

Ingenious hurdles to access

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Today being Christmas eve, let me take a cue from greedy little boys all over the world who prepare their 'I want' lists for Santa Claus. In deference to my being a Hindu from Tamil Nadu, let me change the identity of my prospective benefactor from Father Christmas to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. This is consistent with the kindness she has been extending to people with disabilities throughout this month. She began by commissioning a fleet of buses equipped with special lifts for wheel-chair users, and followed it up with promising to reserve a quota (for people with disabilities) of 3% of all employees hired by her State Government; but the largesse I seek are of a slightly different nature from free TV sets or laptops. My need is actually quite simply stated: *All I want for Christmas is a barrier-free environment!*

Allow me to highlight some elements of planning - seen even in the latest buildings - which are strokes of genius if their goal is to ensure that no mobility-challenged person depending on a wheelchair can ever access the buildings in question, or sections thereof: to such a person these are as moats around castles of yore were to hostile bands of marauding invaders.

1. Some number of steps (1,3,5, whatever; any number greater than 0 is as effective as any other) need to be climbed in order to get from one level to another. These hurdles manifest themselves in numerous forms:
 - They may lead from the street level to the entrance foyer of the building. At one stroke they ensure that access to the elevators is denied to anyone who has not climbed the required step(s).
 - An entire section of a room could be at a higher level than others, e.g., when there are split levels - such as in all Japanese apartments/houses where you can (should!) leave your footwear at the lower level before ascending cleaner to the higher level.
 - They would be the only means to the roof of a building; even if this building has 100 floors, and elevators will take you all the way to the top floor, you will still have to climb some (10, 15, ..?) steps to reach the roof-top with the magnificent view (a popular site for parties!).

- Auditoria have enough steps strategically placed so that there is no way that a person can get to a place from which she can either attend or perform in a play/concert/lecture held at that auditorium without having negotiated those steps. (Prime examples are The Music Academy and The Museum Theatre in Chennai and the J.N. Tata Auditorium in Bangalore; many of them have already been at the receiving end of my loaded comments.)
 - I first saw the following stroke of genius in some apartment complexes housing the faculty in the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research in Mumbai (allegedly *the* premier scientific research institution in India): the idea here is that if a building has 10 floors, elevators only need to halt at 5 places (at levels 1.5, 3.5, ..., 9.5) so you ‘only need’ to either climb up or down half a flight of stairs after getting out of the elevator in order to get to the floor of your choice.
 - One of the most spectacular walkways in TIFR is the one right next to the sea, separated from the sea by only a 50-foot-wide clump of rocks, carefully designed so the waves splash on them furiously and majestically during the monsoon, causing a tremendous spray of water on the walkway. It has been some time since I went to TIFR. It used to be necessary to negotiate many steps before one could get there. I will be very impressed if some kind soul has arranged for strategically distributed ramps which would permit people like me to again have that uplifting multi-sense experience of the sea through sight, feel and smell.
2. Dimensions - be they width of doors, depth and width of elevators, width of toilets - are not specified with wheel-chair users in mind.

This pessimism has been fueled by a recent visit to Hiranandani’s ‘Upscale’ gated community, prompted by friends suggesting that I would surely find ‘a barrier-free and accessible environment where the quality of my life would be significantly enhanced’; I found steps without ramps in most places. There has been some email correspondence subsequently, but nothing concrete has transpired. I am mentioning names here in the hope that some enlightened soul at Hiranandani’s might deem it fit to contact me about making this dream of mine a reality!

Let me conclude with the concrete wish that agencies such as CMDA (the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority) are instructed, if not legally bound, to refuse to give sanctions to any future (at least public) buildings which do not satisfy minimal accessibility norms? if I can be more greedy, may I dare hope that CMDA will generously use the bulleted points above to identify some strict no-no's?