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ABILITY

India's Cross-disability Magazine

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VISION 2008

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Success & ABILITY, India's cross-disability magazine enjoys wide circulation both nationally and internationally, and has a wide readership that includes industrialists, administrators, Indian and overseas Government and Non-Government organisations, libraries, disabled persons, families and the general caring public.

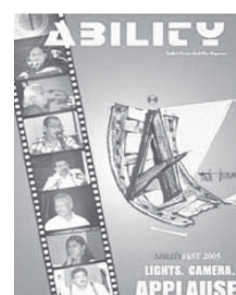
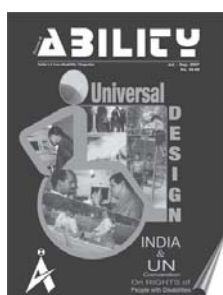
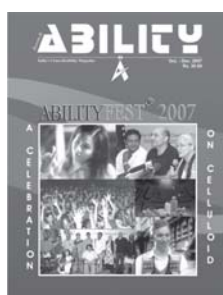
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Success & ABILITY is India's innovative lifestyle magazine focusing on disability issues. Proud of the standards it has pioneered, the magazine aims to inform, inspire and interest its readers from all sectors of society. Success & ABILITY is a bridge between the world of people with and without disabilities and a powerful representative, for all issues concerning people with disabilities.

Success & ABILITY is published by Ability Foundation - a national NGO that works for the mainstreaming, empowerment, employment and rights of disabled people. Ability Foundation works with a single minded purpose - to provide equitable opportunities and a level playing field in all aspects of life. All it takes is an open mind.



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From The Editor's Desk

Friends,

Every time a brand new year surfaces, people can be heard saying, "This year went by too fast". Although we all know that it really didn't, in the context of 2007, things did happen faster for the disability sector. It began with hope when the sub committees of the Planning Commission included several disability activists and leaders in the sector. It went on to India holding its breath with great new hope – being one of the first countries to be signatory to the historic UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. It led all of us to rally for the ratification of the Convention – merely being signatory was no use, we said. Then, wonder of wonders... India did ratify! That too on Oct 2, 2007! A date close to every Indian's heart.

India's ratification of the UNCRPD was perhaps the most significant development of Year 2007. This is a way forward to strengthen us to change the face of many things. While the other laws — the RCI Act, the PD Act & the National Trust — make demands for reprieve that can be sought by the right person, at the right time, in the right manner, in the right court, in the right proceedings, in the right economic conditions... the UNCRPD is, simply put, our opportunity to enforce our fundamental rights. Widespread acknowledgement and awareness of the UNCRPD and an obligation in the international scheme of things will strengthen our hands and work towards elimination of discrimination in all forms, as citizens of the country.

This apart, I'm sure you've noticed that a major change in the attitudinal and social outlook of the average Indian is coming about. At every turn we see disability issues being covered in the media. People are looking at disabilities with new eyes. There is a rethinking on educational norms. The acceptance of sign language as a compulsory mode of communication for deaf persons, a question asked on being disability-friendly, ramps, accessible toilets, Braille signage... A fresh look at disabled people and their innate talents has opened up. Movies on pertinent issues are being made. A need to incorporate an inclusive society and celebrate diversity is beginning to be felt. Several doors that initially began to open cautiously, now do so with a renewed vigour and a sense of understanding and acceptance.

Now, as the first quarter of Year 2008 comes to an end, this issue of our magazine throws an insight on many of these... right from the World Bank Report, to some of the important legislations passed, to the historic UNCRPD and the way ahead, the vision for this year as spelt out by some of the sector's activists, our bold step to take our CavinKare ABILITY Awards and our job fair EmployABILITY to the country's capital and the overwhelming sense of exhilaration and satisfaction that followed.

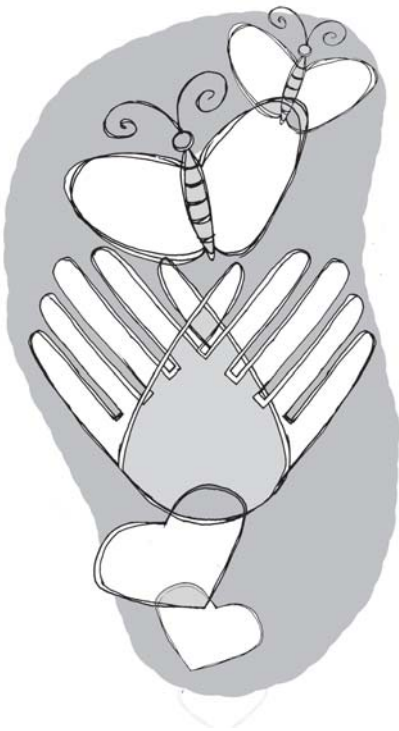
Carrying the EmployABILITY initiative to Delhi, as well as holding the 6th CavinKare ABILITY Awards programme there, was a challenge to the Ability team. The dance performance by the Articulate troupe of visually impaired dancers, along with national award winning actor/dancer Shobana was nothing short of sheer brilliance. It was a first time experience and revelation for everyone in the audience. Organizing any event in Delhi can be intimidating for anyone. However, our small team from Chennai was able to do what initially seemed unimaginable. I must place on record the fantastic support we received from CavinKare, the NHRD Network Delhi Chapter, naukri.com as well as so many NGOs. It was a great feeling.

If the packed to capacity "Lal Chowk Theatre" at Pragati Maidan on Feb 23 lifted our spirits right up to heaven, the sweet smell of success was even more so the next day, when our job fair saw the participation of 51 national and multinational companies encompassing IT, IT enabled services, Healthcare, Manufacturing, HR, Product Services, FMCGs, Insurance companies and more. Added to this was the gratifying presence of 364 candidates from nearly 22 States (out of a total of 835 candidates who had registered for the fair) – who had ventured out of their hometowns – many for the first time in their lives – to come to Delhi, unmindful of the distances and travel difficulties, to attend interviews. Their faith in EmployABILITY was evident in this show of strength. What more could we ask for? It was wonderful to see the jubilant expression on the faces of those who had been offered jobs on the spot, as well as the look of hope on those who had been short-listed for the next round of interviews. While such gestures brought immense hopes to the participants, for us at Ability Foundation, there was happiness in another direction as well – to have succeeded in sensitising the companies and to opening their minds to the vast hitherto unexplored group of deserving and qualified disabled persons. I am convinced that this will positively snowball into much broader awareness. The talented pool of qualified persons with disabilities cannot be ignored any longer. The repeated success of our job fairs – now held four times in succession, is proof of this. The movement is catching on. We are thrilled to have kick-started a trend.

Jayshree Raveendran

VOICES

Poems by MANISH GUPTA



Who is a FRIEND?

A Friend ...
strings together hearts,
repairs the wounds
encourages discovery,
enlightens the mind,
dissolves pain,
banishes loneliness,
understands anxieties,
increases the joys,
deepens the spirit,
and frees the soul,
true friendship is
the silent language of the heart,
that is
Love.

There is light

*If I cannot have the sun,
I still have the moon,
If I cannot have the moon,
I still have the stars,
If I cannot have the stars,
I still have my evening lamp
to give me light,
If I cannot have all these,
I could go to sleep and dream that
there is a light.*



Faith & Hope

Differently abled they say I am disabled,
I do not think I am, only differently abled,
and in many ways I can, do better than you say,
when body, mind and soul, link in to show the spirit,
of the person as a whole, our bodies do not listen,
to what our minds do say, and in the scope that's given,
we have to find a way, to carry out our mission,
and prove that we are good,
and do our tasks much better,
than a normal person could,
we however need a platform,
that's level, just and fair.
We accept a ramp is better
than a complicated stair.
Give us the means to carry out
our daily tasks on earth,
and we will show you,
what we can do of spirit there's no dearth,
awareness is important,
acceptance follows next,
a fair and just society,
and in this context people who give freely of faith and hope and love,
and you will see us stronger, with help from god above.



IF WISHES

Were HORSES

Waiting for it to happen, wanting it to happen, willing it to happen...

We have seen the birth of yet another year. As with each new year, bright hopes arise with the golden sun on the eastern horizon. Buoyancy comes wafting in with the cool morning breeze. Before we get enveloped in it we pause, look back and take stock of what has been done. Was our optimism last year justified? Could we do what we set out to do? Could we come closer to realizing our dream of an all-embracing society? Is there enough reason to feel even a little elated?

To answer these questions, and to get a perspective of where we stand today, let's first list the significant developments for the disability sector in 2007. The major one, all of you will agree, is what happened at the dying moments of 2007.



After months of lobbying, discussions, arguments and counter arguments, India ratified the UN Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities. Then there was the much-awaited World Bank Report of 2007. We had the exhilaration of finally seeing our draft report being accepted in the XIth five year plan, albeit after some focused lobbying. Overall, we saw better awareness of disability issues. Now, the looking forward. What do the country's activists and leaders in the disability

sector have to say? What do they envisage as prospects for this year? We bring you anticipations of some of the prominent leaders. A little further down - right into the year so far - *Success & ABILITY*'s first issue of year 2008 recounts two milestones, happenings of the first quarter of the year, the CavinKare ABILITY Awards and Employ*ABILITY*2008, that took place at Delhi. Do these anticipate several more positive events through the year? Wait and see and form your impressions as the year goes by.

THE WORLD BANK REPORT

At a private level, there was news to cheer. The World Economic Report 2007 (People with Disabilities in India : from Commitments to Outcomes) talked at length about milestone happenings, and amongst other things prominently about Ability Foundation's efforts at mainstreaming. There was mention of the CavinKare ABILITY Awards for Achievers with Disability. About our popular magazine, *Success & ABILITY*, it said: "*Equally, the disability movement is becoming more effective in disseminating insights into the lives of persons with disabilities through vehicles such as the Success & ABILITY, quarterly of the Ability Foundation in Chennai.*"

Under the heading *A Jobs Fair Bringing Employers and Disabled people Together for Mutual Benefits*, the Report carried a detailed description of our annual job fairs and how they benefited both the job seekers and the employers. It concluded: *So impressed was the TN IT department that it promised all support for an annual job fair. According to the Ability Foundation team, "This fair emphasized the need for a productive relationship between government, the public sector, the private sector and society at large to bring about sustainable change."*

Source: *Officer* (2005)

Mention was also made of our weekly radio programme *Thiramaiyin Thisayil* (In the Direction of Abilities), broadcast in association with All India Radio. The report said, "*It focuses on issues and policies which affect the rights of PD's... Letters and responses from remote rural towns of Tamil Nadu indicate its significant penetration.*"

POLICY: SIGNIFICANT DISABILITY NEWS IN INDIA IN 2007

• Disability cannot be reason for dismissal of employee

In a significant judgment the Supreme Court of India has held that the government cannot dismiss an

employee (Bhagwan Dass) or force him to seek voluntary retirement from his existing job if he becomes disabled during his service. The bench said that the rights of an employee, who acquired a disability during his service, were protected and safeguarded by Sections 47 of the PD Act, 1995 and that he could not be dismissed or forced to take retirement from his job.

• Disabled government employees cannot be denied promotion

In another development, the Delhi High Court held that disabled persons could not be denied promotion even if they were physically unfit to discharge duties of a higher post. Dismissing a petition filed by the Centre against an order of the Central Administrative Tribunal, Justice AK Sikri said, "Even if it is presumed that he (Disabled Employee) may not be fit to discharge the duties of the post because of his disability, he has to be posted in an equivalent post with the same salary."

• Cabinet approval for 1lakh jobs for the disabled

The Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) gave its approval for the central sector scheme of providing 1 lakh jobs per annum to persons with disabilities, with a proposed outlay of Rs.1800 crore during the 11th Plan Period. In addition, CCEA also approved a provision of Rs.16 crore for four years for giving adequate publicity to the scheme. The implementation of the scheme will lead to considerable social profit and goodwill as people with disabilities will get regular employment in the organised sector. It will be applicable to employees with wages upto Rs. 25,000 a month.

MEDIA

Movies

This report would be incomplete without the mention of two remarkable movies released during the year. One was the Tamil movie *Mozhi*, which probably for the first time in Tamil film history depicted a deaf-mute person as intelligent, independent, and one with "normal" aspirations. In a boy-meets-girl format

*Mozhi*

supported with adequate humour, the movie took us into the world of hearing and speech-impaired persons for a significant message: mainstreaming disabled people need not be a distant dream; all it needs is a little understanding and plenty of empathy. The phenomenal success of the movie proved several things. People will watch well-made movies that portray disability as its main theme. Movies on disability need not fall into the documentary, “art” or ‘shown-only-at-festivals’ category. They can be commercially viable, popular and heart-warming. In short, *Mozhi* did for mainstreaming what tomes of writing on the subject could not. In that sense, it broke several records along with stereotyped myths.

The end of the year saw the release of *Taare Zameen Par*; another landmark movie that takes us into the world of children with dyslexia. Lovingly directed, the movie moves beyond learning disabilities to make a statement on education itself: there is no one-size-fits-all method for teaching; we should allow the child to learn in the way he understands; patience and love are far more important in teaching than rules, caning and detention. The movie hopefully will make authorities sit up and formulate policies to train teachers and make education child-centric. The movie tells us poignantly that every child is unique and has a talent of his own.

*Taare Zameen Par*

THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON RIGHTS OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

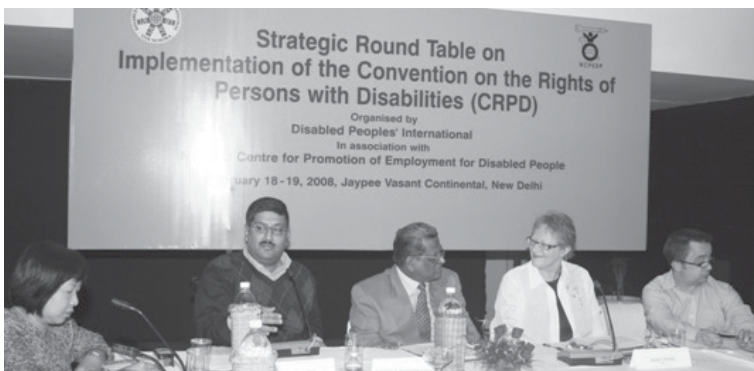
Briefly, the UNCRPD promotes and protects the fundamental rights and freedoms of people with disabilities (PD). The Convention includes people with physical, mental, intellectual or sensory disabilities (defined by relevant acts in the respective country) on an equal footing with others. Out of 191 UN members, 102 have signed the Convention so far. The United Nations opened this treaty for ratification on March 30, 2007. Many nations have indicated support of the treaty and interest in ratification. Seventeen nations including Croatia, Cuba, Gabon, Hungary, India, Jamaica, and Panama have actually ratified it.

We can be proud of the fact that India was one of the first countries to ratify the treaty. The date on which we did it is significant, too – October 2, Mahatma Gandhi’s birthday. The treaty becomes legally binding 30 days after the 20th nation ratifies.

However, signing the Convention, or even ratifying the treaty does not by itself imply that disabled people are protected from human rights violations. For that to happen, the ratifying country must make sincere efforts to implement the provisions of the Convention in “letter and in spirit”. The Convention marks a major step towards changing the perception of disability. The challenge now is to make India’s ratification have a significant change in the lives of the millions of disabled persons in the country.

UNCRPD – India After Ratification – The Way Forward

Disabled Peoples International (DPI), partnered with the National Centre for the Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), New Delhi to hold a two-day convention in February, 2008 to discuss the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Nearly 40

*The Conference in Delhi*

disabilities representatives from India and abroad participated in this roundtable conference.

Participants included Steven Estey, Human Rights Officer, DPI, Mary Ennis, Executive Director, DPI, Saowalak Thogkuay Regional Development Officer, DPI (Asia Pacific), Sawang Srisom Assistant to RDO, DPI (Asia Pacific), Phillipe O'Keefe and Sonali Sen, Social Protection Specialists from the World Bank and YSR Murthy, from the National Human Rights Commission.

Javed Abidi, Executive Director, NCPEDP moderated the discussions. The roundtable was inaugurated by Justice S. Rajendra Babu, Chairperson, National Human Rights Commission. Rajendra Babu brought out the necessity of implementing the Convention in the rural areas. "About 70 percent of the population lives in rural areas. We have to strengthen the network and translate the Convention into Indian languages," he said.

Mary Ennis of DPI said that India was picked for this pilot workshop because it is one of the first countries to sign and later ratify the UNCRPD.

The key demand, which was unanimously approved at the end of the workshop, was this: The Prime Minister's Office should monitor the implementation of the Convention. The disability sector should not be restricted to the Ministry of Social Justice alone but should be taken cognizance of across various ministries. Unless the PMO is involved directly, there is no hope for it to move at the rate of speed required. A memorandum to this effect would be submitted to the government soon.

Steve Estey, Human Rights Officer, DPI said, "The point of drafting the Convention was to set the standards high and make this a strong reference point for issues like legal capacity for PDs. Development of domestic legislature should be in the spirit of CRPD. Domestic

These are the major ideas that found approval among the delegates

- Each article of the CRPD should have an implementation checklist for us to know what has been done and what is still to be done. The list will tell us the specific outcome of the implementation of each article.
- Regular campaigns should be organized to spread awareness about the UN Convention. This should be done at all levels, down to the local self-government blocks.
- Amendment to domestic laws should be made "transparent and accountable". In fact there should be an overview of all the laws in each Ministry.
- Lawyers, architects and human resources managers should be sensitised on the potential of this Convention. Presentations should be made in colleges as well.
- The Convention should be translated into important local languages so that awareness about its provisions reaches different sections of the population. It should be translated into Braille and every talking mode possible.
- Independent bodies like the NHRD must be involved in the implementation
- Ms. Aloka Guha will draft the amendment of the existing Act. The Ministry should share it with us. There should be a 15-member committee to support her work.
- The Law Commission's work in the area of implementation must be monitored.
- Implementation should have a cross-sectoral approach. Successful methods of the child and women's rights groups should be incorporated in the Action Plan.
- The UNCRPD must be tabled in the Parliament. It is for ownership by the nation. It has huge symbolism.
- Lobbying for implementation could be done at the Programme Implementation Ministry.
- NHRCs will prepare reports on implementation using the Universal Periodical Review mechanism.
- The Optional Protocol must be investigated. A group must be created for lobbying for statistics. What is the government doing?
- Lobbying should go on for the inclusion of persons with disability in every representative body to the meetings on UNCRPD.
- A strong committee for monitoring and implementation of the UNCRPD should be constituted.

lobbying should not dilute it. It should be connected to the Convention process.”

Steve Estey talked about the need for a Shadow Report. “The government will accentuate the positive, they won’t talk about shortfalls. The NGOs should prepare Shadow Reports highlighting the gaps in government programmes. The reports should focus on specific issues. For example, the first report could be on housing for PDs. This should be aligned to Articles in the CRPD in this domain, such as Article 28. We should constantly talk about treaty obligation. Finally it is the civil society that has to shine a light on the issue. The government is not governed by the Convention for implementation.”

How will the monitoring work? “There will be a first meeting of the state parties within 60 days after the Convention comes into force,” Steve informed. “They will meet in New York. A fixed number of countries that have ratified will participate. DPI from all countries will have a strong presence in this. You must start networking now. Our engagement is important.”

Eventually, countries will file their report on the

implementation. The NGOs will file their Shadow Report. The monitoring committee will have two members allotted for each country to scrutinise the reports thoroughly. They will meet in Geneva where diplomats will make their presentations. The dedicated members will connect the two reports and identify gaps. They will give the concluding observations and will offer suggestions. “Develop your expertise and file that Shadow Report,” said Steve. “Do it as soon as you can.”

Are we happy? The answer would be a reserved “Yes”. The road is long and we need to keep moving.

For this year’s first issue, we thought we would stop to ask for directions. In turn, we have posed this question to people in the disability sector - “What, in your opinion, is the one issue that should get priority for tackling/implementation/enforcement in 2008? If you made a “to-do” list what would go to the top? Why?” The answers came back – varied, embracing different aspects of the disability question.

So here is our New Year’s pot of wishes ... like other people’s usual resolutions. Yet a different cuppa.

India’s leading activists speak...



AKHIL PAUL, Director, Sense International (India).

In 2008, at the top of my “to-do” list, I will strive for inclusion of “deafblindness” as one of the categories of disability in the amended PD Act. For a person who can see and hear, the world extends as far his/ her eyes and ears can reach, but a deafblind person has a unique experience of the world. It is initially much narrow and extends only as far his fingertips can reach. Deafblindness also places unique demands upon families, teachers and caretakers as they take on the responsibility of bringing up a deafblind child. So a legal recognition (in line with Article - 24 of UNCRPD) of deafblindness will usher in a new and promising future for this population as well.

I also resolve to facilitate effective implementation of the UNCRPD because the Convention is of prime importance in promoting the rights of people with disabilities. It will help in setting up common standards for disability-related legislations in India, which are fundamental in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities and are the most effective means of facilitating social change and improving the status of people with disability.

As the PD Act is under amendment, the disability sector has to join hands to make sure that the spirit of the UNCRPD is appropriately reflected in national policies and programmes that reach persons with disabilities. This is crucial to bring positive changes in their lives. For effective implementation, we need to involve the larger community to support the Convention. As NGOs in the disability sector, we will have to form strong linkages with key decision makers. We must identify and involve the political community. In this struggle, alliances with other Human Rights groups will be needed as well. Similarly, I would also like to see a separate “Ministry of Disability & Development”, which can give 100% attention to the sector.



MADAN VASISHTA, Associate Professor, Gallaudet University, U.S.A.

The government of India and the NGOs have been working on improving the lot of disabled people in India for many years. However, these efforts have not resulted in significant gains for bringing equity to people with disabilities. The main reason for this sad situation is the disparity between goals and plans and ACTION.

If we look at the PD Act and its various articles, we will find that this Act has become more and more an unfunded mandate. India signed the UN Charter last year and a lot of hoopla was raised about it. However, is there an action plan to follow upon it? In the year 2008, the government should make it a priority to audit the agenda it followed during the last ten plus years. How much money was spent on making promises and holding meetings and beating the dead horse of planning, planning and planning? How much money was spent on implementing all these plans? More than that, what were the end results? Did the government get a good bang for the rupee?

In this audit, we also need to learn how much the prevalent Indian tradition of corruption is at work. There are stories about “hard working professionals” who take out contracts to provide services for the disabled, but do nothing except to hold some conferences with a luminary making yet more promises. The actual help that trickles down to disabled people is miniscule compared to what is spent on planning meetings and other functions.

After this audit and the resultant housecleaning, the government will be able to provide much better services to the disabled population. Otherwise, it will be business as usual.



MALINI CHIB
Senior Event Manager
Chairperson,
ADAPT Rights Group

My wish for 2008 is that the mindsets of Indians should become more open to disability and to disabled people. India should become much more accessible to disabled people and different kinds of disabilities.



Dr. MITHU ALUR, Founder
Chairperson, ADAPT(Able Disabled
All People Together), formerly The
Spastics Society of India

The vast majority of disabled children and people in our country are illiterate and uneducated. They are still lying on their backs at home and being thought of as the village idiot. It is the right to education bill that needs to go through to reach the millions of children in the poorest percentile of the social sector. Unless India can take education to the masses, there are millions who will be out of the safety net.

It is these children whose rights need to be restored. I have no idea why the centre is lagging behind on this. I would like to see the Right to Education Bill being made into an Act-a constitutional right for every child. My work will be finished when every single child and adult in this country is given education and employment enabling him or her to be a valuable citizen of India.

ARUN RAO, Director, Deafway

We'll work towards taking the first steps for establishing colleges for the hearing impaired both at the Indian and international level. Side-by-side, we'll work for increased interpreting services. We'll lobby for the post of an interpreter in government offices at a teacher's salary. Deafway will set up dynamic advocacy websites. We'll also develop what we have and give people upgraded information on what's happening. Another thing that is close to my heart is preparing the syllabus for a sign language course that teachers, especially special educators, will take up across boards.



RAJUL PADMANABHAN
Director, Vidya Sagar

What is my wish list for people with disability? I am going to put them all under three headings: In the far future, In the near future & What we want now and will not wait for.

In the far future: We want an inclusive society where difference/disability is celebrated.

In the immediate future: We want budget allocation and a special component plan for disability in all the ministries. All places, transport and information outlets made

accessible to all people with disability. “Disabilities studies department” in all colleges and Universities.

We can’t wait any longer: for

Motorised wheelchairs - now

Technology for communication - now

All schools and colleges to offer inclusive education - now

Any policy for disability - include disabled people - now

And finally : Disability activists should be asked for “wish lists” for disability issues, not heads of NGO’s.



G. CHIDAMBARANATHAN,
President, Tamil Nadu Handicapped Federation

I have an immediate goal and a long-term one. As State President of the Federation of Tamil Nadu Physically Handicapped Association, I tour extensively in the rural areas. I know for a fact that a lot of disabled people live below the poverty line. I would consider any family with an income less than Rs. 40,000 or Rs. 50,000 as being BPL. So, in the coming budget, can provision be made to give disabled people in these families rice and dal free on their ration card?

This will not be a big drag on government expenditure! The Andhra Pradesh government has already implemented this scheme. In rural families, disabled children, especially girls are considered a burden – they get no education, no employment and are just left to languish. Many are treated badly since the parents think of them as a burden. This free ration, while helping to ease the family’s poverty, should get families to treat members with disability with more dignity and respect.

My other wish is provision for self-employment. What we need to do here is to collect statistics of people with disabilities. We could follow the Thirunelveli model here. We need information on the economic status, the education status, the employment status, the disability status and the aptitude of every disabled person in the state. If the Election commission can organise voter identity cards for the entire population, this should not be a difficult exercise.



The Panchayats, ward officers, DROs and the District Collectors can be entrusted with this enumeration. The local self-government offices could rope in the community leaders to spread awareness and sensitise people about the necessity for data. Can’t people in every street put together this information? Data collection can be done by local communities. Communities get together and build temples. This should not be a challenge for them. Students can be given the responsibility to gather data as part of their NSS work. There should be complete information on disabled people.

Above all, can we have a state policy on disability?



ANJALI ARORA ANAND, Lawyer

I like to dream. When day dreaming, I imagine having the magic lamp to rub or the bottle to open and call the genie out to grant my wishes. I have my wish list ready for the genie!

“Ask for three wishes Anjali!” said the genie in my dreams.

“I wish to experience customised and blind-friendly public services,” I said.

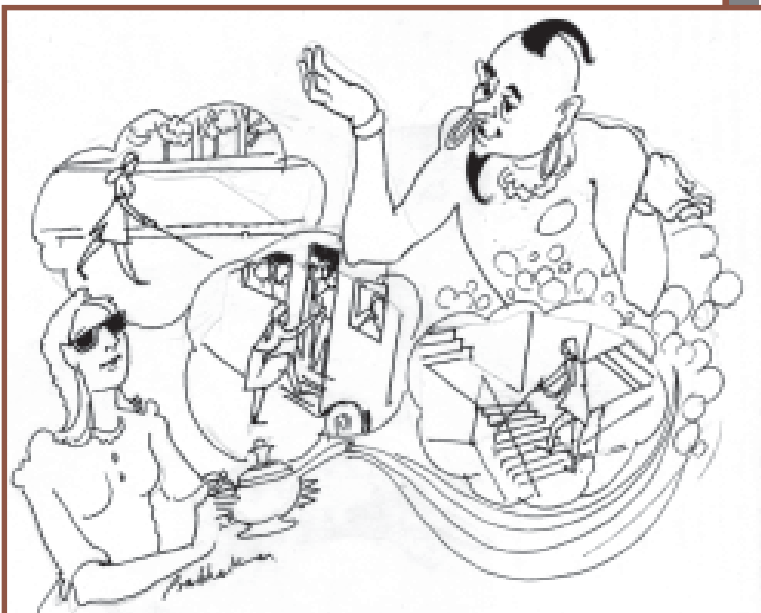
I begin to dream that I am walking on the road independently, safely crossing traffic signals guided by auditory announcements, boarding the bus, and getting down at the right stop because it has auditory announcement. I feel empowered in this dream. It is a wonderful expectation to imagine. Then I see myself being able to reach the right public building, going to the right floor and reaching the room with ease, safety with all the accessible information to guide me all through!

I imagine being able to transact business with public service by myself, independently or being given timely and adequate assistance, ah ha!

This imagination of altered and customised public services and infrastructure for me, as a blind person, is so much needed. So, I command the genie to grant this!

I then wish to be able to exercise the freedom to choose!

I dream of making the simplest choice about the school that I as a blind person could go to for my primary, secondary and senior secondary education. I dream about choosing my profession without limitation, I dream of choosing from the abundant options and opportunities, the same as are available to sighted persons. I dream of living with dignity and exercising my choice without the others influencing or being involved in my decision and choice as my better-offs.



“Granted!” said the genie, “and what’s the third?”

The third thing I wish for is the adaptation and accommodation in products, appliance, and technology.

I dream that I’m able to use all electrical products with ease because of adaptive design and blind friendliness as its regular feature.

I dream that everything in the market that is available to the non-sighted world is also available to me without extra effort or addition.

I dream of accommodation in all places, and the right attitude everywhere. I wish there is a place for me as a blind person.

I dreamt the genie granting my wishes!

So if the genie were to appear then I would ask him to give:

Completely safe and accessible infrastructure for the blind and visually-impaired people;

The recognised right and dignity to choose for myself without limitations, or barriers or deemed inability;

Accessibility and usability of all products, things and appliances with blind- friendly features naturally incorporated.



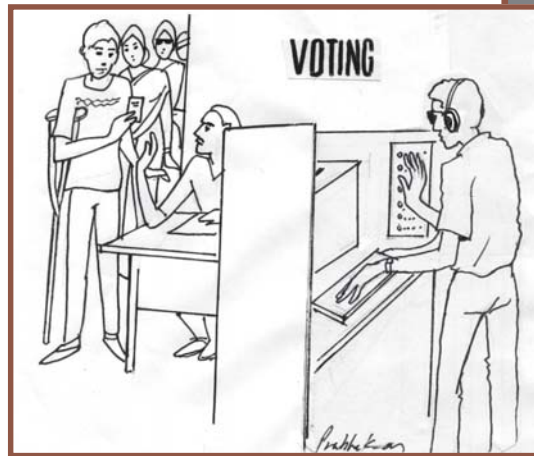
GOVINDA KRISHNAN, Director, Netrodaya.

Every political party should have 10% of its candidates for election reserved to people with disabilities. This will ensure several things:

At least some of them will win the elections and become councillors, ward officers, MLAs and eventually MPs. The likelihood of more people with disabilities being given responsibilities in the central council of ministers becomes higher. As they campaign for seats, people with disabilities are more likely to talk about issues like the right to education, employment and access. The process of political education for disabled and non-disabled persons is set in motion.

Every time the Social Welfare Co-ordination Committee meets, the deliberations never go beyond asking for more charity. Is that what we want? When a lawyer passed away, a prominent political party recognised his contribution to the party. In his place, the party ticket was allotted to his daughter. When she won the election, she was directly made a minister with independent charge. No one asked if she had any previous experience in social welfare matters. Similarly what should prevent the party from deciding to field disabled candidates? Why can't they arrive at a consensus similar to the one that made a novice a minister?

If a political process gets underway, accessing resources will become easier. Right now, there is no particular committee that talks exclusively on disability issues, no ministerial level meetings, no talk at all! There's no one in the driver's seat! Talking of "political process", shouldn't something be done to ensure total confidentiality for the visually-impaired voter? The usual excuse is, "The ballot paper is in Braille!" This does not solve the issue.



For the actual voting, a visually-impaired person still has to be accompanied by an escort. Voting is intensely personal, it is a fundamental right. Yet after all these years, a visually-impaired person cannot vote with total confidentiality. All that has to be done is to make the EVM (Electronic Voting Machines) speech-enabled and attach headphones!

And then there are the coaches reserved for disabled people on trains! The question is, why are the two coaches separated? The one in the front is attached to the engine and the other at the rear is attached to the guard's van. Why? Aren't all reserved compartments together? Aren't all AC compartments attached? Why are "disabled" coaches separated at berth? Ask and this is the answer: "They have been put near the guards at both ends, sir, in case you need help." Amazing! What is forgotten is that if the coach at the rear is full, a person with limited mobility will have to traverse the entire length of the train to reach the other one!

We don't want safety provided by the guards. God is with us. What we need is accessibility and comfort, like everybody else! I have a lot more New Year wishes, but solving these will do nicely, for a start!



RAJANI GOPALAKRISHNA, CA, Infosys Technologies.

My priority is making the people around aware and sensitise them to deal with disabled persons. As more and more people with disability are entering the mainstream and interacting with non-disabled people in different streams of life, there has to be systematic sensitisation of the non-disabled people.

Non-disabled people in general do not know how to interact with people with disability. Disabled people are either kept away or they are not encouraged to get into any activity in the same manner as a “normal” person. Say for example, when there is a social gathering and if a person with disability is attending the same, the person is made to sit at some place. No one bothers to even talk to that person or include him/her in the group. Many a times I have seen or rather experienced that. For example, when a person who is visually-impaired goes to some get-together, it is clear that that person cannot interact easily, as he/she cannot see. It is necessary for others around to talk and make the atmosphere conducive so that the disabled person also can enjoy the fun and be a part of the group. But that never happens. Others expect that this person should come forward and interact. I wonder what keeps them back.



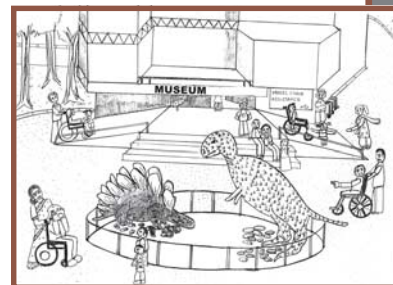
The same is evident in group meetings, or official gatherings or any other place where there is interaction among more than two people. It is not the mistake of non-disabled people, for they may not have come in contact with disabled people earlier. Hence it is necessary to sensitise them and create awareness in them as to how they should interact with people with disability. It is not enough to introduce the concept of inclusion, but it is equally important to ensure its effective implementation.



JAVED ABIDI, Executive Director, NCEPEDP

Life is meaningless if one is a virtual prisoner within one's home. If one can't step out; if one can't go to a school or a college or a university due to the lack of accessible public transport; if one can't travel from one city to another due to inaccessible roadways, railways and even airlines; and if one can't enter buildings - be it schools, colleges, etc. or offices, factories, etc. or even malls, cinemas, etc. How does one study, how does one work or simply put, how does one live a meaningful, dignified life? I am convinced that without access, one merely survives and how frustrating or painful it must be, I cannot even dare to imagine. When I say access, I don't mean physical access alone and when I say physical access, I don't restrict myself only to mobility-impaired people. For me, access is a far more wide and a far more complex issue.

Under physical access, we must not limit ourselves to only ramps and wheelchair-friendly toilets! One must focus on the needs of people with visual impairments and also, people with hearing impairments. Sound prompts for the first and visual prompts for the latter are some easy examples of what I mean. Thanks to a few well-meaning friends in Delhi, I am now broadening my own horizons to also look at the issue from the point of view of people with intellectual impairments and neurological disabilities. Under the wide umbrella of access, the other totally neglected area is that of access to knowledge & information and of course, access to technology. Example: We recently got five key government websites audited, to see if a visually-impaired person could access them. Not one passed the test! They are the websites of the National Trust, the Rehabilitation Council of India, the office of the Chief Commissioner for People with Disabilities, the Ministry of Information Technology and last but for sure, not least, the Ministry of Social (In) Justice!!





JAMSHED MISTRY, Lawyer, Disability Activist

What would top my list would be enforcement of barrier-free movement for those persons with disabilities who live below the poverty line. The one thing that has to be done this year is to introduce legislation against discrimination and provide for stringent penalties for offenders! Why? Because people have remained silent spectators for far too long and the time to act is certainly ripe.

At another level, I want the governments to ensure that the rural areas get the basic infrastructure to help people with disabilities. It is also crucial that the UN Convention is implemented in full. After all this work, why do we still see hidden discrimination? Look for example, at the movie portrayals!

There needs to be a second wave of reform implementation that would include the middle class. It should help us to push ourselves upwards. We could definitely take a leaf out of what the Goa Tourism Department is doing – they have been completely sensitised when it comes to accessibility. They have even printed menu cards in Braille. During the recent assembly elections, they made all the provisions necessary to get disabled people to vote without difficulty. They didn't have to be told or sensitised to what had to be done. There were ramps in the booths and Braille ballot sheets. It's time others followed suit!



TAP VARADAKUTTI, State President,
Tamil Nadu Association for the Welfare of the Physically Handicapped

Because of our unstinting efforts, the Disabled Welfare Board was constituted last year. We placed this as one of our demands in the last State Conference on Disability. The Disabled Welfare Board is supposed to regulate the fund allocation for the NGOs. It is supposed to co-ordinate with the DDROs (District Disabled Rehabilitation Officer) in its work. In its latest development, the members have been divided into five groups and have been asked to visit the six districts allocated to them.

While all this is going on, the main work, that is, the implementation of the PD Act has not made much progress.

The State Co-ordination Committee, which has statutory powers under the Act, I feel, has been side-lined in this whole exercise. The period of the existing SCC is over. The Committee now has to be re-constituted and people with experience in the sector should be selected as members. The SCC should be made functional as soon as possible.

I would put this down at the top of my list of priorities for the year 2008. The other thing I want done at once is accessibility. I want all public buildings, wherever they are, to become accessible. For me, mobility is of paramount importance. A lot of the problems disabled persons face can be mitigated if they enjoy total mobility. Provision for mobility should go to the top of the agenda.





ARVIND DUTT ABDALI, Dy. Commandant (Info Technology).

My priorities would go like this:

PEOPLE

- 1) Integration in society (a person should be able to do things like others can do)
- 2) Perception of self & others - that we can Do It, we can perform and we have a strong will to do it.
- 3) To become gainful members of the society.

FUNDS

Associate people with disabilities with people who have resources to support/to encourage/ to give opportunities to them. To do all this – supporting, encouraging, and giving opportunities, you need funds. Total rehabilitation requires funds. Now to become at par with others a disabled person has to put in extra efforts in terms of money/material/in convincing others/in becoming a participant in activities, etc. So we should identify things /procedures/ environment so that his extra efforts are reduced.

However there is a basic need:

- 1) Barrier free access / environment for the independence, convenience and safety of all people with disabilities.
- 2) Availability of resources.
- 3) Availability of right information.

PUBLICITY

To change the perception of the general public (which I feel is very important), wide publicity should be given to those who are performers with disability. It could be done through advertisements and entertainment programmes highlighting their achievements.

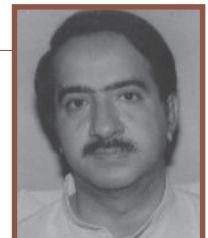
With sensitive media publicity, the required information would go to people with disability, to people who are in their near vicinity, or who are associated with them directly and indirectly. This would change the perception of non-disabled individuals. This in turn, will help disabled people in joining the mainstream. What is needed is the right kind of inputs to the public, corporates and the government.



ASHOK HANS

Director, Shanta Memorial Rehabilitation Centre

Inclusion is what comes to my mind. In higher education, in IT, engineering and vocational training. The second thing I want is a comprehensive disaster management plan. Prior preparedness, quick response during disaster and a rehabilitation mechanism, to be put in place. Most important is awareness about the socialisation of people with disabilities – especially women. Women with disabilities should be made part of all activities, be it festivals, social functions are voting. They should have access to reproductive health. This can be done by giving them a livelihood that is not equated with domestic forced labour. From their childhood, girls with disabilities stay home or become victims of trafficking. Things are improving, but there is a lot to be done.





ADITYA GOVINDARAJ, System Specialist

The disability sector has a lot of issues that need to be addressed. And it is very hard to pin just one issue that would top the list simply because the needs of different segments of the disabled are varied and differ from one another. For instance, a blind person's problems would be different from those of a hearing impaired one, like myself. However, I think there is one issue albeit a major issue that is common amongst all the disabled segments which needs to be addressed seriously. And that is "Access to *Quality Education*". Note the special emphasis on access and quality. Why?

Education in India has always been a major problem especially for disabled persons. According to the Census of India 2001, a whopping 35.30% of the country's disabled population falls under the age-group 0-20 (Refer to Annexure). This number will be much higher as the Census was taken in 2001. Much of the access to quality education is top-down rather than bottom-up. In other words, there is 'access' to quality education vis-à-vis higher and college education but severely lacking at the primary and secondary level. Whilst we see reservations at colleges, we do not see the same practice being implemented at the primary and secondary level. Most schools do not admit special children, pleading that they are not specially trained or equipped to handle them. Should it not be made compulsory?

Coming to the quality aspect of education, and I mean 'quality' in every sense of the word – from quality teachers to quality infrastructure to quality tools and aids - compulsory, with free FM system in class, visual aids, ramps etc. We also need quality teachers who can teach such children.

The numbers of such teachers are very low to even make a positive difference. Therefore, for a disabled person to be able to stand on his/her own feet, quality education is a birthright and must be given at low cost no matter what background that child belongs to. And we must act fast to give the coming generations all the hope they need for a bright future.



We leave it to you, reader, to decide. Do we want these wishes to remain wishes? Certainly not. We would like to see the wishes of different thinkers turn into reality. From what we've seen in 2007, we know these are eminently doable. But for wishes to turn true, we need one important ingredient - hard work. Relentless push. Constant thrust. And above all, togetherness. Hand in hand, we will conquer. We'll derive strength from each other's thoughts, spirit, actions. And that will be our common resolution for this bright New Year.

***If wishes were horses, all of us would ride.
If our friends were watches, I would wear one as my guide.***

THE ABILITY TEAM



EmployABILITY2008 was a raging success. There is no other way to put it.

On a beautiful sunny day, in the courtyard of Delhi Public School, R.K Puram, there milled candidates and recruiters, hopes and expectations visible on the faces of all. They were all here for a purpose; the candidates wanted a job commensurate with their qualifications, and the recruiters wanted candidates who matched their needs. This was not an event about charity; this was purely about acknowledgement of merit.

The Job Fair kicked off on the 23rd of February with a series of seminars addressed by eminent personalities like Dr. Madan Vasishta, George Abraham, Nitin Goyal and Sandeep Bidani, amongst others. The sessions focussed on helping candidates understand the changing expectations and attitudes of the corporate world which is now more open to inclusive employment. The seminars also addressed basic issues such as pointers on preparing CVs and how candidates ought to conduct themselves during interviews.

The popularity of these sessions could be gauged from the packed rooms. There were many first time job seekers for whom these sessions were primarily intended, and went a long way in dispelling fears and anxieties that come with

APITAL STEP

facing interviews for the very first time. Indeed, this would be a useful feature in conventional Job Fairs as well, although one doubts if any other organisation would be able to pull it off as successfully as Ability Foundation! “We have a lot of headaches when we go to ‘normal’ job fairs,” said Aditya, a recruiter from NIIT Smartserve. This was a great experience, he said, not only because it was well-planned, but because of the remarkable results of the preliminary test conducted by his company. Forty out of sixty people had cleared the test, and three candidates had even scored full marks-an extremely difficult feat!

Ability Foundation’s superb organisational skills also received kudos from Mukesh Sharma, a candidate from Delhi, who almost rebuked us when we asked if he thought the fair was well organised! “It is actually not good, it is excellent,” he smiled. “It was well organised and well managed,” he said, and hoped that in the future the duration of the event could be extended.

The next day saw the placement process, with candidates being ushered into a waiting area, where they were given a list of companies to meet, periodic announcements being made to notify the candidates as to when they ought to move to reach a stall. All the events saw the presence of sign language interpreters, who were also to be found walking



Thiru.P. CHIDAMBARAM, Union Finance Minister



A job fair like this is a moving occasion. When I visited it in Chennai, I was struck by a number of things. One of them was how confident and hopeful the candidates were. This was a huge change from locking themselves at home,

depending on others. Here I see them willing to seize an opportunity, and show the world how they can contribute to the society.

I also see employers genuinely interested in hiring people with disabilities. They no longer view it as charity or an obligation. They now see it as skills. It's a resource-based approach. This effort deserves to be congratulated. We have already announced government support for one lakh jobs for people with disabilities in the private sector. The government is committed to compensate the companies through payment of ESI and EPF. The project is under evaluation. We will get it started. We will begin with one lakh jobs given or taken, but there is no limit to it. We want the 100 crore people identified, placed and registered in the national register as soon as possible.

You should work with the Ministry of Labour, with Mr. Oscar Fernandes and Ms. Sudha. Before the 31 March, 2008, 10,000 jobs should be given/taken and I promise my support to it.

A word to the candidates. Many who have jobs have become recruiters today. If you do not get a job at this fair, do not lose heart. Wait, and someone will come forward to employ you.

Interviewers also need training, so they empathise with the candidates. Are they all capable of dealing with the candidates? Ability Foundation must train at least 10 to 12 HR people on skills they need to possess to interview People with Disabilities. They must be briefed on do's and don'ts. It is possible the HR people may not be able to give them jobs. But they should put it across softly, without shattering the candidate's self-esteem.

about the venue with other volunteers. The placement process ran smoothly and simultaneous to the official inauguration ceremony which saw the presence of Thiru. P. Chidambaram, Union Finance Minister as the Chief Guest. Others who took the stage were C.K Ranganathan, MD CavinKare, Rajan of NHRD and Hitesh Oberoi of naukri.com. Actor Revathy was present to hand over a memento to the Finance Minister.

Fifty companies, candidates from twenty-two states, several on-the-spot placements with companies like HCL and Quattro ...The statistics were phenomenal, but this was not about the statistics. This was about people, both extraordinary and ordinary. This was about the exercising of a basic human right-the right to employment. It was about collectively reminding the world that 'ability' forms the largest part of the word 'disability'; that a professional qualification isn't less worthy if the holder happens to have impaired eyesight, hearing or mobility.

This was also about the future; when will we stop needing special Job Fairs in order to get talent recognised? Why are companies reluctant to hire disabled people when statistics indicate that such individuals make for better long-term

SUBBALAKSHMI, HR, Genpact



I was a little worried if English would be a good enough medium for the talk, but I need not have worried. Only a few sentences needed translation. I must tell you, the thought of disability never crossed my mind till at the end of the talk the candidates

began to ask questions. They were as active as any aspirant till they began to list their strengths and weaknesses. Should I list my disability as a weakness, they asked. I was taken aback. Here I am desperate to hire. For them unemployability is a problem! I went back to talking about skills, problem solving and customer relationship. I talked of being tongue-tied in front of a stranger. I said that was normal and asked them to work on it. I asked them to concentrate on subject-matter expertise, and get out of the "can I walk, talk, see" mode. I told them, "Everyone has a shortcoming. At the starting point of your career what you need is awareness of your strengths." Overall it was an excellent interaction. I think I managed to chip away at their additional mental barriers release a bit of their tension and helped them dig out their resources to find comfort with themselves.

employees, in terms of loyalty as well as performance? Are the companies that participated in EmployAbility 2008 the exception or are they indicative of a new trend that recognises potential in individuals regardless of 'disability'?

Punitha Gibson of Pantaloons pointed to a changing mindset in Corporate India, where companies are increasingly looking to become equal opportunity employers. She said that inclusive employment "is not something that can come about overnight. It needs extensive planning, be it in terms of infrastructural requirements or general sensitisation in an existing organisation. It is a learning process for all involved, one that needs to be entered into with an open mind."

"We're here to build a career, not just give a job", said Meenakshi, a recruiter with Mphasis Ltd. Such comments leave one with hope that one day, in the not so distant future, inclusive employment will become the buzzword with HR departments of all companies, and candidates will be offered jobs that are currently made inaccessible to them because of social prejudices.



KOYEL LAHIRI

SANDEEP BIDANI, HR, NDTV



I felt this big gap between the candidates' capabilities and awareness among employers about this. Those who are in government jobs have no clue about what companies have to offer them. Within reservation, only those who are orthopaedically impaired get

jobs. The criterion seems to be least disability, not best qualification. On the other side, employers aren't aware of the computer capabilities of visually impaired people. Companies do not have a policy to employ people with disabilities. They still complain the infrastructure will cost a bomb. I don't think there's much awareness among people with disabilities about what they can do, where they should source information, what opportunities are available to them and whether they can work from home. Companies should do a cost-benefit analysis about employing disabled people. They will know that only minimum investment is required for large benefits. How much will it cost to build an enabling environment - the bathrooms, ramps and elevators? I must confess my own office is not disabled-friendly. It can easily be done as part of the budgeting process.

NITIN GOYAL, Business Controller, Nokia Siemens



Excellent interaction with the candidates. Yes, they are apprehensive about their acceptability. Confidence levels are generally high among orthopaedically-impaired candidates. I am impressed and surprised to find that

many of them are experienced and are looking for better job prospects. I stressed a lot on being ready to face the HR officers. I talked about introducing themselves. More than 80% of the job offers are decided in the first few minutes of the interview. That crucial first impression is made through eye contact, a firm handshake, and posture. It's important they do their home-work [a] about themselves, why they did the courses they did [b] their consistent career goals [c] where they want to see themselves 5 years from now. And of course, they should find out something about the company they have applied for. I told them about getting out of the "victim" mentality. Forget about getting help, instead help yourself, I said. Go as a candidate, not as a disabled candidate. I see that many of those registered are well-known equal-opportunity employers. They are extremely supportive.

Dr. MADAN VASISHTA, Associate Professor, Gallaudet University



I posed questions and insisted on answers. I asked them how they would co-operate with the boss, how they would get team members to co-operate with them. I told them 'each person has some innate talent that only he knows about. They should make the

recruiter know about their skills.' They should also keep telling themselves, "I am good. I don't need sympathy. I can make a company better.' I told them my story, I was once cutting grass in a rural area, how I kept telling myself that I would make it in the world one day. I asked them to impress the HR about their qualification. Give a summary of their achievements. I told them not to use words like "cope". They should instead say, "I'll be in your position in 10 years. I'm quite confident. I gave them my e-mail and told them to inform me when they got a job.

ALOK NARAIN, VP-HR, Quattro

Alok, on being asked about the strengths and weaknesses of candidates said, "They all have their own strengths." He didn't want to mention any weakness because he felt it made more sense to focus on the strengths, but on being pressed, said "lack of exposure" which leads to shyness (in speaking up during interviews, etc). Again, when we pressed them, Siddharth and Alok said about 25% of the people in their room (total of about 29) would have faced interviews previously. Alok said that in the workshop he spoke about the expectations of the corporate world. That there was openness in mind today, which could be because of an acute shortage of talent, and that companies were willing to train employees.

HITESH OBEROI, COO, naukri.com



A truly special event with a good perspective. Our company now understands diversity, thanks to Ability Foundation. We joined this with an open attitude. There is so much we can do in terms of getting jobs for qualified people with disabilities. May be we can do these

job fairs more frequently. Our database of disabled job aspirants will soon be searchable.

However, we have an e-newsletter that reaches nearly a hundred HR offices. We can use it to educate HR managers on how they can map jobs for people with disabilities - when and how to get in touch with them.

A database on the website alone may not work very well for employment. What you'll need is talent, facilities and the awareness of rights should come together. I must tell you our new facility in Noida will be totally disabled-friendly. We've already talked to Shivani Gupta about this.

N.S. RAJAN, President, NHRD (Delhi Chapter)



I am the President of a Network that has a wing called "Beyond Business". We work with NGOs and volunteers for capacity building for destitute women and orphaned children. We envision, plan, strategise and put in HR systems. Following this

stupendous job fair, I am presenting Ability Foundation to the Board. We would like to be on-going partners to Ability Foundation and take the job fair to different parts of the country. We need to showcase this to the country. I am convinced that this is do-able. We need to go out of this town. People out there need this kind of support. It's a privilege for me to be working on this. I am a firm believer of diversity. I believe competence and knowledge have no limitations. If you talk of disability with a definition, I am disabled by lack of maturity, lack of control over emotions. Our grey cells are not connected to stereotypes. We need to celebrate that.

We have to go to the rural areas and create islands of excellence. We have to search for potential. We never know where it is. If there are impediments, we have to work around them.

GEORGE ABRAHAM, CEO Score Foundation



Some of the things I could touch upon were [a] carrying their resumé and other papers in a zipped bag to avoid scattering them. [b] Having their answers ready on questions like how they would manage their disability in the workplace. [c] Taking the initiative

and telling the recruiter "I do it this way" rather than letting him guess how it would be done. [d] Staying calm before the interview and finding out the venue. [e] For the visually impaired, holding on to the helper to give an impression that he/she is in control of the situation.

SIDDHARTH SHARMA, CEO, Foundations PR

Siddharth told us, "Only 32% of the physically/visually disabled are employed in the US," to substantiate the fact that inclusive employment is a problem in developed countries as well. He also mentioned how awareness needed to spread. "In small towns there is no employability or corporate social responsibility." The philosophy of the company matters in areas such as incentive to hire disabled people. Opening of minds is needed, through talk and dialogue, through organisations like Ability Foundation. Removing of mental block is needed. It is all about attitude, he said, attitudes on both sides.





Night of the Dreamers

We envisaged holding our Awards and Job Fair in New Delhi too as part of Vision 2008. It was important to take our work of total inclusion beyond the southern borders to the north, to the capital city. We felt that our philosophy, our way of articulating that philosophy and giving shape to its implementation needed to be taken to the hub of political and social activity - the country's capital. Did we make a good start? The following report might give you an idea.



The winners flanked by C.K. Ranganathan, Jayshree Raveendran, Leila Seth, Hitesh Oberoi, Navin Chawla, Dr. V. Krishnamurthy & Revathy

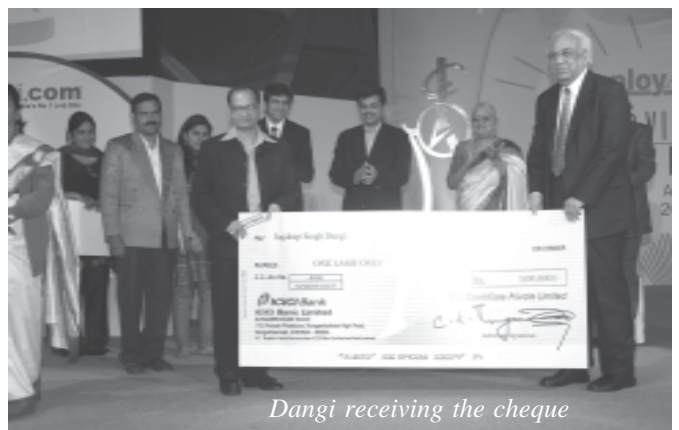
New Delhi sat up and took notice when on the evening of 23 February 2008, four wonderful achievers with disabilities were honoured with the CavinKare Ability Awards. The capital's eminent personalities were present to hand over the memento, the cheque and the citation to the achievers – one for Eminence in helping others and three for Mastery in their chosen field. As the sun went down on that balmy evening at Pragati Maidan, the amphitheatre filled with people waiting to find out who would light up the stage to give and receive the prestigious national awards. They didn't have to wait. The programme began at the appointed minute.

Not a single member of the audience was prepared for the cultural show that flagged off the function. As strains of divine music reverberated in the air, six young men in resplendent costumes and jewellery floated in. Keeping time meticulously to the beat, they invoked the five elements and paid obeisance to the pantheon of gods.

National award winner-actor-dancer Shobana joined them and wove herself elegantly through their movements elevating the show to an ethereal level. That six of the seven male dancers were visually-impaired was only a minor detail. As the finale of



Shiordhonkar receiving the citation



Dangi receiving the cheque



The lamp being lit



A section of the audience

the performance, the troupe broke into pure dance, a Thillana, that requires intricate footwork and leaping postures. When it came to an end, the mesmerized audience gave them a standing ovation.

The evening's programme was integrated in other ways too. Members of the award jury - Justice Leila Seth, Navin B. Chawla, Election Commissioner and Dr. V. Krishnamurthy, Chairman, National Manufacturing Competitiveness Council were on stage as *EmployAbility2008*, the equal opportunities Job Fair to be held the following day was inaugurated. Mohini Giri of the Guild of Service was at hand and read the citations in a rousing voice. Representatives from our partner organisations for the job fair, the National HRD Network (Delhi Chapter) and naukri.com were there too, applauding the achievement of the winners. The media partners, Dainik Bhaskar, Indian Express and CNN-IBN recorded the event for posterity.

Nitin Goyal, Business Controller, Nokia-Siemens who was present in the audience, sent us this note:

“Hey this is Delhi! But I guess these South Indians don't know that. The card said the programme starts at 6:30 pm. I surprised even myself by reaching the venue by 6:20. Having skipped lunch the four of us sat down in a cafe beside the venue for a snack. We placed the order and relaxed back, catching our breath. I had just started digging into the sumptuous Chole Bhature when the function started. I heard a deep sonorous

Excerpts from the dance performance*Jayshree Raveendran*

voice declaring the function open. Hey, it's just 6:30! This is Delhi - 6:30 means we will think of starting by 7:00, maybe 7:30, if things are lucky. Uh Oh! We had to finish up double quick and rush! Wow! Even the

VVIPS had already arrived. What's happening? But I guess, this was the strength of an idea. People were working here with commitment and it was infectious.

The ceremonial stage was created with simple materials and looked so very elegant. The dance performance had to be seen to be believed. It's only in the second dance that I noticed that some of the dancers were giving verbal cues to each other, and I realised that some of the dancers were visually impaired. And it's only after the whole performance that I came to know that six out of the seven male dancers were visually impaired. My salute to them and their trainers. They embodied the vision of Ability Foundation - total inclusion of everyone in an equal society where disabilities don't matter enough to mention!

I suggested to Jayshree that they should hold the job fair at least 5-6 times in a year and all in different cities. There is a big need for such job fairs, at least till we reach a critical mass when the successful performance of the people recruited makes companies to recruit more by themselves.

Returning from the Ability Foundation's award ceremony, you can't help but think that the foundation is very aptly named - reflecting the magnificent abilities and passion of the feisty ladies comprising the Foundation. My wife commented that

*The Ability team*

this is one place she wants to contribute her services to, as it looks like a genuine organisation which is really doing good work."

In an impromptu speech, actor Shobana grabbed the mike to say this: "When Asha (Revathy) introduced me, she said I am not able to remember many of my shows. But this one I will. It was a very pleasurable experience - a humbling one and a learning experience. The dancers were very quick, easy to work with, and with no other distractions, it was work, work, work. We had only one rehearsal for tonight's show..."



Opening eyes to Education & Employment

Madhukar Vishvanath Shiordhonkar a veteran with vast experience of 75 winters in his life is a respected name in the blind welfare field of Madhya Pradesh. In fact he is considered the man behind all the movements for blind people in that state. Many blind persons today remember him as the main force and inspiration for their formal education and eventual success in life.

Founder Honorary Secretary of M.P. Welfare Association of Blind, Indore (President currently) since its formation in 1961, and Secretary of NAB branch of MP and founder member of the MP branch of 'All India Confederation of the Blind' - Madhukar Shiordhonkar has gone through great struggles to achieve this status.

Losing his one eye at the early age of 7 years, Madhukar Shiordhonkar lost total eyesight in 1942, when he was barely 10 years old. Four years later he lost his beloved father too and was left all alone to take care of himself as his mother was illiterate. A retired railway man who knew the family in Mumbai guided and supported his education at NAB Mumbai. Shiordhonkar fondly remembers him as Kulkarni mama

who became his friend and guardian and who brought completeness to his life.

In Mumbai, Shiordhonkar did something no one in his state, with his disability had attempted before. He chose to do a course in Physiotherapy from NAB. "Going to VM School for the Blind was the turning point," he said. "In '54, I was the first to win the scholarship for Physiotherapy. And I witnessed the birth of NAB." He returned to his hometown Indore with a certificate, but there was no job support or acceptance for a visually impaired physiotherapist. Shiordhonkar lobbied hard with repeated visits to the Chief Minister and Governor for a physiotherapist's job at MY Hospital, Indore.

"Getting a gazetted job was a herculean task because of prejudice and stigma," he said. "I met HV Pateskar when he visited Indore and asked him for a job. He asked me to go to Mumbai. I told him, "Should all of us go to Mumbai for jobs? Isn't it the MP government's responsibility to provide jobs for us? Please give me a job here." He then met CM Katju who was hard of hearing. "Can you cope?" asked Katju and wrote to the Deputy Director, Health recommending Shiordhonkar for the job.

Shiordhonkar eventually got the job, but the challenges didn't end there. His



**C.V. VINKARE
ABILITY
AWARDS
FOR EMINENCE**

radiologist boss spied on him and questioned the patients about his work. Then the Chairman of the Public Service Commission came under his expert fingers and persuaded the KEM Hospital in Mumbai to start a full-time Physio course. "When a job was advertised at KEM, I applied but was given one at a lower scale of pay. That's when I decided to start my own organisation. I did not want anyone to struggle the way I did. What I'm most happy about is the school I started for blind girls in the 70s. I have been holding swimming and chess tournaments for them."

His dedicated approach soon made him one of the most popular names in his profession and today we can see many blind physiotherapists. Indore itself boasts of many in both public and private physiotherapy centres. Blind by birth, Dr. Chelani, inspired by Madhukar Shiordhonkar's success is one of the leading physiotherapists of the city. He agreed that Shiordhonkar had changed the meaning of life for many visually impaired persons by opening a new window of job opportunity for them.

1961 Madhukar Shiordhonkar founded MPWAB in a rented room. It was the first organisation of its kind in MP for vocational training and rehabilitation. Its visually impaired members had to get outside support for food and accommodation. His repeated efforts to establish better facilities to serve the poor blind people of rural Madhya Pradesh were taking shape in the form of a hostel for 50 students coming from the interiors of MP such as Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand. Visually impaired people living in these areas had no way of getting any professional training after formal village schooling. Now they could learn many courses for self-rehabilitation from the WAB vocational training centre which had a light engineering workshop, handloom training, chair weaving and telephone operating. Recently computer training has been added after which the visually impaired get JAWS software for just 10 rupees - the cost of a blank CD.

One such beneficiary – Ramesh Chandra Parmar from Alod village of Ratlam district who lost 75% vision because of chicken pox came to WAB in 2003 and has gone through a vast change from someone sitting idle, roaming pointlessly in his village to becoming a good handloom weaver with higher education.

The numbers - over 22,000 beneficiaries in the last 46 years of Madhukar Shiordhonkar's consistent efforts - tell the story of his contribution towards blind welfare in this part of the country.



Shiordhonkar receiving the award

Ask for organisations working for blind people in MP and the only name that comes up is Madhukar Shiordhonkar – pioneer, leader and visionary. Ironically, he could not get support and infrastructure from the public or the government in all these years of struggle. “Inspiring blind persons and bringing them together to start activities for the cause is easier than finding dedicated sighted people to sustain and conserve what has been done,” he lamented.

Shiordhonkar is constantly striving to develop new facilities – the recent one is a school cum rehabilitation centre for blind tribal girls and boys at Bhabhra village in Jabua district.

Many new courses in computers, B.Ed. physiotherapy training and remedial training for visually impaired students recognised by Bhoj Open University are just a few of the recent milestones in his long journey. Oh yes, a lot of awards and certificates have come his way – including the Rustom Merwanji Alpaiwala Award, NASEOH award...

“Awards give me momentary satisfaction, but they recognise the team work and the organisation,” he said. He is happy that Madhya Pradesh has a sensitive CM. “In March, we will develop a system to implement the Act,” he said. What bothers him is the lack of co-operation among the NGOs. Our awareness camps and workshops should become ongoing projects. We need to lobby hard. Ministers make promises and promptly forget it once they are off the stage. In any job, it is the visually impaired who get rejected. Their condition is really bad in the rural areas.” His message to the visually impaired? “Keep yourself united and broaden the path of construction which is always narrower than the path of destruction.”

CHITTARANJAN

CAVINKARE ABILITY EMINENCE AWARD

given to

MADHUKAR

VISHVANATH

SHIORDHONKAR

In recognition of excellence achieved against all odds. One of the first visually-impaired physiotherapists to secure formal hospital appointment in Madhya Pradesh, he dedicated himself to the improvement of the quality of life of others like him. A pioneer in every way, he not only established the MP Welfare Association for the Blind, The All India Confederation of the Blind & The Apang Kalyan Sangh, he also broke new grounds in the field of sports. From 1960 he has worked towards the implementation of several pioneering projects for the blind, the deaf-blind and women with disabilities. Continuing to work even today, 48 years later, in various capacities, changing lives of countless people and making it his life's mission to bring dignity to several disabled people. His is a story of true grit, determination and a source of inspiration to many - both disabled and non-disabled.



His Electronic Mantra

- Interface

for all



GOVINKARE
ABILITY
AWARDS

FOR MASTERY

Jagdeep Singh Dangi's story is one that's common among disabled persons in India. He was born in a small town – Ganj Basoda of Vidisha district in MP with a population of 1 lakh. In 1984, when he was seven years old, he was hospitalised for pain in one of his hips. A wrong injection resulted in bone abscess. Dangi paid for this medical negligence with seven difficult operations and years of hospitalisation. When he was discharged, he was blind in one eye, limped on a leg that was 4 inches shorter than the other and had damaged kidneys. In the remote area he lived in, advanced medical treatment was a very distant dream.

"I never thought of it as disability," he said. "I never used it as a disadvantage. If I did, I would in some way become handicapped. That's not a thought I wanted to carry with me. What had happened had happened. I should ignore it and see what I could do, not what I could not," Dangi said.

Dangi had two things going for him. He was the youngest among 5 siblings in an agricultural family; he had great interest in academics. Combined with these was his inherent inclination to achieve success that was mixed with a gifted vision to share his achievements with the people around him.

Dangi's brothers gave him unstinted support. They would take turns to attend to his medical and academic needs. In turn, Dangi brought fame to his small township with his name on the State merit list in his higher secondary exams and securing admission to the Engineering College in Vidisha. He was probably the first from his area to complete BE in computer science on merit. His BE degree was a milestone for him in many ways.

During his engineering course English language became a big hurdle for him. This talented son of a Hindi-speaking village almost lost confidence, as he could not make head or tail of the medium of instruction. But Dangi was tough. He pushed himself to study, to understand the concepts by referring to English-Hindi dictionaries. That's when the idea struck him. Shouldn't he be putting his computer knowledge to help those who were linguistically impaired? He decided to develop a unique Hindi software for their benefit.

"As a young kid, I would not stay in one place for long," he said. "Here I was, spending 18 hours in front of the PC trying to prepare a software I wasn't sure would make money. My family of farmers, not your technical ones, was of course angry."

Ignoring lucrative job offers, he preferred to sit all alone in a 6 x 10 feet room of his small home, pursuing his lonely goal. His family was unable to understand his decision. They had an engineer son sitting idle playing with a computer! Eventually, his determination won. They brought him floppies and CDs from Bhopal - 100 kms away, as Ganj Basoda had no such shop.

All on his own, with no support or grant from outside, this fresh engineer finally developed this software in 2005, using a 1997 model machine and working at odd hours as day-time power failure is common in Ganj Basoda.

His software "BhashaSetu" contains :
I-browser++ : (Hindi internet explorer with click for Hindi translation),
Shabdakosh : (Hindi to English and vice-versa Dictionary cum Thesaurus)
Global Word Translator : (Hindi to English Anuvadak)

"I had to do double the work," he said. "I first worked on the college dictionary software to understand the language. My communication skills were poor. I had no Internet access at home. Initially the software I developed would give you the Hindi version after typing the word you needed. I wanted to do away with typing every word for translation. Then I thought, "Why not change the browser itself? It took me four years to design the algorithm."



Dangi receiving the award

The core part - 'internet' was confined to English language only. This clearly shows that his is a pioneering contribution to using the Internet in Indian languages.

Dangi was quickly discovered by the press. Type Jagdeep Dangi in Google and the search opens up hundreds of pages with his success story splashed on them. He has been awarded

many times over for his software that can revolutionise internet use in the hinterland and bridge the digital divide in the rural areas. "The Scindia college which asked, 'Why do you want to do Computer Science when you have a language problem?' gave me the Scindia Award," he said wryly.

Dangi has been able to overcome his physical and linguistic disability to such an extent that it's easy to forget that he can only walk with a special shoe and needs help to walk on uneven surfaces, steps or heights. One of his brothers always accompanies him to all the places. He smiles when he says that it's due to the restriction in his mobility that he got interested in computer technology.

"I sent it to the IT ministry," he said. "I asked them to distribute it to the rural areas and give me the revenue. I need financial help to do the software in all the languages. I also want to be recognised by the government. Now I do contract work. The Ministry said, 'We can't take technology from an individual, though yours is powerful.' Microsoft has recognised me. Later they placed an ad for Hindi software. I applied for it and C-Tech Bangalore passed it. I was bypassed by the Ministry. They said they had overlooked it by mistake."

Dangi, the small town man, will sell his software only under his name. We wish him luck.

CHITTARANJAN
GEETA PADMANABHAN

**CAVINKARE ABILITY
MASTERY AWARD
given to
JAGDEEP SINGH DANGI**

In recognition of excellence achieved against all odds. His visual impairment and orthopaedic impairment notwithstanding, his sheer genius surged ahead of all detriments that came his way.

Impediments were for him, dogged stepping stones; his frustration at being unable to understand the English language, paving the way for an online Hindi-English dictionary.

With fierce determination, coupled with absolute brilliance, using a borrowed computer, working alone in the remote village of Vidisha, with little access to resources - financial or material, he developed Hindi language software, that included the world's first Hindi Internet Browser cum Explorer that would help countless others intimidated by the barrier of language.

The fruits of his toil are today available for the country's Hindi language users, and hopefully, soon for users of other Indian languages as well.

Dangi's success with the first phase of his dream, "BhashaSetu" which benefits many brilliant Hindi medium brains, who find college and professional education difficult because of language barrier, has put Ganj Basoda on the world map. But the other part of his dream is still unachieved. His vision of sharing it with all the needy ones has made him send back big software companies including Microsoft who had approached him to purchase and market his software. Instead he wants the government to help him distribute his Hindi software to the poor and needy for free or at the cost of a blank CD.

"The interface is in Hindi," he said explaining the software. "For example, you click "Search" and you'll see the word "Khojna" and all other words for "Search" with pronunciation. Click "Web", you'll get "Jaal" and all the words describing "Web". There is a thesaurus and you can take a print-out of the translation. There is no word limit. You open the internet, you read everything in Hindi, word for word translation of what you see in English."

Dangi wants this done in all major Indian languages. He believes it will help local talent blossom and help boost confidence. Many big software companies had been working and spending millions on such a project for years without much success. Most simply have multi-language fonts to make typing or printing in local language easy.



No barriers is too big



CO VINKARE
ABILITY
AWARDS
FOR MASTERY

It is so easy to interview Veena Verma, B.com, MBA. All you have to do is ask your question, kind of press the start button. And she won't stop. Veena Verma talks non-stop, but talks sense, oh yes, very much so.

She opens the door to her apartment wearing trimly tailored trousers under a dark jacket. "You don't have to hide the microphone," she says. "It won't show against the black jacket." Veena was born totally blind due to RP. She knows colours? "Why not? I have a pretty good idea."

Veena is an over-achiever. She went to school at 13 – the time it took her parents to realise that their first-born blind daughter should be given an education. She caught up every year with double promotions and finished school. She took up Science, Math and Accounts in high school and Commerce and Management in college. She holds a diploma in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management and her MBA Degree is from VAMNICOM, Pune where she was enrolled as a regular, full-time student. She took a course in Effective Presentation Techniques at the British Council and attended a Leadership Training Programme organised by Action-Aid India. She has dabbled in research.

An MBA programme? "Why not? I knew I had it in me. I was one of the first visually-impaired people to do it. Oh, yes, I had to fight a few legal battles. (She filed a complaint against discrimination when she was denied admission at Jamia Millia.) But see, now we have no problem getting admission in Universities for this programme." Job? "Sure it was a problem getting a job as an HR person. But I managed to land one in an IT company. I wouldn't allow them to say no." Yeah, you can believe that.

"Why not?" is Veena's constant chant. "You do your own cooking? "Why not? I make everything, from pulao to puri. I check the heat with my palm over the oil and then follow my sense of smell. Look at how I have organised the masala dibbas." What if someone messes it? "No problem. The chilli powder is in a larger container and I'll know right away. Salt and sugar I taste if I don't find them in their allotted

places."

Her husband Prashanth Verma is at work at National Association for the Blind (NAB), where he is a trainer. There is no one else in the house. You manage the household all by yourself? Delhi isn't exactly a safe place. "Why not? We have an intercom that the watchman uses to



Veena receiving the award



Veena receiving the citation

alert me about visitors. I have a grill door. The worst are the door-to-door sales persons. I have not had any problems with them so far.”

At the time of the interview, Veena was a Senior Assistant Officer, HR at the National Thermal Power Plant, Vindhyanager District, Madhya Pradesh. “It is in the middle of a forest with coal dust hanging in the air. I stay in the guest house and walk around 2 kms to work.” Well, she is the first blind woman to have been offered this senior position in National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC). “I started as a junior and quickly rose to this position.” (She has recently been transferred to Delhi.) “I miss the counselling work I do in Delhi.” Misses her husband too.

When in Delhi she was a regular counsellor at NAB, Delhi, talking to women about the importance of self-esteem. She tells them how to go about getting educated and the absolute need to become economically independent. “Counselling comes naturally to me,” she says. Sure. “Arre, what is this thing about not being able to travel to do a computer course or upgrading skills and degrees? I tell them. ‘Just go out and do it. See the friends you get!’”

She uses screen-reading software for

writing (for which she holds a certificate) and rarely takes help from assistants in the office to compose reports. “My work is largely confidential.” She meets union representatives and makes presentations. It’s better not to get into an argument with her. A lot of union leaders might vouch for that.

Veena was elected President of the first ever Rrotract Club for visually-impaired persons. She has worked with the FICCI-SEDF on their Jeevika project that aims to promote welfare of persons with disabilities. Said Ranu Kulshreshta, in-charge of the project, “You have no idea what a role model she is. Educational levels of people with disabilities in north India are abysmally low. When I go to talk to groups of men and women with disabilities, all I have to say is: ‘Look at Veena’. She really can talk them into shedding their hesitation and start working toward improving themselves.”

“I love to go trekking, rock-climbing and para-gliding,” she said smiling. “I did a course with the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. The feel of the wind in your face, it’s the feel of freedom. Totally intoxicating!”

That is the effect Veena has on you when you say your bye-byes!

GEETA PADMANABHAN

**CAVINKARE ABILITY
MASTERY AWARD
given to
VEENA MEHTA VERMA**

In recognition of excellence achieved against all odds. Unfazed by her visual impairment her indomitable fighting spirit and unceasing optimism took her on the path that she designed for herself.

Allowing neither disability nor other trials and tribulations to stand in the way of achievement, fighting for her rights with persistence and tenacity of purpose, she studied subjects of her choice... subjects not usually given to people with visual impairment: Math, Science, Commerce, Accounts & Management. Becoming the first visually impaired woman at her level at NTPC. An adventurer besides: with mountaineering, para-gliding, rock climbing expeditions to her credit; Making a success of everything, both in her position of responsibility at office and as counsellor at the National Association for the Blind. Living independently and living life to the hilt, she’s surely an icon for all those who endeavor to be masters of their own destiny.



She has DESIGNS for all



**C. VINKARE
ABILITY
AWARDS
FOR MASTERY**

Shivani lives alone in a ground floor apartment in Vasant Kunj, New Delhi. She has a dog for company and a maid sees to her needs. The main room of her apartment is her office from where she runs AccessAbility, a disability access and employment consultancy firm she has co-founded. Shivani is a tetraplegic following a spinal cord injury. She has limited use of arms. She uses a wheelchair for locomotion. She needs help for all Activities of Daily Living (ADL).

Shivani's life can be neatly divided into two parts – before and after the car accident at 22 that put her in a wheelchair. If you read the two parts separately, you wouldn't see any connection at all. Before the accident (in February 1992), Shivani was a typical happy-go-lucky, intelligent Delhi girl earning a decent living as Guest Relations Manager at Delhi's Maurya Sheraton, having acquired a diploma in Hotel Management from the Institute of Hotel Management, Delhi.

After a long period of rehabilitation followed the accident. Shivani decided to work for the disability cause. The Indian Spinal Injuries Centre, where she had her rehab noticed her spirit and took

her in as a peer counsellor. Six years of counselling followed. Shivani felt the foremost need of the mainstreaming movement was to fight for a barrier-free environment. She went back to school to learn about inclusive environments. At 32, she enrolled in a college (Rai University) for a diploma in architecture in a totally un-inclusive environment. This only spurred her on to know more about total accessibility.

She travelled to the University of Reading, UK for an MSc in the subject. Both she and her father marvel, "We

don't know how we managed the finances." But manage, she did – the finances and her PG degree in the most difficult circumstances. In the UK, she discovered that the "We give you accessibility, you do everything yourself" attitude did not always work well. Access, she understood, actually began in the mind, and went by the name of "attitude".

She also holds a certificate in Non-Handicapping Environments, UNESCAP, Thailand. Now Shivani looks like she is in total control of her destiny. She is innovative in organising the things around the office. With no background



Shivani receiving the award

Shivani receiving the cheque

in math or architecture, she has managed to learn every single aspect of access designing.

Shivani returned to India as the first professionally qualified access consultant. Her objective now was to sensitise architects and architect students and encourage them to use the concept of universal design to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities. She has consulted for the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, CII and NASSCOM. She also went full time as an artist – painting was an old love – and held exhibitions in both India and the UK. She joined Jindal Saw Ltd as Programme Manager of their CSR initiative called Svayam.

With two partners she opened AccessAbility, a “Disability Access and Employment Consultancy” social entrepreneurship that strives to unlock opportunities for people with disabilities by facilitating:

- Accessibility in the built environment
- Employment opportunities
- Providing disability sensitization training to the private and government sectors

Shivani has uncontrollable spasms in her feet. She has difficulty breathing – she has to heave her torso to keep air-circulation going. She looks like she has problem sleeping. But she remains

unfazed. Even as we talked, she had an episode of spasms, but she just waited for it to pass. Without a trace of embarrassment or self-pity, she picked up the conversation where she left off. A thorough professional with a high degree of sophistication.

Shivani’s sharp intelligence is complemented by a quiet determination to see her way through. People we talked to were unanimous about one thing – Shivani knows what she is talking about. Hers is no second-hand knowledge. She has studied the subject of accessibility thoroughly, brushing aside personal problems. “There is total substance in what she says,” said one of her partners.

Shivani’s first newsletter is out. It is a thoroughly pro job, just as everything she does is. *Let’s Talk Employment* has both an online and a printed version and carries plenty of information on accessibility and job-related issues. “It is written and formatted in-house,” she said.

Shivani has used her disability to good advantage. It has helped her venture out and do something she would never have thought of otherwise. As we moved around ITC Maurya in Delhi where she is an access consultant, she remarked wryly, “This hotel refused to take me in after the accident that made me a wheelchair user. Today, they open the door for me and respect my suggestions for making the place barrier-free.”

This is Shivani’s unqualified achievement.

GEETA PADMANABHAN

CAVINKARE ABILITY MASTERY AWARD given to SHIVANI GUPTA

In recognition of excellence achieved against all odds. Despite being rendered a tetraplegic at a young age she allowed neither disability nor other trials and tribulations to stand in the way of achievement.

With a diploma in Architecture, and a post graduate degree from the University of Reading, United Kingdom, she rose to meet the challenges of immobility, Resolutely pursuing her dream of creating an accessible India lecturing, travelling, investigating access throughout the country.

Pursuing a serious hobby as an artist as well, despite fingers not being fully functional.

Living independently in the city of New Delhi, keeping up with an extremely demanding occupation, displaying a strong resolve and a spirit indomitable to obstacles.

Trees are the best. And they are best in the mornings.

This morning I smiled as I saw the Persian Lilac that stands in the middle of our garden. When we planted it last year it was only a long, slender twig, but now, a year later, it has a rich, round canopy and has outgrown us by many feet. It must easily be about twelve feet high. I am sure we can swing ourselves on it now, though I haven't tried doing that for sometime. The last I tried that was in the monsoon but the earth was quite wet and as I dangled, the tree started tilting slowly from the base. I quickly let go of the tree and straightened it, patting the mud back into place. Now the trunk is as thick as a child's thigh and I am sure it can take my weight. Perhaps I'll give it another shot in the approaching spring.

The Persian Lilac attracts many birds. In the mornings, a laughing dove perches itself on the lower branches and goes *gur-gur-groo* for minutes on end. Its mate hovers around for a while, perches on the broadband wire going by the tree and finally joins its mate on the tree. They both cosy up and *gur-gur-groo* softly into each other's ears. Maybe they will build their nest in the Persian Lilac. If they do, it will be the first nest on the tree.

When the sun is up, a pair of Ashy Prinia makes regular visits to the tree, hopping from branch to branch restlessly and *jimmy jimmy jimmying* loudly. They seem to treat the tree like a Jungle Gym. A hoopoe that regularly visits the garden and digs holes with its hammer-like head sometimes perches itself on the Persian Lilac, but he doesn't spend too much time on it.

Another tree we had planted last year is the banana. We had got it courtesy the Post and Telegraph Department. We had gone to pay our telephone bill and the P&T office had some lovely banana trees. We asked the *maali* where to get one from, and to our surprise, he just gave us a sapling, a wide grin lighting up his face. The banana reached our knees then. Now it's also about twelve feet high and has

When roots grow in the

HEART

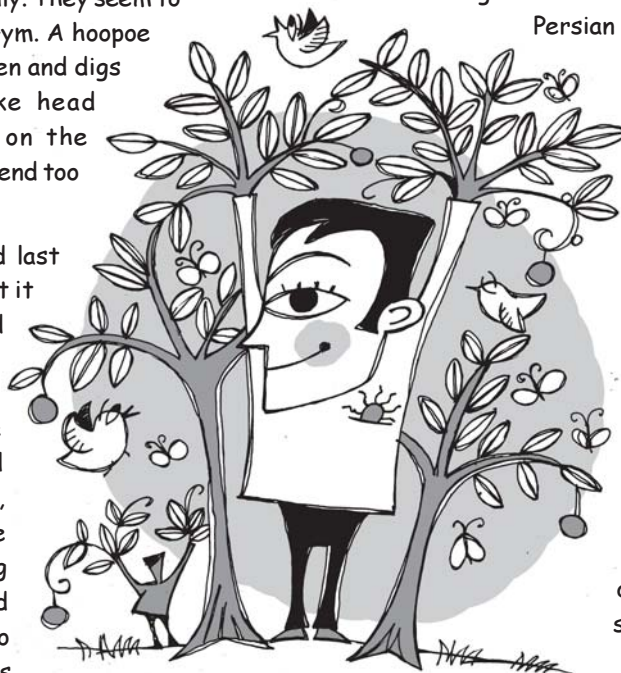


made itself into three-and-a-half banana trees, looking like a small grove of its own. When the banana sprouts a new leaf, the leaf stands tall and straight and is an eye-pleasing light green. The older leaves are torn at the edges and look like they have grown beards or wrinkles. I love to look at the banana in the rainy season when the raindrops form rows of round wet pearls on its leaves.



One winter morning we had found a single strand of gossamer, shining in the sun's slanting rays, stretching from the Persian Lilac to the banana — a distance of about fifteen feet. It was obviously the handiwork of an ambitious spider, and we couldn't figure out how it would have managed to get from one tree to the other without breaking the strand, or touching the ground. Seeing the delicate strand, I started thinking of our connection with the trees. Since it is a rented place, we are likely to move out of the house by the end of the year. The trees are like family members but we'll have to leave them behind. Standing in the garden on that winter morning, I wondered if our strands of attachment with the trees will stretch too, like the spider's.

SALIL CHATURVEDI



ASMITA

How did Asmita, an NGO working with women, chance upon the idea of beautifully done, inclusive pictures for a calendar? Dr. KALPANA KANNABIRAN, President, Asmita, writes...

ASMITA (literally, Identity) was established in 1988 as a non-profitable, non-political and non-governmental organisation by a nucleus of young enthusiastic women journalists. Its general objective is to fulfill the existing gap in participation, representation and access to media for women. It is committed to finding new ways and directions for women's progress. Its major aim is to produce various publications on women.

Asmita began working in the area of disability rights around six years ago. Late last year, we decided we needed to do something to usher in the new year on a different note. Calendars seemed like a good idea. But what would be the theme? The first and only thought we had was that the calendar should explore the theme of disability rights. Artist Nivedita has been a close collaborator for over ten years.

UN discussed the theme and decided it would be best to look at the UN Convention and create drawings that would demonstrate inclusiveness along every dimension in every field – work, school, travel, tourism, the market, sport, home, everywhere. We discussed the idea with Raj Mohan, head of the design team at Vishnu Mohan's Sutras. He asked us to pass the drawing on to his team only when we were convinced that we could look at each of the drawings for a month. Distributing the calendars would be part of our campaign to popularise the UN Convention on Disability Rights.



Asmita



March 2008

s	s	m	t	w	t	f	s	s	m	t	w	t	f	s	s	m	t	w	t
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
						21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31			

NEWS NOTES



Delhi takes long strides to be barrier-free within this year.

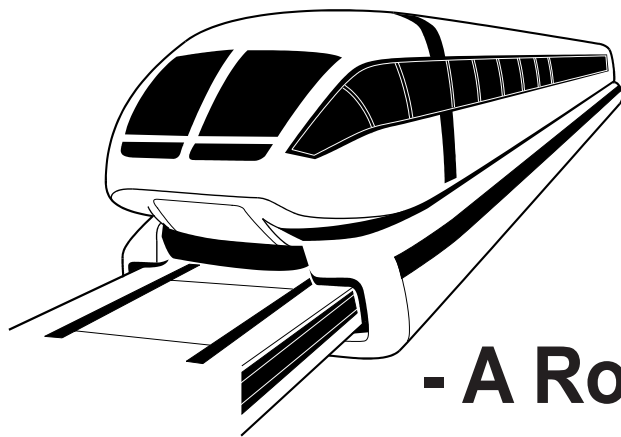
Moving in the direction of making Delhi accessible to all, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation has in collaboration with Samarthy National Centre for Promotion of Barrier Free Environment for Disabled Persons identified 20 sites and services in the Capital, including 225 Delhi Transport Corporation bus queue shelters and New Delhi railway station, for making them barrier-free under its “Accessible Delhi” project.

As part of the two-year project that seeks to develop Delhi as a “model barrier-free city”, the Foundation had come out with a

user perspective on the plans while they are being implemented to ensure that there are no mistakes and costly rectification at a later stage is not required.

Of the 20 sites and services, she said, while the plans of all but two had been finalised, work had also started on six of the projects. These include the 11 Murti tourist area on Mother Teresa Crescent and Janpath Municipal Market where the streets and the sidewalks would be aligned to provide barrier-free movement. “Likewise, the whole of Connaught Place and Palika Bazar is being made barrier-free,” Anjilee said.

The other four projects on which work has begun are the DTAC bus queue shelters and the procurement of low-floor buses,



Accessible Delhi - A Road Map for 2003-2008

plan document, “Accessible Delhi — A Road Map for 2003-2008”. The document identified bottlenecks to draw up appropriate design concepts and lay down an action strategy for all civic and government agencies involved in these areas.

The Project Officer of Accessible Delhi project, Anjilee Agarwal, said that the access audit of 18 of the 20 sites and services had already been completed and the reports submitted to their respective owning agencies. Of these sites and services, six pertain to the New Delhi Municipal Council, two to DTC, two to Indian Railways, one to the Archaeological Survey of India, one to the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation and eight to the Delhi Government.

Anjilee Agarwal said construction work on all the sites is expected to be completed by this year-end. A key feature of the project, she said, was that it would also help in procuring end-

and making of New Delhi railway station barrier-free along with the creation of facilities to provide for easy access to railway coaches.

The other places and services that would be made accessible to all under the project are Hanuman Mandir Complex, Talkatora Garden, Nehru Garden, the road from Ram Manohar Lohia hospital to Gole Dak Khana, Senior Secondary Govt Girls School (No.1), Tagore Garden, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Hospital, Garden of Five Senses, PVR Naraina, Safdarjung Tomb, CGHS Dispensary at South Avenue, Sarai Kale Khan Bus Terminus, Indraprastha Stadium and Indian Airlines Reservation Office at Safdarjung Airport. A very important aspect of the project is that it would make all these services and places accessible in a time-bound manner.

Courtesy : THE HINDU

NEWS NOTES



Krishnakant Mane is the first blind professional to master back office and front office applications. The software he has developed can read character by character or word by word.

A visually-impaired information technology professional from Mumbai conducted an introductory class

State's Rehabilitation Department had given Rs. 5 lakh to the ELCOT for purchase of a computer.

"I have been using proprietary software since 1988 and have moved to non-proprietary software since 2000, as it gave me the much needed freedom.



IT Professional On a Mission

for over 80 blind students and 10 teachers in two days to motivate them to become system administrators, instead of data operators.

Krishnakant Mane, the much sought-after consultant with the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), is also the co-author of Orca software for visually-impaired persons.

It is the only software that can read character by character, or word by word. Mane is the first blind IT professional who has mastered back office and front office applications and programming.

He was in Chennai on an invitation from the Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu (ELCOT) to install the Orca open source (Linux) and free software for use by the visually-impaired persons and to educate ELCOT officials. Incidentally, the

The proprietary software is costlier than the costliest laptops. The users are under the mercy of software firms, since they are not allowed to carry out customisation as per their needs. Hence, I started popularising Ubuntu, a community developed operating system on open source," he said.

Mane said that through the talking software one could operate the desktop or laptop like a regular user.

"Around 80 per cent of the Web operates on open source. Big and cash-rich enterprises have started using the open source operating system that predicts great future for us.

This system currently speaks in English and Hindi. Efforts are being made to introduce Malayalam. The English accent can be changed to suit one's need and

speed. This is the greatest advantage of open source and free software."

Earlier, the Karnataka Government invited Mane to spread the IT culture among the visually-impaired students. "Though everyone is talking

about introducing IT culture, no one is willing to adopt the Linux operating system, which is open source software. Here, the users have to buy only the computer, while the software is free, and it can also be customised according to one's desire."

ELCOT Managing Director C. Umashankar said that as part of the Corporate Social Responsibility, "we have involved ourselves in capability building for the blind people in IT skills so that they can be employed by the IT industry."

The ELCOT was reluctant to buy a computer with proprietary software and licence for a single user at Rs. 5 lakh. "We are getting computers for Rs. 22,000 a set and will supply 22 sets instead of one with 19" DFT monitors to all the blind

NEWS NOTES



schools. Anyways, the software is free. We will talk to government officials for introducing Tamil manual in the computers to help the blind people," he said.

ELCOT has now put forth a proposal to the Social Welfare Department regarding giving schools for visually-impaired 30 computers each with orca, a free and open source software technology designed for persons with visual impairments. There are 25 such schools in the state.

ELCOT, in association with the state

Commissionerate for the Disabled, organised a three-day training programme for teachers from schools for the visually-impaired. Social Welfare Minister Poongothai Aladi Aruna said the initiative was in line with the department's approach to empower those with special needs through education and employment. "We plan to start early intervention centres for children with visual impairment in the next financial year," she said.

Umashankar said, "Since we wanted feedback on this software we organised this training programme, which had over

50 visually-impaired teachers among the participants." Mumbai-based programmer Mane, a visually impaired research scholar at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, highlighted the flexibility the free software offered. "It would enable visually impaired students to look beyond conventional jobs and consider becoming programmers," he said. State Commissioner for the Disabled V.K. Jeyakodi and Sarva Shiksha Abiyan's (SSA) State project Director M.P.Vijayakumar commended ELCOT and Mane for their effort.

Courtesy : THE HINDU

Manchester to host Paralympians

The world's leading Paralympians will travel to Manchester next year for the Paralympic World Cup from 7-11 May.

The event is one of the biggest multi-sport events for elite disabled athletes outside the Paralympics.

The competition, which is in its third year, will again feature four sports - athletics, swimming, cycling and wheelchair basketball. Over 340 of the world's best Paralympic athletes from 47 countries competed for 143 medals in four sports this year. There will be coverage of the competition on BBC2 on Sunday 11 May.

Athletics, swimming and track cycling will all have an extended programme while the GB men's and women's teams will both take part in the basketball events.

The women will take on Brazil, China and the Netherlands with the men facing Germany, Sweden and the USA, who are making their first Paralympic World Cup appearance. Among those who are set to compete are British wheelchair racer David Weir, who will be chasing medals in China at the Beijing Paralympics in September.

"It is absolutely fantastic news that we will have the opportunity to compete in Manchester just a few months before the Paralympics," he said. "This is a great

opportunity to fine tune our preparations and will offer us a perfect challenge ahead of Beijing. "It should provide all the GB athletes with the chance to test ourselves against the very best in the world - something that we will need to get used to if we want to win medals in future competitions."

International Paralympic Committee president Sir Philip Craven said that the event would again be an exciting spectacle. "With the countdown to the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games well underway, the competition promises again to be of high standard as well as a good test for all competitors," he said.

Courtesy : BBC NEWS

NEWS NOTES



Global disability and poverty efforts get key boost from agreement between SU's Burton Blatt Institute and World Bank

A promising new collaboration between the World Bank and Syracuse University could spur global efforts to reduce poverty for an estimated 400 million people with disabilities living in developing countries. The Burton Blatt Institute: Centers of Innovation on Disability at Syracuse University (BBI) and the World Bank have signed an agreement to support activities of the Global Partnership on Disability and Development (GPDD), an international disability network initiated by the World Bank and committed to promoting inclusive development as a means to achievement of Millennium Development Goals.

Established in 2006 with assistance from the World Bank and set up by a multi-stakeholder task force, the GPDD brings together organisations, government agencies, multinational lenders and

research centers focused on reducing the link between disability and poverty, and promoting inclusive development activities.

BBI will receive \$350,000 from the World Bank's Development Grant Facility (DGF)-with another \$350,000 likely in 2009-to support the growth and organisational development of the GPDD.

In turn, the GPDD will share information, expand knowledge, improve public policies and practices, and foster collaboration to improve education and economic opportunity for individuals with disabilities and their families worldwide.

"This is a great honor and unique opportunity for BBI and Syracuse University," says Peter Blanck, BBI chairman and SU University Professor. "Both BBI and the GPDD share the same mission of advancing the civic, economic and social participation of people with disabilities worldwide.

This collaboration and support system will help further accelerate the inclusion

of people with disabilities into the social and economic mainstream."

BBI-World Bank - 2

"This new collaboration will connect the expertise and resources of our Burton Blatt Institute to the GPDD and the World Bank in ways that will promote inclusive economic and social development across the globe," says SU Chancellor and President Nancy Cantor.

"Given that people living with disabilities are among the poorest of the poor worldwide, we welcome this agreement with BBI and Syracuse University as another step forward in dismantling the link between poverty and disability," says Joy Phumaphi, vice president of the World Bank's Human Development Network. "The social and economic exclusion of people with disabilities in developing countries requires the attention and investment of resources by development institutions, government and nongovernmental organisations."

Maria Reina has been jointly selected by BBI and GPDD leadership to serve as

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP on Disability and Development

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executive director of the leadership network in an open, international competitive process. Reina, director of international projects at BBI's Washington, D.C., office since 2006, has diverse experiences working on disability research, advocacy and development work, including an intensive dedication to the United Nations Ad Hoc Committee for the Disability Convention. She previously worked for the Center for International Rehabilitation; the Institute for International Disability Advocacy; the Institute for International Cooperation and Development; the Argentinean Disabled People Organisation, Cilsa; and the University Institute San Martin in Rosario, Argentina, where she was an adjunct professor.

"As a person with a disability from Argentina, I have traveled to developing countries and witnessed the physical and attitudinal barriers that diminish full participation and contributions of people with disabilities," says Reina.

During the next six months, BBI and the GPDD will mobilise disability-led

organisations worldwide-in cooperation with governmental and non governmental organisations (NGOs) and the private sector-to identify best practice strategies that promote inclusion in economic and social development. Through research, training and community development activities, the GPDD will increase participation of people with disabilities in national poverty reduction efforts in developing countries.

"Improved access to education, health care, technology and transportation are needed to reduce the barriers of stigma and discrimination," says Kalle Könkkölä, GPDD task force chair.

The World Bank provides critically needed financial and technical assistance to developing countries, and is composed of a number of development institutions owned by 185 member countries, including the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Development Association (IDA). The mission of both institutions is to reduce global poverty and to improve living standards of developing countries around the world.

BBI-World Bank - 3

While IBRD focuses on middle income and credit-worthy poor countries, IDA focuses on the poorest countries in the world. The World Bank Group provides loans, interest-free credit and grants to developing countries, and is a knowledge leader in development.

For more information, visit <http://worldbank.org>.

BBI fosters public-private dialogue to advance civic, economic and social participation of persons with disabilities in a global society. BBI takes its name from Burton Blatt (1927-85), a pioneer in humanising services for people with mental retardation, a staunch advocate of deinstitutionalisation, and a national leader in special education.

The institute currently has offices in Syracuse, New York City, Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Tel Aviv. For more information, visit <http://bbi.syr.edu>.

For more information on GPDD, contact Reina at (202) 296-2042 or mvreina@law.syr.edu.

FREE FROM SCRIBE EXAM FEE

The Madras high court has directed the principal of Voorhees college in Vellore to appoint a scribe to write the examinations of a blind student without collecting (scribe) fee from him.

The first bench comprising chief justice A P Shah and Justice TV Ramasubramanian gave the direction on Wednesday while passing interim orders on a writ petition from R Senthil of

Arni in Thiruvannamalai district, seeking to set aside clause 8 of the hall ticket, which stated that the student should pay the fees for the scribe.

Senthil, an orphan and a poor blind student, doing his first year BA (literature), was to write the first semester commencing December 13, 2007.

He said that till the completion of his school education, the fees for the scribes were paid by the government. When he applied for exemption from the fee, the University rejected the plea. Hence, the present petition.

Courtesy : INDIAN EXPRESS

NEWS NOTES



The AIR Foundation, a nonprofit organisation headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota, will promote universal accessibility so that every blind and low-vision person in the world has access to digital information over the Internet and Worldwide Web.

'Accessibility is a RIGHT'

Executive director Art Schreiber also announced that the organisation's first offering will be free usage of a Web 2.0 accessible screen reader. The product is provided through an exclusive license in perpetuity granted to The AIR Foundation from Serotek Corporation, the leading provider of Internet and digital information accessibility software and services. The screen reader is called SA To Go and is powered by Serotek's

award-winning System Access software which provides immediate text to speech, magnified visual, and Braille access to digital information presented through the Web or other means, while the user is directly connected to the Internet. The software does not remain resident on the user's computer when the connection to the Internet is interrupted or terminated.

Users can obtain access to the free software by calling 877-369-0101 or

visiting www.accessibilityisaright.org. "The basic tenet of the Foundation is that accessibility is a fundamental human right, regardless of financial or geographic constraints," said Schreiber. "By allowing the blind and visually impaired to have equal access to computer and Internet information through the free use of an advanced screen reader like SA To Go, we have already taken great strides toward our mission," he added.

In an effort to build upon the self-advocacy movement of persons with disabilities in Kosovo, Kosovo Mental Disability Rights Initiative (K-MDRI) recently assisted "Ne Per Ne" peer support group members in fully understanding and participating in Kosovo's historic winter elections to choose national and municipal assembly members and mayors. "Ne Per Ne," which means "We for Ourselves," is Eastern Europe's largest peer support group for persons with intellectual disabilities, started by MDRI.

In preparation for Kosovo's November elections, the peer support groups invited and welcomed representatives of the major political parties to discuss the importance of the elections, the work of the parties, and the issues that would affect them. Participants were able to ask

questions of the candidates such as, "What are you going to do regarding jobs for people with disabilities?"

For the first time in their lives, approximately 90% of the peer support group members voted in Kosovo's elections. "My vote made a difference. I thought it wouldn't count, but it obviously counted; I'm very happy MDRI helped me realise that." - Avni (Kacaniku Peer Support Group) "I thought I couldn't vote because I didn't know how to read; I didn't know I could bring people with me who could help me." - Laura (Peja Peer Support Group)

"I would get so upset at my peers during the peer support group meetings when they would say that they didn't know how to go to the voting place; it's very easy, think ahead and plan transportation before hand. I asked my father to take me and he was happy to do that. They could ask someone too - 'I don't know how' is

Voting is for all



not a valid excuse." - Gazi (Kamenica Peer Support Group)

Kosovo Mental Disability Rights Initiative (K-MDRI) is an initiative of Mental Disability Rights International as a result of our 2002 report, "Not on the Agenda: Human Rights of People with Mental Disabilities in Kosovo." To find out more about the work in Kosovo or to read more about MDRI, please visit www.mdri.org.

MDRI is an international human rights and advocacy organisation dedicated to the full participation in society of people with mental disabilities worldwide.



THE MUMBAI *Marathon*



The facts are fairly well-known. The Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon is now Asia's richest event and disburses US \$240,000 in prize money (according to www.newstrackindia.com). Long distance athletes from all over the world look forward to participating in this New Year event. On 20 January, 2008, this great athletic platform attracted nearly 30,000 participants.

What is not well known is the fact this is the only race where disabled participants competed on the same day under the same rules as the non-disabled participants. The event has become so popular that nearly 35 wheelchair users were seen cruising down the lane meant for them.

The wheelchair event covered 2.5 kms and had a mix of interesting participants and an equal number of volunteers. The marathoners included Tushar Parab, a former fireman, 13-year-old Dinkle Shah injured in the deadly Bhuj earthquake, Neenu Kewlani of ADAPT and Ketna Mehta, once a paraglider. "We practised for a week," said Ketna, referring to members of her Nina Foundation who turned out in a large bunch. "For us it was more than just exercise for the body, it was a confidence building exercise." Dinkle Shah, with Deepak Harnekar came 2nd in the race, Ajay Parmar with Shameem Akhtar and Pradeep came 3rd and Arvind Prabhoo with Mangesh came 4th.

"What made you do it?" we asked some of the participants. Neenu Kewlani told us that she joined the marathon three years back to promote visibility to Spastics in wheelchairs. She felt tremendously enthusiastic every time she participated, she said. "Society must acknowledge their existence and common needs with that of the non-disabled in every area of life such as education, employment, infrastructure, social and political rights. And I need to be part of the mainstream," she added.

Ajay Kumar Singh Parmar was there to promote the formation of a rehabilitation centre in Mumbai. Currently there is no rehabilitation centre for persons with spinal cord injury in Mumbai, he pointed out. Nearly 5 lakh Indians are paraplegic, but public places have no ramps for disabled people. Buses are not

accessible. The Department of Human Welfare funded the National Handicapped Financial Corporation with Rs. 5000 crore in 2005. "What has been done for disabled people?" he asked.

This was business. On the pleasure side, Parmar looked forward to being among celebrities, media and industrialists. "I should thank Ketna Mehta of Nina Foundation for getting me here," he said. "Will Ability Foundation conduct seminars in rural areas for the disabled for spreading awareness about things?" he asked. "Wheelchair users are concentrated in rural areas. They are raring for opportunities for participation, you know."

Director-actor Nagesh Kukunoor, producer-actor Elahe Hiptoola, and TV actor Chetan Hansraj supported the wheelchair race. Started last year by Able Disabled All People Together (ADAPT), a part



"As trustee of Nina Foundation (NF) I was responsible for getting things ironed out with Procam International to make wheelchair participation possible and convenient this year. In the first year, it was the Spastics Society's ADAPT with Dr. Alur that spearheaded the movement. I participated solo from NF in 2006 to get the feel of it. I then persuaded 25 members to come for the marathon and NF funded the registrations, logistics, co-ordination, couriering the details and making arrangements for food packets, T-shirts etc. It was an uphill task last year, but it was worth it. This year the ones who came were more than happy to be a part of it." Ketna Mehta

of the Spastics Society of India, it is an attempt to make the marathon more inclusive.

Nagesh was seen pushing the wheelchair of Malini Chib (a trustee of the Spastics Society of India) while Elahe powered ADAPT member Farhan Contractor's chair. Congress MP and actor Sanjay Dutt's sister Priya Dutt flagged off the wheelchair event.

Our interaction with wheelchair participants revealed a few hiccups. Many marathoners found seriousness missing from the event. "They should have made ours too a competitive event," said 25-year-old Rajiv Virat, who wants to climb the Everest one day. Rajiv has multiple sclerosis and has been a wheelchair user for eight years.

"We don't lack competitive spirit!" Otherwise, he felt, this was just tokenism.

Neenu Kewlani, another participant said, “There was no washroom facility for us. While making other arrangements, basic facilities for disabled people should also be made available.”

Last year, a huge controversy broke out as the marathon entry forms explicitly stated that no “wheel vehicles or animals” were allowed on the track. “We nearly sent a legal notice to the organizers,” remarked Anita Prabhu of ADAPT. Being asked how the resistance to wheelchair lanes in the marathon was overcome three years back, Malini Chib told Ability Foundation that were it not for the Spastics

the race have failed to showcase our talent,” he complained. “We are athletes of international repute. In our race, people with different disabilities, including those on three-wheelers and crutches should take part.” “I should be allowed to compete in the half-marathon over a distance of 21 kilometres. There I think I can show what I’m capable of,” said a 41-year-old Ghatkopar resident who had won medals in events like running, badminton, tennis and discus throw.

“The half-marathon that they want to compete in has a very steep bridge at Peddar Road,” said Vivek

Neenu Kewlani told us that she joined the marathon three years back to promote visibility to Spastics in wheelchairs. She felt tremendously enthusiastic every time she participated, she said. “Society must acknowledge their existence and common needs with that of the non-disabled in every area of life such as education, employment, infrastructure, social and political rights. And I need to be part of the mainstream.”



Society and film actor Sunil Dutt, it would have been impossible.

Some of the wheelchair participants were on a fundraising drive. Sankara Raman from Ayikudy (Tamil Nadu), who became a wheelchair user at age 12, managed to raise over Rs 10 lakh for his charitable organisation, Amar Seva Sangam, a rehabilitation centre for disabled students.

A large number of Standard Chartered staffers were involved in this drive. “I have travelled on the uneven roads in my village in Tamil Nadu. Mumbai roads are a cakewalk for me,” he said about his participation. “Last year when I could not participate in the marathon, I missed those steps I took as a child. This time I am happy to take part and express my solidarity with wheelchair users,” he said.

Satyaprakash Tiwari, who has won 13 medals in international events, including a bronze at the 2006 Asian Games has been taking part in the marathon since its inception four years ago. “The distance and

Singh of Procam International, the organiser of the race. “It requires special training and better wheelchairs to climb that bridge. Our race director Hugh Jones felt it could be dangerous for them.”

Tiwari, however, has not lost hope. “I admit that it could really be risky for us but we also have state-of-the-art wheelchairs in which we have been winning medals in international events. We can use them for such races. We should be given a chance to show our strength over the Peddar Road bridge. I will officially request them in advance next year. I hope we can prove them wrong.”

For these disabled athletes it is not about proving a point about their capacity. They just want to send across this message to everyone. “We want to show all our disabled and non-disabled countrymen that if we could participate in the half-marathon, they could also compete,” Tiwari added.

Compiled by : JAYANTHI SANKARAN



JUSTICE

On the Move

A mobile court to hear complaints from persons with disabilities held its sitting for the first time in Chennai on 7 January, 2008.

The joint sitting, chaired by Chief Commissioner for Disabilities Dr. Manoj Kumar, Deputy Chief Commissioners Dhariwal and Sunita Singh and State Commissioner for Disabilities VK Jeyakodi, was held at the Little Flower Convent in the heart of Chennai city.

The first sitting of this mobile court in Tamil Nadu was held over two days in Trichy, a southern town. In the all-day session in Chennai, grievances with respect to the provisions of the Disabilities Act, various schemes meant for disabled persons, benefits,

public buses and access for public buildings. There was no dearth of issues, local or national.

By 10 in the morning, the large quadrangle of the Convent was filled with people – some visually-impaired, some hearing/speech-impaired, some in wheelchairs, others moving on crutches – but all with the hope that their long-held complaints would finally be addressed. The presence of the Chief, Deputy Chief and the State Commissioners personally receiving the complaints was a big source of

impairment. This was to facilitate the awarding of the “disability certificate”, an ID mandatory for all the concessions, jobs, and well, all the transactions that we deal with in life. You can imagine the enormous help this would render to disabled persons who generally have to go from counter to counter, from office to distant office, for this important document.

“People have come from all over Tamil Nadu for the cards,” said Sheeba, hearing-impairment consultant. “There are complaints about old cards, no cards

By 10 in the morning, the large quadrangle of the Convent was filled with people – some visually-impaired, some hearing/speech-impaired, some in wheelchairs, others moving on crutches – but all with the hope that their long-held complaints would finally be addressed.

concessions and reservations in education and employment – all major issues, in fact – were heard.

Disability activists like TAP Varadakutty, G. Chidambaranathan and Dr. P. Veeramani were present. There were representatives from Vidya Sagar. Each had come with a set of petitions and suggestions. They talked about the need for a national smart card for people with disabilities, inclusion of a disabled person in the censor board to monitor disability in movies; allotment of more seats in

assurance. So was the mini “office” set up in the room for processing the complaints. It had a computer and a typewriter. Three officials were seen busy doing the paper work. A sign-language interpreter, Sundar was at hand, helping to interpret the grievances of the hearing/speech impaired. In the adjacent room sat a Medical Board consisting of paramedical personnel, an audiologist, a psychologist, a couple of psychiatrists and specialists in locomotor disabilities, hearing/speech impairment and visual

and cards that are not accepted everywhere.” Added Sunil, an LDC in the Commissioner’s office, “Complaints are about disability certificates, jobs and pension. Some have brought in petitions on harassment at the workplace and others want family disputes settled.” A State Transport Corporation bus driver, denied employment after injury and resultant disability came for alternative employment in the department, which is mandatory according to the Act. A common request was a barrier-free environment.



The commissioners listening to complaints



"Signing" the petition

Waiting outside to provide immediate consultation for the complaints were officials from various departments. There was the MD of NHFDC, officials from the Railways and from local bodies. "All types of complaints from disabled persons, including those regarding implementation of reservation in education and employment, welfare schemes, infringement of rights and discrimination, will be heard," Jeyakodi said. "We are empowered to summon officials of government departments to inquire into the complaints. Orders on the petitions would be passed immediately," he added.

It was a hectic day, with a lot of people vying for the Chief Commissioner's attention. Dr. MANOJ KUMAR took time off to answer our questions on this new venture. This is how it went...

Q: How did it all begin?

MK: *For a year, I sat in my office, monitored and reviewed the status of disabled persons and our own work regarding it. I did it for 8, 9 states. We had received over 6500 complaints in the last 11 years. You see, when you have entitlement, you will also have grievances. Most concerned the problem of mobility. How will they get education unless you mobilise infrastructure? How will they go to school? Another thing that struck me was that outside the state*

capitals there was no facility for redressal of grievances. The answer was this outreach programme.

Q: When did the road show start?

MK: *I first wrote a book "Role of Distinct Level Officers in Empowering People with Disabilities". I sent copies to all the 625 districts. In it I had stated what each person should do. I mentioned each one's role and the power vested in him to play that role. I wrote to NGOs receiving grants. I asked for returns. This was in November 2006.*

Q: Then?

MK: *Chandigarh came forward with a report. We got to know of the type and the magnitude of the problems in the rural areas. We began to collect two reports one from the capital and another from the rural areas. Then we thought of this idea. If infrastructure was such a problem, then we had to go different areas and solve the immediate problems.*

Q: You have named it Mobile Court. Why?

MK: *It has all the powers of a civil court, within the provisions of the PD Act. The Act is governed by rules. They are effective rules, implementing them is mandatory.*

Q: What about the provision "subject to availability of funds"?

MK: *Non-availability of funds as an argument is not tenable.*

Q: So, how mobile have you been?

MK: *The remotest we have gone to is Jharkhand. We registered 268 cases there. But the capital, Ranchi had less than a 100 cases. In Bihar, we covered Patna, Bodh Gaya and Muzzafarpur and dealt with 2030 cases. In Sikkim, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Assam we registered 780 complaints. I'm happy to tell you out of these, 450 got government jobs.*

Q: What about physical access? It is a major issue.

MK: *Yes, it is mandatory that all public buildings and those that are open to the public be accessible. There are building by-laws to this effect. On the basis of the report of the architect, we can bring the building down.*

Q: What are the main complaints?

MK: *We constantly get grievances with regard to provisions of the Act, schemes, benefits, concessions...*

Q: After hearing the complaints, what do you propose to do?

MK: *We'll issue show-cause notice to all the departments concerned with the complaint. They get 30 days, which is the stipulated time for sending an answer. Once we receive their reply, we examine the case, and if need be, we will summon them. There is counseling and passing orders. We then*



Mobile Court in session

push the government departments for implementation.

Q: What is the major aim of the courts?

MK: *The idea is to build a social consensus, which comes with awareness about disability rights. For example, everyone has a right to attend a wedding, go to the temple or the church. This right to participate in social functions, the right to worship should be allowed to be exercised. What we have is a socially beneficial Act. It must be implemented in full.*

Q: What is the most difficult problem that you have come across?

MK: *More than a "problem", I would call it irony. Up to 2006, nearly 350 disabled people got through to the Civil Services. Very few have received appointment orders, even after selection. Posts have not been identified. People within the department should not be prejudiced. Now there is an attempt to change that. Candidates also should demand that they be appointed.*

Q: How successful is the implementation in the rural areas?

MK: *Even in the national capital region, only a small percentage of people have something as basic as a disability certificate. Obviously, things must be very bad in the rural areas. Most are happy with a Rs. 100/- pension. Many*

are poor, illiterate. We have to look into that also. Micro-financing, rural employment, implementation of Indira Awaaz Yojna ... the list is long. It all starts with empowering people with disabilities.

Q: What hurdles do you face in the rural areas when it comes to implementation of schemes?

MK: *There is no modus operandi of distribution of benefits. How well is the NREGS implemented? How do you identify the skilled and the unskilled among disabled people to reach the programme to them? We are now planning for skill development. We have a training module. For instance, 70% of the lift-operators' jobs are lying vacant. Disabled people could easily find employment here.*

Q: What should the disabled people do to make things work?

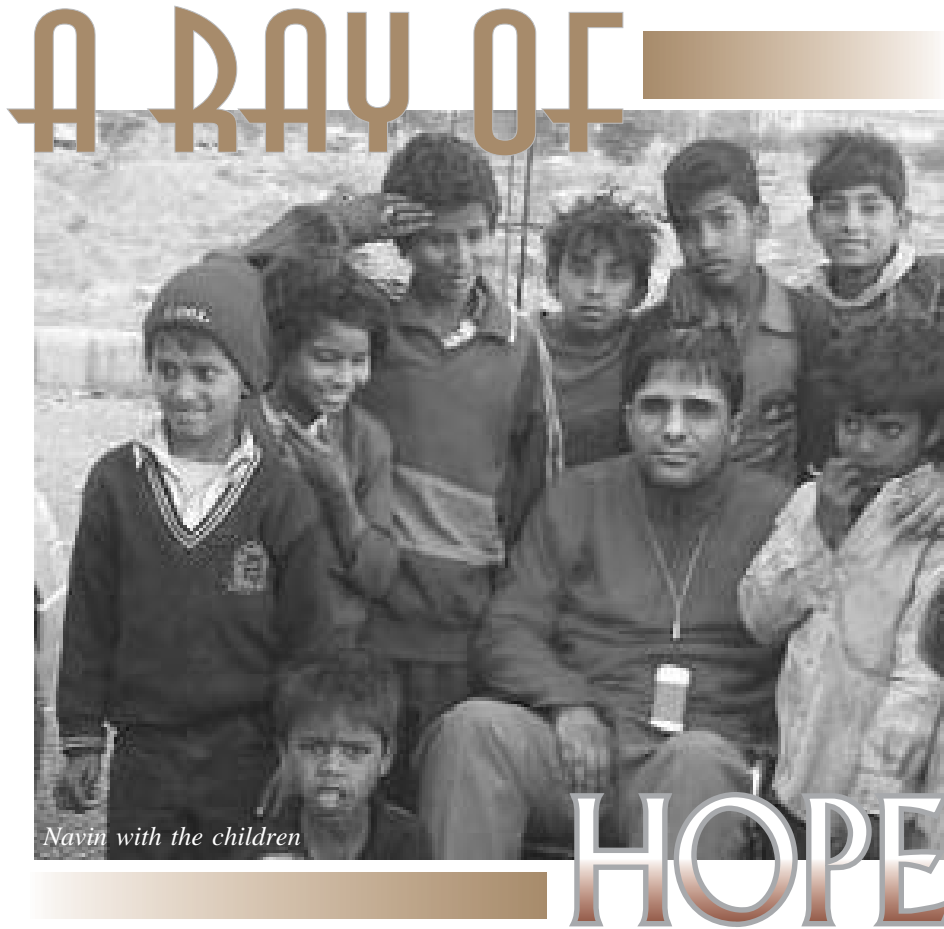
MK: *Disabled persons need self-confidence. There should be awareness about rights. They should get together when they demand facilities for them to work and travel. The numbers will do the trick.*

A month (time given for a response) has passed since that historic day. We decided to track a case to see how effective the exercise has been.

Dr. P. Veeramani, Director Anbagam, a

school for children with mental disability, came with a petition for allotment of free land to build a school in Kancheepuram district that is contiguous to Chennai. For many years now, he said, he had been asking for 97 cents of land that has been registered as Gram Natham Poramboke (waste land in which construction is permitted). He worked on it, met a host of local officials at all levels and completed all the formalities required in 2004. He said that his request fell within the provision of Section 43 of the People with Disabilities Act, 1995. He is still waiting for allotment. In the intervening years, he has met the DRO, the camp Tahsildar, the then District Collector and the Special Deputy Collector, only to be informed that it was to be given away to the Animal Welfare Trust. He got a stay order from the court.

At the Mobile Court, his case was found to be valid. It was then referred to the Tahsildar. Dr. Veeramani is trying to get an appointment with the Tahsildar. He is hopeful, he says. After all, he has waited for 4 years! "Holding mobile courts that go to the vulnerable population to listen to their grievances is an excellent idea," he says. "But will all the paperwork translate into action? Will follow up to the show-cause notices be done promptly? Unless that happens the court will remain just another empty exercise."



Navin with the children

Navin Gulia, the CavinKare ABILITY Mastery Award winner for the year 2006 has found a new calling. Cruising around in his hand-driven SUV in the near sub-zero temperatures in Gurgaon near Delhi this year, he chanced upon street kids who were barely clothed and looked hungry. He felt he had to do something. That “something” – distributing clothes and biscuits he collected through his Foundation AADA - led him to an important discovery. Here he is, narrating that experience.

While carrying out the clothes distribution drive, we chanced upon this group of about 30 makeshift huts made of the barest minimum materials. I thought they might be the huts of labourers working in the construction that was happening in Gurgaon – the so called Manhattan of India. But no! I was wrong.

The moment we got down to distribute the clothes, there was chaos, the whole crowd pounced on us. There was a woman with her child trying to get our attention with a repetitive request and a smile (there was something irritating about it too). There

was another woman with a disabled child and the child had been told to move in such a way that his handicap would be more prominently visible. There was a woman with an uncovered shivering girl child. Everybody was trying to get our attention. It was chaos and a shock for us - Khushi, Sunita, Mudrika, Mahesh (our volunteers). I was trying to make sense out of this. This was a sight that anyone would run away from at the first instance and here we were, on the inside of it, by choice. There was an urge to run away, but I resisted it

We tried to identify kids who needed help. And the men and women tried to get more out of us in terms of the kids’ clothes and biscuit packets. I was only trying to make sense out of it. There was no respect for each other. The men did not respect the women and the men and women did not respect the kids. There was no respect for any human emotions. I saw a man pull a woman’s hair, I saw a woman slap a child. What was going on? Why? The

hour-long exercise was too exhausting but we were able to give clothes to some kids and distribute the biscuits.

A day later Sunita said, “Let’s provide one cooked meal to the people in that place.” Now, I did not have the courage to serve cooked food in that crowd (in my mind I was seeing them pounce and grab) but since Sunita was keen to take on all the work and effort, right from contributing the amount needed to getting



Food being distributed

the stuff cooked and transported to the place, I agreed to be part of it. We were hoping that the people would organise themselves properly when food was being served and when there was enough for all. We were wrong.

The situation was even worse with every one trying to collect the maximum for themselves. The men wanted and had food before the kids and women. Fine, no problem. There were women trying to collect for later. There were kids trying to protect what they had managed from other kids and have that too. There was an infant shrieking wildly every time someone came close to his plate while his mother had gone for more. At the end of the 2 hr exercise, it was all over and they'd had their fill and collected some for later too.

A possible answer to why they were behaving like this, was that people had come in the past and dumped the food/items before running away, leaving these people to fight over it. But it was not the complete answer.

They were ethnically, genetically different.

They didn't seem like one large family. Neither did they look like a tribe. Some were very dark, some very fair, some short, some tall. Why then were they all staying together in these hutments?

All the adults thankfully went away after the food. The kids remained. We started talking to them and they collected around us. Finally, they wanted to talk. No more pouncing or begging. They joyfully started telling us how many times they had the sweet halwa. One said "I had ten times, mazaa aa gaya." I was talking to Sunita in English and saying, "I think we should bring education here first, food they can manage; they should develop respect for each other to live a happier life, a more meaningful life and a life out of which they can get something more."

We then started talking to the kids. What do you all do? What do all the elders do? There was a pause, as we repeated our question. A boy looked blankly ahead and then at us. He said,

"Maangte hain, sab maangte hain" (beg, everyone begs). The way he said these words, they will echo in my mind for a long time to come. I could identify with his tinge of hesitation and the strong desire to say it too and the inevitability of saying it. I had got my answers.

A group of beggar families, shooed away from everywhere no doubt, settled in an isolated open space, with every next moment uncertain as they could be evacuated by the administration anytime (labourers are given time and place to resettle). In such

a life, how could culture, custom and tradition find space? I did not find their behaviour wrong at all. Our whole society does this, albeit in a more sophisticated and respectful manner i.e. snatching, pouncing, manipulating/marketing gimmicks – these people were doing it in a basic and crude manner. For them it was a matter of survival.

Sunita asked one of them, "Why do you beg?" The boy said, "Kya kareng, gareeb hain" (what can we

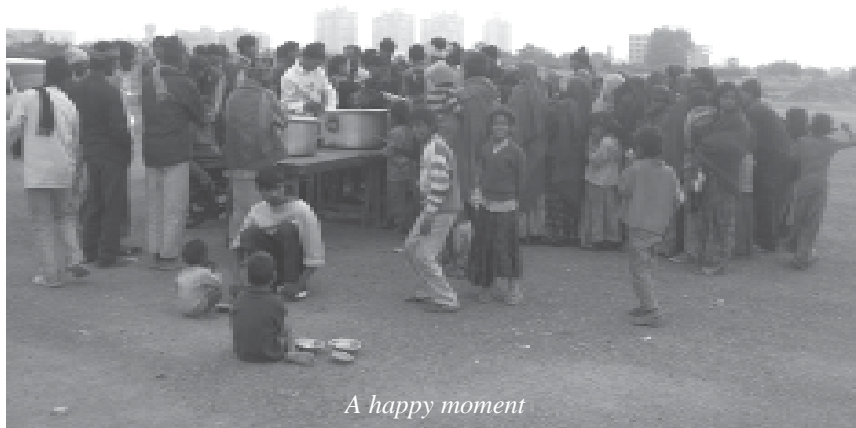
do, we are poor). With no other skill set or opportunity, begging would mean the difference between going to bed on an empty stomach and a full stomach.

One question was still pending. What to do? How to do it?

The boy was looking blankly ahead. I could see he had thoughts/dreams of possibility in his eyes. He said "Aap khaana mat laao idhar"(don't bring food here). "Aap khaana mat laao idhar" he repeated "aap hame padhaao"(you educate us). A child for whom 'a full stomach' was a remote possibility every day was saying that he didn't want food, he wanted to study. I had got my answers. I had got my hope. I had got my Asha. This is what I plan to work on from now.

'Asha' – 'hope' is like the lives of the children. Uncertain. We don't know whether we will find them if we go there tomorrow. But till the time we do, we shall work together on 'hope'-'Asha'.

NAVIN GULIA



A happy moment

They were ethnically, genetically different. They didn't seem like one large family. Neither did they look like a tribe. Some were very dark, some very fair, some short, some tall. Why then were they all staying together in these hutments? All the adults thankfully went away after the food.

A star shines bright

SRK might rule the roost. But when it comes to serious acting, I guess, Aamir still gets the cake. My first impressions about Aamir was, just another Kamalhasan! A similar approach to life, a turbulent and tempestuous private one, an absolute no-nonsense approach with the media, always in the eye of the storm. But, (this is a very big but!) the zest for making fine cinema overrules everything else and one cannot help but love Aamir more. Watch *Tare Zameen Par* if you're in doubt.

Taaare Zameen Par has no fancy locales, no designer clothing, no overwhelming sets erected. It has an unpretentious storyline, a script that could be tightened ... but all that pales in front of some mind-blowing performances by the artistes.

The movie is endearingly poignant. The earnestness and sincerity come across even at the outset; that you are willing to



forgive its shortcomings. The constant refrain "*Tare Zameen Par*" by Shankar Mahadevan is hauntingly melodious. So also, '*Rum pum bole*' by Shaan which is exuberant, as it should be. Then, there is some more punching music by Shankar-Ehassan-Loy

Aamir had a message to deliver and he needed a platform. What better than the medium that has a large faithful audience following – celluloid.

The question that confronts you as you reluctantly leave the theatre is – is the story about a child with dyslexia? Or is it about children as a whole? The answer is in the tagline of the movie itself- 'Every child is special'. So treat them with respect!

The movie brims with emotion – be it the creatively charged Ishaan Awasthi who is full of ideas but is unable to express

them verbally, the 'Dada', Ishan's elder brother when he fails to win the tennis match and meet up to his parents' expectations, Ramu Damodaran, the optimistic and confident boy who walks with the help of crutches, the children with autism and Down's Syndrome from Tulips and their parents revelling in their children's accomplishments, the boy at the tea stall who gets a cup of tea, the constant misty eyes of Ram Shankar Nikumbh (Aamir Khan)... the list is endless.

Children are natural actors. The spontaneity with which they perform can be recounted in many movies. But what does one say about Darsheel Safary, the boy who plays Ishaan or rather lives the role to a T? Darsheel is outstanding and amazing as the fun-loving, insecure boy to whom alphabets are swimming devils and the numbers are dancing dervishes. Here is a kid who loves the freedom of expression that his creativity gives him, and alas, to whom classroom atmosphere and homework are stifling and inhibiting his imagination.

Movie-making is team work. While the director is the captain of the ship, unless the crew members are in tune with the leader, there can be no progress made. Aamir has thought out each frame and the completeness of the film leaps out of each frame.

There is appropriate use of animation as symbolism - of the multitude emotions and thoughts juxtaposed in Ishaan's mind. Though the background music is pervasive, toning it down could have lifted the mood of the film. There are times when you wish there was silence deployed.

The emotionally torn mother portrayed by Tisca Chopra immediately strikes a chord, while the busy father played by Vipin Sharma does make you think - when will fathers make time to understand their children better? Here he lives in emphatic denial. No, there could be nothing wrong with his son. His son! Look at the elder one! Not his genes! This particular subtext points to the fact that fathers have to be there, physically and emotionally for their children, when they really need them.

Loving does not just mean providing for them; it is about nurturing and accepting them and helping them by holding their hand when it is needed the most.

Aamir as Ram Shankar Nikumbh is lovable. The teacher who senses the trauma of the child and goes out to help him overcome his shortcomings. This is too good to be true, but ... the passion for his belief that every child is special and deserves to be treated so; the commitment with which he has directed, and the involvement in every

Taare Zameen Par is not one of those films that merely entertain but also enlighten. The film which is loosely inspired by the book Thank You, Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco introduces Ishaan Awasthi an 8-year-old dyslexic child with difficulties in reading, spelling and numbers. Ishaan's parents expect him to be perfect like his elder brother Yohaan (who tops in sport and academics). He is packed off to a boarding school.



Vasanthi Raja

Here a new art teacher Nikumbh (Aamir Khan) comes into his life. Nikumbh who himself had dyslexia, discovers Ishaan's problem and his talent in painting.

With Nikumbh's professional style of teaching Ishaan's grades in language and mathematics improve. He excels in art and painting. When Ishaan's parents come to take the child back home for holidays they are speechless. They are amazed to see the boy's skill in painting. Ishaan's father is in tears upon seeing this change, and realizes his mistake. Before leaving for the holidays, Ishaan runs to hug his teacher who tosses him in the air.

Director Aamir Khan has portrayed the difficulties and the trauma of a dyslexic child beautifully and the frustration of his parents is well illustrated. The movie is an eye opener to all parents and teacher who term their child or student lazy, unorganised or incapable. The director however, has not exposed any information about the remedial skills or the different teaching strategies used to help dyslexic children. Parents of dyslexic children need to understand that their kids are constantly trying and trying harder. Sending them to boarding school is not a solution. There have been many instances of children with severe dyslexia who have poked and hurt themselves with a compass due to their frustration at being unable to read and write. The director should also have focused on the parents' understanding and acceptance of their child.

Darsheel Safary has not just played but lived the life of a dyslexic child. The music composed by Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy stays honest to the film's theme. On the whole Taare Zameen Par is an outstanding work of cinema. The movie has won several awards that it richly deserves.

VASANTHI RAJA

frame tugs at your heart strings and forcefully pulls you into the movie.

While I can go on in this vein about the emotional quotient of the movie, it is even better if you watch the movie first hand,

trust me! *Taare Zameen Par* – *Ab to aur sitaren zammen par aana he padega!* (Stars on the ground, there's no way you can stop others from descending to the earth)!

SANDYADEV

Spin Off

“The most inspirational and encouraging movie,” is how Narayan, National Co-ordinator, Indian Development Foundation (IDF) described *Taree Zameen Par*. He gave us an example of its inspirational effect on students of SIES College of Management, Nerul, Navi Mumbai. The students took the children of Vimala Dermatological Centre to the movie at the Sun City Theatre in Vile Parle, Mumbai on 13th January.

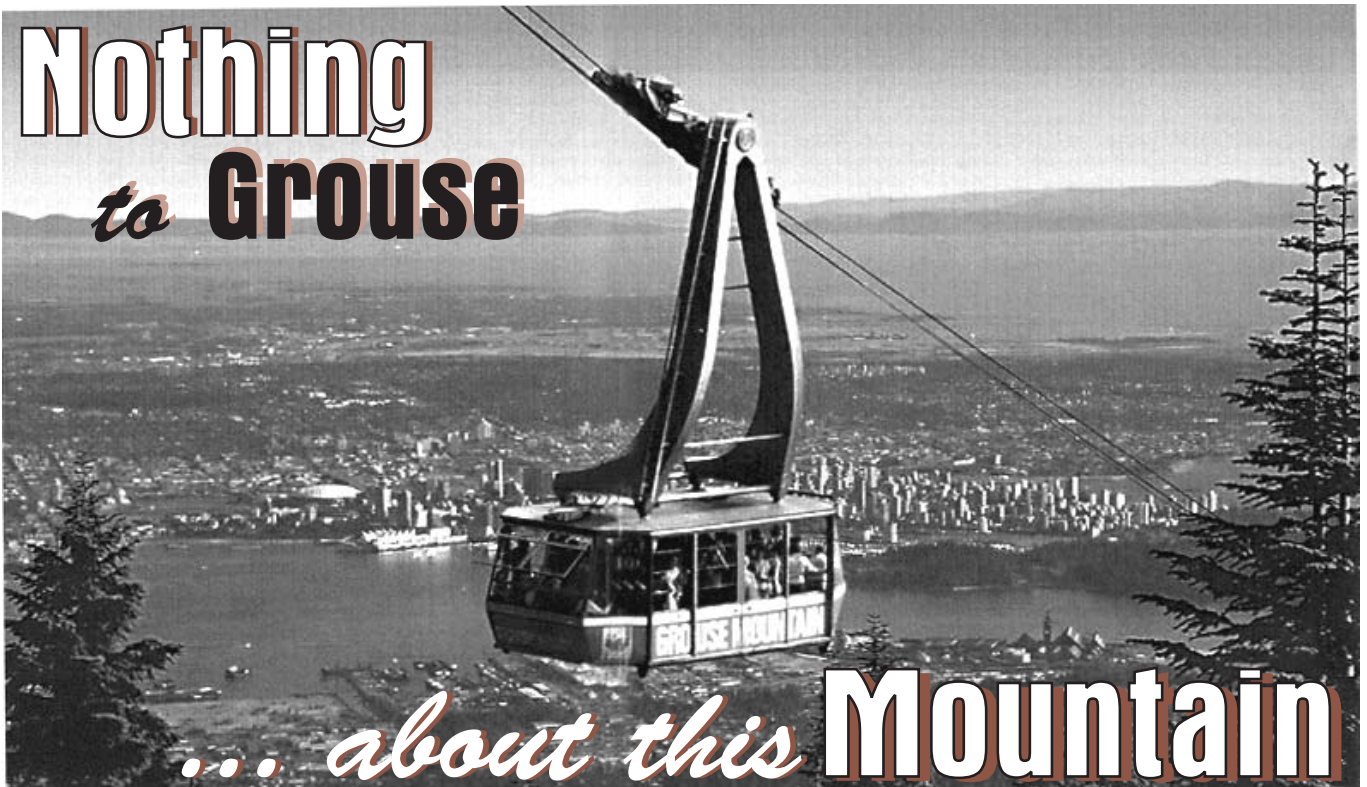


“My friends in the college volunteered to sponsor the event. What could be more satisfying than to take the Vimala Centre children for such a motivating movie,” said Hari Thampy, a student from the SIES College. A group of 53 children and Sisters from the Centre, had the privilege of visiting a theatre for the first time in life. “The children were very happy to watch a movie which every teacher, parent and student must see,” said Sr. Lucia who led the group. Watching Darsheel play the role of Eshan, the boy with a learning disability was a moving experience for them. Vidya from Vimala Centre said, “A girl of 4 years from the Centre said, ‘I cried most of the time. I loved the child artiste and also the drawing teacher’s role.’” That’s the effect the movie had on audiences.

At a seminar on learning difficulties in New Delhi, teachers and principals listened carefully to someone who has lived with dyslexia - guitarist Susmit Sen, of the band Indian Ocean. “Support from somebody at home in these cases is absolutely essential. It should be done without letting the person know that the support is being given just because he or she is dyslexic. One has to simply believe in the child,” says Susmit Sen. All this was an endeavour to highlight what needs to be done next. Founder, Orkids Learning Centre, Geet Oberoi says, “After *Taare Zameen Par* was released, people have become more aware of the symptoms of dyslexia and of what the child feels. We wanted principals and teachers to come to the seminar so that they understand why it is important to tap each child’s potential and how they can do it.” Hopefully, the Government is moved to action.



On Children’s Day, after hosting a radio show for a Mumbai-based station, actor Aamir Khan said that India needs a more relaxed education system. “I think parents need to be more relaxed. This trend where every child should get 90 per cent is not right. We have to develop multiple faculties. Someone may not like doing Maths, while another child might want to do painting. We should encourage that,” Aamir Khan said. While shooting for his home production *Taare Zameen Par*, Aamir Khan set up a special school on location for the children who acted in his film and shot for limited hours so that their routine was not disturbed. “I took special care that time doesn’t exceed and that the children get their freedom on the sets. Their attention span is small, so one needs to keep that in mind,” Aamir said.



Visiting Grouse Mountain is to go “home”, a Return to Nature, away from city plains paved with concrete and buildings of uniform plaster. It is looking at Grouse from a cable car, a view breathtakingly beautiful over the Pacific. MEERA RAO writes about an unforgettable experience it gave her.

When I told my US-returned friends that I would be accompanying my husband who would be attending a conference in Vancouver, Canada, they wanted to know if a visit to the U.S. was on our itinerary. It wasn't. Their reaction ranged from surprise to disbelief. “How can you be so foolish as not to skip the U.S. which is not far from Canada? You don't know what you are missing.” The general feeling seemed to be that Canada was a “poor cousin” of the technologically advanced big brother next door. These comments formed a very interesting prelude to my trip to the country.

As we made our way to the exit from the Vancouver International Airport, the first thing that drew my attention was the sight of two people engaged in polishing a bronze cast which was gleaming under the lights. The plaque attached to the base announced that it was The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, The Jade Canoe by the world renowned artist and carver Bill Reid who has been widely acclaimed as the pivotal force in the renewal of artistic traditions of the Haida people of British Columbia. This gave me a glimpse into the country's past.

Nestled on Canada's Pacific Coast, Vancouver, its third largest city and the venue of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games is a scenic gem. The occupants of the multi-storeyed offices, condominiums and apartment buildings which dominate the skyline are justifiably proud as they can view the mountains or the sea from a multitude of windows and the mandatory balcony. Walk up the busy downtown streets and you will be





After the demo they flew away, but soon swooped down within our hands' reach, perhaps for an encore and applause! A kind of catwalk in the sky! Oh, no! None of us even dared to touch these winged beauties! This fascinating show would certainly have delighted an Ornithologist! As I returned, I wondered if the name of the Mountain had some relation to the game bird that bears the same name.



treated to the sight of the coast mountains, the splendours of Stanley Park, the waters of Burrard inlet, or all the three depending upon where you stand.

Absence of zigzagging freeways contributes a great deal in avoiding congestion in this well-planned city. Automobiles do ply around, but an excellent public transport system comprising bus services and sky trains ensure comfortable sightseeing.

We decided to leave the man-made wonders to seek out wonders of nature. We decided to visit Grouse Mountain, a fifteen-minute drive from the city of Vancouver over the Lion's Gate Bridge.

Vancouverites boast that given the right season, it is possible to ski in the morning and swim in the afternoon when the snow melts on Grouse Mountain! It may not be technically untrue but no Vancouverite dares it, we were informed.

The Grouse Mountain Sky Ride, an aerial tram that whisked us 1100 metres over the tree tops in a minute reminded us of the cable car ride we had through the rain forest in Cairns during our visit to Eastern Australia, with one important difference. Nearly half a dozen cabins of the cable car in Cairns accommodated four passengers in each whereas we were more than 50 in the hexagon shaped single tram referred to as the Gondola.

We followed the elderly lady who was wheeled into it and we all returned her greeting. Over a brief conversation, she said she was fond of travelling and seeing places (I was amazed at the facilities in foreign countries offered for the disabled to travel in comfort). In Cairns we passed through Eucalyptus trees on the ascent while here the ascent was lined with a thick growth of Cedar, Hemlock and Douglas. We peeped out through the enclosed glass and were mesmerised by what we saw - ships sailing in the azure waters of the Pacific Ocean appearing like small boats from a distance on one side and cone shaped trees rising to the sky on the other. We alighted on the mountain top and walked along the mountain path and could watch the melting snow, pure and white. We pulled ourselves away to reach the venue of the world famous Lumber Jack show.

The Lumber Jack show is a show of "Birds in Motion", where rare and endangered birds of various sizes and colour flew out of their cages and perched themselves on the demonstrator's palm for her to parade them one after another and run a commentary regarding their classification, characteristics and lifestyle. After the demo they flew away, but soon swooped down within our hands' reach, perhaps for an encore and applause! A kind of catwalk in the sky! Oh, no! None of us even dared to touch these winged beauties! This fascinating show would certainly have delighted an Ornithologist!

As I returned, I wondered if the name of the Mountain had some relation to the game bird that bears the same name. So this was a sample of Vancouverites' hospitality towards visitors and guests. No, Canada is certainly not the "poor cousin", nor are its people "poor cousins" of their "affluent" neighbours in the south.

N. MEERA RAGHAVENDRARAO

In a Maze of Thoughts

“Close your eyes, take a deep breath and remove all thoughts from your mind for half an hour. See the light burning within you”...so instructed the preceptor. I promptly dozed off, under the preceptor’s meditative gaze. The next time, I took care to catnap before the session; even as I tried to rid my mind of thoughts, like wiping a blackboard clean, I thought I did glimpse the promised light- a much flickering, weak one, ready to be put out any moment.

Put out by what? The winds of thoughts of course. The only enlightenment that occurred from this initiation to meditation was that warding off thoughts was more difficult than shooing off sniffing stray dogs.

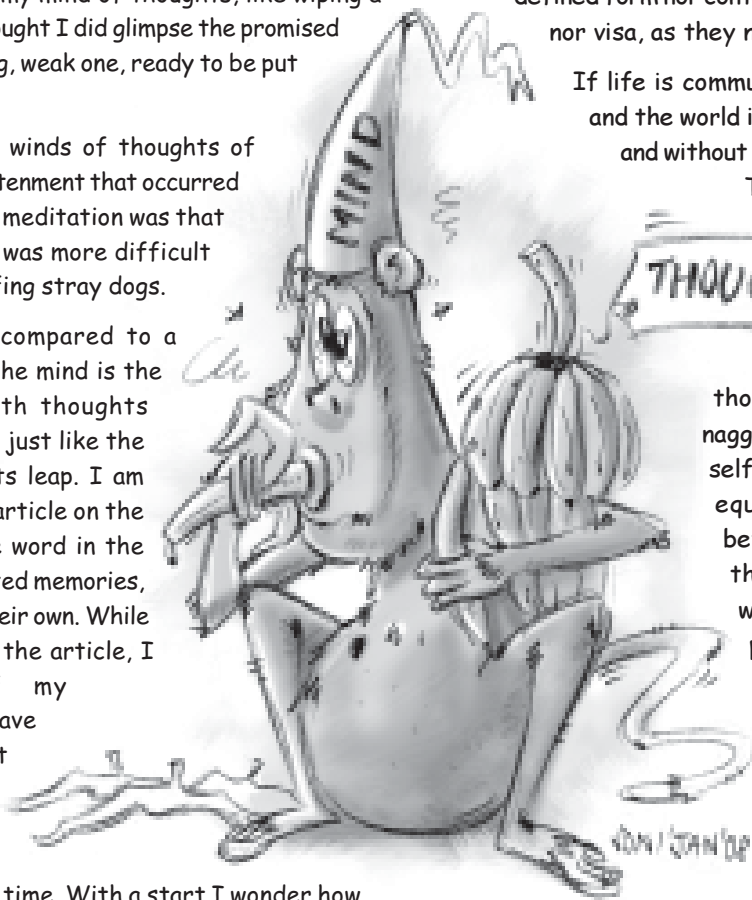
The mind has been compared to a monkey. I would say the mind is the forest populated with thoughts monkeying about. And just like the agile simians, thoughts leap. I am reading an absorbing article on the nuclear deal; a simple word in the article evokes associated memories, which branch off on their own. While my eyes are scanning the article, I am wondering if my expectant niece will have a baby boy or girl, what she will name her child, whether my advice will be sought in the matter like last time. With a start I wonder how

the nuclear deal is related to my niece’s pregnancy. A name, just a name in the article took me through mazes of thoughts before resting on the niece. I had to retrace my steps one at a time to find the connection and was quite amazed by the speed at which thoughts travel. Thoughts demand neither defined form nor content, words nor grammar, passport nor visa, as they navigate effortlessly.

If life is communication, speedier and speedier and the world is more and more connected with and without wires, what about thought power?

Telepathy, intuition, scientific discoveries, clairvoyance and spiritual enlightenment are the exalted forms of

thought power while gnawing worry, nagging anxiety, obsessive fear and self-destructive thoughts are their equally potent negatives. The in between area is full of the average thought fare-small joys, medium worries, pleasant day dreaming, petty jealousies, ridiculous comparisons, relevant questions, healthy wondering, wild conjectures... like the haphazard traffic in an Indian city, the thought traffic jumps signals, defies discipline and often overspeeds.



As if there is a shortfall of individual thought production, there are spinners of 'thought for the day', weavers of thought-provoking bits, Internet dispensers of thoughtful soulbytes, then there are the politicians and the spirituals who direct, divert and dissect thoughts. Even while physically living the today, thoughts roam freely in the immediate or distant past, or fast forward themselves; if tomorrow's dress code or next year's holiday plan seem routine enough, thoughts of a happily-ever-after life or fear of a retributive reincarnation spring forth from thought power. Like supplements added to a deficient diet, someone else's thoughts no doubt tone up a deprived individual's intellect. He can be influenced, inspired, guided or brain-washed by them.

Jumping back to thought-jumping, do thoughts really need to be put in harness all the time? Keep your mind clutter-free and focussed, says a holistic healer; that's the way to sharpen your intuitive powers. If you desire your cousin in the US to call you just when you are thinking of him, this is the route! And one day you could read the mind in front of you! Or see through a fraudulent business deal before it is too late. One day you could predict futures, look into the past, even make a lucrative business of it...but to reach there, we first need to learn to live the present in the present.

Thinking of what to cook for the evening while the neighbour is pouring out her woes will only leave you with an intuitive stump. It could serve your interests better to listen to her story carefully, at least to be able to cut her tale off at the appropriate moment. Don't we take the present for granted? Think present, live present. A child's mind focused on play is a worthy example of living the present in the present. A sleeping child's absolute sleep more so.

A sleeping-or is it sleepless- adult is more prone to lapping thoughts, overlapping thoughts, thrashing about thoughts, tormenting thoughts...it is then that a disciplined mind helps. If one can just order it to shut shop and go to sleep, would one not be amongst the most blessed? Counting sheep and counting 1 to 100 have been devised as alternatives to sleeping pills. When I try to count sheep, my mind pictures them as white sheep, brown sheep, fluffy sheep, bleating sheep, running sheep, nursing sheep...and 1 to 100 doesn't remain formless either. Fat figures, long figures, red and black ones...I wish I could bundle them all off into space and instead see the glow of the light burning within me. Effortlessly, of course. There are times when freelancing, prancing thoughts are a boon. During a brief lull in a heated fight, it helps to leave the arena, at least mentally, and wander off into neutral



terrain. Think of how the TV soap's next episode will shape; whether the Third Front is viable or whether birds sing, shout or talk...anything to cool the overheated ego. Routine actions, like sweeping and washing go well with creative runaway thoughts. A falling apple and the Eureka bathtub are examples of how productive unbound thought power can be. Drives and walks are ideal times to let thoughts footloose. Instead of plugging in earphones, why not simply unplug the mind? To each his own, you may say.

Multitasking may be your forte; four differently coloured phones on your table ringing simultaneously do not faze you. Perhaps you are at ease to dwell on each word of the spouse's argument, even while sending your colleague an important text message.

To think or not to think is thus the question...as also, when to think and how to think. Thinking of it, thinking is akin to bodily functions and calls for regulations. Too much thinking could be as congesting to the being as bad cholesterol

WHAT one thinks is of course another story. "We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care about what you think. Words are secondary. Thoughts live; they travel far," said Swami Vivekananda.

Can we give it a thought?

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