**India Matters: Finally, Signs of Inclusive Tourism**

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NEW DELHI:  People with disabilities join us on a special journey as we look at initiatives that are Enabling India.  
  
The steps are making travel possible for more people and at the same time changing the framework, moving beyond disability to focus on accessibility.   
  
An enabling environment benefits nearly 46 per cent of the population, which includes senior citizens, people with disabilities and children.  
  
32-year-old Satish Navle, who is visually impaired, is an adventurous traveler. Based in Pune, he is currently on his fourth visit to Delhi. In the last 15 years, the radio producer has undertaken 55 solo journeys to Kashmir, Kanyakumari, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh among others.  
  
A radio producer and blind education researcher, Navle said, " When I went to Jallianwala Bagh, I saw those bullet marks on the walls and understood what people went through when General Dyer was firing at them. Nothing can be more exciting than visiting the place and experiencing the environment. Take the case of cricket. One can watch cricket on TV, but why do nearly 60,000 people go to stadiums and watch cricket live. We cannot get this feeling in books."  
  
There are over a billion people with disabilities worldwide. According to Lonely Planet, the world's largest travel guide publisher, 50% of people with disabilities would travel more if suitable facilities were available to them wherever they travelled.  
  
"The thing about tourism and travel is that it's a great way for the family to be together. You have a family member with a disability and persons without and it's very difficult. I have lots of friends with disabilities who can afford it, prefer travelling abroad, because they find it so accessible. I went to the museums in Chicago and other places and I saw so many people using wheelchairs, many children with intellectual disabilities everywhere. And I just thought, there are there so many people with disabilities in United States. And it was only after that  I started working with disabilities and realised that there are probably more people with problems of disabilities in India," says Amba Salelkar of  Disability Rights.  
  
A disability can happen to anyone at any time. Sminu Jindal, Managing Director of Jindal SAW, became a wheelchair user after a car accident at the age of 11. A frequent international traveler, she is a champion for the cause of accessibility. Svayam, an NGO founded by her, has worked as consultants with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), to make world heritage sites in Agra and Delhi barrier free.  
  
After eight years, she returns with us to Agra to take stock of the achievements at the historical landmarks of Taj Mahal and Fatehpur Sikri.   
  
We see Braille signage and audio guides that help to explain the historical significance of the site to the visually impaired. The audio guides in different languages are very useful for both domestic and international tourists who do not understand Hindi or English.   
  
Wooden ramps have been placed to avoid permanent alterations to the heritage site. They are practical and have the right gradient for wheelchairs.  
  
It is possible to wheel around the compound and absorb the beauty of the Taj. However, the ramps only connect to the first level of the marble mausoleum. There are about 25 steps leading up to the main mausoleum which is inaccessible to them.   
  
Sminu has enjoyed her tour. "This is my first time I went up really close. For me it's a very emotional moment to actually go there and see Taj once again, it's a national heritage and we all are so proud of it. I really want to thank ASI to think about it in such an open fashion and make it accessible to all and everyone be it a pregnant woman, an old women or disabled person. Seeing places with so much accessibility actually gives a lot of people hope and that hope is priceless. This makes India come across as a very friendly country, this is a country where people enjoy the soul more than the body. "  
  
Svayam has suggested that the ASI use a hydraulic lift to make the main mausoleum accessible to wheelchair users.  
  
Dr Bhuvan Vikrama, Superintending Archaeologist of ASI, Agra Circle, says," It was considered long back. But it was because of the dimensions involved, some new inclusions were involved. At that time it was not found feasible. Maybe with the new technology, when they become sleek and less intrusive. I mean that is going to be in the view so the total balance of the structure is going to be hampered with that."  
  
We had other concerns regarding accessibility. The battery powered vans which take tourists to the Taj Mahal from the parking area do not have ramps. The vans, operated by the Agra Development Authority, run in the zero emission zone which ends 1 km from the Taj.  
  
There are no tactile blocks leading the visually impaired to the braille signage.   
  
Though there is a designated accessible toilet at the Taj, the ramp leading to it is steep. Worse, we found it poorly maintained, making it user-unfriendly to all, let alone wheelchair users.   
  
In response, Dr Vikrama said he would look into the issues. About the toilets, he said the maintenance agencies would be contacted.   
  
The Fatehpur Sikri group of monuments in Agra, also a world heritage site like the Taj, is almost fully accessible and Sminu covers the vast expanse on her wheelchair.  
  
While the ASI works on gradually making all monuments under them accessible, many hotels are working on providing tourists accessible accommodation  
  
Amit Manga, an entrepreneur and independent business traveler, accompanies us to the Lemon Tree Hotel Company that is redefining the term accessibility.   
  
A young and award winning hotel chain, the company has upscale, midscale and economy hotels.   
  
Amit will be examining an accessible room in their economy brand, Red Fox Hotels.  
  
Amit says he is satisfied by the hotel's accessibility standards. "The first thing I noticed was the flooring and that is fantastic. It has to be wooden, non-carpeted flooring or a marble flooring. That's very essential for the wheelchair to move around conveniently and smoothly. The bed height is perfect and the most essential part is the washroom. It was large, it's got grab rails all around and the height of the vanity counter is right. Even the shower is a roll in shower. There and no steps, no edges. Closet also, they have got a shelf which is at a height easily accessible by a wheelchair user. Many hotels overlook these little things.  
  
Amit suggests that the chairs in the room be traditional ones with armrests as guests like him would feel more secure when seated in them.  
  
He says he is familiar with experiencing disappointment with so called accessible hotels.   
  
Hotels do have guidelines but they don't have compliance. In the west, they have very strict compliance issues. A ramp has to be of certain gradience, opening of the door has to be of certain width. There are too many variables in India.  
  
Accessibility is an integral part of the Lemon Tree business model. About 13 per cent of the employees, that is nearly 400 of the 3,000, are people with disabilities. Most of them are hearing and speech impaired, and general managers in the chain are expected to learn sign language to communicate with them. The company has now started taking people who are orthopedically impaired and those with Down Syndrome. The inclusive work policy has sensitized the staff to the needs of guests with disabilities.  
  
Aradhana Lal, Vice President, Sustainability Initiatives at The Lemon Tree Hotel Company, said, "If we bring awareness, I don't see why any hotel company wouldn't bring in accessibility because it makes so much business sense. You open yourself up to such a huge customer base that you were not open to."  
  
Accessible tourism is seen as the fastest growing business opportunity in the tourism industry. In North America alone, people with disabilities spend more than $13 billion each year on travel. While there are positive changes across all sectors, accessible tourism is an evolving knowledge universe. Take for instance, airlines, which are learning to meet the special needs of passengers.  
  
Samuel Mani, who has cerebral palsy, is at the airport to experience the services extended by Indigo airlines to passengers with disability or a medical condition.  
The airlines would like the passenger or his family to inform customer care in advance about the nature of the assistance required.   
  
Mani is met by the ground airline crew.  
  
"I am Japneet, Indigo Employee. I will be here to escort you till the airplane. Thank you."  
  
A key question often is whether the passenger would like to be transferred to the airline wheelchair. But Mani, who uses a wheelchair customised for him, is most comfortable in his own wheelchair. For most people living with disabilities, the wheelchair is like an extension of their body.  
  
He is wheeled to the check in counter for his boarding pass and taken for a security check.  
  
Attendants now take him towards the boarding area. The ramps at the airport seem steep and a wheelchair user would not have been able to negotiate them on their own.   
  
The airline buses have ramps which not only help wheelchair users but all passengers with reduced mobility, like senior citizens.  
  
Once he is taken off the bus, Mani is shifted to a narrow aisle wheelchair. His wheelchair will be folded and carried separately.  
  
Perhaps the most innovative are the zigzag boarding ramps to the Indigo aircraft. They are the only airlines to have them, and the ramp allows wheelchairs and stretchers to be taken into the aircraft effortlessly.  
  
Since the aerobridge is not always available on domestic flights, Mani tells us other airlines lift him up bodily along with the wheelchair which scares him.  
  
The airline is also the only one to have a braille menu.  
  
Samuel Mani, who is CEO of Neutron Computers and Founder of Yes! We Can, said, "It was a very good experience; it was a positive change and being in India positive changes are very few."  
  
Indigo follows a proactive policy to ensure the best service and accessibility to their passengers with disabilities who are also paying customers. At the training school, cabin attendants, pilots and other staff go through an eight hour training module.  
  
In recent weeks there have been complaints against Air India for a faulty wheelchair and Indigo for deplaning a deafblind passenger and there is learning for all concerned. Take into account the fact that there is a high turnover of airport attendants who are outsourced and the fact that there are diverse disabilities with diverse needs.  
  
More detailed communication of the passengers' needs to the airlines by the family would also help.  
  
Accessibility means different things to different people. For a wheel chair user, it's a ramp, a non-slippery surface. For somebody who is blind it might mean tactile tiles, audio guides. For deaf person, its visual signals, a sign language interpreter. For someone who is intellectually challenged, it will be safe spaces, and prevention of very loud noises or bright lights.  
  
City transportation plays a key role in experiencing the world. Nikhil, Gajendra and Goldy come with us for a ride on the Delhi metro.  
  
The three have spinal cord injuries. Gajendra fell from a tree, Goldy was in a bike accident, and Nikhil in a swimming pool accident. Though they have no power in their fingers, they have trained themselves to operate their manual wheelchairs and are regular users of the metro. They find the metro accessible but say it would be better if the coaches had ramps and easy to use seat belts.   
  
Nikhil Kumar Gupta, who is senior quality assurance engineer at Oracle, said, "In many places, there is a height difference between the platform and the metro door. So we have to essentially lift up our wheelchair. Sometimes we can manage it. At other times we have to wait for someone to support us. Only then we will be able to enter. We all are trained but not all wheelchair users are trained for doing that."  
  
The designated wheelchair spaces are in the ladies coach.They find it convenient, since the ladies coach has more space than the others and they are able to get the back support they need. But occasionally there is a problem.  
  
"Sometimes we are not allowed to travel in the ladies coach. The guard asks us to get up from the wheelchair just to check whether we are actually disabled or not. There is no awareness about the fact that if someone is on a wheelchair, he just cannot stand up," says Nikhil.  
  
22-year-old Anmol, a student at the Noida Deaf Society, is happy with the LED visual signals. Through sign language, he communicates that he finds the Metro easy and convenient.  
  
We notice that tactile tiles that help the visually impaired are missing at a couple of metro stations.  
  
A welcome development is that movie theatres are becoming accessible.  
  
At the Inox Eros theatre, Gajendra and Goldy are joined by Shishir Bhatnagar a maritime consultant who was injured in a swimming pool accident.  
  
The three are happy that the theatre has no steps anywhere, that there is an accessible lift and toilet. Orders for snacks can be taken both inside the theatre and in the lobby by the theatre staff.  
There is a wooden ramp inside the theatre. But Shishir points out that it is steep and they need help wheeling over it. The management promises to build a new one.   
  
Shishir points out, "It's very important that they take feedback from the actual wheelchair users. Often I have seen a place is made accessible by somebody who doesn't know anything about accessibility. It's like a loop because the cinema halls would say why should we put ramps you know people in wheelchairs anyway don't come to see movies. But because it's not accessible they don't come. So till you put in ramps they are not going to come. It is the same with restaurants and shopping places."  
  
Alok Tandon, CEO, INOX Leisure Ltd, said, "I would say that all our new properties, all the properties that we have designed from as a green field project are accessible. There are a few properties which we have acquired over a period of time. There too we ensure that at least one or two auditoriums are wheelchair friendly."  
  
While accessibility is the rising travel trend, finding critical information regarding accessible travel is tough. To meet this need, Mumbai entrepreneur Yeshwant Holkar has launched the country's first online travel platform for people with disabilities. Umoja.in is like a search engine for people to find hotels that can meet their accessibility needs.  
  
Yeshwant Holkar, CEO and Founder of UMOJA, says, "I realized that there are so many people actually that need this. There are 1.1 billion people in the world with disabilities so why not try and leverage technology to provide this kind of information for people who need it so that they can really travel with confidence."  
  
Mr Holkar believes that while a number of hotels may not yet be universally accessible, they have put in the work to become accessible to certain categories. The guest wins, the hotel wins.

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"We are actually opening up to any hotel in India that would like to understand how accessible they are and for what type of disability they are accessible we are inviting them to come on the site download our app or we can send them an offline version of the assessment and we will provide them a comprehensive absolutely free report of  exactly how their hotel is accessible," he says.  
  
Umoja.in wants to become a marketplace for accessible restaurants, taxi services, health care providers, professional caregivers, and equipment rentals. Clearly these initiatives across different sectors will unlock travel for many people. It's a signal that accessibility's time has come.

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