

The office lift as leveller

The lift industry in India has grown 20-25% over the last four years

Wider Angle | S.Mitra Kalita

My working life in India began in a chaotic queue in the front lobby. A mad scramble, mostly of testosterone, ensued and somehow everyone found a place in the lift — except me.

The doors closed on my gaped expression.

Nearly two years later, I have mastered elbowing my way in, retreating into the corner, not bothered by the pushes and probes, the whiffs of cologne and sweat. And I have come to embrace the minute or so in the lift each morning as the rare time to observe Old India, New India, In-Between India without much of a filter.

Once, CEOs demanded their own ride but now elevators are among the last integrated means of transport left

There's the varying dialects among construction workers, the gossiping among professional young women, the office boys holding hands with the lift operator, the stoic stare of the analysts into their mirrored selves. I imagine the places from where we have come, the secrets we all have, how and where we spent last night.

One friend of mine likens lift culture to the equalizer that was the Indian Railways before its cars divvied into a spectrum of chic to cheap. Another friend retorts it's more like the local in Mumbai. But with the boom in lifts, commercially and residentially across the country, they indeed remain one of the last integrated means of transport left. Although, this being India, even that is under threat.

Sociologists have studied behaviour in lifts as a way to understand the culture of a country. The study of space, known as "proxemics", yields Americans as very self-conscious in the elevator; Indonesians, meanwhile, link arms when they want to enter crowded spaces together but keep others out.

Indians have far fewer space issues, although that is changing among classes, says Tak Mathews, vertical transportation consultant (that means elevators and escalators). He's also the logical guy to help launch the *Elevator World India*, a magazine debuted earlier this year.

The industry in India has grown 20-25% over the last four years, with about 35-40,000 new units ordered last year, Mathews says. He expects a plateau soon given the real estate slump.

Once upon a time, Mathews recalls, it was not uncommon for the chairman of a company to demand a lift all of his own, or at least one with special timings to suit his rides up and down. "It's started reducing," he says. "I actually check with people, 'Do you even care who is in there?' ...They really don't anymore."

Thus a diverse ride is the reality of liberated workplaces, a space crunch and everyone's offices having some construction going on with workers in and out. Across companies that espouse flat hierarchy but find it honestly impossible to implement, lifts can be the real thing.

There are some exceptions, points out Vivek Menon, marketing head of Jones Lang LaSalle Meghraj. Older buildings are owned by multiple people, who tend to avoid creating complexities in common areas such as separate lifts. Newer buildings tend to be owned and leased by developers, who see having freight and service lifts as long-term investments. But even there, Menon notes, "In Gurgaon, there might be a call centre worker and investment banker and a labourer. There's no differentiation out there. A lot of

democratization has happened.”

Ironically, this liberated thinking is missing in the most personal space of all — our homes.

A few months ago, the landlord of my three-storeyed building put a lock on the lift. He said too many maids and service people were using it. I see where he was coming from, since the electricity and maintenance is shared by all. And when our yoga instructor started using the lift to climb just two floors, I too raised eyebrows.

But in new developments with much larger towers, just what to do with the servants in public spaces is the stuff of residence welfare association agenda. Can they swim in the pool? Should they be allowed to use the toilet? And, yes, can they use the lift?

In his colony in Mumbai, Mathews says, maids and servants use a separate lift. “You have both extremes,” he said. “There are people who don’t care as long as they can go up and down and there are people who are very finicky.”

While D.P. Singh, a vice-president for developer DLF Ltd, has not seen any requests to keep maids out of lifts institutionally, he says he wouldn’t be surprised. “Today morning, I received a request from a plotted area of bigger houses saying they want to know why there is a common road between their houses and a plotted area for smaller houses,” he said earlier this week. “I had to tell them there can be a road for the rich and the poor.”

Maybe some day, the chairmen and CEOs will take the cue to again demand their own chariots. Until then, I’m content sharing my ride with them and others to different floors, pantries, cabins, cubicles, to resume our disparate lives, apart from each other yet a part of each other.

Your comments are welcome at widerangle@livemint.com