

DISABILITY ACTIVISTS FLAG CONCERNS IN NEW ACCESSIBILITY NORMS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Persons with Disability including Mentally Ill People - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

Better access: More public buildings and spaces need facilities for the differently abled. File photo

A month after the Central Public Works Department (CPWD) released revised accessibility guidelines, disability rights activists have raised concerns over the changes, including in handrail heights, from the 2016 version, as well as sought clarity from the government on which version would be applicable for auditing public buildings.

Anjlee Agarwal, the executive director of Smarthyam, which has worked with NITI Aayog and various government departments on accessibility issues, said the 2021 guidelines had made changes in dimensions and heights, leading to confusion.

Ms. Agarwal, who had worked on the 2016 guidelines, wrote to the Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry on January 20 asking for “synergy” between the standards mentioned in the 2016 document and the 2021 one.

“If the 2021 harmonised guidelines’ standards are followed, then 2016 harmonised guidelines’ standards will become obsolete. Under the Accessible India Campaign, these standards are used in accessibility audits and retrofitting of buildings from 2016 till now; it will also become obsolete,” Ms. Agarwal wrote in a letter to Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Secretary Anjali Bhawra.

Handrail height

Ms. Agarwal, who is a wheelchair user, pointed out that the handrail height on ramps had been changed from 760 mm for people of a short body profile and 900 mm for adults to 600-750 mm and 900-1,000 mm, respectively. She questioned why the heights were changed and on what basis, as the 2016 guidelines had been based on Indian anthropometrics and ergonomics. “Upper level handrail on ramp is 900-1,000 mm, while on steps it is 900-1,100 mm. Is everyone 6 feet tall?” she asked.

She pointed out that the knee recess of wheelchair user, which was used for giving dimensions of tables, workstations, washbasins and so on, had been changed from a minimum of 650-680 mm to 600 mm and 675 mm. “For an average Indian adult, the lap height is 680 mm. Wheelchair users use a cushion, hence the lap height further goes up. If knee recess is kept at 600 mm, then a wheelchair user will never be able to access any counter/workstation,” she said.

Ms. Bhawra could not be reached for comment.

Vaishnavi Jayakumar, a member of the collective Disability Rights Alliance, had filed a petition in the Madras High Court in September 2021 seeking greater public consultation on the draft guidelines. While disposing of the petition in November 2021, the court had said such drafts should be circulated in all official languages in the country.

‘Not specific enough’

Speaking to *The Hindu* from Chennai, Ms. Jayakumar said: “The guidelines are not comprehensive enough. Bus, railway coach, airplane, etc., are barely covered. Despite the name, it’s still mostly built environment. We need an overarching universal design and accessibility code. It is also not specific enough.”

For instance, Ms. Jayakumar said the guidelines said “non-slip” floors should be used, but did not adequately define what that meant. She said government projects had continued to use polished granite for aesthetic reasons, instead of the more slip-resistant unpolished granite. The guidelines say “marble/granite” have “good” slip resistance when dry and unpolished, while it is “very poor” when wet and polished.

Rama Chari, the director of the Diversity and Equal Opportunity Centre, said the 2021 harmonised guidelines had a “lot more figures and photos, which is good”. But, she added, there were “no explanations for the changes made”.

“In some places, the standards have been diluted and in some places it has become more stringent. There is discrepancy between the text and diagrams. When would these become applicable?” she asked. She added that the revised guidelines come at a time that establishments are gearing up to meet the June 2022 deadline for accessibility, as per provisions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

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