

Attitudes

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**AMERICAN ATTITUDE  
TOWARDS THE WHEEL CHAIR**

Malini Chib-Alur



# REFERENCE



## THE AMERICAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE WHEELCHAIR

*Malini Chib-Alur*

*(Articles published in a leading Bombay daily.)*

*This summer, I, being disabled, had the advantage of seeing America on a wheelchair, My dad and I had been planning this American trip for months! We visited New York, Washington, and California.*

*We left Heathrow on the ninth of August for New York. My first impression of John F. Kennedy Airport was its chaos. Organisation and John F. Kennedy certainly do not go together! One may say that most airports are disorganised, but one would expect first-world airports to be a little better than Kennedy. Even Sahar is better! Being a frequent a traveller, my judgement is not too unsound.*

*As tourists on a limited budget, we wanted the cheapest form of transport and yet the most accessible. We were on the look-out for the shared Limo Scheme and the next thing that confronted us really shocked me - they would not take a wheelchair. So much for America. Even in India, cab-drivers happily comply with wheelchairs! We finally put our tired bodies into the Limo. The size of a regular limo was huge, and while riding in it, I felt like a rich Arab !*

*Seeing the hustle and the bustle, I began to feel as if I was about to conquer America !*

*People have often compared Cuffe Parade to Manhattan. Manhattan is not a bit like it. As you enter the city, tall buildings envelope you and you cannot see anything but skyscrapers. The city is made up of a concrete jungle consisting of blocks which are countless. But one can never get lost in this city. Any place is easy and straightforward to find.*

*There is a river on either side - the River Hudson on the west and the East river on the other, the haunt of young lovers in the evening ! Manhattan is not bereft of greenery. The Famous Central Park is situated right in the middle of the city. Central Park is massive. If one walks through it, it seems as if one is in a forest or in some wood. The rivers, the park, the flora and the fauna in Manhattan were appealing to me.*

*Another place which I loved in Manhattan was the South Sea Port. The ambience was like Europe, with open air cafeterias, and people sitting and drinking informally. Often, tourists go on a night cruise enjoying Manhattan by night.*

*In New York, there are two things a tourist must do. They must see Manhattan by night and they should go on top of the world's tallest building - that is the World Trade Centre.*

*We were taken there by my aunt who resides in New York. A visit to the World Trade Centre is an event in itself. It is full of posh restaurants where customers are expected to dress formally. This is important to know because everywhere in America, most people wear shorts to portray a "cool" image - even middle-aged people.*

*Manhattan, being the world's largest cosmopolitan city, you would meet a cross section of people all wearing different clothes ranging from the shortest of shorts to bell-bottoms! In fact, I would not have been surprised if I had seen a topless lady walking down Broadway!*

*In New York, if one owns a car, one would be stuck in it the whole day, so the best form of transport is either by subway or on foot. We walked most of the time because my Dad has a passion for walking and I being on a wheelchair, wanted to get a feel of the city, which was great. From a wheelchair, I saw the hustle and bustle of the New Yorkers.*

*On one occasion, because of being in a tearing hurry, we had to use a cab. Manhattan is noted for its rude cab-drivers. After coming from a city like London where they give a special taxi card for a disabled person, I astonished to find that the cab-driver did not lift his finger to help Dad with the wheelchair. However, there was an exception. On our way back from California to London, when we stopped in New York for a day, a cab we took had a*

*woman driver, who not only drove exceedingly well, but was very well mannered, helping me and Dad with the wheelchair. Perhaps, if there were more ladies on the road, then traffic would be more organised!*

*New York did not impress me too much, except for the heterogenous mixture of people. It was quite dirty and was full of beggars. To me, New York was a mixture of Bombay and Calcutta with a touch of the west. From New York, we moved to Washington. Washington reminded me of Delhi. It was clean and it was such a relief coming from a dirty and overcrowded New York.*

*Washington is the first place in the world, where I could use public transport with ease. A wheelchair-user has access to the subways! The subways are all on one level, where the doors open automatically. My wheelchair could easily hop on and off without the slightest problem. The subways are also geared for people who have hearing impediments, because when the trains approaches the platform lights flash, indicating that the train has arrived.*

*Dad had worked in Washington, and I had a cousin, who is like my sister, who was "at my disposal", so I demanded to be shown the city! Being good natured, she agreed. During the days, we roamed about in shorts and dark glasses (looking like two freaks!) nobody took much notice, as we blended into the American scene! We visited beautiful art galleries and museums. We took a glimpse at the White House, but unfortunately, we were not invited*

*to tea! It could have done India a lot of good!*

*Life really began for both of us after six p.m. We used to meet up with friends who were working during the day and have an early dinner, then visit all the wine bars, drinking cocktails and feeling immensely happy!*

*We then moved on to the West Coast, to California. We stayed in San Jose with relatives. We were shown Carmel and Monterey. Carmel is a tourist resort with its exquisite beaches. The colour of the sea was deep blue, the scene was like a picture. We took the seventeen mile-long drive which was magnificent. We kept stopping and admiring the scenic view which was breath-taking.*

*Of course, if you go to California, your visit is not complete if you do not visit the Golden Gate in San Francisco. The Golden Gate is one of the wonders of the World. The bridge is intricately constructed, and is one of the oldest bridges in the world. My wheelchair could be taken right down and I could touch the tip of the sea.*

*We also visited Fisherman's Wharf. There was a wide range of fish displayed by chefs who were eager to sell their products. I could not resist the temptation, so I gobbled fried scampi. We drove down the narrowest road in the world; my heart was in my mouth, but nothing too drastic happened!*

*I noticed that no heads turned to stare at me, which was, to say the least, most pleasant. The accessibility, the casualness of people towards me, the variety of exciting things to do, made America on a wheelchair truly great fun.*

*I can truly say, that, being on a wheelchair, does not deter one from seeing America - instead you discover a considerate, thoughtful, civilisation, vital and vibrant in its individualism.*

## **THE FACILITIES THAT BERKELEY OFFERS FOR PEOPLE ON WHEELS**

It was love at first sight for me, when I visited California this summer [1988] The famous California beaches with the deep blue sea made my heart miss a beat. We visited Monterey and Carmel which was breath-taking. The walk along Fisherman's Wharf with its fishy but mouth-watering delicacies on display, waiting to be cooked by gourment chefs, a rare and unique experience. One can get any type of fish here, ranging from crab to pomfret. Of course, being half-Bengali, it stimulated my palate acutely and I wanted to eat more than my stomach could take!

Beside the breathtaking beauty of San Francisco, what really captured my heart was the University of California, Berkeley, one of the top universities in America. The university town of

Berkeley is infested with electric wheelchairs - in fact such wheelchairs are the order of the day! Wheelchairs have the right of way - the traffic comes to a halt just to let them cross the road. The access is splendid. All the pavements are ramped so that a wheelchair can hop on and off with ease. A disabled person on a wheelchair can go anywhere, be it to a restaurant, shop, school, public toilet or theatre, independently. In fact, the location of the campus is on a hill and it is advisable for a disabled person to have an electric wheelchair. Besides mobility, it gives the disabled a sense of freedom and makes one forget that one cannot walk. It was unbelievable for me, coming from a country where most buildings are totally inaccessible to wheelchairs. Often I have been upset whilst trying to enter five-star hotels, art galleries or parks in India to find that no thought has been given for a person who cannot walk. Usually, all it needs is a ramp. Wherever there are stairs in any building, if a ramp is provided, people on a wheelchair can enter. In Berkeley, there are several organisations dealing with disabled students and fighting for the rights of the disabled. One is the centre for Independent Living where they train disabled people how to manage their lives, even if they are severely handicapped.

Surveys have been done to find out whether the disabled prefer hired people or their own family and friends to help them. The results show that hired help is preferred, as there is no emotional attachment. These people are known as personal attendants. In Berkeley they help you with the daily living function, of toileting, dressing, etc. depending on what you need. They argue that nobody is completely independent:



for instance, a normal person would need a carpenter, a plumber or electrician, perhaps. The disabled, too, are dependent on getting help for independent living, so that they can function more efficiently and be able to take up employment. Therefore a personal attendant is really one's hands and legs in the form of another human being. The disabled person instructs his attendant about the ways and means he would like to be helped. He is taught how to train his own personal attendant, to hire as well as to fire. To me, this form of independence is essential if I am to be allowed to contribute positively to society and not always be treated as a second class citizen. Again this kind of philosophy was new to me.

Another dynamic organisation is the World Institute of Disability. It has launched a movement for securing the rights and privileges of the disabled. It was started by Judy Heuman who was stricken by polio and is now wheelchair-bound. The institute is a public policy-making centre, dedicated to reducing the implication of handicap, through promotion of independence, equality of opportunity and full participation of people with disability in decision-making. When Judy was asked how she felt about being handicapped, she answered

*"I am bitter about being handicapped but not about having a disability, for it is not my disability that handicaps me. It is society that handicaps me and my brothers and sisters, by building inaccessible schools, theatres, buses - the list goes on -"*

The World Institute of Disability has been very succesful in lobbying with the Federal Government and has seen through legislation backed with financial allocation. The American Government now gives \$25 million towards personal attendance service for a disabled person. We, too, in India, need statutory and financial provisions to be made by the government. We cannot be dependent on the servcies of a handful of good samaritans, What attracted me the most about Berkeley was that the disabled are trained to think independently and hold responsible positions. They are placed in key positions and do not remain silent spectators. The American attitude towards disability is the most advanced one that I have experienced. They look at disability from a positive point of view and, everywhere I went in Berkeley, I felt accepted. I do not have to be a taker permanently. I too can 'give' to others. Also, I guess, when one is different, one wants to be a part of something and not stand out conspicuously.

If one can be a hue or a part of a colour merging and blending as in a rainbow, or in a beautiful sunset, if one can somehow contribute in some meaningful way then one does not feel stigmatised, rejected or isolated - in sum, one does not feel disabled. These are all the beautiful thoughts that surged through my soul in San Francisco and that's why high on a hill I left my heart!

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