

2018

Our City, Accessible City. Let us realize this dream together

for VoSAP essay competition

[This essay reflects the ideas and views of the author regarding the plight of specially-abled people and how an accessible city can help them normalize their lives and be an integral part of the society. The opinions are based on facts and figures together with personal experience and vision alike.]

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9/30/2018



The dictionary meaning of the word 'Accessible' is able to be reached or entered. In other words it refers to anything that anyone can be a part of, and without any sort of discrimination whatsoever. On the similar lines, an accessible city is the one which is inclusive and treats all the people with equality. Here, the purpose of equality is providing equality in treatment, opportunity, reach and entry. Often it is seen that when we hear the word inequality, we associate it with wealth & status, caste & creed, race & religion, gender, region etc and the focus is only on atonement of these fallacies. But we miss that there are other segments too that add to our social diversity. These include people from the LGBTQ community, dependents like elderly & orphans and physically & mentally disabled people. We tend to consider them as a burden on our society and neglect them for the same reason. Here we shall elaborate more on the accessibility with regards to the last segment mentioned, also popularly called specially-abled people.

Use the skills that I have got. Do not focus on what I have not. Of course, I am aware of my limitation. Yet, I am a part of God's wonderful creation. - William Lightbourne.

These are not just mere words, but an absolute truth. The best example of this is the performance of 4 para-athletes for 1500m in Paralympics 2016 was quicker than their able-bodied counterparts of Rio Olympics 2016. Some famous people like Stephen Hawkins (scientist suffering from ALS), Helen Keller (blind and deaf lecturer as well as activist), Sudha Chandran (dancer with an amputated leg), John Nash (schizophrenic mathematician) amongst several other artists have achieved what most of us cannot even dream of. Traditionally it has been witnessed that many successful musicians and singers are often specially-abled, thus reinforcing the idea that they are indeed constitute an integral part of the society. Given below are the photos of specially-abled people exhibiting their talents publicly without any restrictions whatsoever.



All of these people have helped in betterment of city and society in general. Be it arts, sports, academics or entertainment, these people have mastered their fields and eventually made impeccable contributions.

But not all such people get the sufficient exposure required for them to excel. Thus, we as a society have an active role to play in giving them an equal platform to demonstrate their skills. For this, it is

most important to first make them feel confident and inclusive in the cities they live in. Thus having an accessible city is the budding step for nurturing their talent. Only then will all our other efforts yield the desired results. Some basic ways in which our city can be made accessible is by doing the following:

- Have provisions for moving around in city like bus and taxis supporting wheel-chairs, aids hearing via induction loop technology etc
- Ensuring the buildings have entry and emergency evacuation which is accessible for disabled
- Provide public spaces and facilities to specially-abled like designated parking spaces, sidewalks, Braille street signs etc
- Assistance by providing personnel for serving them, especially at public offices
- Ensure these sections are well represented by including their leaders in planning process for city development, so that they can give personal inputs and first hand information about their needs
- Encourage participation at all major public events and thus increasing their societal involvement, like having guided tours for travellers with disabilities
- Efficiently using technology to provide them with help and support. Examples to take inspiration from include Sesame smartphones, Wheelmap and Jaccede maps, Assist-Mi app.

For more such ideas, there are quite a few articles available on the internet, an example of which is provided in the link - <https://www.debatingeurope.eu/2016/04/05/how-can-cities-be-made-more-accessible-for-disabled-people/#.W7KLk3szbIU>

The cities that I personally have resided are Mumbai, Valsad and Edinburgh. These cities have made efforts in their own way to make public places accessible to the differently-abled people. Brief description of how each of these cities is accessible city is given below:

Mumbai – Being the commercial capital of India and one of the most cosmopolitan and educated cities of the country, Mumbai has made quite a few efforts to address this issue. Examples include:

- Facilitating the disabled with special shortened queues at railway booking offices, post offices, passport offices, supermarkets, pharmacies, places of worship and other such places open to public
- Privileges at public offices, airports, railways, buses and hospitals like reservations in recruitments, concessions, tax reliefs, priority service, specialised service on request etc



- Elevators at all major public places being large enough to accommodate multiple wheelchairs
- Reservations in government schools and colleges to encourage them for studies amongst other perks, besides grants and subsidies for such special institutions built especially for these children



- Designated train compartments for physically disabled travellers on local trains as well as outstation-bound trains and reserved seats in other modes of public transport like BEST buses, Reliance Metro, Monorail etc



By offering these wide varieties of services, Mumbai can definitely consider itself an accessible city. However, there is still a lot of scope for further development. Together with the support of society, we can dream of making it a fully accessible city one day.

Valsad – This city located in southern Gujarat is a Tier-III city and thus offers very limited extra privileges to the specially-abled people besides what is compulsory and is laid under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. The services offered are sub-set of those provided in Mumbai, mentioned above. It will take some time and drastic efforts before we can term it as an accessible city and more provisions will have to be made in future.

Edinburgh – Being the capital city of Scotland, United Kingdom the benefits enjoyed by specially-abled people are in addition to those provided in Mumbai. Personally, I have noted some differences in the treatment between the two cities, which are as follows:

- Lothian Buses - the city bus service have mechanism that bends down the entire bus to its left at bus-stops in order to facilitate boarding of disabled passengers. Also, there are a few frontal seats specially allocated to people falling in this category.



- Accessible toilets for handicaps at almost all places, which is a rarity in most of the Indian cities.
- Student welfare society for handicaps in Universities ensuring their fair representation. The general educational institutions lack such provisions in India.



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Thus, one can conclude that Edinburgh is definitely a very inclusive and accessible city capable of fulfilling the dreams of the specially-abled people leaving only a very little room for development.

The Indian government is taking lots of efforts for serving the disabled. They have taken 7 key initiatives as a part of Accessible India campaign, which can be found on this link - <https://www.thebetterindia.com/31834/government-initiatives-for-the-accessible-india-campaign/>
The following table gives data on beneficiaries of government OPD services:

National Institute	OPD cases treated
National Institute for the Physically Handicapped	74,265
National Institute for the Orthopedically Handicapped	57,015
The National Institute of Rehabilitation Training and Research	39,546
National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped	36,306
The National Institute for Visually Handicapped	26,327

Collectively all these efforts towards an accessible city can make their lives better. The prime benefit being the shortening of queues which saves them a lot of effort and makes them non-reliant on others for getting the regular work done. And also, removal of uninspiring and mundane tasks will enable them to work and play smarter than they would have otherwise. This is very important since they already have natural limitations to deal with and making them do redundant day-to-day tasks would make them deviate from enhancing their skill sets and thus just compound their miseries. With our help, they can completely focus on their strengths and eventually contribute to the overall development and welfare of the society.

At present there are around 2.69 crore people in India who fall in this category with male-female split of 55%-45% and they constitute 2.2% of the current population, out of which 30% stay in cities. Currently they are suffering because of insufficient awareness in the society but if we join hands to realize our dream of having a fully accessible country, then together we can create awareness and eventually make a difference in their living. This is our responsibility to make our country great which is only possible if it is truly inclusive and accessible for all. To achieve at country level, we must start at city level first and thus making our cities accessible cities is the way forward for building a great nation.