**Accessibility holds the key to empowerment**

The Financial Express > Fe web specials Updated: Feb 28 2007, 05:30am hrs

Accidents never happen to me, old age can never touch me, ailments afflict only strangers, broken bones naa, never me, arthritis cannot be my fate as I gym regularly, and no osteoporosis because I take my daily supplements and have healthy eating habits.
What a wishful thinking if only life could run on the dictates of human whims and fancies. Unfortunately reality is much more harsher and human frailty utterly fragile.
The first casualty resulting from any of these probabilities is mobility and the extent of helplessness cannot be gauged by anyone other than the sufferer. The extent of faith in ones infallibility is so much that one hardly spares any thought for people with reduced mobility.

Reduced mobility challenges populace that includes the elderly, expecting mothers, mothers with newborn babies as well as toddlers and the physically challenged or even the ailing. When taken in totality the numbers defy gravity.

Half hearted measures and efforts will not provide accessibility. The callous attitude of the able and the policy makers divorce from ground reality have robbed these teeming millions of their basic right to live with dignity.

India seems to be one of the very few countries where even the public transport system and public places are completely inaccessible to people with reduced mobility.

Government housing is a nightmarish grind for accessing even ones own dwelling with dignity. If one falls sick or breaks a leg, the only way to negotiate the never-ending narrow flight of steps is to piggyback on an obliging family member.

In case of fire emergency or earthquake, forget evacuation. There are no emergency exits. How come the learned architects and engineers overlook such basic things and how does the government agency award completion certificates to these dwellings. Is common mans life and right to dignity of no consequence

Though government has introduced housing bylaws, there is no one to check whether these changes are being implemented or not. How come systems and procedures are not in place to ensure compliance

I agree that it would be a mammoth task for government agencies to set up newer task forces to implement the enacted bylaws but in this age of public private partnerships why cant agencies that are proficient in Inclusive Environments be invited to take on the onus of responsibility and put in place a system of certification on the lines of fire safety certificates without which completion certificate cannot be awarded.

If you go around Delhi, you can see massive foot over-bridges constructed. Would anyone please help me understand how a person like me who is wheelchair bound or for that matter any elderly person can access it.

Public transport system leaves much to be desired. Lofty claims and low high capacity buses have failed to provide respite from even dependence on family and other obliging people.

Train travel is another harrowing experience for ambulant or the wheelchair users as the existing design and dimensions of the train compartments do not allow for entry into the compartment itself.

The design is just not conducive for travel by the reduced mobility challenged. If somehow one manages to board, the absence of disabled friendly washrooms is another oversight that makes train travel nightmarish for these people.

The solution does not lie in providing separate compartments (as mooted in the Union Rail Budget 2007-08) for reduced mobility challenged people because it will further add to their vulnerability with all sorts of goons and con men making a beeline for this compartment.

And I refuse to buy assurances by the railway ministry that they will provide beefed up security for this segment. Its not simply viable.

We have not been able to provide security on sensitive routes as has been proved time and again in the past and most recently by the attack on Samjhauta Express.

What needs to be done is to make trains disabled friendly by providing wheelchairs that can be specially designed to access the current compartments and making one of the washrooms in each compartment disabled friendly and ensuring that all the new compartments that are being made adhere to the international standards of inclusive environment.

The government can invite expertise of people working in the field of Inclusive Environment to assist them with this mammoth but doable task once it trains its sight on making life easier for the elderly and the disabled.

Comprehensive plans and concerted efforts by policy makers, implementers and trained professionals in the field of Inclusive Environment are the need of the hour.

*Sminu Jindal, MD, Jindal SAW, is also the founder of Svayam- An initiative to make India Accessible.*

<http://www.financialexpress.com/archive/accessibility-holds-the-key-to-empowerment/170667/>