Accessibility for the Disabled

Akira Kanbayashi

Past and Present Treatment of Disabled People in Japan

How can we define the term 'disabled person'? What is disability? I don't believe there is a precise way to define these words. But I suppose we could say that a disabled person is someone who experiences some form of impairment or disability in an external or internal part of his/her body. This seems like a fair definition, but people who agree with it could probably never find someone who is not disabled in one way or another.

There are as many disabilities as there are people who are disabled—every disabled person experiences certain inconveniences that are unique to them.

The USA recently passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which goes much further than Japan's Basic Law on Disabled Persons, and is far more comprehensive than other Japanese legislation or policies for the disabled. But I do not intend to discuss which country's system is better, since the conditions and status of disabled people are affected by unique historical circumstances.

As I mentioned, everyone has some form of disability in the broadest sense of the word, but all citizens of a country should enjoy the same rights to services, whether provided by the government or private enterprises. There should be no distinction between those who are impaired and those who are not. Although this is my view, I do not believe it is strongly coloured by my disability.

Disabled people in Japan (and elsewhere) have been treated very poorly in the past. Except for a few talented individuals, disabled people were broadly labelled as incompetent know-nothings who were useless members of society. In a sense, this is hardly surprising because they were not given a chance to show their competence, they were taught nothing, and were not allowed to perform useful jobs. They were called 'non-persons' and were shut out of society. Having a disabled person in the family was viewed as a disgrace and a heavy burden. The disabled had no opportunity to leave their homes and play a role in society, and could never become independent. Those were shameful days.

Greater Mobility

The visually handicapped gained some degree of independence during the late Edo Period in the 1850s and 1860s. But this independence was limited to talented people with skills in fields such as massage or the *biwa* (Japanese lute). They earned a living as masseurs or musicians, and enjoyed some economic and social independence. But restrictions remained—they were unable to move from one province to another and could only work within their own city, walking from house to house with a cane and working for samurai or government officials. This situation continued until the latter part of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), when education for the blind finally started in Kyoto. It was around this time that railways began linking the different parts of Japan, and rail travel became more common. Although Kyoto was situated far to the west of Tokyo, the new capital, Kyoto was where the disabled first tasted social integration, and where the Japanese disabled rights movement began. The progressive spirit of Kyoto still stands out in stark contrast to Tokyo's resistance to change, but it is Tokyo that acts as the driving force of technological progress in modern Japan and defines the national mood. Tokyo's backward approach is one reason why the disabled in Japan still lack barrier-free access to most aspects of society today.

Defeat in World War II gave the Japanese

Buying a railway ticket from a complex ticket machine is a daunting task even for people with unimpaired vision. *(Author)*

A disadvantage of silent ticket stamps compared to the old noisy ticket punches is that finding the ticket wicket is more difficult. *(Author)*

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an excellent opportunity to reflect on the past. It brought a new Constitution that enshrines the principles of peace, human rights, and social security. Today, disabled people can, with their wheelchairs, canes, hearing aids and other tools, set out to explore their cities and the world, to experience the joys of learning and fulfillment through work. These advances would not have been possible without the efforts of disabled people themselves and the support of others, including many volunteers. Today's Japan offers far greater opportunities for disabled people than it did in the past. One good example from the field of transport is the reduced fares offered by Japanese National Railways (now JRs) and private railway companies that help us enjoy a greater degree of independence and a better life.

Safety in a Barrier-Free Society

The theme of the 1981 International Year of Disabled Persons was 'full integration and equality'—in other words, normalization. In tomorrow's Japan, I hope disabled people will be able to participate in many more facets of social life. Two other minority groups: the elderly and pregnant women are already participating in society on equal terms with others, enjoying the many benefits that society offers.

We are now moving towards a new society where all barriers will be removed. But it worries me that the current tendency is to use only machines and special devices to break down barriers, while ignoring the importance of the human factor.

Faster transport and advances in communication technologies make life easier and more convenient for society as a whole, but those of us with disabilities might end up being left behind. For example, transport operators should make it easier and safer for us to use their services. Automated ticket wickets at train stations are a prime example—they are not designed with free passage of wheelchairs in mind.

In the past, the visually impaired located the ticket wickets partly by listening for the chatter of the manual ticket punches. But this sound has disappeared from stations. The new automatic ticket machines are hard to find, and when we do find them, a touch on the screen in the wrong place can silence the voice prompts and even shut down the machine. Some stations have Braille versions of the fare schedule, but how do we find it? Passageways have long lines of tactile tiles going off in different directions, but how do we know where each one goes? It takes considerable time and courage to walk from the ticket wicket to the platform.

These are small annoyances that pose no direct danger to life. But imagine all the dangers lying in wait for visually impaired people on the platform. On island platforms with tracks on both sides, the safest place to walk is along the middle of the platform, but we walk smack into pillars, kiosks, benches and communications equipment! The tactile tiles run close to the platform sides, but if we follow them, we bump into other passengers and trip over luggage. Furthermore, we do not know which side of the platform to wait on, because the sound of the trains comes from both directions. In such conditions, people have fallen off platforms, sometimes losing their lives.

There are other dangers when boarding the train. It is all too easy to mistake the gap between cars as an open door.

Imagine a cold unmanned station late at night with no other passengers nearby. It is cold, so we put our hands in our pockets and stamp our feet to keep warm. As we stamp, we unintentionally turn around and end up not knowing which way we are facing!

The gap and different level between the train and platform is a serious safety hazard. *(Author)*

Despite the tactile tiles at the platform edge, many visually impaired people have fallen on the tracks. *(Author)*

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Many smaller stations have no tactile tiles to guide us and some new local trains have doors that we must open manually—but where is the button?

Some of these problems are small inconveniences, but others lead to serious accidents. It is wrong to belittle these arguments, saying that if an accident occurs it is because the visually impaired person was not careful enough.

Recently, I heard that a government regulatory body told a private subway operator that, compared to JRs, its platforms pose too many risks for the disabled. Any transport company that merits such criticism obviously has its priorities wrong.

Today, the visually impaired can take their seeing-eye dogs on public transport, making it possible to travel alone. But we still feel uneasy at stations we use for the first time. Many of my friends have expressed gratitude for station personnel who contact the station where they will disembark, and for others who wait at that station to help them transfer to another train. This shows that, no matter how safe the technologies and equipment are designed to be, the best system involves human interaction.

I believe that the only way to make platforms safe for visually impaired commuters and tourists travelling alone, without troubling station personnel, is to install guard rails and special platform barriers. JRs and a few private railways have already done this at some stations, but the question remains about who should pay for this? Here it is worth remembering that, as Japan's population becomes more aged, many more elderly people will be using public transport. New types of safety devices are needed to ensure the same level of safety for them that the young and the agile enjoy. The design of these new devices should be based on the ideas of a wide spectrum of users, including of course people with different types of disabilities. I hope decision-makers realize that facilities cannot be made safe for disabled users if they only rely on projections made by academics.

At this moment, I am writing this article on a shinkansen that takes only 98 minutes to cover the 310 km from Niigata (on the Sea of Japan) to Tokyo. I am commuting to work as anchorman for a 5-hour live broadcast celebrating 1 January 1999 on JBS, a radio station that broadcasts to the homes of visually impaired people throughout Japan. The wheels make a nice sound and the car runs smoothly, so writing is easy. The JRs are to be praised for its technological development of cars like this, but I close by expressing my heartfelt hope that the JRs, in their ongoing quest to develop safer and more comfortable ways to travel, will not forget the needs of the disabled and disadvantaged. ■

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'Instant Senior Citizens' Discover Inconveniences of Stations

To experience the problems suffered by visually impaired and elderly passengers, Japanese Ministry of Transport officials and newspaper reporters transformed themselves into instant senior citizens in an experiment at Kasumigaseki Station on Tokyo's Marunouchi subway last February. Ankle and wrist weights coupled with vision-obscuring goggles, ear plugs, gloves, and movement-restricting clothing soon helped them discover the difficulties of reading awkwardly placed fare tariff boards, and negotiating steep stairs and dimly lit platforms. One participant said, 'I found myself unable to extricate the coins from my pocket, and I panicked so much that I dropped the ¥100 coin. It was torture trying to pick it up. I reached the platform at last. Because it was difficult to tell where the platform ended, I tottered along, making sure to keep close to the wall and wishing the platform was better lit.'

The Ministry will take the lessons learned from this hands-on experiment into account when it introduces a system next year for rating major stations in terms of user-friendliness for disabled and elderly passengers. ■

Experiencing the difficulties of buying a subway ticket (The Daily Yomiuri)

Acknowledgement

This article is based on information published by *The Daily Yomiuri* on 4 February 1999.

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