

Whiter than the white

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A friend of mine invited my wife and me to lunch at her club today, and I inwardly groaned. Do you know that all the clubs where the well-heeled in Chennai hang out of an evening carry on this baggage from the erstwhile British Raj. Originally and for the longest time, our white masters would not permit a brown-skinned native to sully the character of their fair clubs. I don't know the exact facts (which are not hard to find anyway). If I am not mistaken there were no non-white members of the Madras Club till 1960; in fact, when it started, it did not even allow white women into its club! Not surprisingly, the Madras Club is considered the most prestigious of all the clubs in Chennai even today.

And here is why I groaned at the prospect of going to one of the clubs: the brown sahibs who rule the roost have their own rules, according to which neither Gandhi nor Nehru would be allowed to enter the premises of one of these clubs. You cannot enter wearing a kurta, or a Tee-shirt unless it has a collar! Now I always go to work in a kurta and always wear shorts and Tee-shirts not hindered by collars on holidays. So I had to dress up in a shirt and pant and feel like I was in a fancy dress. This is India, for crying out loud!

If we have to ape the white man, can we at least copy some of their better traits. Most of UK is very accessible to mobility impaired people, and its people are blessed with a modicum of sensitivity which would anticipate possible problems of anybody who is slightly different. I have not seen a ramp at any of these clubs of ours. It is such a trivial thing to identify places where there are steps, and manufacture some make-shift ramp that can be kept tucked away somewhere nearby and pulled out whenever someone on a wheelchair comes by. Going by my old memories of Gymkhana Club where I had swum and played tennis as a lad in my teens, I thought that it would be necessary to walk some distance, so I had taken along my motorised wheelchair today. But when you throw in three or five or seven steps every few feet, the whole exercise begins to look like something out of the theatre of the absurd.

So, Tara, if we have to go out for lunch, let us please pick some place which is accessible, where one can go decently but comfortably clad (even if it does not sit well with the brown sahibs who are whiter than the white!