

## Wheels within wheels

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This is more in the nature of an open letter to airlines and airport authorities. As one who must have flown more than hundred times with a request for wheel-chair assistance, I have acquired a motley collection of stories with the common denominator of lack of forethought and planning. Here are a few samples, which I narrate in the hope that some appropriate authority might consider it worthwhile to attempt some concrete steps at implementing solutions to the problems I mention:

- Having been taken in the wheel-chair on the ‘aerobridge’ to the door of the craft, I have hobbled out of the chair, only to be informed - more than once - that my seat was ‘28 (or maybe 30) Charlie’, which required my having to move on my own steam through the length of the aircraft. When asked if they could not seat me close to the entrance, I have received several responses, such as:
  1. They do not do so because I would then have to walk the length of the aircraft if I wanted to use the toilet; (I, as an economy class passenger, could surely not expect to use the facility at the front of the craft, since that was reserved for the Business Class clientele!)
  2. the seats in the front rows had been reserved for the use of frequent fliers who had tele-checked in and reserved those seats; (silly me for beginning to think that mobility challenged people could expect privileges offered only to people with enough flying miles!)
- Still on the theme of having to negotiate miles between the aisles on their own steam by people (sometimes even not as fortunate as I to be able to hobble the length of the plane on my own steam, albeit with pain and with the help of crutches), I once asked (on a Jet Airways flight from the recently built airport in Bangalore) why they could not have ‘aisle chairs’ (wheel-chairs narrow enough to move in the aisle of a plane) and received this gem of an answer: ‘the onus is on the airport to provide such amenities and the airline has its hands tied’. *Why, one wonders, does a newly built airport claiming to have state-of-the-art facilities not consider the need for providing aisle-chairs a part of this ‘state-of-the-art- character?’* A paraplegic

friend of mine had to suffer the ignominy of being carried like a sack of potatoes in order to move from her wheel-chair to her seat in the craft and kept saying ‘No I do not’ in a frigid tone of voice to repeated questions on whether she would like something to drink; when this query was repeated for the n-th time by a solicitous stewardess, she snapped back ‘And who will take me to the toilet if drinking all these things on offer makes me need to use the toilet? So, NO THANKS.’

- One of my classic experiences involves Indian Airlines flights: on two distinct occasions, after my wife was asked several probing questions regarding the nature, causes, and possible consequences of the infirmity which resulted in my asking for a wheel-chair, she was given our boarding passes; and upon reaching the craft, we were guided to seats in the 7th row ; now row 7 was adjacent to the emergency exit, and even an able-bodied person assigned a seat on that row is supposed to have the prerogative to ask to be re-seated elsewhere if he was unsure of coming up with what it takes in case of an emergency! But when I raised this point, the cabin crew told me the staff at the check-in counter screwed up, and I would have to sit in my assigned seat for now and hope they could eventually find another seat to re-seat me after the plane filled up.

As Henry Higgins asks in the movie *My Fair Lady* while listing the dangers of ‘letting a woman in your life’, *why is common sense never even tried?*