

## Spare a thought for the elderly

My writing this column in the Times of India for a while now is the only reason why I have been asked on two different occasions now to give a non-mathematical talk, first by a corporate house and more recently by a local chapter of the Rotary Club. It is very satisfying to know that there are people who read my column, like what they read and what is more, even want me to further publicise the issues addressed in my column. I shall more or less reproduce the talk that I gave the Rotarians.

Not long ago, my daughter who has the advantage of belonging to the facebook generation sweetly offered to start a blog on my account at <http://differentstrokes-vss.blogspot.com/> as a convenient place to collate all my pieces appearing in this column, along with anything else that that I may have written which addresses the issues of inclusivity in society, as well as to give people a chance to post their responses if they wished to do so.

She knew what she was doing; I soon received the following eminently sensible response in the blog from one of the more faithful of readers of the blog: (And this wasn't the first reader of this column to have made similar observations.)

*Although you have so far focused on the problems faced by people with certain specific disabilities, age itself is in one sense a disability that many of us will face one day. Unless the attitudes of our planners and administrators change drastically, the aged in India will find themselves confined to very tiny pockets of their respective towns and cities. You are therefore writing & speaking on issues which may concern a few even during their prime, but will in all probability affect every one of us in course of time.*

Just the other day, I had gone to Krishna Gana Sabha in T. Nagar in Chennai, which is a very chic far cry from the thatched roof pandal with bucket cane-chairs it used to be in 'the good old days'. In the middle of the performance, I needed to find a toilet. (The increased frequency with which one needs to do so is also an offshoot of aging.) Of course there are lots of steps everywhere so you can't use a wheel-chair even if you wanted to. After I had hobbled what seemed to be very, very far for my screaming limbs, I found a not very hygienic place, with more steps of course! After doing what I had come for, I started the long walk back feeling sorry for myself - like many of our star batsmen must have repeatedly felt during their extended recent nightmare in Australia.

Like them, I had the comfort of another aged comrade walking the same path and suffering the same pain, and this seventy-plus lady looked at me labouring with my cane and said commiseratingly: 'These sort of distances are such a problem only for people like us'. But as the above reader observes: *Sooner or later, everybody is going to be a 'person like us'.*

As per the city traffic police, one out of five pedestrians killed in road accidents registered in the city last year was an elderly person and 80% of them were pedestrians.

According to a report by the Chairman, Transport Advisory Forum, Chennai:

*An elderly woman died on the spot after being knocked down by a bus near Vadapalani. It is a story repeated in every city in India. These accidents show that pedestrians, especially the elderly, are extremely vulnerable. Pedestrians account for about 50 per cent of all persons killed and about 45 per cent of persons injured in road accidents in our cities. The elderly constitute 30 to 40 per cent of those killed or injured in these accidents. Elderly pedestrians*

*walk in extremely unsafe and hostile conditions, are in constant conflict with motorised traffic and, hence, easy victims of accidents in India.*

(I can't resist the urge to say 'I told you so': one of my early articles to appear in this column lamented the almost impossibility of crossing roads today, especially multi-lane speedways such as OMR, with the possibilities for crossing them being few and far between.)

According to a recent newspaper report:

*Transport experts have welcomed the idea to introduce foot overbridge with escalators, but not without warning. "It will be very helpful to senior citizens and the differently-abled, who are otherwise at the mercy of motorists. The government should ensure proper maintenance of these structures, or else they will meet the same fate as the escalators at MRTS stations, that are idle without maintenance," said KP Subramanian, former professor, urban engineering division, Anna University.*

If the traffic authorities cannot help save our elders on our roads, what sort of a reflection is that of the Tamil saying (by Avvaiyar) from antiquity:

*Annaiyum Pitavum Munnari Deivam*

(One's mother and father are the first gods one encounters!).

This is a plea to readers to use your contacts, singly or collectively, to apply pressure on the relevant authorities to try and ensure that:

- while so much money is being spent on roads to facilitate fast traffic, at least a small fraction of that should be devoted to usable pavements and foot-bridges with escalators/elevators; you don't have to be disabled and dependent on a wheelchair to appreciate the need and the comfort of elevators.
- there should be an efficient complaint/service mechanism in place for getting the concerned people to repair these elevators/escalators when they start to malfunction. (If reporting and repairing faults can be smoothly done 'online' with BSNL, it is not as if there isn't a blueprint for a functioning model which is already in place.)
- in public places like concert halls, marriage halls, etc., toilets should not be located at great distances or up/down flights of stairs from the 'central' areas;
- public places should have a few wheel-chairs on hand which will be gratefully used by many people, who can be trusted to have them returned to where they were found.

I know all this is far easier said than done. The only thing that works is to identify specific instances where something seems warranted and try to implement the necessary change. I am proud to say that by being a persistent nuisance, I have succeeded in getting at least three places of higher learning agree to conduct 'access audits' of their campuses and improve the state of accessibility for people like me. Wars are won only by winning many small skirmishes and battles! So, please help save our elders before modernisation makes them extinct: set yourselves achievable small goals and steadily chip away at this mountain of a problem.

*By a probably not very strange coincidence, yesterday was my 60th birthday and it seemed appropriate to have this article appear on my first day as a senior citizen!*