

Railway Stations and Right to Equality

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Japanese railways run on time and use some of the latest technology, but their high standards of excellence do not extend to wheelchair users like me. We disabled people are calling for improvements and a change in mentality that railway companies seem unable to achieve. Over the last few years, disabled people, who have been ignored by the railways for decades, have finally started to take the train, but the railways still cannot understand what our new mobility means.

Railways' Mistaken Assumptions

When I enter a station, someone working there will rush out and start pushing my wheelchair. I ask him to leave me alone, but he just says, 'It's OK, I'll do it for you'. He thinks he's being helpful, so I can hardly argue with him. Station personnel like him don't understand the true meaning of accessibility, even if they work at a station that has been upgraded to supposedly accessible levels. Anyone can see that I can use an elevator myself, but they 'help' me in and go up with me. If the elevator leads to a floor that is not part of the station, they take me to where the station property ends, say goodbye, then get back in the elevator and return to work. Their concern extends only as far as the station boundaries. Then, when I wheel my chair back inside their boundaries, I find myself under their control again, like a child. They cannot understand that I am an independent adult able to make my own decisions, just like anyone else my age would expect to do. They see us as people to be helped, people who cannot do anything without their assistance, people who cannot choose for themselves. Even if we say we don't need their help, they think we are just being shy and reserved. Their overly kind attitude shows that they do not really respect our wishes.

If the problem were only the excessive zeal of station personnel, I would not

complain. But the attitude seems to come from the railway companies themselves. One stationmaster told me that his staff must accompany me '...because wheelchair users can't move about on their own, and could end up in a dangerous situation'. Surely we disabled people can make our own judgments on such matters. And if the company believes that its station is dangerous or not properly accessible, why doesn't it do something about it? Being overly helpful to the disabled and taking away their independence will not get at the root of the problem.

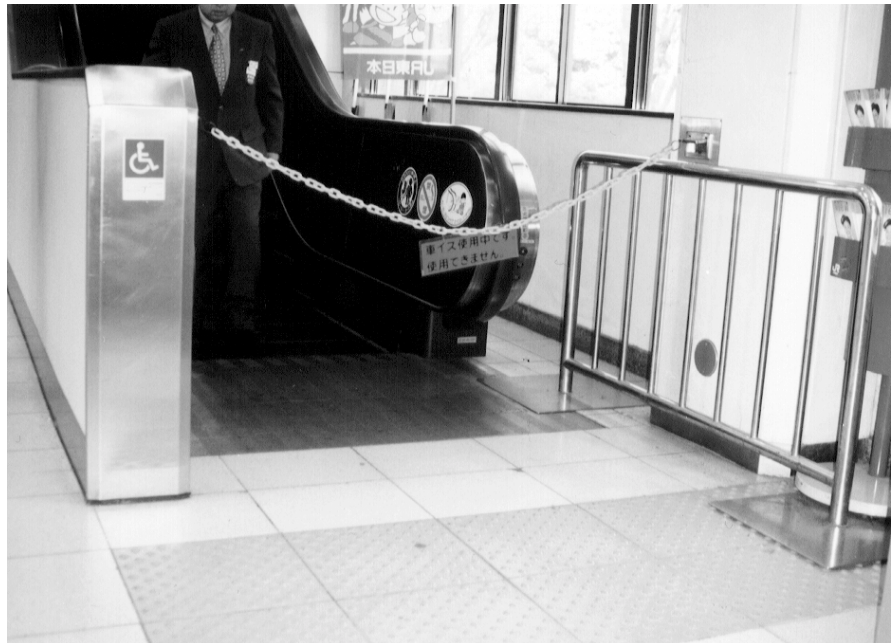
Strange 'Improvements'

Japan's population is aging faster than almost anywhere in the world, but our social structure has not adjusted to this fact. Today, elderly and disabled people are eager to play an active role in society, and this is forcing the railways to make their facilities more accessible. But the railways do not look at things from the

user's point of view, so some of their 'improvements' are very strange indeed. Japan has the technical ability to solve many difficult problems, but seems unable to apply that technology properly.

As a wheelchair user, I face two barriers in most stations—stairs, and the difference in height between the platform and the train. Because of these barriers, I need help from station staff. Railways have developed different kinds of equipment to help the disabled go up and down stairs, but most devices are designed for the exclusive use of wheelchairs, and cannot be used without the help of station personnel. Our desire to move freely on our own is ignored.

Freedom of movement without help from station staff should be the central goal when making stations more accessible. At the present, stations in the Tokyo region put more priority on installing escalators that can accommodate wheelchairs, and less priority on elevators. But an escalator can only carry a wheelchair if someone working at the station first stops the escalator,



When wheelchair users ride this special escalator, the chain prevents other passengers from riding.

(Author)

asks other passengers to climb the stairs, installs a special platform for the wheelchair, then operates the escalator with the wheelchair user on it. Needless to say, the passengers who cannot use the escalator look at us with bewilderment. It is very embarrassing.

A unique and unpleasant feature of accessibility programmes in Japan is the tendency to force disabled people to follow a route that is entirely different from the path taken by other people. One new station elevator I know is at the far end of the platform, behind a barrier with a sign that reads, 'Authorized Personnel Only'. Another has a sign saying it can be used only from 0800 to 2100—but the trains run from early morning until late night! I have been told that the shorter time frame is for the benefit of station staff, who feel they must help us. At another station, the elevator is in the middle of the platform, but the doors are locked and I have to call someone to open it. The railways' policy is consistently against us—we are completely under the control of the station staff, and cannot move without them.

Elevators and escalators should be located where everyone can use them easily. What is the point of making us call someone to unlock the elevator or enter a secret number before we can use it? Mobility aids should be installed in the normal path of pedestrian traffic, not in some far-off corner that 'disadvantaged' people can only reach after taking a special route.

Station design does not take into account our desire to move freely. The station priorities come first, so we must wait until some member of the station staff finds time to 'look after' us. After they finally help us onto the train, what happens when we get to our stop? Before boarding, we must make sure that someone can help us at the other end. This type of situation can make people think of us negatively, even falsely believing that we are a lot of trouble, that we should appreciate the station's efforts, that there is no need to



The elevator down this passageway can only be used after asking station personnel to open the gate. (Author)

spend huge sums making train travel accessible because we will have to be coddled anyway. The end result may be that railway companies will not be pleased with our custom.

Equal Participation

One old-fashioned idea about disabled people in Japan is that we are weak members of society who need assistance. People tend to look at us with sympathy, and efforts to increase accessibility have been based on feelings of pity or charity. But the right of disabled people to enjoy freedom of movement within the rail network should be based not on some weepy-eyed emotionalism but on the principle that we have the right to equal participation in society.

Being active in society is a fundamental part of being human. People who cannot function freely with others in society can end up feeling they have no reason to live. That is why it is essential that society opens its arms to everyone, developing

infrastructure that makes participation possible.

Anyone who wishes to be a full member of society needs to be mobile. There are many places we want to go, but if we cannot reach these places, they mean nothing to us. Users' transportation needs must be given first priority. Freedom of movement is a right to be enjoyed by everyone, so that they can improve their lives and participate fully in society.

Although people will not die if they do not have freedom of movement, their existence as members of society is denied. One source of the problems is that Japanese society frowns on people who insist on their rights. People have recently begun saying that buildings and transportation systems must be more accessible, but nobody explains why. The only reasons given are based on welfare considerations and society's duty to be 'kind' to people with disabilities or people who are old. Actually, wheelchair users are better off than some others. Anyone seeing us in our wheelchairs knows we are disabled, so they offer us assistance and the use of

special devices, however humiliating this can be. But think of the elderly and others who do not use a wheelchair but have great difficulty walking—they cannot use escalators properly, and when they must walk up stairs, they do so slowly, with much difficulty, clutching the handrail. In many cases they cannot use the devices reserved for wheelchair users, unless they go out of their way and ask.

Ministry of Transport's Definition of Accessibility

To promote the construction of accessible stations, Japan's Ministry of Transport (MOT) requested an allocation of about ¥5.1 billion from the special budget to stimulate the economy. Most of this amount was included in the third supplementary budget proposed for FY 1998. Prior to this, in 1993 the Ministry drew up guidelines for construction of elevators and escalators in stations.

According to the Ministry's definition, 'accessible stations' mean mainly: (1) elevators and escalators (with wheelchair-accessible escalators installed in stations that have no elevators or ramps), and (2) tactile tiles on floors to guide the visually impaired. Promotion of these mobility aids is symbolic of today's programmes for the disabled, and forms an essential part of what are called 'people-friendly' stations. But before railway companies build elevators and escalators, they should raise station platforms to the same level as the train floor. Elevators and escalators are very important, but installing them first makes it difficult to raise platform levels afterward.

Station improvements do not go far enough in other ways as well. A survey has found that about two-thirds of all passengers with no sight at all have fallen off the platform onto the tracks at one time or another. These accidents will continue until special fences are installed at the edge of platforms. But fences cannot be

installed before the door location of all cars is made uniform.

People can also meet disaster when there is a wide gap between the train and the platform, especially in places where the platform and track are curved. In order to eliminate the gap, all platforms should be straightened, with the track being moved accordingly.

Before railways construct 'people-friendly stations', they must first make sure that stations do not endanger lives. This means raising platform levels, installing fences to keep people from falling on tracks, and taking other real steps that may appear mundane, but are nonetheless essential.

New elevators and escalators create the impression that the railways are doing something for the disabled. This is effective advertising, but the problem remains that disabled people will not experience much improvement if they are forced to use these equipment under the supervision of others. If elevators and escalators are constructed and used in a way that singles out disabled people, other people will have the impression that people with disabilities are different from others and need special help. This officious approach belittles our natural desire to be part of the social fabric. Stations should not be improved only for a specific group, but for all.

In Japan, providing accessibility for people with disabilities tends to be regarded as providing special services for them. But accessibility permits people with disabilities to use facilities freely, just like anyone else.

This means giving people with a disadvantaged status the same status as other users.

Transport should naturally be unrestricted and safe—the real goal of railway companies should be more reliable, more comfortable, and safer transport for all, without pigeonholing people as elderly, disabled, or whatever. Only when railway companies in Japan embrace these goals can they say they are promoting equal social participation.



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