

What they say

by

V.S. Sunder

Sometimes I feel I have been using this column as an avenue for the frustrated ranting I periodically have the urge to subject society to. (If you can do that to me, I should be able to do this to you!) But the real - and stated - motive for this column, in the first place, was to periodically remind people of the special needs of the differently abled. The purpose of this piece is to show that I am indeed far from the only person in this category and that there is a silent majority of my kind out there who sympathetically vibrate to these rantings of mine. I thought I might, for today's instalment, reproduce a few lines (or paragraphs as the case may be) from some email responses I have received from readers of this column:

My first response here is from one who has to use the Chennai buses, and he provides further proof of the abhorrent lack of civic sense in our countrymen(*), and he says:

On a number of occasions, it is a fact that nobody offered that seat meant for us (I am 75) - but one day a blind old man entered and the seat meant for him was not given. The worst part is when he sat on the floor of the bus it was objected to as being a hindrance!!

((*) I must especially exempt Ms. Jayalalitha from this blanket criticism, in recognition and gratitude for the fleet of buses she recently commissioned, with special lifts for the benefit of wheel-chair users. One only wishes people in the capital of her state would show similar sensitivity!)

The above reader was referring to the two seats in Chennai city buses which are purportedly reserved for elders and the differently abled, and he goes on to note that these seats are invariably occupied by ladies who are neither elderly nor differently abled, and who seldom consider it necessary to give up their seats when people of those categories come into the bus!

Here is one of my favourites, reproduced in almost its entirety:

I've been reading your insightful articles in the Times Of India and after reading each one I went...aaah!!!

I'm Sarah. I had polio as a kid and have used crutches and a brace on my right leg all my life. Over the years I have started experiencing symptoms of Post Polio syndrome, which has resulted in more weakness, fatigue etc. This has resulted in me using a wheel chair while at work and one at home.

That being my personal background, I'm writing this to assure you that your articles, written in spite of your very busy academic life, are not just your personal story. There are many, many silent "Sunders" out there who are going through exactly what you've written and wishing that the powers that be would be sensitive enough to include their needs while planning infrastructure.

I too like you have had my share of being bundled up airplane steps, lugged down stairs in a private hospital (like a strussed up pig!!), facing intense dehydration due to reduced liquid intake, to avoid having to use public toilets...the list is endless....

Thanks for taking the cause of people like you by convincing TOI to let you have your say. Let's hope that our voice is heard through your writing and more sensitivity is shown.

Keep up the great work.

My last quote is from Fatima: (these names - Sarah, Fatima - remind me that we do live in a secular society and that worthy causes bring us all together in a very satisfying manner.)

One can see from Dr Sunder's blog that the South is 100 years ahead of the North in terms of civilization. It also make us realize yet again that PR works better than prodding the beureaucratic Kumbh-karans of India!

I responded with a gloomy 'The Kumbh-karans will never awake. Only self-help works.' - maybe because I had had a bad day! And she came back promptly with this feisty response:

Sir, I believe that a relentless internet campaign has got the potential to stir up revolutions, so why not the kumbh-karans?!

I have quoted all these emails, not to show how well my column is being received, but to show the natural empathic response that it has elicited from people who are in the same boat as I, thereby seeming to justify the *raison d'etre* of this column - which is to make people sensitive to the needs of the multitude of silent Sarah's in our society, for whom this special day has been dedicated.

Today, in case you didn't know, is 'World Disabled day' - which is why the editor kindly agreed to carry my column today even though this was really due only next week.