

## What is not accessibility

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I was witness to this classic equivalent of a ‘self-goal’ in the cause of disability sensitisation. As part of their ongoing efforts to bring world-class neurologists to come and lecture to us right here in Chennai on various issues, our local (and quite distinguished) neurologists had organised a conclave and a lecture by an American expert , on the topic of Multiple. The hotel seemed to have put the odd ramp in place in what seemed an eleventh hour afterthought. The ramp at the entrance was probably of more than the maximum slope safely navigable by my motorised heel-chair. The ramp on the second floor could only be scaled because somebody manually steered the chair from the back.

By the time we entered the room where the conclave was in progress, the hall was filled as far as eye could see with chairs draped in white-cloth; the problem was how to move even five feet away from the entrance door. Somebody spotted my plight and moved some chairs so I could progress a few feet till the next bottleneck and the next good samaritan to help me get past that one, and so on, until we eventually found our way to one of the tables up front, where I saw three other wheel-chairs and felt less of a freak.

When we finally settled down, the secretary of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of India was finishing her report. The next speaker was a young man on crutches who had to painfully hobble his way up the dais - one of my more hated constructs of modern society - to the microphone, where he made many good points.

- He raised the issue/slogan of ‘nothing for us, without us’; i.e., if you wish to do something for the betterment of the lives of PWD (people with disabilities), do so *only after* ensuring that there are such PWD in the organising committee for such intended reforms. (When buildings, such as the hotel this event had been held in, attempt to render themselves accessible by putting in the odd ramp, can they please talk to some experts in the area of accessibility-related matters, and get meaningful advice on such things as acceptable norms for slopes of such ramps? - *author’s remark*)

- Before buildings, in general, (hotels, etc.) become accessible, can at least our hospitals and labs which run all manners of health-related tests, make efforts to have devices to facilitate PWD, for example, to get on to beds and high places they need to climb onto in order to have X-rays or MRI scans done?
- Will all hospitals have at least a few people conversant with standard sign languages to play interpreter between the doctor/technician and hearing/verbally impaired patients?

When an event is being organised to specifically address a certain disease/disability, does common sense not suggest that many victims of the supposedly target audience will obviously have a common disability (resulting in being on a wheelchair in this case), and should care not be taken to ensure that the event is organised in a barrier-free environment? (Will we ever see one of these?); and to treat these ‘victims’ as ‘chief guests’ and ensure that they have a clear path to a position from which they can get the benefit of the views of the experts on their disease, brought at great cost to the exchequer, regarding their future lives, however long that may be. *And if you ask a PWD to come and speak, is it not **your responsibility** to ensure that (s)he is not inconvenienced in any way in the process of making that speech?*