

Access audit exposes pathetic state of access in Orissa

*“The issue of access is a human rights concern and the onus of ensuring and safeguarding it rests on the Government. Access laws, as stipulated in the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, and other statutes must be implemented to allow equal participation and empowerment of disabled people” says Orissa-based non-governmental organisation **Swabhiman** on the basis of an access audit conducted by it.*

A recent access audit conducted by Swabhiman, with support from ActionAid, revealed some shocking facts about the state of access for people with disabilities even after almost a decade since the promulgation of The Disability Act, 1995. It found that 85 per cent of public institutions, including important Government offices, are not accessible and 6,317 out of a total of 6,825 features and facilities covered under the audit were inaccessible. The findings have exposed the lamentable state of participation of people with disabilities in the State’s educational institutions, workplaces and public utilities.

Ninety three per cent of the public and private institutions have no communication facilities for people with visual and sensory disabilities. In the audited institutions, facilities like signages and auditory signals were virtually missing. Further, 80 per cent of these institutions have no ramps, railings, and adequate space between tables for unhindered movement of a wheelchair. The existing designs and location of water taps and toilets were inaccessible.

A comparison among the various institutions audited in Orissa, 90 per cent of the community places covered under the audit, such as public halls; marriage venues, temples, churches and mosques are inaccessible. This clearly reveals why persons with disabilities suffer exclusion from social life. Main public hospitals, which are supposed to be fully accessible, were surprisingly amongst the worst accessible places.

One of the important findings of the audit was that a hindrance at one point affects access in the subsequent stages. For example, an accessible door width as per the norms is rendered ineffective by an inaccessible office entrance. A conspicuous contradiction that emerged during audit was that though the waiting rooms were largely spacious in some instances, but the service counters were too high and renders the reception areas inaccessible.

There exists a strong correlation in the status of physical and attitudinal access among these institutions. Most of institutions that were inaccessible also exemplified poor knowledge of disability issues, had very few disabled employees, and underserved schemes for persons with disabilities and unsupportive perceptions. To make matters worse, few individuals with disabilities working in these institutions reported of insulting behavior by their colleagues and lack of recognition for their service, as they would expect in promotions, reservations and in otherwise simple cases of transfers on humanitarian ground.

What is shocking is that the officials in the District Social Welfare Office were ignorant about The Disabilities Act, 1995. While being interviewed they reacted as if the Act was a very recent initiative by the Government.

In case of employment the situation is no better. A very small number of people with disabilities are employed in public and private offices in Orissa. Only 460 out of a total of 17,156 employees were people with disabilities.

Institutions	Percentage of Non-disabled	Percentage of Disabled	Number of Non-disabled	Number of Disabled	Total
Government	98	2	7737	191	7928
Hospitals	96	4	735	27	762
Courts	99	1	1407	18	1425
Financial	99	1	2650	25	2675
Corporate & Organs.	95	5	2754	160	2914
Community Places	98	2	235	4	239
Transport	97	3	1178	35	1213

The study represents the voices of people with disabilities, NGO's, Government functionaries and Corporate in all the 30 district headquarters of Orissa, the 630 offices and premises visited and over 6825 facilities audited. Interviews with heads of various institutions and interaction with persons with disabilities and general public were also conducted to examine the status of physical and attitudinal access. In India, people with disabilities, especially those who are poor, suffer from profound social exclusion. This limits their participation in all spheres of life – social, cultural and political and results in a denial of their rights.