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Mumbai, Feb 24 Riding high on the realty boom, the elevator and escalator industry has seen a near 25 per cent growth over the last three to four years. For the current year, industry representatives see the numbers touch 35,000 units with a turnover of about Rs 4,200 crore.

A sizable portion of the demand appears to come from escalators. Mr V. Jagannathan, Executive Director, Johnson Lifts, says the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation has placed a Rs 125-crore order for 240 units. The units slated for delivery by March 2010 are for 60 stations on the metro track — both elevated and underground. And, the escalators would facilitate a 60-km travel distance.

Against 125 escalators in 1998, the number sold in 2007 is over 2,000. Similarly, elevator speeds have improved. From 1.75 metres per second, the speeds now spoken of are six metres and above. Imperial Tower building in Mumbai is to be installed with about 36 such lifts. Johnson is in talks with New Zealand-based TL Jones to provide value-added features inside the lift-cars such as display screens.

Safety

Despite spiralling sales, prevailing safety standards are recommendatory rather than mandatory though archaic state government Acts spell enforceable norms in some States. Mumbai still relies on the Bombay Lift Act, 1958 when lift-cars had manual doors.

Inspection invariably is part of the public works department and the responsibility relegated to personnel with an electrical background. And, in case of accidents, the manufacturer dons the investigator's role alongside the government agencies.

As for escalators, a 1968 IS norm still holds sway though a draft document is in circulation. "As of now, escalators are imported, mostly from China, and conform to the European norms-EN-81," says Mr T.A.K. Mathews, a qualified elevator inspector accredited by the US-based National Association of Elevator Safety.

While reported data indicates two accidents annually in India, it is 30 fatalities a year in the US, says Mr Mathews.

A third of the elevator market is serviced by the unorganised sector. Western India, especially Mumbai, has 230 contractors listed on Government records.

Mr Avinash Dharma, Regional Manager, Johnson Lifts, says IS14665 relates to material, safety requirements such as maintenance, installation, overall span, buffer plate, wire-rope and lift-shaft size. A PWD licence, renewable annually, is mandatory.

It is the 'consistency of material' performance that puts a question mark on supplies made by the unorganised sector. Moreover, the ground-plus-six floor segment is catered to largely by the unorganised sector whose prices are almost half that of the organised sector players. Ninety-five per cent of lifts sold today are up to 1.75 metre per second speeds, he adds.