

Ingenuity revisited

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Some time ago, I had written in this column about a stroke of genius that I had witnessed in the faculty residential blocks at TIFR, Mumbai - that of having elevators halt halfway between floors, by which amazing stroke of economy, it was ensured that you have to climb up or down half a flight of stairs if ever you take the elevator. This ingenuity of fundamental research was to dog me recently far away in the North-East.

In response to a plea from a University there to come and help with 'Curriculum Development of their Mathematics Department', I sent my stock response that owing to my mobility problems, I could come only if:

1. I would be driven from the nearest airport to the place where I would be accommodated; and
2. it was ensured that in view of my mobility constraints, the venues of my accommodation as well as of the office where I would need to work were both totally accessible to my wheelchair.

Back came the instant response that all my worries were noted and best efforts would be taken to ensure my comfortable stay. Lured by the prospect of escaping from Chennai in May to a heavenly 30 degrees cooler and beautiful north-east, with a possible view of the snow-capped Kanchenjunga.

My hosts had thoughtfully sent a large SUV which would comfortably transport my motorised wheelchair (which I had carted through the airports with some amount of difficulty), me, my wife and our baggage. I had been warned that I would need to negotiate a couple of steps at the entrance of the guest house, after which, However, I would have no problems. After negotiating the two steps at the entrance, I entered the guest house to again meet my nemesias the half-landing elevator.

My room was next door to and on the same floor as the room where our meetings were to be held. The dining room was one floor higher. My hosts kindly offered us the option of having our food brought to our room. But as all the others were eating in the dining hall, it seemed the more civil thing to go up at meal-times.

At the end of a gruelingly long day of going over syllabi of courses, we were told that the Vice-Chancellor had invited all of us 'external experts' with their families to dinner - which we later discovered was

to be at floor -3 in a hotel without an elevator, so it was back to our room for dinner. The next night, we were told that dinner would be slightly delayed - to 9 pm - as the VC was going to join us for dinner. With my wife insisting that surely he was coming because I had not been able to go for the previous day's dinner, it was time to again hobble down a flight of stairs to get to the dining room. After pending about ninety minutes chatting with the others, it transpired that the VC would not be coming after all!

Although I had spent 48 hours in the beautiful North-East without once stepping out of my maximally inaccessible guest-house, I had the satisfaction of having a spectacular view of Kanchenjunga from the terrace of our guest house, and I achieved my primary purpose in undertaking the gruelling trip, which was to see a friend of mine in Kolkata who was not in the best of health! But the (invisible) VC had his own back by calling my bluff about being constrained to a wheel-chair by making me hobble up and down those stairs a fair number of times, thanks to the fundamental brilliance of his elevator.

In conclusion, I wish to assure my hosts that I do appreciate their sincere attempts to make my stay comfortable, but I also wish to stress that if I had indeed been wheelchair-bound then this trip would have been an unalloyed nightmare!