

Shades of perceptions

V.S. Sunder

A physics professor friend of mine drew my attention to an article posted on the internet (at <http://nirmukta.com/2012/10/11/no-country-for-wheelchairs/>) which was just music to my ears. He started the email carrying this information with almost an apology for possibly overstepping his limits by mentioning my column/blog devoted to almost exactly the same circle of ideas (in the comment he had posted on that article)!

The author (of the article posted on the internet) sets the ball rolling with the astute observation that most people might have trouble remembering details of just how the entrance to a known building looks, while people with disabilities have to notice and shelve in their memory various details which are of prime importance to them. And he then sets about describing the almost uniformly inaccessible (to wheelchair bound people) nature of the posh 100 feet road in Indiranagar, Bangalore. His article is replete with photographic evidence of this lack of accessibility.

Let me not deprive you of the pleasure of reading its contents by presenting a half-baked summary of that article. Instead, let me dwell on the different levels of sensitivity exhibited by the perceptions of different people who have posted comments on this site. One reader comments that in order to take any action as was done by the author, one requires only a *raised awareness* and that the article in question pooh-poohs common excuses such as lack of time or resources. My physicist friend Professor Balakrishnan rightly points out that ‘most of our streets and shopping areas do not have proper access for ANYBODY who is not really athletic, owing to encumbrances, encroachments, rubble-ridden pavements, haphazard parking of vehicles, just plain decades-old junk strewn about, etc. etc’.

And then there is the reader who argues that it is not important how steep a ramp is, so long as there *is* a ramp because (he says, and I quote:) ”most of the handicapped people in India use a bit of help from the public in any case. If not the public, security guards/establishment staff will be eager to help clients, from what I have seen. At least, family members/friends with whom they have coffee with at Coffee Day. Even without ramps, people in wheelchairs are carried palanquin style across steps in most places in India.” At

one fell swoop, this argument ‘arrives’ at the conclusion that people with disabilities should just be happy to exist so long as they have relatives and/or friends who are prepared to unceremoniously carry them like a sack of potatoes (*à la palenquin*) wherever they want to go. Why, it might go on to ask, would a person with disabilities be so silly as to expect or hope that society might allow him an iota of dignity on some day at some place?

I find this thinking ingenuous and dangerous as it fails to recognise the right of people with disabilities to be able to benefit from various public resources without having somebody along to enable them to do so? Does a person’s right or ability to enjoy a beautiful concert have to have anything to do with being blind or crippled? Are such people entitled to enjoy such beauty only if there is someone else to enable them to do so? When a ‘normal’ person has no such constraints, why should an ‘abnormal’ person be penalised for not ‘being normal’? Should we ‘abnormal’ people just pack up and wait to die, or are we allowed to hope for as close to a normal life as is consistent with our ‘abnormality’? The word ‘abnormal’ has advisedly been consistently used in quotes, as that is not the politically correct word to use in this context. The phrase ‘people with disabilities’ is used not euphemistically, but positively, in recognition of the basic rights, independence and empowerment that it connotes.