An accessibility agenda

The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (Divyangjan) has an initiative that deserves greater publicity. This is known as the "Accessible India Campaign" (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), launched in December 2015. I am not getting into broader, and legitimate, issues of how we define and measure disability. The 2011 census gives a disability number of 26.8 million — 2.21 per cent of the population. By any global yardstick, provided we capture it right, the disabled population cannot be significantly lower than 15 per cent. But for present purposes, let us ignore that.

There is a 1995 legislation, the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act. Among other things, persons with disabilities (PwDs) require access and that is set out in Sections 44, 45 and 46, respectively in transport, on the road and in the built environment. For instance, Section 46 states, "The appropriate Governments and the local authorities shall, within the limits of their economic capacity and development, provide for — (a) ramps in public buildings; (b) adaptation of toilets for wheelchair users; (c) Braille symbols and auditory signals in elevators or lifts; (d) ramps in hospitals, primary health centres and other medical care and rehabilitation institutions."

There is also the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). India signed this in 2007, though not the Optional Protocol. Article 9 of UNCRPD is about accessibility and 9(1) mentions "(a) Buildings, roads, transportation and other indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, housing, medical facilities and workplaces; (b) Information, communications and other services, including electronic services and emergency services." Understandably, any Accessible India Campaign will have many dimensions, such as spreading awareness, ensuring barrier-free access when new buildings are designed or there are additions to existing buildings, ensuring access to public transport and some measure of access for ICT. However, there is also the bit about gauging the extent to which existing government buildings are accessible, interpreted mostly as physical access. (I am not denying the importance of doing this for non-government buildings too.) That requires an access audit. Take a look at ISO 21542:2011. That's about accessibility and usability of the built environment. Though I said the Accessible India Campaign deserves greater dissemination, I think the argument is stronger for the access audit. Even those who are aware of the Accessible India Campaign seem to be unaware that such an access audit has been done for 57 cities through external access auditors. (The details are available on the department's website.) For each such city, a number of government buildings have been identified. Having done the audit, the intention is to make them completely accessible.

I presume doing the accessibility audit requires an interest on part of state governments. Why has Jammu and Kashmir undertaken access audits for 18 cities, but West Bengal none? It's not as if the share of PwDs is low in West Bengal. I mentioned the all-India figure of 2.21 per cent. As shares, the highest percentage of PwDs is in Uttar Pradesh (15.5 per cent), Maharashtra (11.05 per cent), Bihar (8.69 per cent), Andhra Pradesh (8.45 per cent) and West Bengal (7.52 per cent). In Delhi, 23 buildings were audited and many were hospitals. One of these is the Supreme Court and this particular audit was done in 2016. There is a wealth of information — on approach, main gate, parking, entrance to the building, reception, lifts, ramps, stairs, cafeteria, toilets, drinking water facility and disaster preparedness. If the SC is an indication, the accessibility agenda is usually interpreted as alighting, accessible entrances, ramps and movements along corridors and doorways. One doesn't necessarily think of accessible toilets, cafes, signage and emergency evacuation. The SC does well in the first list but not in the second. Every such audit report has specific suggestions for improvements and these aren't too expensive. Hence, it will be interesting to see if the SC takes cognisance and when it becomes fully compliant.

Though not listed in the category of government buildings in Delhi, but listed separately, there is a 2016 access audit report for the [Indira Gandhi](#) International Airport (IGIA), with separate segments for Terminals 1-C, 1-D and 3. Unless you yourself are disabled, you are likely to think that this modern airport is PwD-friendly. The report will make you think again. IGIA is indeed relatively friendlier. However, as with the SC, in designing, one thinks of the most obvious aspects, not the less obvious ones.

As the third access audit report, I will mention that of New Delhi Railway Station, undertaken in 2015. The railways have a 2009 manual of standards and specifications for railway stations. This is easier to implement for new green-field stations, or for those existing stations where modernisation has an element of green-field retrofitting. The New Delhi station doesn't fulfil these criteria and I expected that, unlike the SC or the airport, this report would be unkind. That's indeed the case. The Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan has an objective that at least 50 per cent of all major buildings in a city should become fully accessible. (This number is 50 for some cities and 25 for others.) Once a building becomes fully accessible, no fresh access audits need be done for that specific building. That being said, it is difficult to see what can be done with suggestions for the railway station, unlike those for the SC or the airport. Some can indeed be implemented and should be. But others are close to impossible. New Delhi railway station will never be able to conform to the railways' own manual too.