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**The Nation spoke with Major Anil Seneviratne, who was injured during the war and lost a limb. He is now the CEO of Navajeevena, a Tangalle based organisation that has been serving disabled people for many years.**

Thousands of soldiers have given their limbs to help defeat terrorism in Sri Lanka. They were previously toughing it out in the dense jungles and difficult conditions on the battlefield, but now, it seems that many of them—while still young and fit—are prevented from entering the public buildings of this country, because of thoughtless design.

Yes, I think the topic is both current and timeless.

My opinions on this issue have developed as a soldier, a person wounded in the field, a disabled person, a private sector employee, and a disabled Rights activist.

We have to admit the fact that the number of disabled persons has now increased due to a three-decade-long war. Most of the soldiers, who have been injured, are young and strong. And, although it is unintentional, it is indeed a sad situation to see that those people are now not included in the mainstream.

This is due to a lack of anticipation as a nation, and a lack of caring for marginalised communities, by society. Those young people still have responsibilities to their families and loved ones. They still have a role to play in their family and in society, and to do this, need to access buildings and public facilities often. If the environment is not ready to accept them, it makes them frustrated, which can end up with them developing hatred towards society.

A disability is, anyway, an unpleasant thing that no one likes to have. So, the environment should be modified in such a way that such difficulties can be reduced. And, actually, whether you are a soldier or not, once disabled, the needs are common. We are moving towards an inclusive society, and physical accessibility is the key to an inclusive society. People also fail to realise that, when we afford accessibility for the disabled, we are making it easier and safer for everybody to use.

And, you know, the other thing is, if society does not consider disabled people, that means, society neglects a potentially lucrative consumer market.

How do soldiers feel, when, though they are considered war heroes, they are not supported in their basic Rights for accessibility, that are the laws of the land?

There is another sensitive and little spoken of aspect of those individuals. That is, not everyone can be a soldier.

A soldier is a person who places his self-esteem over his life. I still remember the motto of my troops; “Death before Dishonour”.

It is an insult that the environment that we build to live in does not include the disabled. It is a dishonour to those proud citizens.

It is true that the disability changes your whole lifestyle, behaviour, and hopes; but it does not and should not erase ones beliefs – especially, core beliefs of a sense of self-esteem.

Therefore, it is much needed to enforce laws and create an attitude that considers their pride and dignity, if you really want to respect them as heroes.

What are some of the common issues disabled soldiers face with regards to accessibility?

There are many, and their needs are just like other citizens. But some of the common ones include: using public transport, using roads, accessing water and sanitation, getting into public and private buildings and using its facilities or services, moving around their own houses – especially, the toilet facilities, problems in the workplace, and isolation due to inability to use common facilities that everyone else in the community can.