

design: sensibility

THERE IS A SOCIAL DRIVE UNDERWAY TO MAKE PUBLIC PLACES FRIENDLY FOR THE DISABLED

easy ACCESS

Designs which are accessible to users with special needs. That is how universal design, also called inclusive design and accessible design, is generally defined. "Many countries, governments and business houses have recognised the importance of universal design. Some nations even include it in their philosophies for the society and as right for citizens to have a dignified life. But sadly this approach has been neglected in India," says NID-qualified product designer Amit Sheth, director of Mind's Eye Design Pvt Ltd, "and yet, we are a country that needs universal design the most".

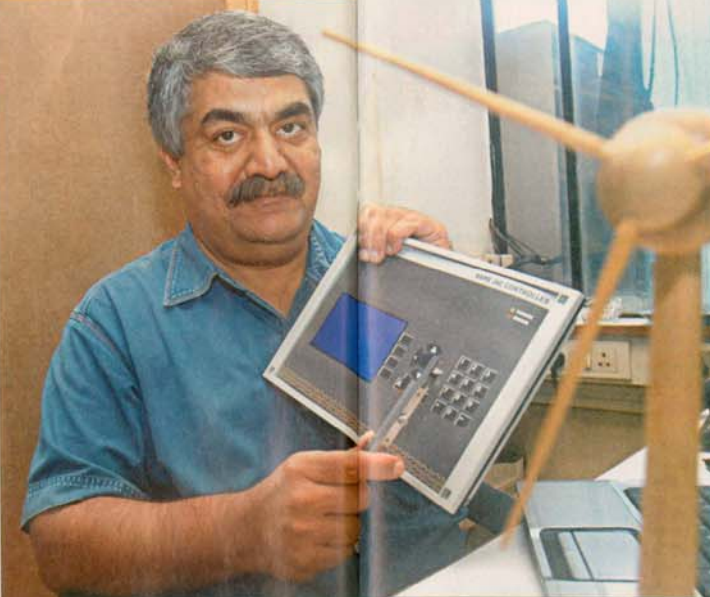
This concern, he says, has led to architects, socially-conscious designers, activists and organisations of Gujarat to come together and form a loosely-knit voluntary group called Access Resource, which hopes to make the state as barrier-free as possible. With the population approaching a billion, there are many in the country who suffer from permanent mental, visual, hearing, locomotor, orthopaedic and various physical impediments. There are senior citizens and children who need better accessibility to built environments and safety in public areas. "When we think about the fact that accessibility to buildings is an important factor for pregnant women, arthritis patients, those suffer-

ing from chronic or temporary ailments, people with a fracture or muscle injury, then the issue becomes mind-blowing in proportions", says Sheth.

He feels that universal design is also specially important in India because of social constraints in our society. Mind's Eye has worked on better signage and products that can be used by people regardless of the circumstances. "I have developed long spoons and forks with easy to grip and attractive handles which can be used even by paraplegic people," says Sheth.

The challenge is not an easy one, Sheth explains. "As a way of offering access to the disabled, we come up with separate and stigmatising solutions. For example, a steep ramp on which a wheel chair is pushed beside the main stairway leading to the same or a different doorway needs to be changed—to just a gradual ramp—that can be used by the wheel chair bound person. It needs to be safe and comfortable for everyone and not just people with disabilities."

According to Geeta Sharma of Unnati, a NGO for development education, awareness about the importance of accessibility design increased among Gujarat's organisations after the devastating earthquake in 2001. "It was while working on rehabilitation of the



Sheth's company Mind Eye Design has designed clear signage products and special spoons



earthquake-affected people of Gujarat that we realised that people with disabilities, senior citizens and children were a vulnerable group during natural calamities," she says.

As they studied the possibility of assisting such people, there emerged a more holistic idea of universal design and concepts for them. "While our research showed that we have provisions for the disabled, our laws are such that those with special needs are often not able to take the benefit of these quotas. As they do not have access to information and accessibility to buildings."

From discussions between organ-

isations and concerned individuals, there emerged the need for taking steps towards removing obstacles from the path of those with any form of disadvantages. So, NGOs such as Unnati, Handicap International and Blind People's Associated decided to start the initiative with a seminar at Law Garden, Ahmedabad in March 2003. The meeting brought together NGOs, private organisations, rehab institutions, architects, designers, decision makers, educators, media, service sector and people with impediments to understand the need for enhancing accessibility in the state starting with a greater awareness among the people. This milestone event, Sharma says, increased the involvement of key stakeholders to take up the accessibility issue.

Inspired by the response, the group formed out of organisation representatives, architects, designers, planners and activists invited Samarthyaa, a New Delhi-based group run by Anjee Agarwal and Sanjeev Sachdeva that has success stories like making Dilli Haat, a food brasserie and craft bazaar, accessible to the disabled and incorporating universal design concepts into the Delhi Metro, to their credit, to interact with the decision markets through a series of workshops.

The outcome was the formation of Access Resource Group. "From March 2003 to December 2004, we had generated a lot of material like a 'Design Manual for a Barrier-Free Built Environment' which incorporates concepts from around the world adapted to local conditions, a CD called 'Freedom of Being' which illustrates accessibility issues and provides solutions, a brochure that has pictures shot locally to show that we can even do it in Ahmedabad of examples of accessible areas like wide doors in the city", Sharma says.

Agencies like AMC and Disability

Commissionerate have also asked the group to train their personnel on this aspect. This, she says, is in addition to the awareness event at Himmatnagar, a builders meet in Vadodara, workshops, melas and presentations.

Adds architect, scholar and academician Yatin Pandya of Vastu-Shilpa Foundation, "One of the key responsibilities of our group, which includes architects and disabled people, is taking Access Audits. This has been made possible by a combination of awareness, because of which many institutions came forward to ask us to check their places for accessibility and provide universal guidelines for modifications in their campuses."

Among the places audited were Law Garden, Sardar Patel Institute of Public Administration (SPIPA),

Many architects, designers, activists and organisations have come together to form Access Resource, a voluntary group, to make the state barrier-free

Eklavya School, Planet Health, ICICI Bank, IIM, airport in Ahmedabad, gardens, public buildings and M Cube (a builder's initiative to make a barrier-free mall, and important buildings in

Kutch district. The group includes some of Gujarat's best known architectural companies like those headed by Nimish Patel, Hasmukh Patel, Kamal Mangaldas, Karan Grover, Mitul Shukla, besides the Vastu Shilpa Foundation.

Says group convener Arindam Mitra, "The audit reports have been implemented by several institutions. But what really touched my heart was when architect Kamal Mangaldas told me that he had designed the Acropolis complex in Ahmedabad to be very accessible based on what he had learnt from us." The group is also putting together information about products for architects and builders who want to improve accessibility of their environments.

Nothing short of lending a helping hand. ■ by Anil Mulchandani