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Lifting Malls?... III

After our experience at the mall described in "Lifting Malls?... II" my associates and I were left with a moral dilemma.

What alternative did the two young mothers have than dangerously maneuvering their infants in prams down the escalator? The wait for the lifts was long with the shopping carts getting priority on each trip down and they understandably were impatient.

The best option for the mothers would have been to carry the babies in slings or backpacks meant to carry babies rather bring prams into pram unfriendly locations. While this would have ensured the security of their babies, it would also have kept their hands free to shop as well as hold on to the escalator handrail. Probably something that Malls could consider as a facility provided they could assure hygiene.

And now that they had come in with a pram, the safest option was to use the elevators despite the wait. The other safer approach with cooperation from the mall service staff would have been as follows.

- The mothers carry their infants in their arm.
- The service staff follows

carrying the folded prams.

In any case the first requirement was a clear understanding of the rules involved in using the otherwise safest mode of transport.

Lifting Malls?... III tries to explore the issues of safety involving elevators, escalators and moving walks (E&E) in the Indian mall context.

The following news items point that the issue is very real:

- ELENET® 406 of January 3, 2007 (ELENET® is a free biweekly newsletter by ELEVATOR WORLD magazine) reported "..... KGET recently reported that a four-year-old boy lost several fingers when he fell on a department-store escalator in Bakersfield, California mall....."
- Channel NewsAsia | Posted: 06 November 2006 2157 hrs ".....Another child has been injured in an escalator accident at a shopping mall on Monday evening. The 2-year-old girl had her toe caught while traveling on the escalator at Tampines Mall. This is the second such accident in two days....."
- ELENET® 398 of Sept 13, 2006 reported "..... an escalator accident occurs in

Singapore on an average of once every three days.....”.

- The US records about 18000 accidents and 30 fatalities every year involving vertical transportation systems (source Google search).

If I have startled you, the recorded accidents in the US were over 500 million daily trips statistically this would still make elevators and escalators the safest mode of transport.

Statistics apart, the glaring aspect however was the consensus that almost all the accidents could have been avoided through proper maintenance and / or safe usage. The other sad aspect was the number of children involved.

In contrast the Google search revealed only “a few” incidents in India and that too over the last 10 years. This should not be cause for comfort since it is obvious that the statistics are incomplete and the number of trips per day is comparatively less.

On the other hand in the Indian context, there are reasons to be concerned. The rate at which malls and multiplexes are being launched in India, point towards the possibility of an exponential increase in incidents.

The first reason for the probable increase in incidents is the fact that most states still do not have a legislation to assure users of a safe elevator, while none have any legislation to deal with escalators. Even the states that have

legislation are stressed by the absence of adequate number of trained and skilled engineers to carry out the required inspections, a matter that has been reported through numerous news articles. The elevators and escalators standard formulated by the Bureau of Indian Standards and National Building Codes is just recommendatory unless enforced by state legislation. Incidentally the current valid Indian standard on escalators is dated July 1968.

Safe installation and maintenance can be achieved only by ensuring the equipment is supplied, installed and maintained by companies who have competent people, a robust and scientific process and an auditing system to ensure implementation and then following this up by being a proactive and concerned owner. This is compromised by the tremendous growth that the elevator and escalator industry has witnessed over the last 5 years.

A standard escalator has not been designed keeping in mind flowing sarees, lehengas, dupattas, dhotis or for that matter soft rubber soled shoes / flip flops. With the users being unaware of probable issues, the potential for incidents increase even further

The growth in the real estate sector has put pressure on the industry in terms of ability to deliver and availability of adequately trained manpower. The basic design approach and source of material has also become a matter of concern.

The third reason is low level of awareness among users (and even owners). This is complicated further in the Indian context by our callous attitude towards safety and discipline. With more malls and multiplexes spreading through the country and extending to the Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, more unaware people will be exposed to these vital life lines of the vertical development.

The fourth reason and specifically related to usage of escalators and moving walks is our dressing habits. Escalators are not particularly friendly to loose clothing. A standard escalator has not been designed keeping in mind flowing sarees, lehengas, dupattas, dhotis or for that matter soft rubber soled shoes / flip flops. With the users being unaware of probable issues, the potential for incidents increase even further.

Most mall owners recognize some of the issues involved and try to address the problem by stationing personnel from the security staff. There are limitations to the effectiveness of this practice on account the lack of awareness and understanding among the staff. Even if the security staff had the knowledge, enforcement will not be easy considering that most propagators are parents / elders

The following elevator and escalator rules are derived from the norms established by the Elevator and Escalator Safety Foundation (EESF). The points in italics apply to the Indian context.

Elevator Safety Rules

- Watch your step getting in and out – "step over the gap"
- Leave closing doors alone
- If elevator stops and the doors don't open, ring alarm button, use the emergency phone, and wait
- If there is a fire in the building, use stairs
- *If the Lift is with perforated gates, do not insert your hand between the gates*

Escalators and Moving Walks

- Step on and off carefully
- Check shoelaces and loose clothing (*sarees, lehengas, dupattas etc should not be trailing on the floor*) before riding
- People only – no strollers (applicable to escalators)
- Hold the handrail
- Do not touch sides with hands or feet (*stand as close to the middle of the step as possible*)
- Stand facing forward
- Take care of younger children (*hold the hand of children too small to hold the rail, while ensuring that their feet are away from the sides of the steps*)
- Never let children sit on or play on escalators and moving walks
- Stand to the right, walk on the left (applicable to moving walks only)

who themselves are mostly ignorant of the consequences of their actions and unwilling to be corrected.

Another approach adopted, particularly after the tragic incident at the Delhi airport, is the posting of instructions and disclaimers next to the equipment. This on its own is impractical and at best is an attempt to absolve the owners and the E&E companies in case of an incident.

An approach that could be adopted would be from the US

based Elevator and Escalator Safety Foundation (EESF) that was set up in 1988 to educate the public on the safe and proper use of elevators, escalators and moving walks through informational programs. (Their online training module is available at www.safetrider.org and www.asaferide.org) EESF's "Safe-T Rider" program launched in 1998 and focused on the second graders has already covered over 200,000 children in the US. (The author can be contacted for this material and program).

The responsibility to ensure every visitor is safe rests with the mall owner and the equipment supplying / maintenance company. They have the responsibility of ensuring that the safest mode transportation remains such and to that end, need to do everything that is required to ensure that the equipment is safe and that the user is adequately aware. If the approach were to be proactive and immediate, the better it would be for all the constituents involved (users, owners and E&E companies). 😊