

Relief of escaping Mr Space Hog

We have women-only compartments in trains. What's wrong with extending the concept to aircrafts?



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THANK YOU, INDIGO, for your customer sensitivity.

Safe Harbour Clause: For all men reading this, the caveat is “present company excluded”!

Indigo Airlines' latest offering enabling women fliers to select seats next to other women is utterly welcome. Forget the gender politics, it's the joy of not having to battle an unthinking, entitled man for your share of the armrest that is just so appealing. Also, since the average male flier seems to have more body volume than the average female flier, who has also been taught through years of conditioning to “sit properly”, the men tend to occupy more “airspace” around their seats. Many women avoid taking even the most convenient flight, if only a middle seat is available. Many of them also choose aisle seats despite being bumped into by service carts and people and risking brain damage from carelessly opened overhead luggage bins. It's not that they don't yearn for a quiet window seat with a place to rest their heads and sleep after a long work day before they head home for a second shift of family *seva*. It's just that if there is a Mr Space Hog in the next seat, you don't have the aisle to spill over into, unless you have an aisle seat. Battling on both sides is too stressful.

Truth be told, this space-hog behaviour of the male flier stems from an uncontested, automatic sense of entitlement, conditioned behaviour, rather than any desire to harass anybody. Men reading this may think — are probably thinking — she's overbraining and over analysing this. But trust us, we women have to have antennae continuously on high alert to help us through the complicated machinations needed to take care of ourselves even in everyday situations, like commuting or walking in crowded — or lonely — public spaces.

We have ladies coupes in trains, ladies compartments in locals, ladies special buses and ladies-only toilets for the many reasons that don't need to be enumerated. So what's wrong with extending the concept to aircrafts? Of course the devil is in the details and one is not sure exactly how this will work. Since there's no free courtesy that Indigo extends to anyone, as in the other forms of seat selection, additional fees may be levied for this too, in the spirit of adding value to customers and extracting value from

them. Women will be free to trade off benefits and costs and choose between a seat with more leg space next to a man and a normal seat next to a woman. Whether this will be women-only rows or not is unclear, but Indigo algorithms will figure out how to efficiently get the job done. What if men use the new visibility of gender data when selecting seats to travel next to women and say to them (as they likely may) “Don't protest about my hogging space, go travel in the pink seats or shut up”? Well Indigo, with your “girl power” focus, find us a solution. The airline has been very good at disciplining us so far. In exchange for efficiency, they have got us to stand in straight lines, board in sequence, stand uncomplainingly in caged buses on hot tarmacs waiting for aircraft cleaning, dispose of our own garbage etc. So maybe they will handle this behaviour too.

Execution also reflects the difference between a good idea and a commitment that is built into the DNA of the brand. Pink colour coding for women-occupied seats? As a friend pointed out, it signals the patriarchal, stereotypical idea of the weaker sex needing protection, not empowerment via choices. As we know, purple is the new pink and maybe royal blue would work just as well.

Before other businesses rush to do the same in the name of “new trend”, here are two cautionary anecdotes. One is about a five-star hotel chain that offers a “women-only” floor. “For your safety”

said the young women at the check-in counter. Until then, it had not occurred to me that a five-star hotel was unsafe for a woman. Surely, it was the hotel's problem to keep me safe and not put me in a “zenana”. But worse, when I needed electrical help at midnight, a burly bearded electrician appeared. They hadn't thought through the plan, clearly!

And then there was the iconic chairman of an iconic Indian company who wanted to address a European board director's struggle to follow the dis-

cussion when his Indian colleagues animatedly talked at the same time. So, he, like Indigo, created a systematic solution to a cultural problem. He designed a conference room where one speaker's microphone had to be switched off before another's could come on. The result was everybody focusing on being the “fastest finger first” to jab their microphone and no one was listening to anyone else! So, from my perch as an evangelist of customer-centricity, Indigo gets a thumbs up for listening to consumer pain and devising solutions.

As far as how the solution will work in our “we are like that only” world, the jury is still out.

The writer's most recent book is Lilliput Land: How “Small” is Driving India's Mega Consumption Story