



Mumbai - at a new high

Compromising on ELEVATORS IN INDIA

Tak Mathews writes on the malaise that grips elevator installation and maintenance in India - compromise.

In architecture, construction, engineering and real estate development the word 'building' refers to 'any human-made structure used or intended for supporting or sheltering any use or continuous occupancy.' (Source: Wikipedia). So, while man has possessed the technical knowledge and capability to build tall structures for centuries (the 12th century 72-meter tall Qutab Minar is evidence of this), he has had to limit buildings to less than 15 meters height. Obviously climbing too many stairs was just not practical.

Things were to set change. In 1853, Elisha Graves invented the safety elevator, thereby providing man with the possibility to remove this constraint. Undoubtedly, this is the one single invention that helped change the skyline of the cities of the world.

So how does India approach the lifeline of a building?

The long queues of people waiting for the elevators at the buildings that constitute some of the most expensive real estate in the world as well as landmark buildings in India indicate that something is amiss.

Further, the numbers of accidents involving elevators and escalators around the country are on the rise. While these accidents are routinely dismissed as 'freak' incidents, the reality is that there is nothing 'freak' about any elevator or escalator accident. An elevator and escalator accident cannot happen without errors and

omissions of either the buyer or the supplier, or the maintainer or the user! Incidentally after every elevator accident, the immediate reaction is to blame the lift inspector and the inspection process. The fact is that a third party inspection cannot be 100 per cent accurate, nor can it be done on a 24x7 basis.

So what is wrong? The situation can be explained by a simple word - compromise. This is a reality through each stage of the life cycle of the elevator.

Though elevators form the lifeline of the building, they are invariably at the bottom of the design priority of a building. It is not uncommon to find that even landscaping finds higher priority in the design scheme of a project. While it would be possible to remedy every other aspect of the building barring the structure, once the core comprising the hoistways or shafts have been finalised, it will be almost impossible to remedy the inadequacy of elevators. The long queues at the very expensive Nariman Point and Cuffe Parade buildings as well as many other new landmarks around the country stand testimony to this fact.

The next compromise happens at the procurement stage. India has always been governed by the concept of the lowest bid, and this is even more true when it comes to elevators. Buyers will pay the moon for bathroom fittings and import expensive marble for the project, but they will



scrimp when it comes to the lifeline of the building. John Ruskin's quote, "The common law of business balance prohibits paying a little and getting a lot - it can't be done" applies to elevators to the T. In an apple-to-apple comparison, it is impossible to achieve the 50 per cent plus cost variations that are prevalent.

The scrimping thought process continues to the maintenance stage. It is not uncommon for the building manager to award the maintenance contract to the ridiculously lowest bidder. Again, John Ruskin's quote applies. Such cost advantage, which at times extends to 90 per cent, is not possible without compromise.

Interestingly this malady has badly affecting buildings in the USA too. In the USA, maintenance prices have dropped to such levels that service providers find it impossible to provide any level of service beyond basic breakdown maintenance.



Elevated State

As per figures for 2012, the numbers of lifts at major centres in Maharashtra are:

Mumbai: 39,363

Thane: 11,297

Navi Mumbai: 4,353

Pune: 19,696

Elevator and escalator equipment, as like any other equipment, will age. At some point the equipment will require to be upgraded and at some point of time, it will

need to be replaced. Most building owners will delay the investment to the point when something goes drastically wrong. An elevator or escalator, though the safest mode of transport, if not designed, installed, maintained and used in the right manner, has a high potential to maim or even worse, kill. This is the bottom-line.

In stark contrast to this trend there are developers in India who have an absolute no-compromise policy in the matter of elevators and escalators. The P4 Panel responsible for writing the standards and codes for elevators and

escalators in India has been valiantly trying to remove the compromise possibilities. Many State Governments have also taken up elevators and escalators as a priority and have introduced rules and acts to address the issues.

As one leading project manager put it, "India will learn only the hard and long way." Till developers and owners lose tenants or customers on account of inadequate or bad elevating, nothing is likely to change. Until then probably the old faithful staircase is the dependable way. On a positive note, the staircase is one way

to keep the population healthy!

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