

A BACKGROUND PAPER

Dr B Venugopal, Director, National Museum of Natural History (Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India), Barakhamba Road, New delhi-110001. Email: dirnmnh@yahoo.com

MUSEUMS, ACCESSIBILITY AND DIFFERENTLY ABLED VISITORS

1. Introduction

1.1. Museums are “non-profit making, permanent institutions, in the service of the society and its development and open to the public, which acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit, for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment”. The essence of this definition of Museums by the ICOM (International Council of Museums), the only international professional body of museologists, is that museums are public service institutions and they must be open to the common people and their **services accessible to all**. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also echoes that ‘everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits’.

1.2. There are two aspects for the relationship between museums and accessibility/disability. The first one is the public service aspect, which has been mentioned above. The second is the museological aspect, which is explained below. Museum communication including education and exhibition is based on senses such as seeing, hearing, touching, and tasting objects or aspects of objects in museums. Museum objects do not know the boundaries of language and literacy. Objects may be seen, touched, details of them heard, some might be even tasted, in museums. In addition, Museums utilize many supplementary media such as audio-visuals and the service of interpreters to enhance the educational potential of objects in exhibitions. Senses play an important role in disability as well. Many disability conditions are based on the lack/ impairment of senses such as vision and hearing. Museum settings, which use multi-sensory communication techniques, thus have great potential to become unique educational resources for the disabled.

2. Types of Museum Accessibility: The term access is wider in its scope and may cover equal opportunities, cultural diversity and social inclusion as well. It is pertinent here to classify Museum Accessibility in its wider term: Socio-Cultural, Economic, Attitudinal, Physical, Sensory, Learning/mental and Linguistic

2.1. Socio-cultural accessibility with reference to museums means that even though the people may be located very near the museum geographically, they do not or only sparingly come to the museum or access its resources. They may be afraid to enter these museums which they think are ‘elite’ institutions. This is enhanced by the nature of museum buildings which are huge palaces or colonial structures or heritage buildings huge concrete-jungles, and often not public-friendly. Backwardness with respect to social and cultural status may also force people out

of the museums. Minorities, tribal people, juggi-jopri dwellers, juvenile delinquent, jail inmates etc are included in this category.

- 2.2. Economic accessibility is based on the economic status of the community. This is a major factor in India where a majority is poor. The entrance charges for many larger museums in India are still higher for these people to afford.
 - 2.3. Attitudinal accessibility is another type, which we generally do not take into consideration. More often, it is not the lack of facilities in museums, which deter the disabled to visit museums, but the attitude of the staff. It must be emphasized here that the disabled are citizens of India and they have every right, like others, to visit museums and access its resources.
 - 2.4. Physical accessibility is the one, which is more visible. In addition to the Physically disabled, physical access involves the aged, and all others who are wheel chair bound as well as the spastic.
 - 2.5. Sensory accessibility involves the sensory capabilities of people. People who need special attention in this category include those with impairment in vision (visually impaired or blind), hearing (hearing impaired or deaf), and speech (speech impaired or dumb).
 - 2.6. Mental/learning accessibility is based on the learning capacity of the people. As far as museums are concerned, this involves that the objects/exhibits are interpreted and made intelligible to them. Visitors who need special attention in this category includes the mentally ill, mentally challenged and slow-learners.
 - 2.7. Linguistic or language accessibility is often found in multi-lingual society like India. The interpretation of objects through labels, which is the most common practice in India, needs to be studied in this context. A common solution attempted by various museums in India is to follow the tri-lingual labels: local, national (Hindi), and international (English).
3. **PwD Act 1995:** The Government of India recognized the importance of the disabled people and enacted “The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995” (enacted on 1st January 1996) which is a landmark in the direction. Chapter VIII of the Act, Section 46 dealing with the non-discrimination in the built environment mentions: “The appropriate Governments and local authorities shall, within the limits of their economic capacity and development, provide for Ramps in public buildings; Adaptation of toilets for wheel chair users; Braille symbols and auditory signals in elevators or lifts;”
 4. **Barrier-free environment:** In order to create a barrier free environment in consonance with the provisions of the Act mentioned above, the CPWD (Central Public Works Department), had published “Guidelines and Space Standards for barrier free Built Environment for Disabled and Elderly Persons” (CPWD, 1998). The primary objective of this publication is to frame guidelines for non-ambulant (chair bound), semi-ambulant (lower limb impairments), visual, and hearing disabled persons.
 5. **How to find out Museum Accessibility:** The status of Museum Accessibility (MA) could be found out by undertaking MVS (Museum Visitor Studies) and AA (Access Audits).
 - 5.1. MVS involves all the studies undertaken to reveal the nature of museum visitation and includes two major sub-divisions: visitor evaluation and exhibit evaluation.

The thrust areas of VS include parameters of visitors such as demographics, psychographics, visitor behaviour and learning. It also gives answers as to why people visit museums and why some people do not visit museums? The constraints of non-visitation as well as visitation / accessibility will be revealed if museums undertake MVS regularly.

- 5.2. Another method useful for finding out the status of museum accessibility is Access Audit.
6. **Access Audits:** According to the Oxford Dictionary, “access” is the means of approaching and “audit” is the means of official examination. Access means different things to different people. Generally “access” is related to the needs of the Disabled people. Access Audit for the purpose of Museums may be defined as ‘auditing of public institutions, especially museums, with respect to the access needs of the public for whom the resources of these settings are actually meant to’. An agency or group consisting of members of all stakeholders including museum personnel, disabled, may ideally undertake these audits and others under-represented in museums.
 7. Access Audits may be undertaken for many reasons: To assess the accessibility of museum provisions and services, To identify thrust areas for improvement, To clarify requirements under the various Rules and Regulations of the Government such as the People’s with Disabilities Act 1995, To collect information needed for Funding/ sponsorship, To act as a tool for increasing the social relevance of Museums etc
 8. Museums committed to Access Audits are expected to: Pledge to undertake Access Audits periodically, Take the results and recommendations of the AA seriously, Make a written Institutional Policy for Access in the long run, Make access practices in all aspects of its functioning, Undertake regular Visitor Studies in order to understand who come to the Museums and who do not, Undertake regular Sensitisation programmes for the staff about the needs of disabled and other disadvantaged visitors etc.
 9. Accessible Museum Visits: While preparing checklists for use at the time of access audits of Museums, it will be useful to divide the museum visitation process into three stages: pre-visit, visit and post-visit stages.
 - 9.1. Pre-visit stage: This is the initial stage and involves all the activities the potential visitor may undertake just before reaching the Museum campus.
 - i) Decision stage: Information about the facilities/services/resources of the Museum well publicized through media or through publications or websites, will help the potential visitors to take a decision to visit the Museum. Accessible websites of the Museums are highly useful for Differently abled people.
 - ii) Preparation stage: After the potential visitor takes a decision to visit the Museum, the details of location of the Museum and the available transportation facilities to reach it will help the people to prepare for the visit. Travel directions and signages in key areas will help visitors to move towards the direction of the Museum.
 - 9.2. Visit stage: The various activities the Museum Visitor undertakes once the visitor reaches the Museum up to the time he/ she leaves the Campus.
 - i) External signs: to indicate the main entrance and alternate/ special entrance to the disabled will also help visitors with disabilities.

- ii) Parking: parking facilities especially reserved facilities for the disabled
- iii) Reaching the Museum building: From the gate of the campus to the main building may be short or long depending on the area of the campus and the location of the main museum building. Availability of wheel chairs and specially trained museum personnel at the gate itself will be the ideal condition. Ramped main doors, along with side railings, automatically operated entrances; doors wide enough for wheel chairs etc are advantageous.
- iv) Reception: Counters with suitable or flexible height, seating for waiting, accessible cloak rooms, toilets etc
- v) Orientation: Clear, wall-mounted floor plans of the Museum showing location of various visitor facilities through use of recognized symbols, Availability of guide books in printed and Braille formats (also in local, national and international languages), Availability of guided tours, touch tours etc may also be useful for Differently abled visitors.
- vi) Facilities for comfort such as seats, toilets, cafeteria, rest facilities etc which are accessible to all
- vii) Lifts large enough to take visitors whose mobility is impaired.

9.3. Post-visit stage: At the end of the pre-visit stage the potential visitor will have some pre-conceived expectations about his/ her visit to the Museum. During the visit stage, the Visitor will have access to the resources and facilities of the Museum, leading to the museum experience. The difference between this expectations and experience will decide whether the Museum visit is satisfactory or not. After the visit to the museum is over (post-visit stage), the visitor may or may not return to the Museum in future depending on the nature of his/ her museum 'experience'. In case the experience is negative, the visitor generally will not come to the museum again in future. A positive experience definitely will urge him/her to come to the museum again.

10. Conclusion

Access to museums is an important area of Museum functioning. However, it is seldom discussed among Museologists. For a country like India, access to heritage resources kept in Museums is of prime importance. The accessibility of Museum resources to all including Persons with Different Abilities is an important public service function of Museums. Since this is also a highly specialized subject and there is only limited work undertaken in India, there is an urgent need to arrange awareness programmes on Museum Accessibility to Persons with different abilities among Museologists. The National Conference on Museums, Accessibility and Differently abled Visitors to be held in Bhubaneswar during 15-17 January 2001, as part of the Annual Meeting of the MAI (Museums Association of India) is a positive beginning in this direction.