

Attention to detail

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Let me begin with a qualified apology. This piece can conceivably be viewed, by the antagonistic reader, as a diatribe against the sister math institute to mine in Chennai. It is not that I merely wish to complain and make a fuss; I beseech the reader to view the whole matter from my perspective. Many senior faculty of this institute are good friends of mine, and they will know that the words expressed here are but a manifestation of the campaign I have set myself upon - through my newspaper column and blog - to spread awareness of the special needs of the differently abled. The only reason I may seem to be trashing them is this: How can I hope for sensitivity in these matters from people 'out there' if I can't get that from these personal friends and future Indian gurus of the queen of all sciences?

As you may know, I am mobility-challenged; and as you can imagine - if you ever cared to think about it - a lot of my time is (and has to be) spent in meticulous planning of what sort of preparations I would be required to make where and at which stages of my trajectory to accomplishing any undertaking.

In what follows, my wheel-chair will play a fairly non-trivial role (if you will pardon the math lingo), not unlike Hero in a Phantom comic. To make it less impersonal, let me stop calling it 'my wheel-chair' and formally christen this *vaahan* of mine as *Herbie* (as in the friendly Volkswagon beetle created by Walt Disney) and refer to him rather than it. My first concerns when I plan any 'undertaking' always pertain to Herbie: will he be transported safely to where I will need him? will he be able to transport me indoors to the desired places or will he run into his nemesis *The Dreaded Steps*? Will he have to encounter unreasonably high slopes in the occasional providentially provided ramp?

I feel particularly rotten about the timing of this piece, as I was invited to deliver an endowment lecture last week at this sister institute, let's call it CMI to give it a name, and given a wonderful reception when I got there - as well as got paid an obscenely large sum of money as an honorarium for my efforts! As a routine precaution, I needed to review my experience of the track record of CMI in this regard, which I shall try to present as accurately as I can:

- Many months ago, I made a big fuss on discovering, when I went there to attend a lecture which they had announced by email, that it had been scheduled in a room on the first floor, which is not accessible by any elevator. Many apologies were feelingly murmured, but I have as yet seen no attempts at having elevators installed in the building. Is it so unlikely that they may have a student before long who will be dependent on a wheelchair? Would such a student be unable to attend any lectures held upstairs?
- In those days, my mobility was better than it is now, and I could manage to walk a bit. But recently, I have had painful falls on at least two occasions, and having more sense than to tempt fate to break my hip, I have consciously decided to totally

minimise or even eliminate walking anywhere, and to always move on Herbie, making no concessions whatever.

- Last month, a star-studded conference was organised in CMI to felicitate its founder director on his turning 80. Eager to catch the talks by at least the first and last speakers on the first day of that conference, I set off expectantly with some four other colleagues as well as Herbie in a sufficiently large vehicle organised by my institute that Monday.
- When I drove into the lecture hall for the first lecture, the hall was almost full. The auditorium has every row on a different step of a sort of amphitheatre, with even the first row on a level raised a few inches above the level I drove in on. I had three choices: (i) plonk myself right in the middle of the hall a conspicuous 3 ft. in front of the first row of seats; (ii) get out of Herbie and hobble over to a seat on the front row; and (iii) sit at one end of the hall, in front of the front row, and try not to be in people's way. I don't like being conspicuous; and I don't want a broken hip, so I plumped for (iii). But this meant that my line of vision to the farthest blackboard was almost parallel (non-transverse in math lingo) to the board with the result that nothing the speaker wrote on that board was visible to me.
- And lunch that day (for the luminaries attending the conference) had been arranged on the first floor of the hostel building - which also has no elevator! So I had lunch with the *hoi-polloi* in the canteen downstairs. And it is not as if my mobility problems have not been well-known to practically everybody at CMI for quite a few years now.
- After that fiasco, I spent the rest of the day in the office of one of my many friends there, and amused myself with my PC which I had had the sense and forethought to take along with me.

So before I could agree to give that talk at CMI, I had to get somebody I could rely on to 'see through my eye' and reassure me that the Dreaded Steps would not suddenly leap out to stymie Herbie anywhere. The Director of CMI promised to tell me if there are likely to be any hurdles for us; I decided to trust him even though he did not get back to me to allay my concerns. Rajeeva and I go back some 30 years, and if I can't trust him, who can I?

I iterate my earlier comment that this CMI-bashing is not to belittle them. Rather, it is to merely underline the fact that people do not automatically think of 'the special needs of the differently abled' from the point of view of such a person, and to try and bully them into getting something concrete done about improving accessibility/inclusiveness of their campus. To be fair to some of them, I sent a stinker of an e-mail (to a few select friends there) highlighting the bulleted points above and they have immediately started consulting suitable experts. But let me conclude with the following attempt at emotionally blackmailing my friends, peers and former students at CMI:

As it turns out, I will be turning 60 in a few months, at which time my institute and some colleagues are planning to make an elaborate fuss over me. My institute has been most kind to me in many ways, with one particular way being the manner in which almost the entire campus of IMSc has been made accessible to Herbie and me. There are only a couple of corners left at this time that I can't ride Herbie to. IMSc has also kindly extended the tenure of my service with them (which was to have ended when I hit 60) by an extra two years, and threaten to maybe extend that even further. I am unsure of how long my energy levels will be high enough for me to continue working. My last entreaty to my friends at IMSc and CMI is that I would consider it a great parting gift to me if they would ensure complete accessibility of their campuses by the time I finally retire, maybe in 2014, thereby enabling me to look back proudly at having helped create this legacy of two completely accessible math institutes in the city of my birth and much of my work.