

A right to walk

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When the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) fiasco was being discussed in a high-level meeting in Delhi, a dazzling thought came into the head of a senior official. "Why don't we just get rid of the footpath!" he exclaimed triumphantly. Someone gently pointed out to the worthy administrator that his wife also happened to walk on the same street daily and what would she say about eliminating the footpath?

What Americans call a sidewalk, and the British a pavement, we call a footpath. In romantic minds it conjures images of tree-lined boulevards and sidewalk cafes in gay Paris. But in a typical Indian town, let the mind focus on the image of children walking home from school on a busy road without a footpath. A lorry comes hurtling at them at 70 km per hour, and suddenly those children could be yours. In a nation where people mostly walk, it is frightening that footpaths are non-existent or disappearing. We build roads for cars — pedestrians are a nuisance. Where footpaths do exist in a few cities, they have either been encroached upon or filled with garbage or taken over by hawkers, litterers and urinaters. Walking to the bazaar is not for the faint hearted.

Kanthi Kannan, a lady in Hyderabad, has started 'The Right to Walk' movement to address this problem. She filed a Public Interest Litigation in 2005 praying for the Andhra High Court to save footpaths in her neighbourhood. She bombarded municipal officials with Right to Information emails, asking why the width of the footpath leading from Mehdipatnam to Sarojini Devi Eye Hospital had been reduced and a structure resembling a Dargah built upon it. By March 2008, her efforts had met with some success. Footpaths were restored, parking forbidden on them, but the structure remained untouched. She discovered that no one is responsible for footpaths. The municipality thinks it is a problem of the Roads and Buildings Department, which denies it and says its job is only to build roads.

Mumbai used to be wonderfully endowed with broad sidewalks. I worked there in the 1980s when the municipality approached my company, asking us to build a narrow garden along the long stretch from Mahalaxmi Station to King George's hospital. They wanted us to illegally encroach upon the footpath in order to prevent squatters from taking it over. Such was the political power of the squatters! We did build a lovely, longish garden along E Moses Rd but i felt guilty about cutting into the walking surface. I consoled myself that at least the pedestrians were now walking along flowers, grass and trees.

Prosperity is beginning to spread in India but happiness is not. This is because our government repeatedly fails to provide simple public goods which citizens in other nations take for granted. Footpaths are one of them. It may seem churlish to worry about footpaths when there are more pressing problems of hunger, illiteracy and water. Remember, however, India's future rests in its cities. By 2020, half of India will be urban, middle class, and crowded. What will be the point of becoming

prosperous if it isn't safe to walk?

Kanthi Kannan's noble example shows that instead of sitting around and complaining, citizens can make a difference. The starting point is to extend your circle of concern beyond your front door (as Yudhishtira did in the Mahabharata when he insisted on taking a stray dog into heaven). You will discover that municipalities do respond to citizen pressure if citizens are united and relentless. Demand footpaths but don't be surprised if they demolish your proud garden if it encroaches on the pavement.