

Stairway to heaven, or ...

by

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If you are remotely related to science and have spent some time in Bengaluru, you cannot but have attended meetings or lectures at the imposing J.N. Tata Auditorium across the busy C.V. Raman Road from the Indian Institute of Science.

The architecture of the auditorium, however, betrays a singular lack of scientific thought, common sense or concern for the potential user who may be physically challenged. There is no evidence that the architects or the ‘scientific minds’ that conceived the building imagined that someone in a wheelchair might visit the building. A Stephen Hawking, for example, will simply have no way of reaching the lecture hall, by himself.

Based on personal experiences, permit me to list a few gory details to illustrate the trauma and horror that a physically challenged person, such as myself, can be subjected to at this otherwise plush and pretentious auditorium. To get to the lecture halls of the auditorium, you need to climb three steps from the porch to the interior of the building, and a further eighteen steps (in thoughtful installments of seven and eleven) before reaching the auditorium.

Of course, if at some time, you should be unfortunate enough to need to use a toilet there, you will have to climb down some sixteen more steps before walking about ten meters to get to the toilet - and later, retrace your steps in the reverse order. The toilets, needless to add, are not equipped to accommodate the needs of one who cannot even get out of her wheelchair by herself.

And then, if you should happen to want to spend the entire day at the meeting, you will need to negotiate something like sixteen steps to get down to the area where coffee, lunch, refreshments are served during intermissions and all this for perhaps three-four times during the day, not to mention a few trips to the toilet.

This article is a plea to the supposed intelligentsia of this country to reflect on the condition of the not so able-bodied and their right to lead a life of dignity in an inclusive and enlightened society.

People like me are serious professionals who seek no sympathy or special allowances on our behalf. What we do seek, nay demand, is a humane environment that is more aware and sensitive to special needs, enabling us to continue making productive contributions despite physical limitations. This enjoins on society to do some in-

tropection in planning buildings, campuses and events that are inclusive and participatory.

Is it not the duty of any civilized society to:

- intelligently plan its cities and buildings so that they are more concerned about and accessible to the differently abled;
- refuse to organize events at such torturous and insensitive venues;
- and even boycott all events held at such inconsiderately designed buildings.

Surely there are laws of the land which can compel all public buildings to provide such amenities. While one can take the perverse route of legal injunctions and hefty penalties, I would rather appeal to the directors of the various institutes and presidents of various academies in this 'science city' to not organize events at venues which are not universally accessible, and thereby ensure that science is not rendered inaccessible to some people whose only fault is not possessing the 'ideal and flawless body'.