

Places I love to hate

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My teenage daughter and her almost hexagenarian parent are diametrically opposite in at least two ways: she loves to spend time in malls and to go to plays, while I am filled with a nameless dread at the thought of either. While a teenager picked at random would think I must be particularly weird to feel this way, let me elaborate the reasons for my ‘weirdness’.

I am mobility-challenged - meaning that I either move around on my motorised wheelchair (when I am fortunate enough to be in a place where I can use ‘my wheels’) or hobble around slowly and painfully on my crutch (if I am not so fortunate, which is very often the case).

Here are my problems with malls: how many chairs or benches have you seen in these multi-storey malls which are mushrooming all over urban India? And what is the average distance between any two such seats? The answers are: close to zero, and close to infinity. In fact there is a quite non-trivial distance between almost any two places in the mall. And you can be sure that the toilets are at one end of some long corridor and in a corner of the mall. Unless you are young, agile and full of beans, you are completely exhausted by the time you manage to accomplish whatever you came to do. It is not just handicapped people like me who feel this way; talk to almost anybody over 60 to see what I mean.

Now for plays. I live in Chennai, and maybe my blind spot in this matter is city-specific, although I seriously doubt it. Among the more favoured locales for plays in Chennai are The Museum Theatre and the auditorium in the Alliance Française.

The former is set in a magnificent complex which evokes memories of the British Raj. My problems start right at the entrance. There is an impressive - depending on your viewpoint - set of some twenty curved steps, about twenty feet wide without a single railing which can be held on to for support by those unsure of their balance. And when you enter the ‘theatre’, there is a further sequence of steps heading down towards the stage. All very grand if you are ‘normal’, but terrifying if you are mobility-challenged like me - to the extent that I had to deny myself the pleasure of seeing the daughter

of a close friend do the star turn last week in a play about mathematicians (in spite of my almost avuncular pride in her thespian skills/achievements).

As for the second of the auditoria referred to above, I was invited some time back to attend some films that were going to be screened there. I wrote back to the organiser of this event saying the venue precluded my participation. I explained to her that some five years ago, (and again a couple of years later) it had been only a fierce parental loyalty which had taken me up the three flights of stairs to watch my own little girl perform in a play. It wasn't just me; only a grandmother's love could have helped my then octagenerian mother overcome her groaning knees and the three flights of stairs. Is there any need for such cruelty (albeit unintended)? In fact several readers of this column, who are on the 'wrong' side of fifty, have expressed their solidarity for my tirades along these lines.

I explained to the organiser referred to above that I had decided not long ago that I would not attend events at venues which were totally wheelchair-hostile. I got a response to the effect that AF, Chennai had now entered the 21st century as evidenced by the existence of a new elevator. I persisted and asked: 'will I be able to come to these films on my wheelchair and never need to negotiate steps?' and received the one word answer 'No'. That response was effectively equivalent to saying: 'people who can't navigate stairs need not attend these events'. I am sure it was not meant that way, but for all practical purposes, it might as well have been! How much does it take to incorporate a ramp here or there and complete the transition from the middle ages? As added incentive, maybe I should mention that the Goethe Institut which showcases the culture of France's neighbour does have such a ramp which I myself have used to go all the way in from the street level on my wheelchair for one of their events!

Is it unreasonable to expect/hope that groups promoting socially relevant issues make it a point to hold their events in accessible venues? and better still, that they actively boycott events held at such venues? Maybe that would coerce those venues to remove some steps and take those vital initial steps towards rendering themselves barrier-free and universally accessible!