

# When the pedestal feels like a cage

Public spaces need to be made more accessible to the disabled, but not through gratuitous gestures



RAHUL BAJAJ

Recently, while I was returning from Mumbai to my hometown Nagpur after meeting my best friend from school, a security officer at the Mumbai airport expressed a desire to examine the belt I was wearing. The airport staffer assisting me tried to dissuade the officer from putting me through this inconvenience, whispering loud enough for me to be able to hear, "He is a blind passenger."

As someone born blind, I have often been confronted with offers of what I would call 'untoward assistance' – support that is apparently based on my disability but actually in no way correlated to it. From people who bend over backwards to exclusively offer me a chair whenever they see me standing even though my blindness has nothing to do with my ability to stand for long periods of time, to airport officers who exhibit the willingness to allow me to carry more luggage than the prescribed ceiling; from security officers at bars who ask me not to pay the entry fee to taxi drivers who insist that they will not charge me for the ride, many have made such gestures.

Perhaps the type of behaviour I am referring to is typified by an incident from an economics class when I was in Class XI. Our teacher had asked all students to stand on one side of a classroom for committing an infraction. Soon after making me stand along with the other erring students, she asked me to go back and sit in my assigned location. I soon realised that the reason I was singled out for this benevolence was my blindness though my infraction was, objectively speaking, no less serious than that of my peers. I stood up and requested her to let me continue standing, arguing that my blindness bore no relationship with the relaxation I was offered.

## Social interactions

This pattern of behaviour, premised on placing the disabled on a pedestal, also extends to social interactions. When I was in school, class-



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mates would often address me with the pronoun *aap*, a Hindi term connoting a high degree of formality usually used to refer to elders. They would refer to all my other classmates with the more informal and casual *tu* or *tum*.

My experience is not an aberration. In his *New York Times* bestseller *Eyes Wide Open*, blind lawyer-turned-businessman Isaac Lidsky writes: "While my blindness has never helped me win a trial, it often helps me get a table in a crowded restaurant. I am usually treated as a long-time regular by my second visit to a business."

Why, it may be reasonably asked, should we be concerned about what are benign gestures of kindness aimed at mitigating the hardship of those perceived as having been dealt a bad hand? Personally, I think this is because these actions are often rooted in stereotypes about the capabilities of blind people.

A security officer who thinks that a blind person cannot be dangerous in any circumstance essentially equates a visual impairment with an inability to commit violence. Someone who thinks a blind person always needs to be seated operates on the unstated premise that visual impairment necessarily results in reduced stamina. Someone who refuses to let a blind person pay in an economic transac-

tion essentially brands the latter as a supplicant.

Some may argue that many people capitalise on different facets of their identity to march ahead in different spheres of human endeavour. As David Brooks argues, we live in an age in which it is important to build identity capital – elements of our personality which can set us apart – so, some may think, there is nothing wrong in using the 'blindness card' to obtain these kind of benefits. Further, it may also be argued that the reality is that far too many blind people continue to face persistent patterns of discrimination owing to their disability, so they should not go out of their way to relinquish any favourable treatment that they are offered in a particular life domain, as things even out in the final analysis.

## Acting with integrity

In my view, however, as blind people, it is important that we act with integrity when it comes to asking for reasonable accommodations. This means only asking for accommodations that aim to remove the roadblocks imposed by our blindness – certainly no less but also no more. This is important not only to be accountable to our own conscience, but also if we wish to be taken seriously when we complain of disability-based discrimination. By taking

an undue benefit of entering a bar for free when our sighted peers must pay an entry fee, we lessen our moral authority to complain about being unduly prevented from enjoying the clubbing experience because the same bar is then found to be inaccessible. If we do not question an airport staffer's decision to allow us to carry more luggage than the ceiling just because we are blind when the relaxation has nothing to do with our blindness, on what basis can we then take the same airport staffer to task when she does not provide us the sighted assistance we need to navigate the crowded airport?

## Reasonable accommodation

There may, of course, be circumstances when one's blindness is coupled with other disabilities, making the type of support I characterise as untoward assistance a reasonable accommodation. It may also be the case that one's blindness results in a denial of opportunities to be economically self-reliant, making fee concessions and waivers an appropriate course of action. What I am against, however, is simple-minded pigeonholing of the disabled into objects perpetually in need of favourable treatment that betrays a profoundly impoverished understanding of what it means to be disabled – an understanding rooted in nothing but stereotypes and a sense of pity.

As Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has explained in the context of the fight for gender justice, the pedestal on which women are made to stand is often a cage. To put it another way, what is considered a measure to protect a certain group from harm or to advance its interests often, in fact, has the unintended consequence of substantially undercutting those very interests. This is because it prevents members of that group from fully participating in all societal institutions on equal terms and thereby circumscribes the scope of their aspirations. Therefore, it is high time that those of us truly invested in the welfare of the disabled recognised that the pedestal on which disabled people are often placed is a cage, for only then can we begin to free ourselves from its shackles.

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# The importance of labelling hate crimes

Such crimes impact the social fabric of the country



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

The office of the Readers' Editor (RE) is a visible institutional framework "to improve accuracy, verification, and standards in the newspaper; and to strengthen bonds between the newspaper and its millions of print platform and online readers."

This means the RE has to be an effective interlocutor between the newspaper and its readers and ensure a two-way communication. One of the tasks I have been performing is also to explain the rationale that governs the news judgment and the ethical framework that governs the editorial judgment of this newspaper on various contentious issues.

Last week, there was a front-page story headlined "Four of Muslim family injured in attack at Aligarh railway station". Dushyant Kumar, a reader from Baraut, Uttar Pradesh, who gets the Mohali edition of the newspaper, felt that the headline was both misleading and communal. Oruganti Srinivas, an advocate from Visakhapatnam, discovered a design not just in the headline but also in the tone of the report. His argument was that the report cast a doubt as if the violence was instigated by the majority community in a communally sensitive city and felt that the report promoted enmity between two religious communities. K.R.A. Narasiah, who has often written in this newspaper, saw an anti-Modi streak in the story and its headline.

## Conceptual frameworks

I would like to share some of the conceptual frameworks that define the daily practice of a newsroom, for, the overall ethos of the newspaper organisation informs its choices and its editorial judgment. That is the reason we find a multitude of methods in both reporting and in news processing among different news organisations. The content of a newspaper is organised by a principle called news hierarchy, which varies from publication to publication.

Some media scholars have argued that five different types of proximities determine news hierarchy: geographical proximity, temporal proximity, affective proximity, practical proximity, and utilitarian proximity. These often contending and contesting

ideas are mediated to arrive at a consensus in news meetings where the final decision is taken about any story. This involves a few critical questions: Where should a news item be placed? Is it a front-page story or can it be in inside pages? What should be its length? Whether a story requires an explainer or not? Does it warrant an editorial?

The editorial team told me that they make a distinction between common crime and hate crime, and that common crime is covered in the inside pages while hate crime is elevated to the front page given its enormity and its impact on the social fabric of the country. The U.K. police have come up with an accessible definition of hate crime: "A hate crime is when someone commits a crime against you because of your disability, gender identity, race, sexual orientation, religion, or any other perceived difference."

Realising the difference between crime in general and the toxic nature of hate crimes, the U.S. passed a special law called "The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009". In a country where the First Amendment has given latitude to hate speech and offensive rhetoric, for instance to the utterances of the members of the Ku Klux Klan, the courts and the legislature in the form of both the Congress and the Senate have carved out notable, carefully drafted narrow exceptions to free speech which authorises prosecution for language deemed to fall out of bounds.

## Long-term damage

The rise of hate crimes may be a product of our current polarised polity. As it has been pointed out in many learned articles and pieces of legislation, hate crimes inflict long-term emotional and societal damage, create additional fault lines, fracture communities, depress individuals to the point of self-harm and cannibalise the space for reconciliation and coexistence.

The editorial team and the reporter decided to go ahead with the story on the front page because they did manage to ascertain that the attack on the family of four in Aligarh railway station was indeed a hate crime. It is the duty of a newspaper not only to unambiguously distinguish hate crimes from other forms of breaking the law but also label them accurately. I would like to draw the attention of the readers to the July 17, 2018, observation of the Supreme Court of India, which came down heavily against the recurring hate violence, which it warned should not become the new normal.

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# India's opportunity at the UN

The Modi govt. has a chance to regain its footing in the court of international public opinion

MICHAEL KUGELMAN

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the UN General Assembly on September 27, his country will find itself in an unfamiliar position.

For the first time in some years, India is in the cross hairs of some segments of the international community, thanks to its recent actions in Jammu and Kashmir. While governments around the world have largely remained quiet, some influential voices have lambasted New Delhi's decision to dilute Article 370 and criticised the country over the effects of its ongoing lockdown in Kashmir.

In the U.S., members of Congress, the State Department, and even Bernie Sanders, a front-line 2020 presidential candidate, have registered their concern. It has been a long time since there was so much negative noise about India in Washington, where for quite a few years there has been – and rightly remains – a strong bipartisan consensus in favour of a close partnership.

Here, the annual UNGA meetings offer the government an opportunity to regain its footing in the court of international public opinion.

## On Kashmir lockdown

To achieve that outcome, the most reasonable, and realistic, expectation is for a speech that features two core components: a clear acknowledgement of the international community's concerns about human rights in Kashmir, and a focus on India's robust efforts to tackle the global development challenges that attract considerable concern in the UN and beyond, issues such as health, sanitation, and climate change.

Yes, it will be asking for too much from Mr. Modi if one expects him to mention, much less acknowledge concerns about, a sensitive issue that New Delhi regards as internal and does not want to get further internationalised. Still, Mr. Modi, by stating that he recognises the world's worries about the lockdown and its effects, can push back against global perceptions that his government is wholly dismissive of a real and se-

rious problem. And by striking a note of humility, he could undercut the narrative of Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan who, at the same forum, will in all likelihood come out with guns blazing on Kashmir.

## Underscoring the bona fides

What would also resonate well is a speech that underscores India's bona fides as a rising and responsible global power, in contrast to what are perceived by some overseas observers as irresponsible actions in Kashmir. Here, Mr. Modi can pick up where the late Sushma Swaraj, former Indian External Affairs Minister who delivered India's UNGA speech last year, left off. She highlighted India's progress in meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, particularly through increasing people's access to safe sanitation, and she spoke of India's efforts to mitigate the climate change threat. By homing in on India's track record in tackling challenges that affect nearly every nation, Mr. Modi can project his country as a willing and able global partner. This isn't to oversell the influence of the UNGA speeches. Outside of India, Mr. Modi's address won't exactly be must-see TV. Further, anti-Modi protests are planned during his time in New York, and media coverage of these protests could undercut the messages articulated in his speech.

Indeed, one UNGA speech won't eliminate the critical global narratives about India that have emerged since August 5. So long as the Kashmir lockdown remains in place, and likely after it's lifted as well, and so long as New Delhi carries out a divisive social agenda, those narratives will be present. Still, for a government and a Prime Minister who place a premium on branding, the UNGA offers a useful opportunity to push back against growing threats to India's image. It's an opportunity that would be a pity to squander.

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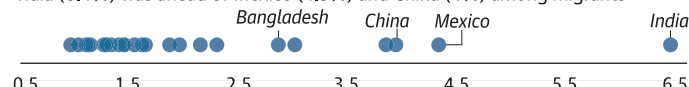
## DATA POINT

### Home and the world

As of 2019, 17.5 million people of Indian origin are staying in other countries as immigrants. They form 6.4% of all international immigrants – the largest share among all nations. Most of them reside in West Asian countries. On the other hand, five million people from other countries are residing legally in India with over half of them hailing from Bangladesh. By Sumant Sen

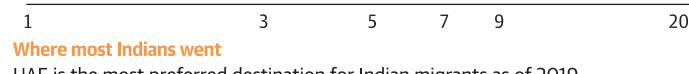
#### Country of origin

India (6.4%) was ahead of Mexico (4.3%) and China (4%) among migrants



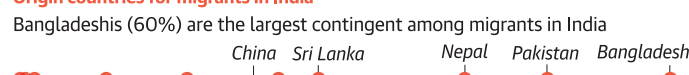
#### Destination country for migrants

U.S. is the most preferred destination. Germany/Saudi Arabia are a distant second



#### Where most Indians went

UAE is the most preferred destination for Indian migrants as of 2019



#### Origin countries for migrants in India

Bangladeshis (60%) are the largest contingent among migrants in India



#### Changing patterns

Among select countries to which people of Indian origin migrated to since 1990, West Asian countries have remained the preferred destinations. The share of Indians moving to the North America and Australia has grown over time

Source: International Migration Stock 2019

#### Migrant count

When the share of international migrants as a % of the total population in a country (as of 2019) is considered, the UAE has the most (88%). The corresponding number for India was among the lowest (0.4%)

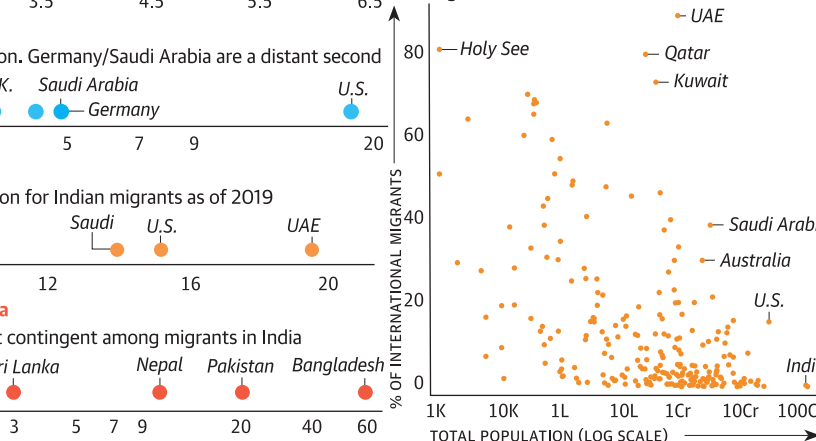


Table lists % of Indian-origin international migrants. For instance, in 2019, 19.5% of them are in UAE

| Country      | 1990   | 1995   | 2000   | 2005   | 2010   | 2015   | 2019   |
|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| UAE          | 6.92%  | 9.33%  | 11.55% | 13.41% | 22.03% | 19.99% | 19.53% |
| U.S.         | 6.80%  | 10.43% | 13.22% | 14.49% | 13.49% | 15.00% | 15.20% |
| Saudi Arabia | 13.69% | 12.99% | 12.34% | 12.68% | 11.94% | 12.58% | 13.94% |
| Pakistan     | 42.55% | 33.05% | 26.49% | 20.83% | 14.69% | 10.73% | 9.07%  |
| Oman         | 2.30%  | 3.95%  | 4.21%  | 3.89%  | 3.58%  | 6.76%  | 7.57%  |
| Canada       | 2.52%  | 3.35%  | 4.02%  | 4.43%  | 3.91%  | 4.16%  | 4.05%  |
| Australia    | 1.06%  | 1.09%  | 1.14%  | 1.55%  | 2.49%  | 2.82%  | 3.25%  |

## The Hindu

### FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 23, 1969

## Army takes charge of Ahmedabad

The Army to-day [September 22] took over complete control of Ahmedabad City and suburbs to tackle the riot situation. Troops took up positions at all strategic points. The local police, Armed Reserve Police and Home Guards will help the Army personnel to create conditions for return to normalcy. The Governor of Gujarat, Mr. Shriman Narayan, the Chief Minister, Mr. Hitendra Desai and other leaders went round the city and appealed to the local leaders to help the authorities bring back order. An official spokesman said tonight [September 22] that the situation in the disturbed areas was fast improving. Stray incidents of looting and arson were reported earlier in the riot torn city. Except for the patrolling vehicles the city presented a deserted appearance. The local station of All India Radio has been repeatedly appealing to the citizens for blood donations for treatment of the injured. The police opened fire twice. The incidents of firing were at Jagdish Park and at Gujarat Vidya-peeth where Mr. Morarji Desai had gone on a fast. An emergency meeting of the Gujarat Cabinet this evening [September 22] took stock of the violent situation. Unofficial sources placed the casualty figures at 350.

### A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPT. 22, 1919

(THERE WAS NO ISSUE ON SEPT. 23, 1919)

## The Congress Deputation.

BY S. SATYAMURTHI

LONDON The industrial situation in England is showing symptoms of grave unrest. Meantime, Mr. Montagu is very anxious that the Bill [on bringing political reforms in India] should go through Parliament before the end of the year. On the other hand, I heard from a good source that the prospects of that are not very encouraging. And, as I sit there listening to the taking of evidence by the Joint Committee, I cannot help feeling that there are at least some members of the Committee who are not overanxious to bring the Bill through. Lord Selborne announced some time ago as the Chairman of the Committee that his function was to see that evidence was not repeated. But sometimes he seems to forget his function. Under these circumstances, I should not be surprised, if the report of the Committee is delayed till the beginning of December. That seems to be the Chairman's anticipation – although Mr. Montagu is, I am told, rather anxious to have it by the beginning of November. Personally I do not mind what happens, for the failure of the Bill in its present form may, in many ways, be a blessing to India.