

Two for the price of one

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(I am sorry my usual article in the newspaper column could not appear today due to some misunderstanding about acceptable length of article, etc. But I decided, nevertheless to put up the piece.)

I want to give a different slant to the phrase in the above title, which is customarily used as a ploy by merchants wanting to induce customers to buy their ware(s). I, on the other hand, want to celebrate the fact that this column has just completed one year of existence, by making a plea for a similar ‘discounting practice’, to appropriate quarters in our Government.

To set the ball rolling, let me recall something I learnt close to forty ago when I was very impressed by the implied sensitivity of our Government. A friend of mine in College was blind, and he told me that when he had to travel, not only was he entitled to a concession in view of his visual impairment, but even that if he wished to take another person with him, the two people could travel at the same cost that any one ‘normal’ person could travel on. I remember thinking then that it was wonderful that our Government was so sensitive as to entitle him to an accompanying person to give him any desired help without having to pay essentially anything extra for that person’s travel!

Much more recently, I was to remember this fact to good effect. It turns out that I have, of late, been receiving a named fellowship which entitles me to a contingency grant which is so generous that it can cover a lot of my travel costs (related to my academic work, naturally), even including some amount of international travel. However, due to my own mobility constraints, I found that I was turning down several invitations to conferences. Then I remembered my friend having been at the receiving end of the entitlement to take along a ‘carer’. So I asked the director of my institute if I could not also be the recipient of such a benevolent provision. He said I should ask the agency (DST) which funded my fellowship if that was acceptable. So I wrote to the big man in DST if it would indeed be acceptable for me to take my wife with me whenever I travelled on work - and charge the cost of her travel also to this fellowship - as I am constantly in need of her assistance. To my great relief and unexpected pleasure, prompt came the reply in the form of an unconditional green signal. So, I have been able to maintain a fair amount of my academic activity which involves travel, this having been unthinkable but for this far-sighted official, who behaved unlike so many of our bureaucrats who demand of disabled people that they produce a certificate at periodic intervals of time which certify (with the necessary attestation of some large number of dignitaries) that they still suffer from such-and-such handicap!

It goes without saying that I am exceptionally privileged to have such accommodating bureaucrats to deal with. This is not necessarily the case in even all reputed research institutions. It has been my endeavour, for some time now, to use whatever leverage I might be able to extract from such recognition as I have in the academic world in India, to bully

people into conducting access audits of their campuses. I use this column (quite shamelessly at times!) and whatever powers of emotional blackmail I can rustle up to achieve the desired end. Some time back I employed such ‘hitting-under-the-belt’ tactics with a sister Math Institute in Chennai, and they have been very responsive and are in the process of having their campus audited even as I write. I tried to use this as a lever to suggest that a reputed science institute in Bangalore ask the accessibility expert (whose travel from Delhi to Chennai and back had been funded by the institute in Chennai) to conduct a similar exercise at their institute now, as they would only need to pay her Chennai-Bangalore-Chennai airfare. I have been cribbing to the mathematicians at this institute that I cannot access a single lecture room in their department, and they have been promising me that they will fix this. I am told they recently went through a ‘renovation/expansion’ of their department, but they still do not have an elevator to facilitate my accessing any of their lecture halls. But my hope of their getting the expert from Delhi to help them clean up their act was dashed for the simple reason that their accounts people did not see any reason to pay for two plane tickets to get somebody to come and do the desired exercise, rather than getting some expert from Bangalore - which they have not done for decades/centuries! The fact is that this expert is wheel-chair-bound and needs a ‘carer’ to travel with her.

The purpose of this article is not to merely give bad press to this Bangalore institute, but to ask why the Government should not have the rule in place for air travel today that they had at least 40 years ago for train travel - which is to enable a person who needs to travel with a carer/attendant to travel with that carer at the cost of one ticket! (After all, the cost of a train ticket then, would probably buy more than a plane ticket today!)

If a relative of a President or Union Minister can make routine trips abroad at the taxpayer’s cost, can’t this perk be extended to an attendant of a scientist, and in fact, of just any Indian citizen who needs such an attendant?