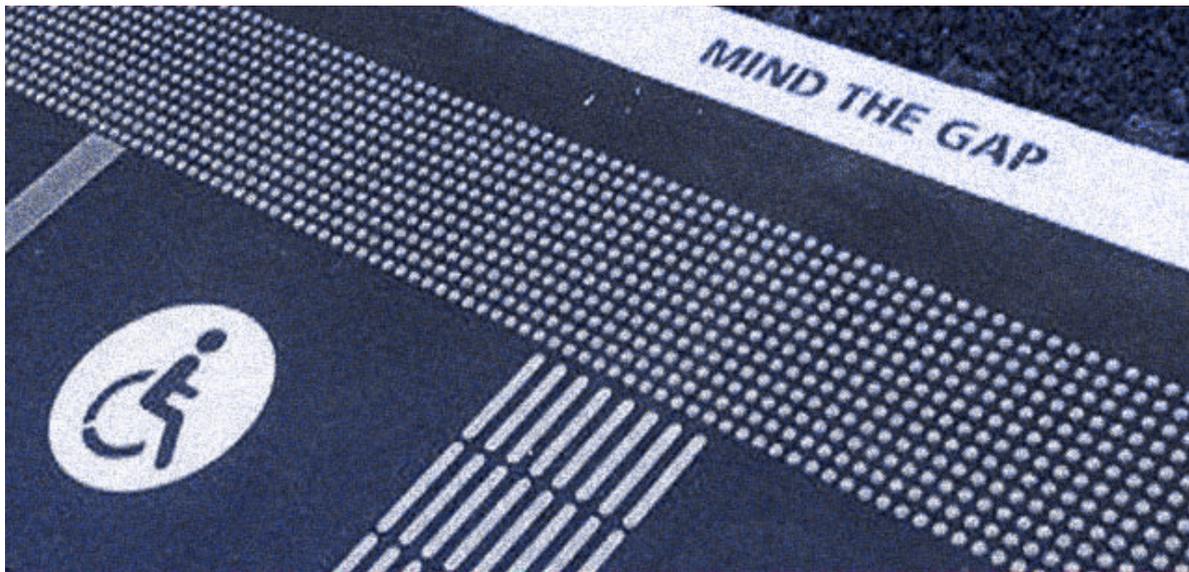




Accessibility of Persons with Disabilities in Railway Services



“Whenever I’ve travelled by train, I have always been taken as luggage over the railway tracks by a porter. Not to mention, I have been molested three times by these porters while transferring me from platform to the train”.

- Tahmina, a 27 year old wheelchair user, living in Dhaka.

To become an inclusive and caring society, as stated in the Perspective plan 2021, Bangladesh needs to ensure basic mobility of persons with disabilities in all aspects of life. To ensure mobility, it is important to ensure accessibility of persons with disabilities in public transport, infrastructure and information. The journey towards a Caring Society for all, followed by the “Leave No One Behind” approach has prioritized “disability” as one of the major thematic areas of its development agenda. The country has already put necessary policy frameworks in place to ensure disability-inclusive development. It has brought in legislation to protect people with disabilities, namely “Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013” and “Neurodevelopmental Disability Protection Trust Act 2013”, and mentioned inclusion of disability in its 7th Five Year Plan, National Education Policy, National Skills Development Policy, and other policy frameworks. Bangladesh has also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and is highly committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, leaving no one behind, particularly those with disabilities.

Having all these legal frameworks, how far have we actually come to put these policies into practice? This paper mainly focuses on the accessibility of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) at the public transport services, especially railway services. Bangladesh Railway (BR) one of the largest railway systems in the world, plays a key role in meeting the transport needs of the country. According to a report in 2017, it carries more than 2.5 lakh passengers covering 498 stations daily. The history of Railway in Bangladesh is of 150 years. Bangladesh Railway has a rail network of 2929.50 kilometers connecting 44 districts . It carries almost 20% passengers among all transport sectors of Bangladesh. However, existing Railway transportation system i.e. rolling stock, platforms and operations are either full of obstacles or are impossible to use by persons with disabilities (PwDs) and reduced mobility.

International Best Practices

Many countries have made progress in providing equal service facilities in the transport environment, particularly in high income countries. Regulation implementation, special consideration while designing transport facilities, symbols and wheelchairs have been taken into account. Examples of accessibility design standards in the world include UK, Mexico, Canada, USA, China, Hong Kong, Singapore etc. Surprisingly enough, our neighboring country India has also ensured accessibility of persons with disabilities in Mumbai and Kerala. To understand about the existing accessible service, we along with NHRC and Bangladesh railway have visited Mumbai Railway station. We went through the parking, entrance, elevator, washroom facilities, platform and finally the coaches of Mumbai Railway Station. We have seen amenities like wheelchair assistance, ticket counter, drinking water station, digital ticketing, visual signage, auditory beepers, tactile platforms, handrails, passenger lift with braille indicators, low height catering units- all providing accessibility to persons with disabilities.

Issues To Be Considered

To become an accessible railway station according to International standard, we have following recommendations for Kamlapur and Chittagong Railway Stations:



1. Pre-journey planning information:

- Tickets are available online. But the websites can be made more user friendly by maintaining all the timetables, prices and other relevant information in one website.
- Persons with disabilities may declare to avail assistant service for their uninterrupted journey by train.



2. Drop off zone and parking facility:

- There is no reserved parking available for persons with disabilities. At least 1 parking space need to be available at the parking area.



3. Signage and announcement

- There is no directional signage on the way to the platform to ride the train.
- Announcements need to be done regarding the timing, position of the train washroom facilities etc.
- Both visual and auditory announcement is needed inside the train about the upcoming station or stoppage.



4. Ticket counter:

- The existing ticket counter need height adjustment.
- Sensitization of the disabled friendly ticket counter will be highly impactful.



5. Washrooms:

- There is no washroom available for persons with disabilities.
- Toilet needs to be wide (at least 66x70 inch which is a minimum turning space of wheelchairs)
- Height of the toilet should be within 18 inch.
- Grab bar should be in the height of 29-33 inches from the floor.



6. Platform:

- Ramps are available, but the measurement needs to be 1:12 ratio (maximum).
- Ramps need to be minimum 36 inches wide.
- The floor and ground surfaces need to be slip resistant, stable and firm.
- Bright color of the path needs to be added to help people with low vision to better see the paths. These paths do lead people right to the places like ticket counters, toilets, platforms etc.
- Handrails are not available. If the ramp has a rise greater than 6 inches or horizontal projection greater than 72 inches, the ramp must have handrails on both sides.

Immediate action to be taken



We understand that ensuring all the above facilities will take time and money, however, some immediate action can be taken which can create high impact within a shorter period of time. These actions might not seem ideal, but can ensure better accessibility of persons with disabilities at the railway stations. These are:



1. Introduce Assistant Service:

Initially, a group of 5 people can be introduced to assist persons with disabilities at the Kamlapur Railway station. Their service rate will be fixed and monitored regularly. They can also provide support to the old aged and pregnant women to get on the train. Those 5 people needs to be sensitized and trained for assisting persons with disabilities.



2. Disabled friendly washroom facilities:

Currently, there is no washroom available for persons with disabilities. At least two washroom (one for men, one for women) can be introduced to be user friendly to persons with disabilities. These washrooms needs to ensure security, hygiene and sustainability.



3. Portable ramp:

Portable ramp can be introduced to transfer a wheelchair user from platform to train. These ramps are inexpensive and can be made locally. Bangladesh railway already have special coaches for persons with disabilities. But without portable ramp, they cannot get in the train without hassle.

Conclusion

Ensuring discount in tickets and reserved seats cannot be the only service to provide to persons with disabilities. To ensure mobility and accessibility, we need to ensure other services like accessible platform, toilets and train cars. The aim of designing any transport facility should be to respond the widest range of population possible. Most recommendations mentioned above can be accessible for everyone else too. Organizations working on policy issues of persons with disabilities need to be more vocal and aware of raising the accessibility issues and work with the Government for successful policy implementation. All these facilities can also be introduced at a low cost. Being the second highest mode of communication, our railway service need to be more inclusive and accessible for all, especially persons with disabilities.