

RIGHT TO WALK

Voices/Movements for Creating Walk Friendly//Safe//Centric Cities

Background

While the primacy to be given to pedestrians is given abundant lip-service the fact is that the pedestrian is relegated to the very last position in the pecking order on the streets of Indian cities. This is despite several Court judgments asserting the rights of pedestrians, in some cases even equated with the right to life under the Constitution. The Rights of Persons with Disability also mandates streets to be universally accessible, thereby requiring footpaths and crossings to be designed an exacting standard. Various Government schemes such as the JNNURM and now the Smart Cities Mission, also stress the need for better pedestrian infrastructure. Various IRC Guidelines specify the design standards for urban streets, which over the past few years have focused on the safety and convenience of pedestrians.

The facts on the ground are that footpaths are often non-existent and where they do exist, unwalkable. Traffic management is meant to move vehicular traffic, at the expense of the safety and convenience of pedestrians. Large road infrastructure is conceived, designed and constructed in a way that further marginalizes and imperils the pedestrian. Footpaths are poorly designed, inadequate, ill-maintained and encroached upon by every conceivable obstacle, from utility poles and boxes, signages and gantries, beautification projects and stalls. Motorists drive and park on footpaths with impunity. Crossing a road has become a nightmare for a pedestrian, bordering on the impossible for anyone who is not supremely agile.

Disempowered Pedestrian

The pedestrian is conspicuously missing in raising the demand for safer and better streets. While numerically a large segment, it is also heterogenous and often belongs to a lower socio-economic class. Having a good footpath may not be the highest priority for many belonging to this segment. Most pedestrians may not even be aware of their rights and where they do, they may lack the agency to act. No city has an effective mass-based pedestrian pressure group.

The Conference

This conference is designed to explore the manner in which pedestrians need to organize to become an effective voice for raising the demand for better pedestrian infrastructure and assert their right to mobility, safety, convenience and influence the forces that make cities less vehicle dominant. We shall enumerate the rights that exist, identify the forces that militate against pedestrians and explore the ways in which pedestrians must organize and fight. We shall look at other such movements and identify strategical alliances. The conference will also enable activists and organizations to ideate on the ways to move ahead. Finally, the very act of organizing the conference will provide visibility to both the plight of the pedestrian and highlight the need for strong collective action if the rights, which only exist on paper, are to be realized on the ground.

Conference Details

The conference is planned to be organized in Pune on February 28th and 29th at the S.M. Joshi facility in Navi Peth, Pune.

The conference will consist of sessions exploring various facets of pedestrian mobilization and activities such as a city-walk, presentations, discussions and exhibitions.

Conference attendees include social groups and individuals who are interested in issues related to pedestrians – be it from the lens of gender, social exclusion, safety, rights, disabilities, governance, policies, sustainability and health.