

Is it so hard to treat people with dignity?

Is there any real reason why any of the following situations, which people with disabilities have to contend with on an almost daily basis, should at all arise if only our societies were sensitive/sensible:

1. The pilot of an aircraft takes a look at a person who is already seated in the craft, and who suffers from a condition described by wikipedia as *encompassing a group of non-progressive, non-contagious motor conditions that cause physical disability in human development, chiefly in the various areas of body movement*, concludes for reasons best known to himself, it is still not clear on what 'evidence', that she was mentally imbalanced and is a threat to the security of 'his passengers'. (A look at her qualifications indicates that the pilot should be more than happy to be mentally her equal.) He has the seated handicapped person 'de-boarded' because he doubts her mental stability, discounting her attempts to inform the airline staff that she has tried/wanted (unsuccessfully as it turned out eventually) to take the flight from Kolkata to attend a meeting she has been invited to address in Goa.
2. A much publicised 'super idol' programme for people with disabilities is organised in Mumbai where Bollywood superstars donate large amounts of money to people with disabilities who have achieved wonderful things despite their limitations; one of the people selected to receive this honour is Hema, the founder of the Association for People with Disabilities. Hema is unable to go (possibly because she has had more than her fill of the indignities to be undergone in order to fly anywhere), but a friend and fellow-worker at APD offers to receive the award on her behalf. This friend is also no mean achiever; after having been a member of the Mysore Hockey team which lifted the national championship continuously from 1960 to 1968 (one of the original *Chak De girls!*), she went on to represent India; but later she was curtailed in her mobility due to the onset of Rheumatoid Arthritis, after which she founded the Arthritis Foundation of India; anyway, Jacquelyn plans to go to Bombay to receive the award on Hema's behalf, in spite of the fact that she herself is constrained to a wheelchair these days. So what happens? For the longest time, she does not get the wheelchair she has asked for, and after having had to stand for close to a half-hour, just before she collapses out of sheer exhaustion, the wheel-chair arrives, and what she has to say about the consideration extended to her by the airline staff is probably not printable. (The latest information on this is that the airline concerned has sent her a sincere-sounding apology that Jackie seems to be reasonably happy with.) Is it unreasonable to hope for wheel-chairs kept freely available like baggage carts?
3. And in case you think I am unnecessarily panning the airlines for all these instances of insensitivity/rudeness, there was a newspaper item a couple of days after the Jeeja Ghosh incident (item 1 above), on how the airport security had been instructed that disabled people in wheelchairs are a potential terrorist threat and need to be scrutinised

with a toothcomb. As was observed by Javed Abidi, a longtime disability activist, and reported in the same newspaper report, India has the dubious distinction of being the only country where **all** people in wheelchairs are asked to stand up and be frisked by airport security!

My concern is over the sickening frequency with which these incidents occur, abject subsequent apologies notwithstanding. Can't a meaningful penalty be imposed for such violations of human rights? As it is, it is almost like Russian roulette as to which disabled person will suffer the next indignity at the hands of some airline.

I periodically receive emails from readers of this column to the effect that they sympathise with me. As I have repeatedly said and will never tire of saying, people like me **do not** want sympathy; we merely ask for an environment that allows us to lead our lives productively and in dignity. **'In dignity' is the operative phrase; is it unreasonable for me to want to not visibly always be in need of somebody else's help?** However willing you may be to help me, is it so hard to understand, for instance, that if I want to pee, I do not want to be aided to do so, especially in front of a hundred people?

And this is what is most irritating about the recent airline episode. This kind of prototyping is demeaning, nasty and unacceptable; it is not dissimilar in obnoxiousness to a black man being arrested because the incongruence of his walking in a rich white neighbourhood makes him 'look suspicious', or a 'low-born' boy getting beaten up for having had the temerity to look at a 'high-caste' girl, or the Dalit girl who was brutally reminded of her place in society for having the audacity to ride a bicycle which makes her appear taller than a brahmin walking on the street (Heaven forbid!). Such instances of heaping indignity on defenceless souls is the trademark of a bully, and has no place in decent society!

Is it too much to want/expect from a civilised society that every individual be treated with the dignity that decency demands? I keep writing in this column that what people like me, who are every bit as accomplished as the next (wo)man, and whose only failing is not possessing somebody's almost 'Hitler-ian' fixation for the *ideal and flawless body*, want is to be treated on the basis of what we bring to the table, and not penalised for what we may physically be incapable of producing.

Do we really want to belong to a society which would, for instance, wantonly omit Sachin Tendulkar from a cricket team because he is not tall or 'fair and lovely' like, say, Graeme Hick (who had trouble holding a place in the England squad)? For crying out loud!