Accessibility and Barrier-Free Environment for the Disabled

According to United Nations, Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) form the largest minorities. This makes it essential that the environment, both tangible and intangible aspects of it, should be in a way that it is all-inclusive and disabled-friendly. However, around 80% of this population live in developing countries, and hence making infrastructure and other resources disabled-friendly and accessible to all is not a priority for governments and institutions alike. Small changes in construction and infrastructure can make a huge difference in making our surroundings accessible, however these measures are often overlooked and by the time realisation dawns it becomes expensive and troublesome to make changes. Following are some points which highlight this issue:

- Basic accessible measures like ramps, availability of wheelchairs, space for mobility etc are absent from a majority of buildings, making it difficult for the disabled to commute on a daily basis. These physical barriers act as a deterrent for their day-to-day functioning and increases the dependency of disabled people.
- Communication barriers hamper the lives of people who have disabilities related to hearing, vision, reading, writing or understanding. These barriers are caused due to texts not having a Braille version, unavailability of written text to accompany visual/oral content, complicated sentences beyond the understanding of the disabled etc. This barrier hampers their education and training as well, as due to lack of provision of audio books or sign language material, it is difficult to communicate any educational material properly.
- The world is becoming more and more digital with each passing day. However, the community of netizens is not inclusive of people with disabilities. Digital barriers are caused by websites who did not follow disabled-friendly guidelines during their programming/coding, videos without captions etc. Assistive technology is quite expensive and can not be afforded by a majority of PwDs.
- An intangible but major barrier is the psychological barrier of people towards the disabled. As they are assumed to be helpless and incapable of productivity and hence it is perceived that they are a burden and can not contribute. This leads to stereotyping, lack of inclusion in both social and professional spheres and limits their opportunity to a severe extent.

The barriers faced by disabled people everyday is unfathomable, and include elements that we take for granted. However, modifying and creating means accessible to all is not only beneficial to the people with disabilities, but also to the society and economy as a whole. With proper accessible and assistive means, it is a fact that disabled people can perform just as people without any disabilities. There is an urgent and increasing need to modify our surroundings in a way that it is inclusive to all and to open our minds to the idea that not everyone is equipped the way we are, but that does not limit their productivity and dignity in any way. Governments also tend to ignore and be passive about policies related to disability, as they see this as a secondary issue. Despite the reservation, the employment levels of PwDs have been dismal in both public and private sectors. Policies related to accessible architecture, or availability of texts in various versions etc are also either not in place or are not implemented in a stringent manner.

Hence putting the onus of barriers, exclusion and discrimination against disabled people on a single group/institution would be unfair. Each one of us have been a part of creating these barriers and it is high time that this changes. From government to citizens, each one of us need to play an active role in ensuring an environment which is equally accessible, supportive and acceptable to all. Some of the ways by which the environment can be made accessible and barrier free are as follows-

- The most significant and urgent change that needs to be implemented is to make each and every bit of infrastructure accessible. Whether it be private buildings, offices or mall or public facilities like bus stops, airports, subways and railway stations, the municipal and civic authorities should ensure that disabled-friendly guidelines are followed during the construction of new structures and the existing ones should be modified to inculcate the guidelines. Mobility is a basic function, and each one of us is entitled to that.
- The next step should be towards information. As a starting step, all the public signs and announcements, important texts and works of literature and educational material should be available in a variety of versions which include Braille, sign language etc. The full productivity of PwDs can only be unleashed if they are kept on a same pedestal as rest of the people, and education is a crucial way of ensuring that. This information can be digital as well. By ensuring small measures like captioning of videos or making disabled-friendly steps in coding, we can go a long way in making disabled people a part of the online community and opening a new world of opportunities for them.
- Educational institutions and professional organizations should not just bind by the reserved limit while including PwDs. If their skill set is adequate, the disability should not be seen as a deterrent. Schools, colleges and workplaces should also be equipped with accessible infrastructure and assistive means and technology to implement this inclusion.
- The government should intervene in this matter and policies should be well-equipped to work towards an accessible and barrier-free environment. It should also regulate the prices of various forms of assistive technology and means modified to suit the disabled, as their high cost acts as a huge barrier for PwDs.

While we can support and encourage institutions like government or public/private organizations to work towards making the surroundings accessible and free of any barriers, the real change starts in our thinking. Since years disability has been seen as a result of some sin committed, or bad choices etc and hence disabled people are either pitied or ridiculed. The real need of the hour is to realise the potential of productivity and contributionif disabled-friendly changes are applied, and the extent of a subsequent growth of the economy and society. People with Disabilities have the right to live a life with dignity and function with ease as much as each one of us is entitled to, and it is high time that the world wakes up to become accessible and barrier-free in each and every tangible and intangible aspect.