

Access improvements at world heritage sites in India

Ms. Abha Negi, Svayam, New Delhi, India (presenter)

In ancient era, when heritage monuments were built, emphasis was laid on grandeur and colossal structures which included lofty staircases, cobbled pathways or multiple levels that added to the opulence of the facade. This general lack of consideration by default rendered these heritage sites inaccessible to people with reduced mobility. Like many of the historical monuments world over, the heritage sites in India fail to welcome people with diverse needs due to barriers in built environment.

Entertainment and leisure are an integral part of human life. Elderly and persons with disabilities have the same motivations to travel as rest of the population given the increased life expectancy and rising disposable incomes and are significant section of visitors to heritage sites and monuments even at the cost of personal discomfort. Despite having the wherewithal, barriers in access dissuade them from visiting any heritage site.

Svayam in its endeavour to provide equitable access in all spheres of socio-economic & cultural life, joined hands with Archaeological Survey of India as Access Consultants to assist them in making the World Heritage sites in India accessible to all visitors alike. An access audit of Qutub Minar was conducted by Svayam in 2006, which took the needs of elderly and people with different disabilities into consideration. Qutub Minar was the first accessible world heritage site of India and an example that can be emulated in other historical monuments across the country.

Emboldened by the overwhelming response of the user group at Qutub Minar, Red Fort, Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri Group of Monuments, Agra are two of the many world heritage sites in India that Svayam in collaboration with ASI have made accessible to all including the elderly and the disabled.

The paper highlights the need to provide access improvements at world heritage sites thereby making them reachable to the disabled and elderly so that they don't feel isolated from the mainstream. It emphasizes on the adoptable measures which can be replicated elsewhere through two case studies and also shed light on a host of challenges that need to be overcome through consistent efforts.

Providing accessibility at heritage sites is a step towards ensuring equality of rights for persons with disabilities and empowering them to experience leisure and travel in an independent, equitable and dignified manner.