Building for All:

A Guide to Assessing Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities.

INTRODUCTION

Accessibility is not a privilege—it is a fundamental human right. In an inclusive society, every individual must be able to participate fully and equally, regardless of physical or sensory limitations. In India, where over 2.2% of the population lives with some form of disability (as per Census 2011), ensuring accessible environments is not only a legal responsibility but a moral imperative.

This booklet has been compiled by Arsh Choudhary, a Grade 12 student of Jayshree Periwal International School, Jaipur and Founder of Prayaas, a school initiative to spread awareness about the rights of PwDs. The objective behind compiling this booklet from various available online/offline sources is, for it to act as a practical guide for evaluating whether a building is accessible to persons with disabilities (PwDs). Whether you are a young student, an architect, building manager, public official, or concerned citizen, this guide will help you understand the essential features that make spaces inclusive and compliant with Indian accessibility norms.

UNDERSTANDING ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility refers to the design of products, devices, services, or environments so that they are usable by persons with disabilities. Accessibility is not limited to physical access; it includes access to communication, information, services, and participation in everyday life.

Disabilities can be:

- Physical (Mobility-related)
- Visual (Partial or complete blindness)
- Hearing (Deafness or hard of hearing)
- Cognitive or Developmental (Learning difficulties, autism, etc.)
- Multiple Disabilities

The principles of Universal Design—which include equitable use, flexibility, simplicity, perceptibility, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size and space for approach and use—must be kept at the heart of all architectural planning and assessment.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

In India, accessibility is governed by various acts and regulations such as The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPWD Act) mandates accessibility in public infrastructure and services, Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility in India (2021) published by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs,

National Building Code (NBC), 2016, which incorporates provisions for accessibility, Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), a flagship programme by the Government of India to improve accessibility, etc. Any assessment of a building's accessibility must align with these regulations.

Assessing a Building: A Step-by-Step Approach

a. While assessing a building, we must see the External Environment first and ask questions like: are there dedicated, well-marked parking spaces for persons with disabilities? Are the parking spots located near the main entrance? Is there an accessible pathway from the parking area to the entrance? Are walkways wide enough (minimum 1200 mm) for wheelchair movement? Are ramps provided wherever there are level changes? Do ramps have a gentle slope (1:12 gradient or as per Indian standards), handrails on both sides, and non-slip surfaces?

b. While entering the Building, we must observe if there is step-free access to the building? Are doorways at least 900 mm wide for wheelchair access? Are entrances clearly marked and accessible without any obstructions? Are tactile indicators provided for persons with visual impairments?

c. While walking around the inside of the building, we must check if the corridors are at least 1200 mm wide? Are all doorways wheelchair-friendly? Are doors easy to open, ideally with lever handles? In case of buildings with more than one storey, are elevators available? Do elevators include Braille signage, audible floor indicators, and enough space for wheelchair users? Are stairs equipped with handrails and contrasting strips for the visually impaired? Regarding toilets and washrooms, we must see if there is at least one accessible toilet available on every floor? Are grab bars installed near the WC and washbasin? Is there enough space (minimum 1500 mm turning radius) for wheelchair users? Are the fittings (taps, soap dispensers) reachable and operable with one hand?

In addition to these, we must also check the manner in which signage is done internally. Are signs written in large, high-contrast text and accompanied by pictograms? Are Braille signs and tactile maps installed where necessary? Are accessible routes clearly marked throughout the premises? For lighting and acoustics, we must check if lighting is uniform and sufficient, especially in corridors, stairways, and toilets? Are there minimal glares and shadows? Are auditory signals complemented with visual alerts for people with hearing impairments (e.g., flashing alarms)?

When about to start doing the accessibility check of any building, it is helpful to keep a checklist ready. Something like this comes handy while walking around a building:

- Entrance: ☐ Ramp available ☐ Wide doorway ☐ Automatic door
- Toilets: ☐ Grab bars ☐ Space to turn wheelchair ☐ Lever taps
- Signage: ☐ Braille signage ☐ High contrast text ☐ Directional arrows
- Elevators: ☐ Braille ☐ Audio cues ☐ Sufficient space
- Parking: ☐ Reserved space ☐ Close to entrance ☐ Barrier-free path

For carrying out the Accessibility Assessment you may use simple devices like measuring tape or digital measuring tool or a smartphone app to calculate ramp gradients, a wheelchair (if available) to test manoeuvrability. You may also like to have a direct consultation with persons with disabilities who use the space regularly. You must not forget to refer to government-published checklists such as those from CPWD or the Accessible India Campaign portal.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we must ensure that the buildings we live in and work in, must be free from hindrances for one and all. Inclusive design is best achieved through collaboration. We must involve persons with disabilities in planning and auditing processes and engage accessibility experts and architects trained in universal design. We need to train staff in disability awareness and accessible service delivery.

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