

Signing Away One's Rights

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For the third time during my experiences in flying on planes in India, I went through an almost identical experience. While I was waiting in my wheel-chair (provided by the airline) for the boarding call for my flight, one of the uniformed representatives of the airline in question came up and asked my wife to fill and sign some form. As my wife knew I would insist on reading anything supposedly signed by me, she handed over the form to me. When I started examining what I was being asked to sign (*It is just something we ask all our wheel-chair passengers to sign*, one is told), I found that by signing that document, I was indemnifying the airline of all damages or responsibility for any accident leading to injury and possibly even death resulting from my having flown with them. Nothing in that form says anything about a wheelchair. I asked how come all the other passengers were not also being asked to sign such an 'indemnity' statement and I was told this was because mine was a 'medical case'. I started raising my voice about this being totally unacceptable discrimination. I told them I would sign it **provided** they gave me a copy of this form that I was signing - only because this form would hold no legal standing in any court, and because I would like professional advice regarding the legality of requiring people with disabilities to sign such forms. I was assured I would be given such a copy, but after some ten minutes the same airline representatives came and told me they had spoken with a senior officer and he had said this was not necessary, 'so I need not worry'. I said I was not worried but only wanted a copy of that form, but my request was politely turned down.

This has happened to me in Kolkata, Chennai and Goa, and with Jet Airlines and Spice Jet. Surely these airlines cannot be within their legal rights in extracting such signatures from unsuspecting persons with disabilities who are only told (if at all they ask what the forms are for) 'these are not important, just something we are supposed to get because of the rules'! Their distaste for letting me have a copy of the form they wanted me to sign surely seems to indicate that! I know what I am going to talk about with my lawyer-cum-disability-activist friend when I meet him on his return from a visit to spend Christmas with his family.