

Oversight

V.S. Sunder

I started this column with grand visions and tall claims. I advertised its *raison d'être*, in my home-page as well as in the blurb at the foot of this column, as my wish 'to periodically remind people of the special needs of the differently abled'. A friend of mine suggested to me last week that I might consider opening up a broader front in my articles, 'and especially include the problems blind people must face here'.

I realise and admit that I have been remiss. I have been maintaining a constant crib about the problems faced by wheelchair users and mobility impaired people. In my defense, permit me to make three weak excuses:

- My previous pieces described what I have personally experienced, which were easier to write about, with a ring of truth;
- I have tried to get in touch with a hearing impaired person on at least two different occasions, but they did not seem eager to talk to me;
- probably my oldest friends, who is visually impaired, has been out of the country for the past few months, with the result that I haven't been able to pick his brains.

If you had told me forty years ago that I would be writing a column on disability-related matters, and if I had believed you, I would have hazarded a bet that one of the first few pieces, if not **the** first, in such a column would be on Venky, the friend alluded to above. It is time now to make amends. I wrote to him asking him some of the problems he had experienced first-hand, and what sort of sensitisation in people would help in doing away with some of these problems. And he replied:

The problem is that I don't see myself as having any great inability. Having said that, I need a sighted guide when I am not able to use my white cane; I am petrified of being on my own in a railway station or an airport in any country other than India. Needing someone to read and write for me as I am too lazy to learn to use a computer with accessible software.

Here is a fiercely independent guy with an uncompromising urge to show the world that he is the equal of anybody, sighted or not. Growing up with him has been a great education for me, and I am convinced I am a better person for it. Most of his friends are seldom conscious of his impairment. (On one of the early occasions that he visited our place, my wife asked me anxiously if she was adequately dressed for the occasion!) Drivers of auto-rickshaws believe he is conning them since he directs them expertly through the city to a familiar place!

He has acquired such expertise in his chosen area of work - related to empowerment of people with disabilities - that his services have been solicited in Cambodia, Africa, UK, USA, Canada, ... ; and after all these decades of such travel and work, he still says he is *petrified of being on his own in a railway station or an airport*.

It is only common sense for any society to make full use of its raw material, to recognise the worth of world-beaters like him and ensure that they are given environments which strive to mitigate their handicap, so their full potential can really blossom? What does it take to enforce high-faluting notions we have enacted into laws of the land such as 'providing braille symbols and auditory signals in elevators or lifts' as well as in buses/ metros, etc.? **People in charge of our roadways and railways should compulsorily spend a few working days completely blindfolded to understand this 'being petrified'**. Why can't agencies that sanction building plans, such as CMDA, make it a necessary condition for all public buildings (including stations, metros, malls, etc.) to have elevators which are equipped with such provisions?

I also know a mathematician couple, who live in housing provided by IIT(M) to the husband who is on the faculty there, while the visually impaired wife is a faculty member at the Ramanujan Institute for Advanced Study in Mathematics at Madras University, which is right across town. For a 'normal person', this is not a problem since it 'only entails a walk of under a kilometre from the IIT gate to a station (crossing my favourite road OMR on the way), and another walk of less than a kilometre from another station to reach RIASM' - with the walk involving highly uneven pedestrian footwalks if they indeed exist, and two-wheelers speeding by at the edge of the roads!'. Can you imagine what poor Sushma must undergo every day to merely get to work and come back.

Leaving aside the humanitarian angle, are we so rich in resources that we can afford to completely ignore the needs of highly skilled and immensely motivated people like Sushma or Venky, deny them any infrastructural assistance in their daily life, and thereby run the risk of not being able to benefit from their expertise?