

Short-sightedness

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Some time ago, I had written a piece about my making a trip purportedly to help upgrade the curriculum at a university in the north-east but in fact out of a desire to see a good friend in Kolkata who was not very well, and I had said some not very positive things then about the VC of that university. The aim then had been to speak about the highly inaccessible nature of the guest house there. This piece has similarities and differences. For the differences, this was in the south-west, and the organisers had done a splendid job looking out for me.

As part of the year-long activities conducted by my institute as part of its 50th anniversary celebrations, I went along with two of my former students to conduct a three-day programme aimed at college students affiliated with a university in southern Tamil Nadu. As always, for me to be able to go anywhere, many plans had to be made in advance. The head of the math department at the university in question had made absolutely impeccable arrangements - making sure that I was accommodated at a hotel without steps at the front and with an elevator to take me to my room arranged on the same floor as the restaurant we ate most of our meals in. And he had arranged the lectures in the unique building in the university which had a ramp, the lecture hall had no raised dais, etc. And he had arranged for a large SUV-type of vehicle into which my motorised wheel-chair could be conveniently loaded at the back, and which was large enough to take all the resource persons from hotel to university and back. The entire experience was very rewarding, what with close to 60 students, mostly girls, with some traveling almost three hours either way just to listen to such wisdom as we had to offer.

On the day before the programme started, the local HOD asked me about a possible 'inaugral function'. Usually, what these 'functions' entail is an hour or more of long speeches, filled with empty platitudes, by various dignitaries of the university who have nothing to do with the subject of the programme. So I was very pleased when the HOD agreed to my suggestion that we completely dispense with the inaugral function, and instead plunge into the mathematics with minimal fuss. But there was a very small function at the end of the programme, when the VC of the university came to meet the

resource people and the students. After he thanked me and my institute for organising this programme at their university and expressed the hope that we would conduct more such workshops in the future, I suggested to him that I hoped to see some more ramps and elevators when I came again. Prompt came the response that I just had to inform them when I was coming and he could arrange to instal a ramp wherever needed. 'It only takes a day; a ramp can be easily arranged', he said. Is it not extremely short-sighted to set something like a ramp in place only when some 'big shot' says he is coming and will need it?

As one of my younger colleagues said later, 'this is all very well for you when you come, but what about some students who may need it?'. If it only takes a day to create a ramp, then why, one wonders, does only one department in the university have a ramp? And, as pointed out, are ramps and other facilities only to be provided for established senior professionals?

And on the night of the last day of this programme, I learnt that my Kolkata friend had just passed away. Although this may be immaterial to this column, I plead your indulgence while I raise my hat to Somesh, one of the gentlest and most decent of human beings I have ever known, without whom ISI, Kolkata will never be the same.