

**With not even one per cent being disabled-friendly, colleges are difficult to access for many**

It is a testimony to how far we are from realising the dream of smart cities that not even 1% of India's 789 universities, 37,204 colleges and 11,443 stand-alone higher education institutions are disabled-friendly. This startling statistic was revealed by a forum for disabled students. Since 1995, when the government made it mandatory for educational institutions receiving aid from the State to reserve 4% seats for people with disability, there has been little improvement in the situation. Despite the enactment of the Right to Education Act in 2009, which promised free and compulsory primary education to every child in the country, less than 0.1% of India's 2.68 crore people with disabilities are enrolled in schools. As they move from primary to secondary and higher education, the figure drops to a dismal .01%.

The dearth of infrastructure that facilitates access for the physically challenged — ramps, railings and accessible wash rooms — is just one of the reasons which prevent them from pursuing their studies. There is the absence of trained staff and alternative teaching aides. In order to compete with their peers, the partially sighted, for instance, need specialised books and material in Braille. Those are seldom provided. In the last decade, since the non-profit Samarthyam's Centre for Accessible Environments began conducting access audits for educational institutions, co-founder Anjee Agarwal doesn't recall coming across even one college that can be termed disabled-friendly.

Despite the laws having acquired more teeth to deal with this issue, our planners and builders remain apathetic. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill passed in 2016 sets the government a two-year deadline to ensure that those with disability get barrier-free access in infrastructure and transport systems. Additionally, it holds the private sector — builders and developers — accountable for creating an accessible environment. This, experts say, is a departure from the 1995 act which was largely toothless. The punitive action for non-compliance can be a five-year prison term. So, in accordance with National Building Code announced in 2016, any new school and college being planned has to be 100 per cent accessible.

Since building by-laws are a state subject, implementation across the country is uneven. The few exceptions to this appear to be government-led initiatives in Odisha, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. Still, putting up a ramp here and a disabled-friendly toilet there doesn't really turn things around. One measure of a civilised society should be the sensitivity it displays towards the disabled. If a chunk of the 2.68 crore physically challenged people in the country cannot board a train, watch a movie or operate an ATM owing to lack of access, and if we make it difficult for many of them to attend college, all the talk of a demographic dividend amounts to little.

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