

Knee-jerk Denial of Reality

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People's defensive knee-jerk reactions to inconvenient questions is one of the biggest hurdles to progress.

'I have nothing against Muslims'. 'I have had Dalit class-mates'. 'We are extremely sensitive to the needs of the disabled'.

The problem arises when these white lies are given as responses to specific questions raised in an attempt to identify the possible existence of a problem that you wish to solve. They result in pushing the awkward truth deeper into the teetering pile of 'to do' files!

All the frustration/bitterness behind these assertions is a reaction to the responses I have, or have not (as the case may be), received to (a) emails that I have been sending to various academic institutions. Almost a year ago (ToI, Sept. 24, 2011) I had made a specific recommendation to the Vice-Chancellors/Directors of Universities/Research Institutes regarding the need to make their campuses barrier-free and accessible, and even suggested a possible way to do so; acting on the belief that one shouldn't leave things to chance, I sent emails - at something like 6.30 am on that 24th itself - to the Directors of various 'premier' Institutions, accompanied by an attached copy of the article (just in case), with an entreaty that they have an 'access audit' of their campus carried out by experts in the business; and (b) numerous attempts I have made at directly talking to bosses of such institutions.

Of the almost dozen institutions which were addressed, ONLY TWO responded. I received even those two responses probably only because of the intervention of personal friends of mine in that institution, to whom I had had the sense to also mark copies, asking them to 'help push things along'. I have little doubt that if any of the directors of the other ten institutions addressed were specifically asked what accessibility-related problems their institute faced, their answer would constitute only minor variations of the examples listed in the third sentence within quotes in the first paragraph.

Recently, I had called a friend of mine from one of these institutes, along with his wife, for dinner, and a most enjoyable evening was had by all. And when they were leaving. his wife said we should come to their place one evening, forcing him to quickly point out shamefacedly that the apartment they lived in (in his institute housing)

was on the second floor - which is a little beyond what I can climb. (And I know several people who can't climb even one step!)

I would like to know how many of the heads of these institutions will be able to give an answer they will be happy with, to the following questions: Given that I am constrained to a wheel-chair:

How many:

1. *of your faculty will I be able to visit in their offices? on-campus housing?*
2. *of your office buildings have a toilet I can use, by myself, without the need of anybody's help?*
3. *sections of your library will I be able to access?*
4. *class-rooms of yours will I be able to attend or give a lecture in? (this should be possible without my having to be unceremoniously carried like a sack of potatoes!)*
5. *entrances to buildings are not so clogged with vehicles (motorised or manually operated two-wheelers or four-wheelers) that I cannot get to the possibly existent ramp I would need to use in order to enter the building on my wheel-chair?*

Even my institute, whose state of accessibility I have been boasting about to my friends, can only come up with: (i) most; almost none, (ii) none, as of now, (iii) parts of one, (iv) most, and (v) usually, all. This is in spite of my having been on the administration's case, constantly. (All answers were 'none' before I started on them - about 10 years ago!)