

The Wrights' problem

V.S. Sunder

Not long ago, the newspapers announced that the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu had introduced a fleet of buses equipped with special lifts to aid wheel-chair users. Soon after, the papers carried another story about the ground realities faced by an enterprising wheel-chair user who took it on himself to test out how these buses really worked. Besides the various shortcomings in the design of these buses that he had pointed out, I want to concentrate on one particular facet of the problems raised/faced by him. To wit, how does one get to the stage of using the lift in the bus? How does one get down from pavements beside the road in the first place in order to reach where the lift is? I want to concentrate on the road to a serious re-think on what accessibility involves.

The entire scenario is not unlike 'what to do with an airplane before you have an airport with runways'! That got me thinking about how the Wright brothers must have solved the problem of what to do with their wonderful invention. And my mind went back to old film clips of planes taking off and landing on wide open fields. They had the space but must have had rough landings. That, and the onset of the larger planes must have been the reason for the huge runways we see in today's airports.

Let me explain the analogy I am trying to elaborate thus:

airplane : airport ↔ people with disabilities : access

Allow me to push this slightly contrived analogy to the hilt. Various airlines have their planes, and various people like me have wheelchairs. They have got their airports; how shall we get access? Let us examine their game plan for success. They first create a powerful Civil Aviation Authority, with inputs from various potential sources for the capital needed for the success of their venture, as well as support from representatives in our governments whose job descriptions would make them interested in the proposed venture. You need the former to fund the building of airports, and the latter to remove potential problems and clear the way for approving the proposal.

To play devil's advocate, you might say 'building airports has obvious potential economic benefits to interest a potential investor; what's

in it for him to promote accessibility for people with various manners of disabilities?’ To this devil’s advocate, I say ‘you will bring a huge task force of people desperately wanting to contribute to society, who are being forced to stay within the confines of their four walls because they have no other choice’. To him, I would say ‘look at the proportion of humanity who have some manner of disability; look at the number of people above 60 who have some manner of impediment and who would benefit from having a barrier-free environment’. To him, I would say ‘The leading scientists, politicians and corporate bosses in India are all, almost perforce, more than 60 or even 70 years old’. And I would ask him : ‘Do your fancy economic assessments advocate that we deny ourselves the inputs of all these people?’ Besides the obviously humanitarian ethical angle, does it not make simple economic sense to make our society accessible.

Going by this premise, I am trying to initiate a proposal to raise the money needed to:

- conduct an in-depth access audit of about 30 of the allegedly premiere public places in some of the richest cities in India (for example, some of the metro stations at vital hubs in Delhi, Doon School, Rabindra Sadan in Kolkata, IIT Kanpur, Church-gate Station, TIFR Mumbai, IISc Bengaluru, Rishi Valley School, the Music Academy in Chennai, ...)
- implement the recommendations stemming from those audits in a chosen subcollection, of maybe 10 places
- publicise the result of the findings from these audits
- bring right-thinking and concerned people - disability activists, potential investors from organisations with some sense of corporate responsibility, representatives from the pertinent branches of the Indian Government - to a publicised meeting where we lay uncompromisingly bare the state of affairs in places representing our efforts to put our best foot forward, and hope the consequent embarrassment would make us draw plans on a war-footing to implement the recommendations of the audits in the remaining 20 places; and finally
- make realistic plans for extending the pilot project, proposed above, from the privileged few to the unprivileged many, and for making that symbolic airport of access a reality.

As a great visionary of the last century said:

I have a dream ...