

A breath of fresh air

by

V.S. Sunder

This column has periodically been putting out a series of complaints on various issues. I thought it was about time I provided relief from a chain of negative articles. I want to talk about something refreshing and ironically located within 100 metres of OMR in Chennai which was the butt of my critical piece in this column some time ago. Let me lead up to the happy ending...

A few years ago, I had been invited to tea by a lady who had been Principal of the primary school where I had studied more than half a century ago. She is still as inspiring and delightful a conversationalist as ever. She happens to be married to a mathematician who once headed the Ramanujan Institute of Mathematics at Madras University. He has been confined to a wheelchair for probably decades now.

Also at tea that day were a charming couple who, besides being alumni of the same school, as I learnt during the course of the evening, ran an outfit called Callidai Motor Works, whose website describes their work so accurately as 'having embraced what is now popularly called Social Entrepreneurship, with the motto "Make Physically Challenged Persons more mobile inside and outside the house"! I was to see their website and understand these words quite a bit later. What did linger in my mind from that evening was Professor Bhanumurthy's happily jocular remark that it was they who had given him his BMW (Bhanu Murthy's Wheels) - which had been fitted with assorted little gadgets meeting personalised needs and making a qualitative difference to the quality of his daily life.

At that time, my neurological problem was still at a somewhat preliminary stage and I could hobble around with my stick. Later, when things got a little more difficult, I remembered the visiting card which I had judiciously saved from that evening. I went to the web-site of Callidai, and that was probably the most intelligent and heart-warming action I was to take in quite a while. I called up Mr. Bhargav Sundaram (the male in the charming couple alluded to above) and made a date to see him with a view to finding out about his wheelchairs. (I had been wistfully dreaming, for a while, about owning a motorised wheelchair. The one I had seen had been purchased by its user somewhere in America at corresponding dollar prices which had seemed astronomical when converted to rupees.)

Little did I know what awaited me at Callidai. To start with - almost like a good omen - I learnt that their workshop was located

just a couple of kilometres from my place of work. When I went to this workshop, they did have a sample available for me to try out. I sat in it, turned on the joy stick and I knew I was hooked. It was miraculously simple in design and easy to operate. I was told that they would build one to my specifications - the version with a lithium dry battery that one was supposed to be allowed to transport in airplanes, which was lighter, and which I could have for the very reasonable Rs. 85,000 - and let me have it in a couple of weeks.

The point of this story is not my love affair with my wheel-chair, but the absolutely amazing feeling of happiness one had when coming out of that factory/workshop. The work-force is almost completely restricted to people who are challenged in some way, but mostly mobility challenged. I have had to take my chair in there a few times to try and have some minor amendments made and had the pleasure of sitting there for a few hours while my job got done. It was utterly heart-warming to see a bunch of people go around (in spite of their various physical problems, on various forms of mobile equipment) efficiently working, almost always to the background of friendly camaraderie of jocular teasing. Never once did one sense a feeling of self-pity that disability is attended by only too often.

There have been two occasions when my wheelchair 'did not travel too well'. The first time, the wheels had got banged up and bent in transit in the hold of the plane. Another time, although I explained numerous times to the man at the Indian Airlines check-in counter that the lithium battery was not a safety hazard and was permitted by some private airlines I had flown in before, the IA security people had done such a hatchet job on the wheelchair that by the time I saw the chair again in Chennai airport, all the electrical connections to the battery had been manhandled so badly that there was no way the wheel chair could move on its own steam. On both occasions, I took the chair to Callidai where they worked on it cheerfully and returned something which was at least as good as new. (On the second occasion I found that the wires had been diligently yanked out of the battery!) I thanked my lucky stars that this fiasco had occurred in Chennai at the end of my travel, unlike the nightmarish experience of poor ex-army-pilot (constrained for some years now to use a wheelchair because of an accident he had been involved in) who discovered on arrival in Singapore that Air India could not locate the wheelchair he had checked in and had a horrific subsequent stay in a foreign land without his means of locomotion!

For the umpteenth time, I thanked the good Lord for giving us Bhargav Sundaram, his wife Priya and their Callidai!