient but as the saying goes 'Half a loaf is better than none' and certainly Delhi can be considered to be one-third of the loaf. [1]

In her book “The Voice of the Orient”, Kate Tibbits, an Englishwoman living in India in the 1900's wrote, “Who so holds Delhi, holds India”. [2]

It's not hard to see why successive waves of conquerors - Persians, Mongols, Mughals and Englishmen - used Delhi as the seat of their power, making the city a glittering symbol of pomp and wealth. If Delhi fell, their empires fell. As long as Delhi held fast, their rule continued unchallenged.

Same goes for the issue of universal accessibility. If we succeed in making Delhi a universally accessible spectacle in its entirety, we do have a good chance of the other cities to follow.

2. ISSUES AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

One feels tied down when he can't move around due to some injury or illness etc. There are people who have to face this condition throughout their life. Deaf, dumb, blind, handicap, pregnant women, old people, small children, people with prams or luggage etc. These differently abled people have life full of small and big challenges. Be it as simple as ascending a staircase, crossing a road, conveying something, walking around, opening and closing some boxes etc. These are no different people but some people who have to face adversities in life more than us.

The concept of the need for accessibility of a city as a whole, arises from the basic fact, which most of the people in society fail to realize, that the disabled are very much like any fully abled individual. Their desires, hobbies, and aspirations are similar to any other person. And if given the right facilities and opportunities as the rest of the population, they will not only give them a tough competition but surpass them as well.

Interestingly, seeking design solutions that meet the needs of the disabled results in a better overall design, benefitting both the able and disabled.

“The disabled are not just some small, disenfranchised group: they represent all of us. So the first step is education, awareness and empathy.”

New terminology has been coined to describe more inclusive design processes, including terms such as accessible design, barrier-free design and assistive technology.

We can define universal design as designing products and environments in such a way that they are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design for particular users.

As architects, our goal should be to promote Inclusive Society and Universal Design in the Built Environment and Transportation. We need to assert that our city be for all people, implying: Barrier Free Tourism - “Tourism for All”; Accessible Transportation - “Mobility for All”; Access to Built Environment - “Access for All”; Access to street/road infrastructure - “Right of way”

Transportation in Delhi for the people with special needs has undoubtedly improved over the years. The Delhi Transport Corporation buses, Hop On Hop Off buses, Low floor buses, bus terminals and stops are universally designed to a very good extent. But many concerns related to access needs to be addressed. Common among them are accessible toilets, drinking water, internal accessible walkways, ticketing counters, accessible connectivity with other modes of transports like taxi/auto rickshaw stand, city buses and Delhi Metro.

The 'mobility to all' thus still has a long way to go.

Moreover, Delhi Metro has recently set an example of Universal and Inclusive Design. The Metro Stations provide features such as designated parking for people with disabilities; ramps with hand rails; guiding paths and warning tactile tiles for vision impaired persons; bright colour contrast for low vision persons; large lettering and information displays and signage; lifts with lowered control panel with Braille and raised control buttons and auditory signals; resting areas for senior citizens and disabled persons and so on. Inside the coaches, designated spaces for wheelchair users, audio announcement with dynamic display and sensory door closing mechanisms can be amply found.

'Incredible India' goes the tagline of Indian tourism. And Delhi certainly bags one of the top positions in the list of the places to pay a visit in India. Hence, in the tourism industry, the accessibility for all is a prime concern. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) had issued an order in 2001, that all historical monuments be made accessible to PWDs. Though ASI did not fully realize the problems faced by people with disability and also pointed out that nobody had approached them with suggestions on how accessibility should be improved, we have to our respite the NGO's which are working for the cause. As a result of their efforts, Braille information plates describing the history of the monuments, facilitated by National Federation of the Blind, were mounted. [3]

Qutub Minar, Humayun's Tomb, Lal Quila (Red Fort) are some of the tourist spots in Delhi to be made universally accessible. There is the need for improvement of access to the Parking, Entrance, ticketing, main tomb, Toilets, Canteen areas, drinking water, reserved parking lots and need of uniform signage and mobility equipment to visit the campus.

We have to admit that the government alone or the NGO's cannot bring the desired change. There should be partnership, a shared responsibility, with individuals and NGOs, in ensuring that Government and relevant agencies are made aware of their specific duties and requirements to make other popular historical monuments barrier free.

The Commonwealth Games, 2010 hosted in Delhi had all venues made accessible for athletes and spectators with disabilities. like Lal Nehru Stadium Complex, SP Mukherjee Swimming Stadium, Indira Gandhi Sports Complex, Siri Fort Sports Complex.

Taking an insight into the realm of education and educational institutes, we have The University of Delhi, known for its high standards in teaching & research. It offers courses at the Undergraduate and Post Graduate levels in most subjects and at present, there are around 71 colleges spread all over the city. With the number of students exceeding 3,00,000, it is among the largest universities in the world. The University of Delhi is taking all measures to achieve the goal of “Education for All”. Special emphasis has been on the students with

diverse disabilities. In this year, more than 700 students have been admitted in various colleges. Still, many opt out because of accessibility issue. Physical access to the college building, both external & internal is usually full of barriers, are unapproachable and non-usable.

The University of Delhi has launched a Project “Accessible University of Delhi”, to make all colleges disabled friendly. It is also mandatory under The Persons With Disabilities (PWD) Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation Act, 1995. [4]

University Grants Commission (UGC) ,which is the governing body, has issued necessary orders to all the Universities and Colleges to implement provisions of the PWD Act. This Project should be expedited as efficiently and as conscientiously as possible; to ensure that all persons with disabilities (students, teaching and non-teaching staff) receive an equal opportunity to participate and succeed in the academic program. [5]

The law states that any public building must be accessible to all. However it is unfortunate to note that these laws exist in jus pen and paper. There are a number of loopholes. There are a number of public buildings and areas which are not universally accessible and we found out that to add insult to the injury, they claim to be universally accessible.

About 21 million people (roughly around 2% of the population) are estimated to be suffering from disability in India, according to Census of India, 2011. Despite this, most important buildings like passport offices, post offices, courts, banks in Delhi are not accessible. [6]

For instance, we learned about a certain post office which exists in the basement of a market in Delhi, down a flight of stairs in a structure with no ramps or lift. That, however, hasn't deterred the India Post from declaring it “barrier-free”. Apparently, the stairs (without even handrails) at the post offices are not a barrier.

In the process of questioning about “accessibility status” a person has to explain what he means by adding parenthetically, “whether accessible/barrier-free or not to persons with disabilities”. In reply to his/her query, he/she informed, “The General Post Office is centrally located and it is, therefore, accessible for all”. Now that is the attitude of the authorities towards 'universal accessibility'. Besides being ignorant of even what accessibility for all implies they have the audacity to claim that their buildings are fully accessible.

We suggest that in addition to going for accessible designs, the mindset of the people be changed and awareness should be created in regard of the needs of the differently abled.

While taking a tour of the city and its wondrous buildings we found out that at many places, the pedestrian pathways around the building are broken, uneven and in discontinuity. Even the internal pathways are very badly designed. They are so narrow

in some places that even an able-bodied person has to climb down to the road to go ahead.

Also, there are no signs and so a user doesn't know where to look for ramps. And if they manage to find an entry, the ramps are cluttered with garbage or blocked by parked cars. The situation is no different at the Delhi High Court. The reception is out of bounds for the physically challenged.

As architects, we suggest the application of all the rules and laws regarding universal accessibility in the city, so that persons with disabilities and reduced mobility could access external environment with safety and independence.

The transgenerational design concept can also be used by architects as it establishes a common ground for those who are committed to integrating age and ability within the consumer population. Its underlying principle is that people, including those who are aged or impaired, have an equal right to live in a unified society.

Often it is seen stairs are given in the front part of the building and just for the sake of universal accessibility, a ramp is provided in the back or side. That makes the differently abled person feel more like a differently abled person. Psychologically that person is affected and hurt. So the entire point of equality become futile.

Thus, the design should be such that the built environment makes the differently abled person feel like he is in a place "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high" as in the words of Rabindranath Tagore.

In addition, it is a general notion that architects design just the spaces. Our opinions in this regard tend to differ a bit. Architects' responsibility is to design areas of easy use for all. Hence, there can be a variety of designs for universal accessibility too.

Like, some products designed such that when combined with accessible spaces give more freedom to the differently abled people.

Some examples are:

Taps with kick plates to turn them on.

Traffic light buzzer.

Auditory output for all sign boards and digital billboards with volume control, contrast control etc.

Commode and toilet designs to help handicaps of different kinds.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The good thing is that considering the needs of the disabled will ultimately lead to designs that are safer, more flexible and more attractive for all consumers. We are hopefully working towards a world where design solutions are found for people of all degrees of ability.

“We only have disabilities, it’s the society which makes us disabled,” says a person with disability when asked by us about the facilities available to him. We truly agree with his statement and conclude that Delhi, being the first universally accessible city of the subcontinent, can exemplify the rest to follow although presently it is just a squinter ruling among the blind.

Therefore, not just Delhi, and not just India it is the right of all individuals to equality and joy and they must avail it to the fullest !

Om Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah

Sarve Santu Nir-Aamayaah |

Sarve Bhadraanni Pashyantu

Maa Kashcid-Duhkha-Bhaag-Bhavet |

Om Shaantih Shaantih Shaantih ||

(May All become Happy,

May All be Free from Illness.

May All See what is Auspicious,

May no one Suffer.

Om Peace, Peace, Peace.) [7]

Where ‘All’ means abled and differently abled people.

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