Manish Kumar: "From navigating barriers to breaking them down, every challenge is a stepping stone to creating a more inclusive world."

Background

Manish Kumar was born on 10th April 2002 in a small village in Sahibganj, Jharkhand. From an early age, he faced challenges due to the limited infrastructure in his rural surroundings, and during a temporary period of relying on a wheelchair, he struggled to navigate inaccessible public spaces. This experience ignited his ambition to address such issues in the future.

After completing his early education in his village, Manish was selected to attend Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya in Sahibganj and later, through a competitive selection process, transferred to Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya, Meja Khas, Prayagraj, where he completed his Class 12th while preparing for the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE). His hard work led him to secure the 3rd rank in his category in both JEE Mains and Advanced, earning him a place at IIT Bombay, where he pursued a B.Tech in Civil Engineering.

Manish chose civil engineering with a focus on creating accessible public spaces, driven by his desire to remove infrastructural barriers for people with disabilities. During his time at IIT Bombay, he gained expertise in urban planning, sustainable construction, and building design. However, he soon realized that addressing the issue of accessibility required more than technical solutions—it also required policy changes. This insight motivated him to pursue a Master's in Public Policy at IIT Delhi, where he explored the intersection of urban planning and policy, particularly in the context of Disability Studies.

At IIT Delhi, Manish focused his research on integrating inclusive policies into public infrastructure projects, with the goal of creating spaces that are accessible and dignified for all. His academic journey reflects a commitment to bridging the gap between engineering and policy to foster a more inclusive society.

Outside academics, Manish has excelled in playing carrom, winning several medals at various levels. He is also passionate about writing poetry, which serves as an expressive outlet for him. His goal remains to create a world where public spaces are accessible to everyone, regardless of physical ability, through innovative engineering and sound policy.

Half Year 1 (March'2023 - Aug'2023)

- Manish began his research by identifying the core issues related to infrastructure accessibility for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in the Delhi NCR region. The fellowship theme focused on addressing gaps in the existing Building Bylaws (BBL) and comparing them with the Harmonized Guidelines (HG).
- Conducted secondary research involving theoretical analysis of existing policy documents like BBL and HG. This research aimed at understanding the policy gaps

responsible for inaccessible infrastructure across municipalities. This step involved mapping inconsistencies in policies and identifying critical issues such as inadequate specifications for ramps, signage, and seating arrangements.

- Launched a primary study involving surveys with a diverse participant base, including people with permanent and temporary disabilities. The surveys were designed to assess their firsthand experiences with infrastructure accessibility, covering essential components like building entrances, corridors, and lifts.
- Deployed a Google Forms-based survey for participants from varied backgrounds. A key feature of this stage was gathering both quantitative and qualitative data to extract insights into the accessibility issues faced by PwDs in Delhi NCR.
- Developed real-life case studies, such as those of Suman Kumar Rajak and Kartik Singh, to illustrate the personal impact of inaccessible infrastructure on individuals with disabilities. These stories highlighted key challenges, including inadequate ramps and insensitive social attitudes, which reinforced the importance of policy reforms.

Half Year 2 (Oct' 2023 - March' 24)

- Expanded on the initial findings by conducting a thorough comparative analysis of BBL across municipalities like Gurugram, Noida, Greater Noida, and Delhi, using HG as the benchmark. This analysis revealed stark disparities in accessibility factors such as lift designs, seating spaces, and corridors, emphasizing the need for synchronized regulations.
- Formulated recommendations for revising the BBL, which included incorporating universal design principles, adding specifications for critical infrastructure elements, and ensuring periodic updates to building regulations.
- Published articles in journals and online platforms discussing the findings of the baseline study and advocating for policy reform. These publications helped in disseminating research insights to a wider audience.
- To gain support from the stakeholders, it was required to make them aware of the underlying issue supported by the adequate evidence collected through research. To do so, a podcast was planned. But due to logistical issue it was not possible hence Manish released a youtube video, highlighting the concerned topic for advocacy purposes.
  The link of the youtube video can be found here: https://youtu.be/tgRM0p-NiaU
- Compiled the research findings into a comprehensive report, outlining the key gaps in the BBL and offering detailed policy recommendations for municipal authorities in Delhi NCR. This included specific proposals such as training municipal officials in accessibility standards and regular audits of public buildings for compliance with the HG. The link for this baseline report can be found here: https://1drv.ms/w/c/46902208f8c1d8a1/EQY6to_Q2kNFnbn2POZkVB8BEr-reDkuXTSVNuOMhkQmIw
- Initiated discussions with key stakeholders such as urban planners, architects, policymakers, and advocacy groups. These consultations helped identify areas where the Building Bylaws lacked comprehensive accessibility provisions.

- Conducted press conferences and collaborated with media outlets to raise awareness about the research findings. This outreach was aimed at building public pressure on local authorities to adopt inclusive policies.
- Led social media campaigns and workshops to engage with the broader public, raising awareness of the accessibility issues faced by PwDs. These campaigns highlighted the findings from both the primary and secondary studies, advocating for more accessible public infrastructure.

Major Achievements

- Panelist at International Purple Fest, 2024, Goa: Actively contributed to discussions on disability rights and policies on an international platform, offering valuable insights from a research-based perspective.
- Strategic Meetings with Authorities: Held impactful meetings with key figures from organizations like the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA), and Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), advocating for improved accessibility and disability inclusion in urban planning.
- Published Research in TISS Journal for Disability: Authored a peer-reviewed research paper published in the prestigious TISS journal, 2024 edition, contributing academic knowledge on disability rights and policy implementation.
- Workshops and Seminars on Accessibility: Attended and engaged in numerous workshops and seminars focused on the accessibility of persons with disabilities, continuously enhancing knowledge and sharing insights for practical policy application.
- Innovative Advocacy through Media: Promoted awareness on accessibility issues through diverse media formats, including YouTube videos, podcasts, articles, and press releases, reaching broader audiences and enhancing the visibility of disability rights.

Experience in the Fellowship

During my research at NCPEDP, I gained valuable hands-on experience in multiple areas that deepened my understanding of accessibility policy gaps and the real-world challenges of implementation.

One of the key skills I developed was data collection and analysis. I conducted both primary research, which involved interviewing stakeholders like persons with disabilities, architects, and urban planners, and secondary research, comparing existing policies such as Building By-Laws (BBL) with international standards like the Harmonized Guidelines for Universal Accessibility. This process taught me how to manage and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data, providing a solid foundation in comprehensive research techniques.

Additionally, I gained a deep understanding of policy gaps in accessibility, particularly in public infrastructure. My research revealed critical gaps in BBLs, especially in areas such as corridors, restrooms, and public spaces, which often fail to meet the needs of persons with disabilities.

Comparing these with the Harmonized Guidelines helped me identify where policy improvements are necessary to make infrastructure more inclusive.

Another significant part of my experience was stakeholder engagement. Through interviews with urban planners and architects, I learned how to communicate and gather insights from diverse professionals. This interaction allowed me to understand the challenges they face, such as budget constraints and a lack of awareness about accessibility standards, which hinder effective policy implementation.

I also honed my skills in developing policy recommendations. Based on my research, I proposed practical solutions to close the gaps between current BBLs and the Harmonized Guidelines, offering ways to improve accessibility in public infrastructure.

Moreover, I encountered the real-world challenges that prevent policy enforcement, such as inadequate funding and societal attitudes towards accessibility. This gave me a deeper appreciation for the complexities of making policies work on the ground.

Finally, working on this project enhanced my research and writing skills, allowing me to contribute to research papers and reports. Synthesizing complex information into clear, actionable insights taught me how to communicate research findings effectively to influence policy change.

This research experience has equipped me with practical tools and a thorough understanding of the intersection between accessibility, policy, and real-world application.