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Offer more than a helping hand

Henna Rakheja, Feb 27, 2015, DHNS:

I am visually impaired by birth and realised it when I was six years old. Since then, I have faced challenges in my life," says 53-year-old Preeti Monga, known as the first visually impaired aerobics instructor in India.

Though she has fought circumstances and achieved success, her heart still goes out for girls and women who have disabilities and are still facing challenges. "In Delhi alone, there are 20 schools for the visually impaired and only one-and-a-half for girls. Half because the second one is a co-ed and it is not easy for visually impaired girls to get education in a safe environment," she says voicing her concern for the visually impaired girls who are not taken back home even for holidays, once they are admitted in school.

"In homes, these girls are unwanted and in many a school they are sexually assaulted. But if you ask them to speak up, they won't for the fear of not being given food is quite strong," adds Monga as a gathering of social activists stare at the floor in dismay.

This is the state of affairs in a country where 15 per cent of the population is of people with physical disability. "In addition, 20 per cent of the population is of people who have limited accessibility due to age and other physical conditions," adds Anjee Agarwal, executive director of NGO Samarthyam.

The Persons With Disability Act was passed in 1995 and makes it imperative on the government to have non-discrimination in the built and transport environment as per Section 44-46. Twenty years down the line, persons with physical disabilities still face trouble in commuting from home to work, leave alone going out for recreation.

Probably this led to the need for inclusion of physically challenged women in the One Billion Rising campaign recently.

"Women with physical disabilities are doubly marginalised. When we say that everyone is born equal then 'everyone' includes minorities and persons with disabilities too," says activist Kamla Bhasin explaining the need to focus on persons with disabilities. She even highlights the issue of mobility for such people since it has been researched that by 2030, 32 per cent of India's population will comprise senior citizens!

Questions on the need for smooth accessibility to roads, to reach public transports arise here putting the National Capital in an unfavourable light. Leave apart proper pavements on roads, there is hardly any provision for clean toilets in all regions.

Agarwal's organisation has come up with a proposal of multi-utility toilets which can be built by an addition of Rs 15,000 to the amount that is required to build regular toilets.

"At an age where our Prime Minister is talking about the necessity of toilets in schools, a report states that out of 500 schools in India, only 80 have toilets out of which 40 are without doors! How do you expect girls to use these? How many women do actually use toilets in public places? The fear of getting infection in the unkempt public toilets is an issue that is long forgotten," adds Agarwal informing that the multi-use or uni-sex toilets are a solution for even transgenderers.

"Government does invest in infrastructure but doesn't execute the planning in an

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effective manner," says Nidhi Madan, landscape architect. She gives examples of the tactile pavements that were created during Commonwealth Games. "It was a very good decision, considering the visually impaired, but their placement has to be such that a visually impaired can dodge an obstacle. Instead, these tiles were laid straight making a person bump into the obstacle!"

As we approach a future where we will have smart cities, it is important to take into consideration a crucial part of our population which would want to move out of homes and live independently.

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Manuka Oval, Canberra

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South Africa won by 201 runs

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