

Role models

V.S. Sunder

More than a decade ago, I once went with my family to spend a year visiting universities in California and Iowa in the US. Upon our return, my brother asked my daughter (now a teenager but only about six years old then) just what she liked about America. Her perspicacious answer was that she could cross the road, and even walk to school all by herself. (*You only press a button, wait for the light to turn green, all cars stop, and you can cross the road!*) Now I am on the verge of becoming sixty years old, am constrained to become increasingly dependent on a wheel-chair due to a neurological problem, and increasingly find myself yearning for the joy of this wonderful freedom expressed by her.

Can we Indians ever hope to crawl out of the black hole we have dug for ourselves with our appalling lack of civic sense - as witnessed by

- more than 70 percent of our drivers seeing nothing wrong with (i) driving the wrong way on a one-way street, (ii) driving past a red light, and worse still honking at the car in front who prevents them from doing so by stupidly waiting for the light to turn green?
- brazenly getting out of an air-conditioned car, unzipping and urinating on the side of the road?
- tossing waste matter (such as the wrapper of an ice cream cone or an empty plastic bag which once contained potato chips) out of a car window, and in the extreme case, throwing domestic garbage over the wall into the next house?

On a personal note, can I hope to ever again cross a road by myself in my own country?

Some time ago, I realised that nobody is going to magically bring this about for me, and decided that as this was a case of 'what's good for me is good, period', I would shamelessly utilise such visibility /marketability I still have as a research mathematician as well as contacts through friends and relatives (I come from a family of respected musicians, scientists - including even a couple of Nobel laureates in physics - and social workers) to apply pressure where it might help in order to improve the state of accessibility and inclusivity in our society. I have been trying the following ploys:

1. Bullying the (admittedly sympathetic and sensitive) Director and Administration of my own institute (IMSc, Chennai) into enabling me to access almost every corner of my institute with such satisfactory results as to cause an Indian friend visiting here from the US to remark on the remarkable level of wheelchair friendliness of IMSc.
2. Writing, as here, and appealing to people's sense of what is right.
3. Making it a point of going in my wheel-chair to various social events and trying to highlight the lack of sensitivity in the construction of our public facilities by making a fuss if that seemed to be warranted.
4. Responding to people who invite me to meetings of an academic nature by saying I will come (with my wheelchair) **provided** they can personally guarantee that the guest house and venue of the meeting I am invited to will all be accessible.
5. Writing to ministers at both Central and State levels about the need for addressing concerns of accessibility.

I am happy to report that action taken as described in ploy no. 4 above has been satisfactorily successful. I have had very positive results in the University of Hyderabad¹ and the Indian Statistical Institute campus in Delhi - with both places having made a few ramps just before my visit there. My conversations with the directors of both IISc, Bangalore and IIT, Madras have been quite positive. In contrast, nothing tangible has yet transpired from ploy no. 5.

While I realise that the magnitude of practical issues needing to be resolved, before anything can be achieved at a national level, is huge, I wish to elaborate on something I proposed to the Union Minister of Urban Development during my last visit to Delhi.

As our centres of learning should be role models for the rest of society to emulate, let us start by making the campuses of all our Universities and Institutes models of etiquette on the road as well as accessibility of buildings: thus, no horns; giving right of way to the smaller vehicle whereby rights of pedestrians take highest priority; making all buildings accessible to the physically (visually, mobility-wise, etc.) challenged.

¹see the unofficial blog <http://hcurocks.wordpress.com/> of the VC of UoH

This article is an entreaty to the Directors and VCs of our Centres of Higher Learning to accept this as a challenge to *set their houses in order and set an example*.

This suggestion is not unrealistic; our youth are far more conscious of the environment and responsibility to the fellow man than their cynical ‘elders’. There is a remarkable ‘Access Audit Report on the International Guest house’² under the project ‘Accessible University of Delhi’ by Samarthyam³ which can be taken as a model of what to do and how to do it. This is an eminently implementable suggestion; maybe our salvation can only come from our youth.

²see <http://www.du.ac.in/fileadmin/DU/DUCorner/pdf/InternationalGuestHouse.pdf>

³see <http://www.samarthyam.org/>