Success & ABILITY

India's Cross-disability Magazine
April - June 2016
₹ 30

HONOUR & ACHIEVEMENT ✧ CULTURE ✧ TÉTE-A-TÉTE
WELLNESS ✧ WORKPLACE ETHICS ✧ CARING CONCERN


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MANGO AVAKKAI PICK
LIME PICKLE
MANGO THOKKU PICKLE
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GARLIC PICKLE
EEN CHILLI PICKLE

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CONTENTS

04 **Culture** *Talent transcends disability. An insight on the Candoco Dance Company, U.K.*

07 **News & Notes** *Check out on these happenings and developments; they are news you can use.*

11 **Honour & Achievement** *Relive the night of the CavinKare Ability Awards 2016, that left everyone inspired and ignited.*

30 **Caring Concern** *Equal opportunity employment norms as followed by the Lemon Tree Hotel Company.*

35 **Cover Story** *Love conquers all. It doesn't take a Valentine's Day to bring this out in the open. For these happily married, loving couples, their disability is but a minor contention.*

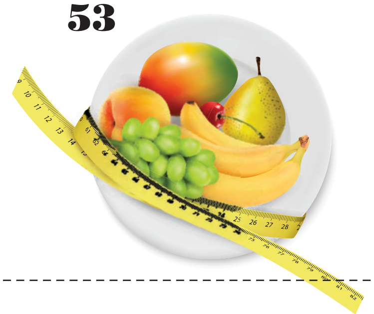
46 **Téte-a-Téte** *Dr. Madan Vasishta catches up with Dr. Gaurav Mathur, the first deaf person to be Dean of Graduate School at Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C.*

51 **Workplace Ethics** *Out-of-the-box ideas at your workplace to ignite your employees' motivation.*

53 **Wellness** *It can begin with something as simple as reverting to our traditional diets.*


55


58


53

55 **Travel** *Experience the magical Aurora Borealis.*

58 **Reminiscences** *The Chennai disaster, the repercussions and the aftermath.*

62 **Last Page** *The travel travails of a vegetarian foodie.*

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

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From the Editor's Desk

Hello friends,

The picture that you see on the cover of this issue is perhaps, self explanatory.
"...it takes two to tango, two to tango
Two to really get the feeling of romance
Two to tango, two to tango
Do the dance of love
It takes two, I say two
Darling, it always takes two
I'm with you"

So goes a popular song by Ray Charles (Heard of him? The world renowned blind musician, whose biopic "Ray" was screened at our international disability film fest: AbilityFest.) And as we move along during the course of each year, we come across so many special days, laid out for those special moments of life that we want to single out from the rest and to celebrate: mother's day, women's day, valentine's day, friendship day and so on. Simultaneously, we come across some remarkable couples — both of who are disabled persons, who veritably seem to celebrate valentine's day every single day, without really needing a day earmarked for love. For this issue, we had them over, and made them spill the beans on their romance and love, what made them tick, come hell or high water! Believe me, you will be as entranced as we were all.

The world is actually an amazing place, so beautiful, so much to behold, so much to make life worth living. So what's a hardship or two, or three, that is flung along our path, as we glide along the routes that Life hands us? Our 14th CavinKare Ability Awards, once again, highlighted this dynamic factor, awakening the very soul of the over 1000 strong audience assembled in the auditorium. We give you an insight on this gala evening of March 2016.

Talking about the splendour of the world, there's the mystery of the unknown, revealed to us through travel to unbeknown places — this time to the seemingly unknown terrain of Aurora Borealis. The téte-a-téte with Dr. Gaurav Mathur, Gallaudet University's first deaf Dean; Dr. Ketna Mehta's out of the box thinking to empower every one of us; positive minded corporates like The Lemon Tree Hotels; the awesome dance of the Candoco Dance Company with winsome movements coordinated to suit both disabled and non-disabled alike... all these and more, are brought here for you to read, and to establish yet again that... ah yes... life is beautiful and so too is the world we live in... despite everything. Positivity, in all its hues, holds the key.

Let's reach out, touch each others' lives and come together in as many ways as we can. The world is waiting!

Jayshree Raveendran

CAN DANCE

Disabled or non-disabled, dance is all about self-expression, writes HEMA VIJAY, after attending a dance workshop conducted by the Candoco Dance Company from U.K.

Dan and Miriam in 'Studies For C'

Just walk, Dan and Mirjam told us. Just keep walking or wheeling around, and look at each others' faces as you move past each other. And we did just that – the eclectic bunch of people that we were – some disabled, some non-disabled, some professional dancers, some novices, some in wheelchairs, some young children, some older people, and just one self-conscious journalist – me.

Think of a daily activity, Mirjam voiced next. Putting on a jacket, suggested somebody. Sweeping the floor, voiced another. And so on… We finally settled for 'putting on a jacket'. "Show me how you would put on a jacket", Mirjam prompted, and we did that. We stretched our arms into an imaginary jacket and moved our arms down next: each in our own style and body language. "Do it faster, do it slower, do it at a lower level, do it at a higher level, do the same turn with a different body part, do it together as a group, do it one after another…", Mirjam coaxed us. We responded, stretching the body part that was amenable, bending in the direction possible. We did it gingerly and self consciously at first, and then with more and more abandon. "Watch each other" Miriam threw in suddenly, and we saw that we were all dancing. Our own choreographies, no less!

Hema Vijay

Dance can be about what one can do, rather than what one can't, dancers Mirjam Gurtner and Dan Daw of the British Candoco Dance Company taught us all. They were here in India for a three-city tour (Chennai, Kolkata and Delhi) to stage 'Studies for C', a dance production by award-winning choreographer Javier de Frutos. The tour was organized in association with the British Council, India.

Until I attended the Candoco dance workshop, I was one of those people who would freeze if I came into focus, being painfully self-conscious. Many others at the workshop had their own challenges too; there were children with hearing impairment, with cerebral palsy, with Down's syndrome, some affected by polio, some wheelchair users – and we all had believed that dancing was not for us.

The Candoco workshop changed much of such misconceptions. Evolving and conjuring dance moves from everyday body movements turned out to be a liberating and exhilarating experience. It boosted our body's self-image, self-confidence and our comfort in a group.

Diverse dancers bring in their own ways of doing things, thereby creating different movements or dance expressions.

Just the previous night, I had watched Dan and Mirjam stage their duet performance 'Studies for C'. As they danced freestyle in their Mexican wrestling masks to the sound of some lilting Latino music and in a shower of dancing lights, I remember thinking, how nice it must be, to dance with such abandon. And here I was, and all of us, doing just that. Dancing!

To many of us who got to see Dan and Mirjam dance on stage, it had come as a surprise to learn that one of the duo had a disability. Dan has cerebral palsy. "I introduce myself as a disabled, self-producing artist", Dan had said with a smile, during a discussion post their performance.

"It isn't about adapting to the disability, but doing the movement that you can do, working in the philosophy of what we have, rather than dwelling on what we don't have. There can be dance in the movements we can make, because dance is an expression of feelings, which need never be done in just one particular, pre-fixed way". That is why they call themselves the Candoco Dance Company. Mirjam states, "What I appreciate most about Candoco is that it sees me as a whole artist".

Candoco Dance Company is a contemporary UK based dance company of disabled and non-disabled dancers that choreographs and stages productions and conducts learning projects and workshops like the one I attended.

Candoco believes that a mix of disabled and non-disabled dancers actually enrich dance choreographies, with the diverse dancers bringing in their own new ways of doing things, thereby creating different movements or dance expressions. Mirjam explains, "For instance, a person on crutches or a wheelchair brings some other kind of movement that is not conceived by a non-disabled dancer".

The fact that Candoco has enabled so many disabled dancers to access professional work makes the group one of the most pioneering dance companies the world has seen. The company was founded in 1991 by Celeste Dandekar who had sustained a spinal cord injury when performing with the London Contemporary Dance Company in 1973, and Adam Benjamin, a painter and dancer. Its current artistic co-directors are Pedro Machado and Stine Nilsen.

"As Machado often points out, the first challenge that has to be overcome is, overcoming the limiting perceptions of who can dance and what is dance", Mirjam says.

"It isn't about adapting to disability, but doing the movement that you can do, working on the philosophy of what we have, rather than dwelling on what we don't have."

"Dance can help people with disabilities to develop or enhance their vocational skills", says Poorna of RASA, the Chennai–based centre that helps children with special needs experience the benefits of theatre arts. Facilitators and students of RASA were among those who participated in Candoco's dance workshop at Chennai.

Dance works in multiple ways on a person. It works holistically, by boosting the person's confidence in his/her own abilities, in enhancing one's cognitive skills, the capacity to listen and respond to situations and instructions and to develop a sense of space and coordination. Dance movements also help in developing motor skills for specific vocations and for activities of everyday life. So then, let's all dance…

A workshop in progress.

NEWS & NOTES

SmartCane for detecting obstacles above knee-level

SmartCane can detect knee-above, over-hanging obstacles.

Here is an inexpensive, safe, electronic travel aid, 'SmartCane', to detect unexpected and hazardous obstacles on roads such as parked vehicles, low-hanging tree branches, electric poles, sign boards, street animals, etc., that can't be detected by the white cane.

An end-user of the SmarCane says, "I often collided with vehicles like trucks, buses, etc., because my white cane would pass beneath them, leading to forehead injuries. After mounting SmartCane on my white cane, I get a pre-warning through vibrations, so I am able to avoid those obstacles altogether". This device also helps the visually impaired to find paths in unfamiliar indoor settings like offices and shopping malls, in following queues and in avoiding unwanted collisions with other persons.

The SmartCane device uses ultrasonic ranging to detect objects in its path and generates tactile output in the form of different vibratory patterns.

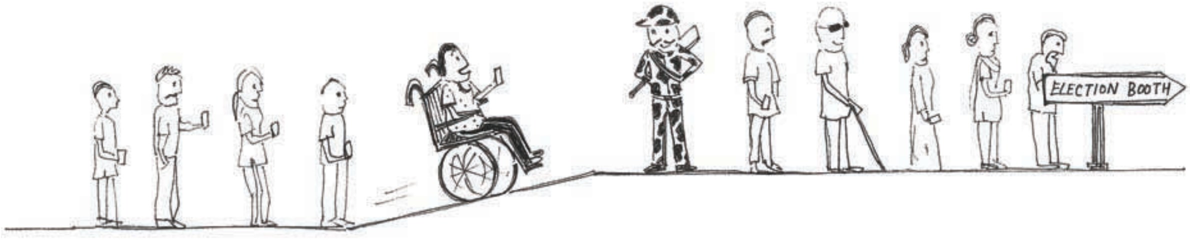
The SmartCane can be mounted on the existing white cane and it detects knee-above and over-hanging obstacles up to a distance of three meters in front. The SmartCane device uses ultrasonic ranging to detect objects in its path and generates tactile output in the form of different vibratory patterns. These vibrations convey distance information, thus enabling the user to negotiate the obstacles from a safe distance. It is small and light weight. The device has highly discernible vibration patterns which are produced throughout the entire grip and offers adjustable detection range that allows the user to switch between long (three meter) and short (1.8 meter) range mode, depending on the usage scenario such as outdoor, indoor or crowded places.

The SmartCane has been developed by the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, Phoenix Medical Systems, Chennai, and Saksham Trust. Saksham Trust is networking with organisations in India and other developing countries to disseminate this device in a sustainable manner. Interested parties may send e-mail to smartcane@saksham.org.

Source: eyeway.org

MOBILE APP FOR ELECTION AUDIT

Was your polling booth accessible?

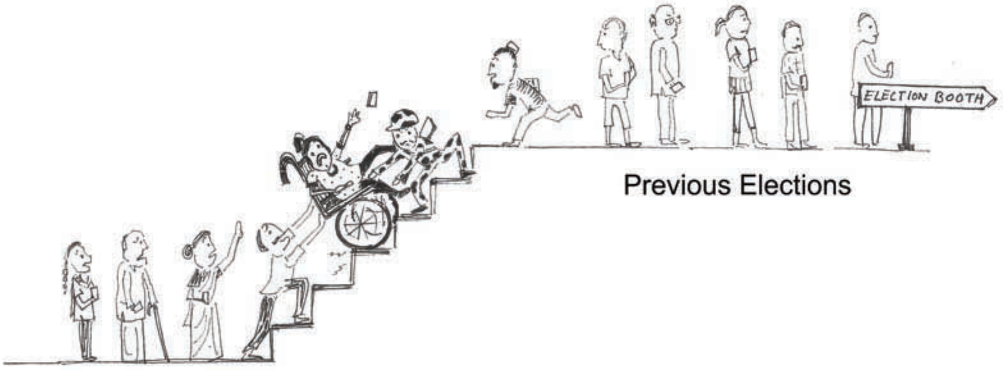


The disability sector has for long been campaigning for accessible and inclusive elections in India. Significant milestones have been crossed, such as the passage of Persons with Disabilities Act (1995) and the Supreme Court Order of 2004 in response to Javed Abidi's writ petition, calling for various provisions to ensure the same. On the ground though, has there been any progress? The 2016 legislative assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam, West Bengal, and Puducherry can shed light on this, courtesy a mobile app.

The Disability Rights Alliance (DRA), has developed a mobile app 'Election Audit' with the help of the software firm Ardhika. This app, loaded in the server of the Chief Electoral Officer, Tamil Nadu (CEO-TN), has the entire list of 3600 odd polling booths in Chennai. Volunteers from Bhumi are conducting access audits of these polling booths using this mobile app. Extending this audit to the wider country, DRA has evolved an Access Audit Reporting Form through Google, sharing it with district networks of Tamil Nadu and other election going states/union territory. DRA has also shared resources evolved by them pertaining to inclusive elections and awareness among persons with disabilities on the importance of voting and the facilities due to them. This also includes a post-election voters' feedback form developed by them.

DRA is following up with CEO-TN on realizing commitments made towards inclusive elections, such as all polling booths needing to be on the ground floor, presence of proper ramps and adequate space for wheelchair navigation, availability of a wheelchair and a dedicated volunteer per wheelchair in 12500 polling stations, 18 exclusively accessible polling booths, a one-metre extension cord to pull the EVM if needed, Braille ballot sheets and EVMs with Braille stickers for voters with visual impairment, priority queuing for voters with disabilities, allowing of a companion for a voter with disability to help in voting, removing/moving away of barricades to allow entry of the voter with disability, and parking of his/her vehicle closer to the booth.

Smitha Sadasivan,
Disability Rights Alliance & Vidya Sagar.



Previous Elections

SWAVLAMBAN HEALTH INSURANCE SCHEME

In a move towards providing affordable health insurance to persons with blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, locomotor disability, mental retardation and mental illness, and to improve the general health condition and quality of life of persons with disabilities, "The Trust Fund for Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities" under the Department of Empowerment of People with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, has signed an MoU with the New India Assurance Company Limited to provide an affordable Health Insurance Scheme 'Swavlamban Health Insurance Scheme' for persons with disabilities. This scheme will deliver comprehensive cover to the beneficiary as well as his family (Persons with Disabilities, spouse and up to two children) and can be availed by persons with disabilities aged between 18 years and 65 years. This scheme can be opted for by disabled persons whose family income is equal or less than Rs. 3,00,000 per annum.

The key features of this scheme are:

1. Uniform premium of Rs. 355 per person/family.
2. Health Insurance cover up to Rs. 2,00,000 per annum on family floater for a period of 12 months.
3. OPD cover for corrective therapy up to Rs. 10,000 per annum is available for the Persons with Disabilities. For Persons with Mental Retardation and Mental Illness OPD cover will be limited to Rs. 3,000 per annum.
4. No exclusion of pre-existing condition. However, corrective surgery for existing impairment can be done only with the prior consent of the Insurer / Third Party Administrator (TPA).
5. No Pre-Insurance Medical Tests.
6. Pre & Post Hospitalization expenses, subject to limits.
7. Persons with multiple disabilities, cerebral palsy and autism are not covered under this scheme.
8. Other terms and conditions to be governed by standard group health insurance policy.

Aadhaar like ID for persons with disabilities

The government has decided to come out with a universal ID for persons with disabilities that will be valid throughout the country. This move will allow persons with disabilities to easily avail the benefits of various schemes and reservation policies. By this, the discrepancies in the validity of disability certificates between different state governments will end, and since it is acceptable across the nation, it will ease out the problems in delivering benefits to disabled persons. A national database of disabled persons is also on the cards and preliminary draft has already been created for the same by the Department of Disability Affairs.

Source: The Hindu

'Accessible Reader' is now free of cost

The ebook reading android application 'Accessible Reader' is now being provided free of cost by Amway Opportunity Foundation. 'Accessible Reader', developed to support people with disability supports languages like Hindi, English and other languages. With the help of this application, documents in your txt, rtf, doc, docx and pdf formats can be read with several user friendly features. The user can set the reading mode between word, sentence, paragraph, and page, increase and decrease reading speed, repeat the reading with repeat command, and play or pause the reading. The app remembers the page last read, keeps the history of the last 10 files read, remembers the position on which the file was closed, saves the speed of reading options, and displays the percentage of the file that has been read. Most importantly, this app is ad free and so saves you the trouble of surfing through ads. It also allows a two–minute user trial, beyond which the app will be closed and can be used only on registration. The application is available on playstore.

https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.sparshproducts.accessiblereader

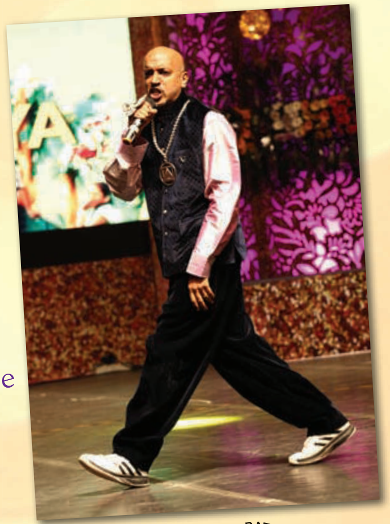
Making our cities disabled-friendly

The Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan, a campaign for making India disabled–friendly and accessible has been taken up by the Union Government to ensure access of services and facilities to persons with disabilities, stated the Union Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment, Krishan Pal Gurjar. The government has provisioned an outlay of Rs 218 crores for this campaign and 100 government and 100 non–government buildings each in 50 cities would be chosen and made accessible for persons with disabilities through ramps, lifts and other facilities. The Central Government has also decided to ensure complete accessibility for persons with disabilities by 2019, by improving civic facilities and modes of transportation, including the railways and airlines.

Source: pib.nic.in

IGNITING MINDS INSPIRING HOPE

The evening kindled hope, positivity, belief, trust, joy, and a resolve to make this world a more accessible place for persons with disabilities in our midst… The CavinKare Ability Awards (2016) night also left everyone ignited by the fire to achieve excellence in their own lives.



Looking beyond disabilities
And breaking barriers together
We thank you for joining us
Dear friends, sisters and brothers
14 years ago
We reached out with all our hearts
And history was re-written
To award the real superstars

Welcome to the 14th Cavinkare Ability
Awards 2016

The nominations are in
The names are written
The votes have been cast
And the recipients about to be
mentioned

Achieving with disability
Impossible is nothing
Let's receive this light together
And share the brightness, with one
another

Right here at the 14th Cavinkare Ability Awards 2016

It's not my fault
The way I am
And as far back as I can remember
I still don't understand

The attitudes the perspectives
People looking at me funny
When I pass by they stare
But we're all a part of humanity right here

It sometimes takes a curse
To turn tragedy into a blessing
It sometimes is unfair
But that's life
A cycle – never ending

And I want to take a minute
To express my thoughts, to express my mind
To make you just think for a second
And I'm a do it in rhyme

We need to think about it
Think about what we're doing
Think of all the millions of lives that get ruined
Minute by minute and day after day

Young and old people throwing their lives away
With no food to eat and no clothes to wear
Sometimes they're struggling to even get on that chair
We need to take a minute
Lend a helping hand
All across the room we need to understand

We need to take a minute
Lend a helping hand
All across the world
We need to pray together man

We need to pray that we got
More time
And more love
more peace
and more fun
more humanity
more smiles
more patience
and no lies
more togetherness
more aware
more joy
and more care

As we leave tonight
Let's pray for hope
And take back some glorious moments
From the show

It's because of your vision
Your voice and adulation
It's because of your kindness
Ability foundation

For when we see the needy
Understand what they need
When we listen to the voice deep inside
And put away our greed

When we come together
In celebration and unity
That's what makes it all worthwhile
To rediscover our own ability

thank you for coming out
thank you for your time
thank you to each of you
for sharing your smile
thank you for the encouragement and support
for the belief and the faith
Cause after every dark night
there is always a brighter day

- Blaaze

Blaaze is one of the most popular and talented rap artists of the country. A multi-faceted artist, he is also a popular playback singer, producer, musician, lyricist, editor and actor. His many awards include the Pepsi MTV Youth Icon Awards in 2008 for contribution to socially relevant issues through music and for his lyrics for the official UN anthem on poverty alleviation, 'Pray For Me, Brother', composed by A R Rahman.

Hema Vijay

When India's trail-blazing paralympic swimming champion Justin Jesudas wheeled himself on to the stage to receive the CavinKare Ability Mastery Award 2016, a thunderous applause erupted, and it went on and on. As Justin looked on at the packed audience cheering him, the spotlight on him put on view his face overcome by emotion. The applause grew louder and virtually blew the roof of the vast auditorium, when the articulate Justin said in his acceptance speech "Please don't perpetuate mediocracy and dependence. Celebrate excellence, celebrate meritocracy. The disabled want neither hero worship nor sympathy, we want only accessibility; give us that and we will show you what we are capable of. And this is why this award is so special to me, because Ability Awards celebrate mastery".

Well, year after year, for the past 14 Years, the CavinKare Ability Awards have been infusing into one and all, a swig of adrenalin brewed with hope and positivity. These awards tell all of us – be we disabled or non-disabled, that so much is possible, even though so much may be out of bounds to us. A feeling that was voiced by the awards night's Guest of Honour, the very talented film actor Vikram who said, "Year after year, I come here to take inspiration – they are the true heroes that I want to be. And sometimes, when things don't go well, my mind goes to these amazing real life heroes and I feel rejuvenated in spirit and carry on with my efforts".

This year's awardees included Major H. P. S. Ahluwalia, who rose like a phoenix from the ashes after sustaining a bullet injury in his neck during the Indo-Pak war of 1965 which left him a quadriplegic — to sit tall, dream big, and create The Indian Spinal Injury Centre, a state-of-art, one-stop destination for all victims of spinal injury. Major H. P. S. Ahluwalia was conferred the CavinKare Ability Special Recognition Award, 2016.

The CavinKare Ability Award for Eminence 2016 was awarded to Tirunelveli-based K.R. Raja, whose organization Global Network for Equality supports children of life convicts imprisoned for 'spouse murder'. While society stays oblivious to the plight of these children who are left virtual orphans and scarred in their emotions and minds, K R Raja has taken it upon himself to heal their young hearts and build a better future for them by enabling free education for them. "They are India's future. For no fault of theirs, they suffer even a more cruel punishment than the one given to their parents. They need society's attention", Raja says, who doesn't let polio-resultant immobility to deter him from this massive task. Raja started off by taking care of children of life convicts lodged at the Palayamkottai Central Prison. His next target is to achieve the same at the Central Prison of Jharkhand and Raja plans to cover every one of the 1300 central prisons in the country.

CAVINKARE ABILITY AWARDS 2016

Vikram, G Venket Ram, Mariazeena Johnson, Santosh Radhakrishnan.

> ***"Year after year, I come here to take inspiration – they are the true heroes that I want to be" – award winning actor Vikram.***

Then there is Anjan Satheesh from Ernakulam, who was awarded the CavinKare Mastery Award 2016. Anjan is the youngest member of Kerala's Cartoon Academy and an Art and Computer Science teacher at the Adarsh School, despite his massive challenges of cerebral palsy along with speech and hearing disability. But as the teachers of Adarsh School say, Anjan is able to communicate with every child in the school – for Anjan communicates from his heart.

No less spectacular is the achievement of Ankur Dhama from New Delhi, who was awarded the CavinKare Ability Mastery Award 2016 for an astounding career in athletics despite his visual impairment. And this, side by side with being a high achiever on the academics front at St. Stephen's College, New Delhi. His accomplishments include gold medals at the World Youth Championships, Colorado USA, the Open Championship, Malaysia, besides many other medals at the recently held 2016 IPC Asia-Oceania Championships at Dubai. Anjan has qualified for the Rio Paralympics to be held this year and is all set to bring home more laurels for his country, something that not many other athletes have been able to do in the international arena, so far.

The awardees were chosen by an eminent and diverse jury that included Arun Jain, Chairman and MD of Intellect Design Arena; Mani Ratnam, Filmmaker; Mariazeena Johnson, Director, Sathyabama University, Rajiv Lochan, MD & CEO, Kasturi & Sons; Santosh Radhakrishnan, Head-Corporate Business, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the Dhainik Bhaskar Group; and G. Venket Ram, Fashion photographer.

The uniquely talented singer, producer, lyricist, editor, actor and of course, rapper Blaaze led the audience through the events. DJ Kave rocked the auditorium by his electrifying selection of music sequences. A R Rahman's Sunshine Orchestra led by senior music conductor Srinivasa Murthy mesmerized the audience with live music that included vocals, flute, violins, violas, double base, cello, besides percussion instruments; so too did talented visually impaired singer Irwin Victoria, who was one of the top 10 finalists of the popular Airtel Super Singer Series 5.

Then of course, there were the thought leaders who dreamt up the concept of the CavinKare Ability Awards — Jayshree Raveendran, Founder Director, Ability Foundation and C K Ranganathan, Chairman & Managing Director, CavinKare, and actor, filmmaker and social activist Revathy. The three spoke of the journey that Ability Foundation had begun 20 years ago, of the positive changes in society's perception of, and interactions with, disabled persons that have unfolded over the years, the other vistas and the road ahead.

As the evening went by, no one at the auditorium was left untouched or uninspired, from the guests of honour to the general audience. There were constructive discussions on what each one could do as an individual to make it possible for people with disabilities to take their rightful place in society. For instance, Vidya, an entrepreneur who runs the Charminar chain of restaurants took guidance from Justin on the architectural and design features that would make her restaurants fully accessible.

The recipients on their part, were inspired to achieve even more. And as they relaxed over the delicious dinner, new relationships were forged and friendships were made with society's who's who.

The CavinKare Ability Awards were instituted in 2003 to honour achievers with disabilities who have soared beyond conventional barriers to realize their chosen dreams, and thereby build awareness on the capabilities of persons with disabilities. These awards have now become a beacon of hope for all. The march continues…

The Sunshine Orchestra performing at the event.

The Sunshine Orchestra

The Sunshine Orchestra is a pioneering project of the AR Rahman Foundation that addresses the Indian music industry's urgent need to produce quality instrumentalists. Simultaneously, the orchestra is also making a positive impact on society, as the children who are identified and trained at Sunshine Orchestra are from the underprivileged sections of society. The classes for the first batch of Sunshine Orchestra began in 2009, and today, these young musicians are on their way to becoming experts in the art of orchestral instrument performance, with some of them already performing with various professional ensembles and films.

Irwin Victoria

A Top 10 contestant of Vijay TV's Super Singer Session 5, Irwin Victoria is hugely popular and polled an impressive two lakh audience votes in the session's wild card round. This amazingly talented young man was originally self-taught; it is only in the last six months that he is taking formal training in music! Irwin lost sight in one of his eyes when he was three months old and has limited eyesight in his other eye. Irwin has sung at music concerts across the country. This Tuticorin-born lad is a talented mimicry artist too.

No peak that he can't conquer

CAVINKARE ABILITY SPECIAL RECOGNITION AWARD 2016

MAJOR H P S AHLUWALIA

Shri P S Surana, Founder, Surana & Surana International Attorneys (third from left) presenting the citation to Maj. Ahluwalia's daughter Sugandh.

Saaz Aggarwal

Just four months after Major Ahluwalia met his tryst with Mount Everest, he became a victim of spinal cord injury.

The year was 1965 and Major Hari Pal Singh Ahluwalia had been called to the front in the India-China war. A bullet in his neck resulted in spinal injury, leaving him quadriplegic. What happened next was the conquest of yet another Everest that had risen in front of him. And as with the other Everest, he faced this one too undaunted, with the persistence and will power to overcome every new obstacle that came his way.

In 1965, facilities for spinal injury management were almost non-existent in India. Therefore, he had to, with the help of the Ministry of Defence, the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute and the Indian Mountaineering Federation to take treatment at the Stoke Mandeville Hospital in Aylesbury, UK, then the premier institute in the world for spinal cord injury. These difficulties, rather than cowing him down, lead him to dream of creating a similar facility in India. He discussed his hopes with the hospital's then medical director, Sir Ludwig Gutman, who helped him prepare a project report. This report, Major Ahluwalia presented to the Government of Delhi, but couldn't get funds.

Overcoming mountain-high hurdles
Literally and figuratively,
Geographically and fundamentally
Being frost-bitten during the conquest of
Mount Everest – being just one part,
Being brutally wounded by bullets
In the Indo-Pak war of 1965
That rendered him a quadriplegic – being
quite another!
Handing him a host of other problems:
Physical, emotional, psychological
& material

Each stumbling block merely making him
emerge
Stronger and determined to establish
an institution that
Is today, a huge empire. Seeking to offer
Every man, woman & child
with spinal cord injury
The benefits that had been elusive to him
Offering facilities, amenities,
comfort, solace
Where none existed; he is a
Person who turned adversity into
a mission, by
Building a landmark establishment
That provides habilitation, rehabilitation
& independence
Of all those injured in road accidents
& other mishaps

There's more besides: the wide array
of posts he's held,
As disability activist, leader & propagator
All of which make us bow
to this iconic personality.

It was in 1983 that Major Ahluwalia, refusing to accept defeat, got a few friends together and decided to set up their own NGO, the Indian Spinal Injury Centre (ISIC), which was registered as a society on 24 March 1983. 15 acres of land was sanctioned to ISIC by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) in a remote part of Delhi that had been rejected by many other NGOs, in August 1985.

Then, little by little, step by step, they toiled to become what they are today! "We started the centre with Rs. 150", reminisces Major Ahluwalia. "Today it is worth Rs. 1000 crores". Currently, the Centre has around 150 beds. Nobody is turned away. This apart, the Centre also has education and research programmes, training courses for physiotherapists and occupational therapists and specialisation in orthotics as well as prosthetics.

ISIC has also floated a Spinal Cord Society to disseminate information about the management of spinal cord injury. With spinal injury, proper evacuation and timely medical care result in a better outcome. How patients are extricated from the site, how they are shifted to the hospital, how they are managed en route and the initial care are extremely important. ISIC is also working towards creating awareness and compliance such as wearing seatbelts while in a moving vehicle and appropriate safety equipment while working.

In addition to all this, Major Ahluwalia, has also participated in a number of other equally adventurous expeditions from his wheelchair. These include a skiing expedition to Mount Trishul, the first trans-Himalayan motor rally and a cultural expedition into Central Asia.

"If you sit alone in a room and cry, nobody will come to you. So – face the world. See where you stand. Look at the things you used to do and see what you can take up in your new situation. Think about the new interests you can aspire to do. You may have lost the use of certain parts of the body. Now you must learn how to make use of whatever is left", advices Major Ahluwalia, who is also a Arjuna Awardee (1965), Padma Shri (1966) and Padma Bhushan (2002).

A saviour for 'invisible' children

CAVINKARE ABILITY AWARD FOR EMINENCE 2016

K R RAJA

Hema Vijay

Society is content with handing out condemnation and law enforcement with meting out punishment to the guilty man who murdered his spouse. Not many have spared a thought to the plight of the children of such couples – motherless, father in jail, and left at the mercy of relatives who often have neither the means nor the desire, to take care of these children. Virtual orphans, the children are traumatized, with some even having been witness to the murder.

K. R. Raja has brought the spotlight on these hapless and vulnerable children. His organization Global Network for Equality (GNE) has identified, located and arranged for free education of all children of life-convicts imprisoned for spouse murder at the Palayamkottai Central Prison, Tamil Nadu. His next target is to achieve the same at the Central Prison of Jharkhand. And thus, Raja plans to cover every one of the 1300 central prisons in the country.

"For no fault of theirs, the children come under extreme trauma and are denied parental care, education and even the basic necessities of life. If not attended to, they are prone to go astray or become victims of abuse. They need the support of both the State and the society", Raja says.

The seed for this was sown when Raja visited the Central Prison at Puducherry for his Ph.D., thesis on the psychopathic deviation and adjustment patterns of life convicts. At the prison, he encountered the plight of children left with no parental care, because of spouse murder by the father. There were 20 such convicts lodged in the Puducherry prison then, in 2009. One of these life convicts told him that he had not seen his children for the last five years. A few had attempted suicide, worrying about the state of their children. That affected Raja terribly, and he tried to identify and locate these children. The son of one of these life convicts asked Raja if he would be able to help him stand on his own feet. "I decided then that I should do something to ensure that such boys get a good education and become happy and upright individuals of society", Raja shares. He went about doing this in a systematic way. .

After completing his thesis, Raja worked with the Coalition for Organ Failure Solutions to gain experience in running a non-governmental organization. He eventually started GNE in 2012, along with Aravindan Sundar, the son of Sundaravadivelu, who had founded the Coalition for Organ Failure Solutions. Though Aravindan Sundar still does support Raja in GNE's activities, GNE is largely a brainchild and operation of Raja.

Raja observes that alcoholism is an immediate trigger for spouse murders in over 40% of the cases. He also has found that this problem is more rampant in villages and in economically weaker sections because they have no access to hobbies, social activities or networks, which could have helped them divert their attention, and be less obsessed with their marital conflicts. "Somewhere, love and expectations had gotten converted to rage and murder. Almost all of these convicts feel remorse, and tell me that they wish that they could relive that moment and handle the situation differently. They say: I could have adjusted, I could have gone somewhere else, I could have given her more time…" states Raja.

GNE also counsels the life convicts as well as their family into reigniting familial relationships and has managed to stem suicide attempts by the life convicts. There hasn't been any suicide attempt in this prison in the last two years.

By routing the donor cheques directly to the educational institutions where these children study and by getting donors to remit annual donations (a minimum of Rs. 1000 per child per year) rather than a one-time corpus donation and by encouraging the donors (both corporate and individuals) to interact with the child they support, by keeping track of the child's progress and helping the child with career plans, Raja ensures absolute transparency.

In the midst of these path-breaking achievements, one loses sight of the fact that Raja has a disability. When he was eight months old, an inebriated local doctor had wrongly injected Raja in his nerves, paralysing him below the waist. Physiotherapy helped him regain 10% control over one leg, while the other remains paralysed.

Refusing to be dejected or yield to a life
Of submissive acceptance or
blame providence
For distressing him with post polio paralysis,
He chose to look beyond himself and
Bring sunshine to the lives of others

He turned his attention to the plight
of hapless children
Of apprehended murderers and
captive criminals
Empowering each one of them through
His organisation "Global Network
of Equality"

A mission to advocate grassroot changes to
The most neglected of neglected sections
of society
Saving the integrity, self-esteem
and adding worth
To the lives of children of prisoners,
Creating avenues for education
and awareness

Making them grasp at life, not vanquished,
But move on with courage,
cheer and respect
A never-say-die attitude and a passion to
Promote equal rights and a desire to serve –
Which saw the birth of Global Network
of Equality (GNE)
An organization that brings happiness
Through awareness and aptitude building
and social empowerment.
Looking at life from the most neglected other
side of the fence.

An indomitable spirit

CAVINKARE ABILITY MASTERY AWARD 2016

JUSTIN VIJAY JESUDAS

Hema Vijay

In 2014, when Chennai-based Justin Jesudas, a wheelchair user, looked around for a professional coach to train him in competitive swimming, he was met with apathy. “I was 34 years old then. The way they saw it, a 34-year-old was not a medal prospect. Even the ones who were mildly interested in training me looked away after learning that my injury was severe, a S3 category injury with my body immobile neck down”, Justin Jesudas says wryly.

Fast forward the years to the present, and we see that Justin has risen swiftly like a phoenix. He got ranked 15 at the IPC World Swimming Championship held in Glasgow in 2015. In fact, this was the first time ever that a severely disabled swimmer from India had even competed at any IPC world championship.

A road accident in 2009 had caused a spinal cord injury that left Justin Jesudas immobile, neck down. After the accident, Justinwent through the various ringmaroles of trying to walk. Several surgeries and rigorous physiotherapy ensued for over a year in vain. “My body was frozen and my parents and wife took care of me totally. Soon, I wanted to become independent and let them get to living their own lives”, Justin recalls.

It was then that Justin Jesudas decided to focus on what he could do and regain independent living, rather than waste more time on trying to make his legs walk. He decided to take up swimming to keep his muscles fit and to boost his blood circulation, as his immobile body could no longer induce blood circulation. “This is why you will see me making little ‘push-ups’ every now and then, to induce circulation”, he shares, adding, “If I stay under the hot sun or a cold environment for over 15 minutes, my temperature would shoot or plummet accordingly, the way it happens with reptiles!” he says, stating the massive challenges his body faces in the tone of a joke.

Rendered a tetraplegic at a young age,
he allowed
Neither disability nor other challenges
nor predicaments
To stand in the way of achievement.
He rose to meet the complexities
of immobility,
Resolutely pursuing his dream of
Becoming a champion competitive swimmer
Determinedly teaching himself when others
feared to coach him
Swimming in the middle of the pool where
No comfort bars existed, to hold on to
Winning championships for the country,
Rising to becoming a star in the
international arena,
Ranking in the Top 20 IPC World
Swimming Championship
In Glasgow in 2015. Parallely accomplishing
The commitments of a full time job in the
IT industry
Keeping up with both these extremely
demanding activities
Displaying a strong resolve and a spirit
indomitable to obstacles.

Justin eventually headed to a government swimming pool and cajoled the coach to let him swim. “They were afraid, of course. They said: You can hardly move, how will you handle it? I told them I could float, and asked them to put me in the water with a rubber float and stay next to me and watch.”

Swimming felt like meditation to Justin. “Initially I was making awkward strokes. However, within a week he began to cover 300 metres at a stretch. In February 2014, he competed at the state level para-swimming competitions of Tamil Nadu and bagged four gold medals.

Around that time, he was inspired to become a professional swimmer. His search for a coach was initially unsuccessful – “but now, after they see my international ranking, the same coaches who refused to coach me, call up and say they would share tips on swimming with me”, Justin says with a wry smile.

Currently Justin trains at the Sports Science Centre of the Sri Rama Chandra Hospital, Chennai. This apart, he also puts up with the demands of a full time job with an IT company.

“I don’t sit down to think why this happened to me. I don’t have the time for that”, Justin says. Besides his swimming and job related demands, he has also co-founded ‘The Spinal Foundation’, to better the lives of others with spinal injury. He has also started a trust called "Life After Paralysis" with the goal of developing an interdependent community of people with paralysis, who generate revenue for themselves.

Justin is hyper independent in every sense of the word. He got his automatic car’s leg pedals converted into hand pedals and incorporated a three-pin device to the steering wheel, that lets him drive much like anybody else. He travels on his own by air. He has also developed simple adaptations (using everyday objects like a toy ball) to let him grip objects like shaving stick, toothbrush and pens. Using the little control he has on his wrist, he has learnt to manipulate his fingers to use the computer keyboard and mobile phone. He even bakes!

When we part, his final comments were, “I did surfing two weeks back. This weekend, I am going to get a base certification in scuba diving. That would let me teach this to other wheelchair users too”.

He draws from his inner strength

CAVINKARE ABILITY MASTERY AWARD 2016

ANJAN SATHEESH

Suchitra Iyappa

His world is marked by silence. He has blurred vision, having partial sight only in one eye. He walks with laboured steps, his slender frame wracked by the multiple surgeries he has been subject to. Yet the first thing that strikes you is his disarming smile. A smile that spans his face, reaches his eyes and draws you into his realm. That's Anjan Satheesh.

Anjan is an incredibly gifted artist. His severe cerebral palsy, hearing, visual, speech and locomotive impairments, are all incidental to him. He has braved all odds with his inventive mind, standing tall in the society in which he lives. His happiness manifests itself through his tongue-in-cheek cartoons. In many ways, these beautiful works of art are Anjan's way of communicating with the world that surrounds him.

Anjan is the youngest member of the Kerala Cartoon Academy and has been declared as an Icon, an honour he carries unwittingly on his frail shoulders. Besides, he is a much loved teacher at the Adarsh Charitable Trust, guiding children with cerebral palsy and autism in the art of drawing and painting, as well as in the use of computers.

Yes, it's been a long haul for this spirited young man. Not to forget his parents and elder brother who have stood steadfast behind him, every step of the way. Anjan's tryst with the operation theatre began a month after he was born, with a surgery for glaucoma. When he was over a year old, he was diagnosed with severe cerebral palsy.

"Those were tough days. During that time, he used to move only on his knees, crawling and dragging himself from one place to another. Any communication was only through lip reading", recalls his father Satheesh, a senior manager with Federal Bank. The onslaught of surgeries to combat the challenges of his condition began when he was twelve. Over a period of six months, Anjan underwent repeated medical interventions to release tendons, insert steel rods and straighten his legs. After months of rehabilitation he could walk with external support for the first time.

Then rose the question of his education. Schools for children with visual impairment did not want to accept a student with palsy and those for students with palsy found it difficult to admit him since he had no means of communication. His parents then went on to enroll him in a mainstream school.

His mother Letikha, a court officer with the Kerala High Court, opted for a break in her career to accompany Anjan to school every day. For the first two years she sat by his side, through every class, going through primary education for the second time herself. Class 3 saw her sitting outside the classroom and by Class 4, Anjan was spending the day by himself.

"The thing about Anjan is that he has fantastic self-confidence. He is happy and content. Leave him alone, and he blossoms", remarks his father. Obviously, this trait has held him in good stead even today.

Anjan's aptitude for art manifested itself as early as a child of two and a half years, but it was a skill his parents discouraged, fearing that he may use art as a replacement for more structured communication. After his tenth grade, his passion for sketching translated into his dream of wanting to be an animator. He enrolled at Toonz Academy, the training cell of the entertainment giant, though their admission criteria mandated a Class 12 certificate.

Anjan was not only able to keep pace with the class, but surpass them as well, with his proficiency in art and self-taught computer capabilities. Unfortunately, his

Being a person with cerebral palsy
notwithstanding, and

Allowing neither his other multiple disabilities of
speech & hearing

Nor the negative mindsets, condescending
attitudes and

Inaccessible spaces to prove hindrances

With perseverance and fortitude,

Becoming the youngest member of the

Kerala Cartoon Academy, as well as

a popular teacher in his school:

Deriving his own unique method of
communication, through which, he

Seamlessly reaches out to people and endears
himself to everyone

Not merely maximizing on his own talents,
but discovering

Those in others and bringing them
to the fore,

Motivating and stimulating his colleagues
to do more

Shining through, with his palpable energy

Revealing a spirit indomitable
to life's uncertainties

Demonstrating the saying

"Where there is a will, there is a way".

professional dream was aborted because of his inability to communicate in an industry that largely depended on team work.

In 2007, Anjan joined Adarsh Charitable Trust as a staff member. In an environment where both he and a majority of students are nonverbal, it is remarkable to see the student-teacher bond. Anjan holds each student's hand and guides them gently through the nuances of art.

His innate ability to identify talent in his students is evident with them bagging prizes at art competitions both at the district and the state level. "We did not even know they could draw. The entire credit for the discovery of their talent goes to Anjan", states Vanaja, a teacher at the school. "He is the darling of Adarsh... The children just love him", claims another.

Anjan's popularity is apparent from the large number of friends on his Facebook page. "He is a complete tech geek", says Sathish with obvious pride. He uploads his work on YouTube, as well as on his blog. Anjan's gallery follows fellow cartoonists closely, and he is a regular contributor to international web platforms like Caricaturerama 3000 and Coroflot, amongst others. It comes as no surprise then to know that he is a noted personality in the cyber world as well as in the print and television media.

In 2015, Anjan was adjudged "Outstanding Creative Adult with Disabilities" by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India. Another highlight has been in presenting eminent statesmen and celebrities with sketches that he has made of them, especially noteworthy being his meeting with the President of India at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Anjan is also very proud of his sketch of Tendulkar, which Tendulkar went on to share on Facebook with over 200,000 likes and thousands of shares, as well as his picture with Abdul Kalam. This picture is featured in 'Kalam's Turning Points: A journey through challenges'. From football icons to politicians, Anjan's portfolio includes them all.

Indeed, Anjan is a heroic individual whose creative genius refuses to be dictated by the multiple disabilities that life has dealt his way. Sitting on the sidelines and pursuing his skill is certainly not for him. Instead, his sunny disposition and infectious energy reaches out and touches everyone he comes in contact with. With his parents, he is animated, lip synching the day's events at work, commenting on the stock market, politics et al. "This one is a chatterbox, our older son is the quiet one", say his parents fondly.

As Anjan walked to the stage to receive his Mastery Award, the lights popped, and the audience roared in thunderous applause. Anjan savoured every moment, standing tall and proud centre stage, while his mother read aloud his acceptance speech.

A triumphant run

CAVINKARE ABILITY MASTERY AWARD 2016

ANKUR DHAMA

Suchitra Iyappa

Ankur Dhama had just landed in Chennai, to receive the CavinKare Ability Mastery Award 2016, after winning a silver medal at the 1500m run at the Asia Oceana Athletic Championship at Dubai. Ankur was sleep deprived, barely having taken a breather from his exacting schedule. But a few hours later, he was up for yet another felicitation — this one for his triumph against obstacles on an unpredictable course. A course called life.

Ankur was barely seven years old when he lost his sight. Coming from a family of traditional farmers from an obscure village in Uttar Pradesh, he was prised out of his joint family and village school onto a blind school in Delhi where he had to learn to fend for himself.

It was here that Ankur's talent for athletics came to the fore; as also the commencement of a life of discipline, rigour and focus that would hold him in good stead. Today, as an athlete who has made his mark on the national and international arenas, Ankur is preparing for the 2016 Rio Paralympics, for which he has qualified.

As expected, it has been a journey fraught with sacrifices and hard work. The struggle, determination, and the sheer wherewithal to make the mark being that much harder due to his 100% visual disability. Ankur's slight frame and his steady and almost self-effacing demeanour belie the fire within and the nerves of steel that he is so obviously made of.

Gold medals at the youth and open championships in Colorado, USA and Sharjah respectively, a new record at the 2012 Malaysian Open Championship; silver and bronze medals at Incheon, South Korea, as well as a slew of medals across the country - his accomplishments are incredibly impressive, to say the least.

This apart, Ankur is a high achiever in academics at St. Stephen's College, Delhi and a winner of the prestigious Sumotomo Scholarship for academic excellence. Currently pursuing his B.A. Honours (History), Ankur has a passion for the subject "because facts, dates and concepts have the power to influence the future".

His brilliant mind and commitment has allowed him to balance his academics with his sports, as also to integrate himself admirably, having been educated in a Hindi medium school.

"Disabled people have to prove themselves doubly hard. There is no problem in asking for help, but one should not shy away from hard work or expect concessions", says the young achiever.

In fact, hard work, struggle and overcoming obstacles underline every conversation Ankur has. So steeped is he in his unwavering focus, that he talks of effort being the prime tool to achieving his objectives, with a conviction driven from his personal experience.

Ankur's day begins at 4 a.m, when everyone in his hostel is in deep slumber. An hour later, he is on the bus to the stadium, 20km away, where he trains for a good two-and-a-half hours. Then, it is classes, assignments and extra-curricular activities like quiz, essay and speech competitions in which he has won several prizes.

Ankur was adjudged the best sportsperson in his college for two consecutive years (2013-2014 and 2014-2015). His lecturers and college mates talk of him as a very hard working, independent all-rounder, brilliant, talented and at the same time also very kind, resourceful and helpful. Reverend Dr. Valson Thampu, the high profile principal of St Stephen's too echoes these sentiments, reflecting on Ankur's admirable qualities.

Dr. Satypal Singh, Ankur's coach at Nehru stadium describes Ankur as a person of the highest integrity, never

Living his dream from being the boy
who refused

To toe the line to others' typecasts, rather, chose
to pave his own path

He shaped not only his career in academics - at
no less

An institution than St. Stephen's College

He also chose to shine at athletics
at international meets forsooth!

Being blind was no stumbling block to this
vibrant young man

And that despite economic constraints too;

Surmounting indescribable tribulations
in pursuit of

Excellence and battling bias on account
of disability

Dismissing as frivolous, the doubts that arose
about his ability to run

His list of accomplishments include gold
medals at

The World Youth Championships,
Colorado, USA,

The Open Championship, Malaysia and
a multitude of national meets.

And ahead is the Rio Paralympics in August
this year

Winning, not just personal
achievements, but

Acquiring a following of students
and friends

Who swear by him with awe
and admiration.

accepting favours, and always ensuring he has earned what he gets. Like many of Ankur's class mates, Dr Singh marvels at his memory in having records and timings at his finger tips.

Indeed, there are several facets to this remarkable young man, for his is an extraordinary saga at so many levels. Of a disabled athlete who has beaten all odds to represent the country at some of the world's biggest sporting events. Of a village lad who has made it to one of the country's hallowed institutions. Of a visually challenged individual who has made it on his own, living away from his family and all things familiar, ever since he was a child.

But these very challenges are what give Ankur that adrenalin rush. "Anything you set your heart on gives you a high", he says, and it is this trait that has earned him the respect he enjoys.

Striding up the stage to receive his Mastery Award alongside his friend and teammate Vipin, Ankur was no more the self-effacing student of a few hours ago. He was transformed into a dapper, supremely confident young man thanks to the attire he sported — his navy blue sports blazer emblazoned with the Indian flag. Clearly, this was his source of strength and pride. This was what taught him life's biggest lesson. It's not about whether you win or lose, but how you play the game.

A section of the audience.

"As I always say, there are more role models amidst people with disabilities than there are anywhere else in the country. To be able to highlight on just half a dozen of these high-fliers is an honour for us and a revelation for the others. It is with a sense of glee that I watch the members of the jury struggle to pick out the recipients, as we can award only so many, every year... Changing their mindsets first, then that of the audience and eventually the country... it's thrilling to be able to do that. That's what we are."

Jayshree Raveendran,

Founder & Honorary Executive Director, Ability Foundation.

"Every year we look forward to touch and enrich lives through such awards and recognitions, to help build a strong future. CavinKare Ability Awards were created in accordance to setting a benchmark in people's lives, and to relive and encourage the excellence they have achieved. It's been a remarkable experience for us, with the nominations we received from various places amidst them facing several obstacles on their journey to successul. These awards help in recognizing them, and to encourage every individual to overcome any hurdle faced in reaching their goals, and hence we are proud to bring out exceptionally skilled and talented persons each year."

C K Ranganathan,

Chairman & Managing Director, CavinKare Pvt. Ltd.

lemon tree®
HOTELS

INCLUSION IS IN OUR DNA

Founded in September 2002, this award winning Indian hotel chain The Lemon Tree Hotel Company operates 3 brands — Lemon Tree Premier (upscale), Lemon Tree Hotels (midscale) & Red Fox Hotels (economy). The chain currently owns/operates 29 hotels in 18 cities aggregating over 3000 rooms with 3200 direct employees. This speedy growth has currently made the group the 3rd largest by owned rooms, with venture capital participation from the US based PE firm — Warburg Pincus, the Dutch Pension Fund Manager — APG, the India–based Real Estate Fund — Kotak Realty Fund and the Japanese financial institution — Shinsei Bank.

Lemon Tree believes that the brand should stand for more than 'just profit' and is therefore driving the brand to become truly Indian and trusted. The brand focuses on creating a socially inclusive work environment which seeks to bring in people of different backgrounds, abilities and ethnicities and work as a unified team with a common goal.

In an exclusive interview with Success & ABILITY, Aradhana Lal, Vice President – Sustainability Initiatives, The Lemon Tree Hotel Company, details how equal opportunity employment policies and an inclusive work environment have proved to be a win–win proposition for Lemon Tree Hotels.

1. ***Please share with us Lemon Tree Hotel Company's work philosophy and vision.***
   Lemon Tree Hotels is now the third largest hotel player in India in terms of owned rooms, with 29 hotels in 18 cities. Our journey of 13 plus years has been based on some fundamental principles that include building efficient hotels with a focus on minimising project cost, without compromising on quality; choosing dense demand markets and not going to cities/locations that are ahead of the demand curve; focusing on the Indian business traveller who constitutes over 80% of our guests, allowing us to be relatively recession proof and investing in the brand and sales to reach out to new customers.

2. ***Do you have a recruitment policy on inclusion of persons with disabilities? Please elaborate.***
   We would like Lemon Tree Hotels to be a great Indian brand which is admired and respected by Indians and we would like to inspire others with our focus on people i.e., employees come first, before customers and shareholders, and by building a socially inclusive work environment. Today, employees with disabilities constitute 15% of our employee base, i.e., 500 employees.

3. ***When you advertise for vacancies, do you add a line about being open to hiring persons with disabilities?***
   Yes, we do. On our website, on job portals, and occasionally when we put out advertisements for recruitment.

4. ***Over the last few years, Lemon Tree has recruited a number of persons with disabilities across various functions. Please specify the numbers.***
   Today we have 500 employees with disability. This includes people who have speech and hearing impairment, orthopaedic impairment, visual impairment, and also those with Down's Syndrome or autism. That apart, we have 400 employees from economically and socially marginalised backgrounds, which is 12 percent of our employee base.

5. ***There being many different job profiles in the hotel industry, what are some of the different positions that have been filled by persons with disabilities in the Lemon Tree Group of Hotels?***

   The breakup of the 500 employees with disabilities is 30% in Housekeeping, 30% in Food & Beverage (Service), 15% in Stewarding, and 7–8% each in Front Desk, Engineering, Stores, and Finance.

6. ***Was this recruitment of persons with disabilities driven as a CSR initiative or as an equal opportunity/diversity policy?***

   Our inclusion/diversity policy is central to our business model and is a part of our culture and DNA. It is a part of how we do business and is not looked at as a CSR initiative.

7. ***To what extent have you pushed the envelope in assigning persons with disabilities to jobs that are not conventionally assigned to them?***

   We have done several experiments and trials where assigning a role is difficult and hasn't been done before e.g., when assigning employees with Down's syndrome and autism to jobs. Also, for employees with visual impairment or low vision, we are currently running a project to solve certain software issues, which would let them successfully access the information needed to do the job.

8. ***Have you ever needed to alter/add to existing office infrastructure by way of access features to provide accommodation for a recruit with disability?***

   Sometimes. Our hotels are already built on the principles of Universal Access and so are mostly accessible to all. Sometimes, if the back-of-the-house has some areas that are not accessible, we try and make them accessible, making workplace adjustments.

9. ***How do compensation packages for employees with disabilities compare with those of others in equivalent roles?***

   It is the same. There is no difference or discrimination.

10. ***What are the opportunities and scope for career growth for persons with disabilities within the organisation?***

    Over the last 2-3 years, we have promoted a few employees with disabilities from 'Associate' level to 'Executive' level and then to 'Supervisor' level. We are developing the methodology for growth and career pathing of our colleagues with disabilities and will focus on it.

11. ***Do you have any training programmes, especially for employees with disabilities? Could you tell us what these are?***

    This sort of commitment also requires substantial investments in training and refresher modules to keep their skill and knowledge levels up to standard, since employees with disabilities are vulnerable to being left behind over time. The training formats need to be customised to their needs and the course material cum delivery systems need to be in tune with the specific requirements of such employees. We have found employees with disabilities to be diligent learners and as, if not more competent than others, provided they are trained appropriately.

An example of the specialized training material/delivery systems we have is the creation and implementation of a visual aid (video/film). For all processes in Housekeeping and Food & Beverage Service, training modules that were written for employees (by the Learning & Development department) have been enhanced with the use of Indian Sign Language (ISL) in the video. This has helped increase the understanding of tasks greatly and is leading to greater productivity.

12. *Once you recruit a person with disability, is there an orientation programme for existing staff?*

Yes, sensitization of the entire employee base is done from time to time and team members are briefed on what each disability means and how it impacts the way that person learns and works. This sensitization is done with the support and help of NGOs/special educators.

13. *How is the general atmosphere and integration within staff throughout the Lemon Tree group?*

Employees with disabilities have proved to be more loyal than non-disabled employees as they greatly value their jobs at Lemon Tree Hotel Company and the stability it creates in their family life. Each year, the attrition numbers for employees with disabilities have been substantially lower than those of the company as a whole. The Employee Satisfaction Scores (ESTS) and the Great Places (GPTW) rankings have both improved over these three years, even as the company has added over 600 new people. The reasons for this are numerous, including on-boarding of employees with disabilities and the resultant sense of pride it creates amongst all employees.

Today, employees with disabilities constitute 15% of our employee base.

14. *Is there a feedback system, so that employees with disabilities can share their experiences at workplace? If there have ever been cases of discrimination, how have these been handled?*

Regarding feedback, we regularly hold feedback sessions and engagement chats in small groups, including for employees with disabilities. Whenever there are persons with speech and hearing impairment, we bring in an ISL expert to help with communication in ISL. Regarding a case of discrimination, we have not faced that situation yet.

15. *Has the inclusive approach that you have been practising found its way into policy?*

Yes, it is part of Lemon Tree Hotel Group's culture and DNA.

> *Employees with disabilities have proved to be more loyal than non-disabled employees.*

16. *Do you work towards ensuring that every person within The Lemon Tree Group is on the same page as far as disability awareness is concerned?*

Yes, through sensitization.

17. *What has been your overall experience in hiring persons with disabilities?*

It has been excellent and the productivity figures/performance has been very encouraging for the company. E.g., Housekeeping room boys with disabilities are 15% more efficient than those without disability and can clean 19 rooms a day as against the usual average of 16 rooms a day.

18. *What according to you makes a company truly an equal opportunity employer?*

Flexibility and an open mind.

19. *What would you say to corporates who are hesitant about hiring persons with disabilities?*

Just try it. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. Once you try, you will see results. These will then become the reason to choose people with disabilities in specific roles.

20. *Likewise, what would be your message to persons with disabilities (with job-appropriate qualifications) seeking jobs, on equipping themselves better to compete on par with their non-disabled peers?*

Keep trying and never give up (on yourself or on the company/companies).

Two to Tango

Who needs a Valentine's Day to validate their bond, or keep romance alive in their marriage? Certainly not these couples we met. In the face of life's many challenges, for them, dealing with disability is just one more challenge. And what if both partners are disabled?

Four such couples, whom we profile here, opened their hearts and shared their stories with us… stories of challenge, struggle and above all, hope and love… where disability certainly doesn't occupy centre stage.

Dheepakh & Nagarathinam

EMPOWERING ONE ANOTHER

Through interdependence, this couple has found independence.

"Oh dear...Both of you are disabled. How will you manage? What happens if one falls sick?", these were just some of the many questions that were thrown at Parthasarathy Dheepakh when he announced to his family that he was going to tie the knot with D. Nagarathinam, a young woman working with the Vasantham Foundation at Thiruvotriyur. This was in the December of 2014. While Dheepakh is affected by cerebral palsy, polio has left D. Nagarathinam immobile waist down. Meanwhile, Nagarathinam's family had their reservations about the marriage too.

These fears and worries didn't sway the young lovebirds though. "Seeing that we were determined to go ahead and marry, our families eventually rallied behind us", shares Dheepakh, who works as senior sub-editor in the sports desk of The Hindu.

Their wedding was celebrated at the auditorium of Dheepakh's alma mater Vidya Sagar, a very appropriate choice. Since the auditorium is one of the few fully accessible ones, it meant that the two could invite all their friends and colleagues with disabilities. "It was a kind of homecoming and a happy time for us with all our friends attending the wedding", says Dheepakh, who happens to be a founder member of Ektha, an organization that promotes self-advocacy for persons with disabilities.

"I have heard many people comment on why disabled persons need to be married at all. I wish people understood that all humans are equal".

The seeds of this marriage were sown at Vidya Sagar. Dheepakh had been living in the centre's Independent Living Unit then. Though Dheepakh's professional life was on track, he had started feeling a void in his life, and he had casually mentioned this to friends at Vidya Sagar. One of them was Navamani. "She told me that I would have to be open to marrying someone who had disabilities too. I was agreeable with that", informs Dheepakh. Navamani then took up Dheepakh's cause and put across his proposal to Nagarathinam. Initially, Nagarathinam was apprehensive about the idea of marriage itself. Navamani suggested that she meet Dheepakh. The rest is history.

Today, the lovebirds have already celebrated their first anniversary on March 25. They are both 28 years old, opposite in temperament but united by a feeling of warmth and pride in each other. They live on their own in a flat in Chennai. "She takes care of me and I take care of her", says Dheepakh.

At their happy home, Nagarathinam does all of the housekeeping — from cooking and cleaning to shopping in the neighbourhood using Dheepakh's motorized wheelchair. And then of course, she takes care of Dheepakh. "Back in Thiruvotriyur, she was cooking for her entire family besides taking care of her bedridden mother. So, taking care of me is child's play for her", Dheepakh says with obvious pride.

Nagarathinam and Dheepakh at their wedding.

Hema Vijay

"I have learnt so much from her. She takes things step by step, while I tend to jump the gun. She adjusts to situations and accepts things, while I tend to lose my temper. By her companionship, I am being moulded into a better person", Dheepakh says.

Seeing the two happily married and seeing them manage their household so well, their relatives who were once sceptical about their marriage are all praise for them now. "Now, I have no fear and no worries", says Nagarathinam in her sweet, soft voice. As she looks at Dheepakh, there is a warm glow in her beautiful eyes.

The one thing that hurts the couple is the fact that people tend to talk behind their backs. "I have heard many people comment on why disabled persons like us need to be married at all. I wish people understood that all human beings are equal, and like anyone else, disabled persons have emotional needs too. Marriage might be a huge challenge for us, but being alone is a bigger challenge and pain. Now, we are interdependent", says Nagarathinam. Dheepakh adds, "We derive strength from each other, share each others' thoughts and feelings and encourage each other. Anybody can help a disabled person with material, physical or financial support. But only a companion can offer emotional support".

Gopalakrishnan & Lekha

A LOVE THAT ENDURES

Married for four decades - it has only made them fall in love with each other, over and over again

It was the early 1970s in Mumbai. In a room far away from her parents' house, she was getting beaten by her husband. On good days, he kicked her and left her bruised. On bad days, things got worse. Through this misery, she lived. She wanted to share with someone what she went through every day. Two things stopped her though – one, the concern that her family would be broken and two, the fact that she was born with a disability.

Lekha was born in 1943 with a speech and hearing impairment. In those days when our country struggled for independence, she struggled to find her identity through education. "My mother pushed me hard to get out of the house and explore the world", she said. Numerous struggles later, she passed the matriculation examination and found employment at Johnson and Johnson.

> *"At my end, my mother was worried. Gopu came from a family with limited financial means. So, it was not easy for my mother to trust him and agree to take things forward".*

Over time, the Mumbai local brought her close to a person, who fell in love with her. After courtship, she married him only to realize the horrors that life can throw up. "His secret affairs, needless anger and physical abuse broke me every day", she said. "And when a person who cannot speak or hear lives through an abuse, it is as if your life is trapped inside your body. You live every moment in fear of what would happen next", she went on.

Meanwhile, far away from Mumbai grew a lively, funny young man. Born into a poor, orthodox Tamil Brahmin family – V. Gopalakrishnan aka Gopu too was born with a hearing and speech impairment. There were not many schools to educate him. But life gifted him with an ability to excel in sports. Honing that skill, he excelled constantly. Eventually, he went on to represent India at the Paralympics. Winning rich laurels there, he also realized how sign language transforms lives of individuals with hearing disabilities in countries abroad. He returned to the country as a star and a transformed man.

Back to Mumbai now; Lekha's domestic violence sufferings grew increasingly. Even the arrival of a child did not help matters. "The beatings were particularly bad when friends visited home. He was worried that I would have shared with them the truths of my marriage", she said.

"So, why would you not share it with your mom?" I asked. "It was the early 1970s. If he left me, who would take care of my child and a disabled me for the rest of my life? My entire life was at stake, and this is India", she replied through signs. Tears began to flow from her eyes as she recollected those days. There was silence in the room for a few minutes.

Lekha and Gopu.

Gopu broke the silence. He said, "This is the problem with women in our country. They misunderstand the virtue of strength. You need strength to build life, not to silently watch your life falling apart".

Eventually though, Lekha found her strength. Unable to take the violence anymore, she divorced her then husband. She moved back with her parents and continued to work for Johnson and Johnson. "It was a difficult time. I locked myself up in a room and cried for days. My mom and sisters were getting worried for me. The hurt of being alone was unbearable. I tried to spend a lot of time at work. But that did not help either", she said. "So, how did you eventually move on?" I asked. "There is enough love in the world for everyone. You do not need it all from one person. However, this simple truth takes an eternity for a human to understand", she said.

Post divorce, months passed. Lekha learnt to keep herself busy. Forced by her mom, she slowly took to participating in a number of outdoor sports. "I took a particular liking to table tennis. The game was easy to pick up and I also made a number of friends because of it", Lekha said. And then, life's magic happened. Lekha happened to meet Gopu at a national-level sports meet for persons with hearing impairment.

"To me, it was love at first sight", Gopu signed with a broad smile on his face. 'I saw her and was mesmerized", he went on. "He keeps saying that. But I do not believe it. I know that our first conversation revolved around my divorce", Lekha intervened. "In the conversation, he insisted that I needed to be strong for my child and focus on building a new life", Lekha went on.

"What has your divorce got to do with my love? I knew I loved you the moment I saw you", Gopu brought his cheeky humour in again. Post the event, Lekha and Gopu exchanged letters. Words helped exchange thoughts. And in time, they fell for each other. "My father was upset. He wanted me to marry a girl who did not have a disability. But I genuinely loved Lekha", Gopu said. "At my end, my mother was worried. Gopu came from a family with limited financial means. So, it was not easy for my mother to trust him and agree to take things forward", Lekha said. "So, my mother put a condition. She said that she would agree to our marriage only under the condition that Gopu would save money and build a house for me", Lekha said.

"That was not a condition. It was an inspiration", Gopu said. "You see, people talk expansively about persons with disabilities falling in love, or marriages not lasting in love. The truth is that once you have financial independence, most problems in love, or marriages, take care of themselves", he went on. Gopu worked for a few years and saved enough money to buy a house. Though his parents were still disinclined about Lekha, he went ahead and married her.

"The initial three years were the most difficult. Both of us could not hear. We would not even know if anyone was knocking on our door, or if anything needed our attention. But the most horrific scare was the arrival of the first child in our life. Too many things were said around how even the child could have a disability. But we were blessed with a healthy baby boy. A few years later, we had a baby girl. Both of them are perfectly healthy and are doing great in their lives today", Gopu said, his face beaming with joy.

"However, I would never forget the first few years. Gopu's parents constantly wanted to take away my child because they feared that the child would never learn to speak on living with us. But then, our children are little angels. They have learnt to adapt to us and to the world parallelly", Lekha said.

Sai Prasad
Viswanathan

> ***"So, my mother put a condition. She said that she would agree to our marriage only under the condition that Gopu would save money and build a house for me", Lekha said "That was not a condition. It was an inspiration", said Gopu.***

"So, looking back, what were the most memorable and toughest moments for you?", I asked Lekha. "It's the little things. There were days when neither I nor he could hear the baby cry out in hunger. So, I decided to constantly have the baby on my hand all the time. There were days when Gopu would return home late and he would be locked out because I would be in deep sleep and couldn't hear the calling bell. The little things were really tough. Yet, we endured them. And in enduring that, we fell in love with each other a lot more", Lekha said.

Today, almost 40 years have passed since Lekha and Gopu married. Gopu went on to write India's first sign language dictionary. Lekha works with a number of NGOs teaching children with disabilities.

Given their disability, not a word was ever spoken between them. Yet, their love and marriage has endured the test of time, disability, family opposition and financial difficulties. Theirs is a story of love that deserves to be told till eternity. Post meeting them, I will never ever fail to believe in love. It is the one true miracle that happens in life.

Velumurugan & Nupur

RISING IN LOVE

The differences in their background and culture are inconsequential. What has endured is their strong bond of friendship, trust and respect.

He is gentle, shy, soft spoken and comfortable in his own skin. She is warm, articulate, ambitious and highly successful, having studied in some of the finest educational institutions in the country.

He is from a small village in Villupuram District of Tamil Nadu, an only child who had a tough life, raised by his mother singlehandedly. She comes from the hinterlands of Haryana, from a well-to-do family who defied the crippling diktats of communal opinion to empower their daughter to stand on her own feet.

K K Velumurugan aka Krishan and Nupur Jain may be as different as chalk and cheese, but theirs is a love story that goes straight to the heart. Married now for six years, following a ten-year courtship, this is clearly a marriage of equals. The differences in their background and culture are inconsequential. What has endured, is the strong bond of friendship, trust and respect on which their relationship is based. Today, as proud parents of four-year-old Likhit, their joy knows no bounds as they embrace life and all that it has brought their way.

Suchitra Iyappa

Nupur was nine years old when tuberculosis meningitis robbed her of her sight, changing the course of her life forever. She left home at age ten for the National Association for the Blind, Delhi. Here, she found her soul mate and partner for life.

Sensitive, fun loving Krishan and she jelled from the start. Krishan had lost his sight following a virulent bout of jaundice as a child, but a series of successful surgeries were able to restore partial vision in one eye.

"We were good friends… he was a part of the gang I used to hang out with. And when I was in Class 9, Krishan proposed", reveals Nupur. As expected, marriage was the last thing on her mind. She was embarking on a journey to make her parents proud and that is precisely what she did. Nupur went on to acquire a post graduate degree in HR and Labour Relations from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, and their long distance courtship had a fair share of highs and lows.

The differences in background made Nupur's parents apprehensive about the match. Would their daughter be happy? Would Krishan be able to support her? It took a year to convince them about their resolve to cement their relationship. Braving all odds, they married in November 2009.

Nupur was selected by Wipro through campus placement and she has been with them ever since. Today, she is an assistant manager and leadership trainer at Wipro's Centre for Behavioural Excellence, besides being a role model for others with visual impairment. Krishan in turn found his calling in software and is an assistant consultant at Tata Consultancy Services (TCS). Both of them share a common passion for rock climbing and adventure sports and have been conferred with prestigious national and state awards for their outstanding achievements..

"My husband has shaped my personality giving me complete fulfilment. He has supported my career at every turn, always celebrating my success. He is doing so well in his job and has won the best performance award from his client thrice in three years", Nupur declares with unmasked pride.

Velumurugan, Nupur and Likhit.

Krishan, Nupur and Likhit live with Krishan’s mother who is the backbone of their existence. “We work closely as a team, a well orchestrated team, with roles and responsibilities clearly defined”, states Nupur. Everything is kept in a predetermined place for easy identification. Bathing, dressing the child, cultivating his interests and disciplining him is what she does while accompanying Likhit to the play area, while overseeing his different needs is taken care of by Krishan.

According to Nupur, both Krishan and she have found a way to live around their disability – “an acceptance, perhaps” – but Likhit’s arrival heralded several new challenges. “Once when Krishan was travelling, Likhit, an infant then, had very high temperature. The audio thermometer did not work and worse, I was unable to pour out the prescribed dosage of the medicine”, she recalls. “It was very stressful. I knocked on my neighbour’s door at the dead of night and they came and helped me settle the baby down”.

> *“I am the happiest girl in my family. Everyone I know has to seek their husbands’ permission for everything. I am independent. I stand on my own feet. When we were dating, Krishan used to say, ‘you fall in love, but we must rise in love’. I think we have managed that”.*

Again, on some occasions, there have been slip ups while coordinating clothes, like the time when Likhit went to school with mismatched socks. But every experience has given rise to a solution. Since then, Nupur has devised a specific way of folding socks and clothes to identify the pair. Further, in the early days of moving into their new apartment, there was a problem in recognising when to get off while using the lift. Today, after talks with the builders, the residential complex includes lifts with audio announcements, besides a tactile pathway which is immensely helpful.

Krishan’s partial eyesight also makes things that much easier — apart from the large network of family and friends who comprise their support system. “My mother-in-law is my biggest strength. She looks after our child when we are at work. When she travels, my parents pitch in”, explains Nupur.

As Likhit grows up, he is becoming increasingly mischievous. Whenever Nupur calls, he hides in order to tease her, yet, on the other hand, he is also becoming aware of his parents’ visual disability and holds his mother’s hand protectively while leading the way. Krishan is able to manage with most activities except paper work, for which he seeks assistance. Else, he is the mainstay of the close knit family.

Holidays are spent relaxing and going for outings. “She loves movies… I describe all the scenes to her in detail”, says the doting husband. ”When my mother is not in town, we cook together. She chops the vegetables so finely I don’t know how she has mastered the art... And yes, we talk and talk”, he adds. What is it that drew her to Krishan? “His infinite patience and his respect for women”, Nupur quips instantly. Ask Krishan, and he says he admires the way she manages all the relationships in his family and treats every member so well.

As a parting shot, Nupur tells me “I think I am the happiest girl in my family. Almost everyone I know has to seek their husband’s permission for everything. I am independent. I stand on my own feet. When we were dating, Krishan used to say, ‘you fall in love, but we must rise in love’. I think we have managed that”.

Krishan and Nupur are an absolutely remarkable couple who complement each other so perfectly. They are a couple who have taken their disability in their stride, dwelling instead on vacations taken and fun times spent. “The major issues confronting us are not related to our disability but to challenges faced by all working professionals, like finding the right work life balance and so on,” they state.

Watch them together, Krishan gingerly leading the way, Nupur holding his arm and exuberant, adorable Likhit propelling them forward with the energy and enthusiasm so characteristic of him… The positivity and happiness they exude is evident. “Our life is complete. There is nothing in the world we can ask for,” says Krishan as Nupur draws Likhit into their circle of love.

Sankareswaran & Kalavathi

IN THE SILENCE, THE REAL STORY

At the core of their story, Sankar and Kala are a couple in love, raising a daughter they dote on

Sankar and Kala walked in, slightly late and very apologetic. We needed to stop over at the hospital, they explained. He was wearing a casual red t-shirt and her blue cotton sari was perfectly starched and crisply tied. They looked the part, a couple on their way to work on a weekday morning. They were cheerful, chatty and very comfortable in the space they had walked in to. They knew everyone, everyone knew them; it was a homecoming of sorts.

There was, however, a difference. To know about their visit to the hospital, to follow conversation as they caught up with mutual friends and shared acquaintances, I had my eyes peeled not on them but an interpreter. There were six people signing in the room - rapidly, animatedly, engagingly. Conversation, though a ruckus, was silent. However, it was unquestionably a homecoming of sorts.

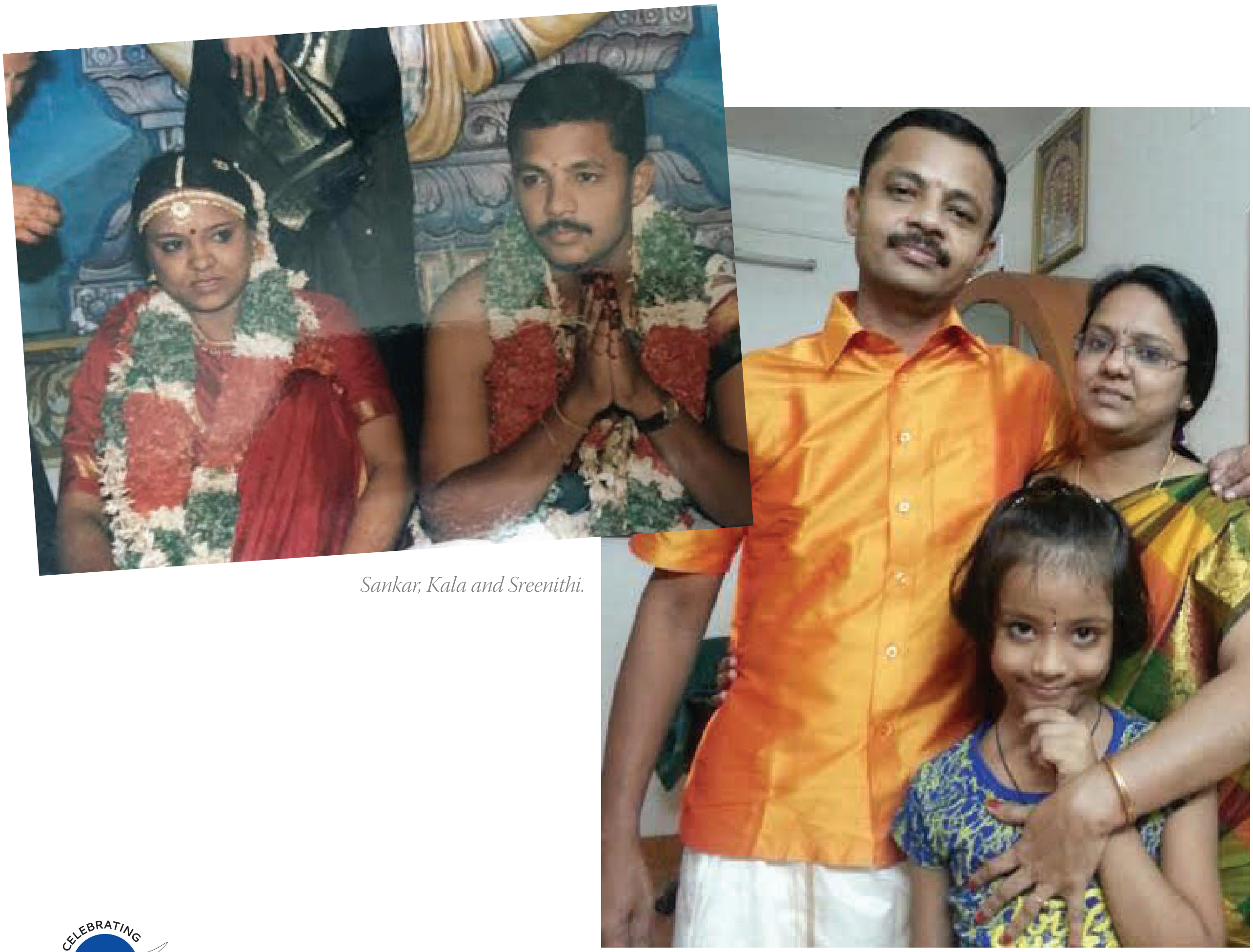
We were at the office of Ability Foundation for a warm, feel-good piece. My brief was to talk to Sankar and Kala about their lives. How did they meet? When did they fall in love? What was their wedding like? What about all the years after? What could they tell me about their daughter? It was an official excuse for me to smile, nod and feel the unmistakable warmth that is born from a happy story.

St. Louis Institute for the Deaf and the Blind in Adyar was the setting for their saga. Both finishing a B.Com. degree at the turn of the millennium, they fell in love on campus.

Ask them how that panned out and the next few minutes are spent in shy nudging and prompting. “She only proposed to me”, Sankar finally volunteers, his hands moving furiously even as he remains self-conscious. “I was scared”. The bright-eyed nodding from Kala next to him speaks volumes of how much she agrees. Four years later, in 2004, they were married. Today, they have an eight-year-old daughter named Sreenithi. Yet, the journey of the last sixteen years has been tumultuous to say the least, with the couple ploughing through on the strength of Sankar’s positivity and Kala’s steadfast determination.

“As soon as we graduated, she got a job and I didn’t”, Sankar reminisces. “I worked as a coolie in Tambaram for four years before my mother pushed me to Ability Foundation in search of a job. In 2003, I became the first deaf person to join Scope International.” Today, there are about seventy others employed by the organisation though Sankar remains the only one in the “very tough” HR department. While Kala had a government job, Sankar spent time convincing the top management of his organization to become more inclusive and teach basic sign language. At that time, their combined salary was Rs. 8000 a month.

Yet, the struggles were not merely economic and financial. “My parents wanted me to marry a boy with hearing because I can lip read and have 50% speech,” Kala chips in.



Sankar, Kala and Sreenithi.

"Especially because I had a government job they were adamant. But so was I. I wanted to marry him only." Her decision was met with a torrent of threats and fears. What if he died? What if they had kids? What if they were not able to support themselves? But the couple stood their ground and despite some displeasure from the parents, got married.

The story did not ease after the wedding. In the years that followed, Kala lost two pregnancies and the third time around, Sankar decided to take matters into his own hands and provide the medical attention he was sure she needed. Soon Sreenithi was born and their strained relationship with their parents began to thaw. Around the corner however, lay battles for housing loans and driving licenses and the struggles for attaining mobility, self-sustenance and independence. With much perseverance and grit, the couple came out the victor and today, Sankar drives himself wherever he needs to be.

For the couple, taking care of a toddler with hearing proved to be filled with challenges. "We could not hear her cry, so we used to sleep under the crib to feel any movement", Sankar explains. The financial struggles also meant that Kala started working four months after the delivery and the couple with the support of Kala's mother took turns in looking after the baby. Today, Sreenithi can both sign and speak fluently and takes care of the doorbell and the telephone at home. At the mere mention of her name, her parents' eyes glow with pride.

Many years into their marriage, Sankar and Kala still fight their battles. "I am not able to help my daughter with school", rues Kala. "I studied in Tamil medium and she is in CBSE. I also struggle to read her lips sometimes", Sankar chips in, describing how situations like parent-teacher meetings at the school lead to stress. "Sreenithi cannot stand other children calling us deaf", he explains. "She will take them up on it and stand up for us".

Today, Sreenithi is the apple of their eye. All the self-consciousness that existed when they were asked of their courting days disappears when they start speaking of their daughter – of how active she is, how talented, how communicative, and how intelligent. "She has a beautiful voice", Sankar gushes. "Everywhere she goes, she wins prizes for Carnatic music. We may not be able to hear her, but we can definitely support her".

At the core of their story, Sankar and Kala are a couple in love, raising a daughter they dote on. They tell her she must place her education before her music. They dream of the day she becomes a teacher ("For the deaf", Kala adds). They share fears for her future and ambitions for her success. While I speak to them and listen to their story of love and life, the room is filled with an unmistakable understanding. In the pause between Kala lip-reading my question and Sankar answering, there is a conversation none of us are privy to. In that conversation, and that silence, lies the real story.

Yashasvini
Rajeshwar

> ***"My parents wanted me to marry a boy with hearing because I can lip read and have 50% speech, and especially because I had a government job. They were adamant. But so was I. I wanted to marry him only."***

AN INCREDIBLE Journey

Dr. Gaurav Mathur is the Dean of Graduate School at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. He is the first deaf person to hold this prestigious position. Dr. Mathur was born in Houston to Dr. Virendra Mathur, a prominent cardiologist and Nalini Mathur, a homemaker. Dr. Mathur received his B.A. degree in linguistics from Princeton University and a Ph.D. in linguistics from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He is perhaps the only deaf person in the world to get a doctoral degree from MIT. He has achieved a lot of 'firsts' and is on his way to reach new milestones.

Prior to coming to Gallaudet University as an assistant professor a decade ago, Dr. Mathur taught at Ohio State University. He was an Assistant Dean in Graduate School before being promoted to Dean. DR. MADAN VASISHTA shares with us his interview of Dr. Mathur.

1. ***What role did your parents play in shaping your educational success?***
   My parents played a big part in my education, no doubt. They were quick to realize that I was deaf when I was five months old. They immediately took me to a parent -infant program at a deaf school in Houston and since then they made sure that I had the best possible education all the way through college. My mother especially worked hard with me in making sure that I could read and write well at a young age. She would often sit next to me at bedtime and make me read aloud stories, and she would encourage me to write letters to relatives in India frequently.

2. ***You have a doctoral degree. What was the driving force behind your ongoing thirst for higher education?***
   While I was in college, I discovered a strong academic interest in linguistics, which is the study of languages as they are acquired and used in our minds. This was also around the same time when I became more interested in learning about deaf culture and sign languages after being oral for most of my childhood. My professors encouraged me to apply for Ph.D. programs in linguistics to pursue my interest in sign languages and I have not looked back since then.

3. ***Now that you have a terminal degree, are you satisfied with your educational achievements, or do you still strive for higher education?***
   One's education never stops. Even though I may have a terminal degree, I am always seeking new knowledge about languages. I do this by keeping up with the latest research in linguistics as well as doing research of my own on sign languages from around the world.

4. ***You are the Dean of Gallaudet's esteemed Graduate School. Did you ever dream that you would be working at such high-level positions?***
   I honestly did not think that I would be entering administration when I first arrived at Gallaudet in 2007. I thought I would embark on a long career as a faculty member, doing research and teaching in the area of linguistics. It was not until one administrator asked me to consider applying for the assistant dean position that I began to see new possibilities for my career. In August 2015, I was appointed as the current Dean of Graduate School and Continuing Studies.

5. ***Are you satisfied with your achievements or do you feel you have higher rungs to climb? Why and why not?***
   I have a long way to go before I can truly say that I am satisfied with my achievements and I do not know if I will ever reach that point. My foremost goal is to raise awareness about the unique contributions of deaf communities to the world, as well as to improve the overall quality of life for deaf people. I could do that in part by deepening the research that I have been doing in the past several years. I could also do that by staying in administration and increasing opportunities for advanced studies by deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

> *My foremost goal is to raise awareness about the unique contributions of deaf communities to the world, as well as to improve the overall quality of life for deaf people.*

6. ***What specific support system helped you achieve your goals? Had you been in India, do you think you would have achieved here what you have in the US?***
   As mentioned earlier, my parents were instrumental in my education and made sure that I had access to many resources for succeeding in school. In graduate school.

   I was fortunate to have a cohort of classmates who were supportive – we would get together socially every week and commiserate with each other on our challenges.

   I was also privileged to have a group of Deaf academics as friends who were in a similar situation as I was – without their support, I would not be where I am now. Plus, I had top-notch interpreters who provided excellent access throughout my graduate career.

   I am not sure I would have access to the same opportunities in India as I did in the US, and I wonder how far I would go if I were in India.

7. ***Your parents are strong believers in oral education and started you off in oral programs from early childhood. If you have to go back, would you still want to start in an oral program or would you want some "infusion" of sign language at an early age?***

I definitely would have liked more exposure to sign language at an early age because it would have allowed me to interact with other kids naturally and to pick up social skills that are so important later in life, like turn-taking, negotiating and making connections. For the first part of my education, I went to an oral school, where all my peers were deaf like me and I bonded with them, but we did not know or use sign with each other – instead we used a lot of gestures and mouthed words to communicate with each other. Imagine the possibilities if we could sign away with each other at a much higher level than is possible through limited lip-reading and speaking.

8. What advice do you have for deaf people in India who do not have the American support system (the land of the opportunity)? How can they realize their dreams?

Find what you like to do and are good at and do it with passion. Get support from friends and family to achieve your goals. No goal is impossible to achieve if you approach it with determination and passion. If the goals require good knowledge of written English, this can be achieved in part by developing world knowledge and connecting it with written texts.

9. At what age did you learn sign language? What role did sign language play in your education, employment and social life?

As a child, I had a bit of exposure to sign language through one deaf friend whose parents supported signing and in my pre-teen years, I went to summer camp for deaf kids twice in a row and picked up some more sign language. In college, I worked with a student volunteer group who visited a local residential school for the deaf regularly, and as part of our prep, we would learn basic signs for communicating with deaf students. When I arrived in graduate school, I was paired with a deaf roommate and met many deaf people through him. I also had interpreters full-time. It was around that time that I began to sign all day, every day, such that it became my primary (and preferred) mode of communication.

> *I definitely would have liked more exposure to sign language at an early age, because it would have allowed me to pick up social skills that are so important later in life.*

With regard to education, there is no question that sign language provided me with full access to information during graduate school, when I had interpreters for everything, and it also made me realize how much I had missed out on (e.g. classroom discussions) during my earlier years in school.

Sign language also led to my current employment in two ways. First, I got hired for a faculty position because of my work on sign languages. Second, my job required knowledge of sign language and I happened to have that on time. I continue to use sign language daily at work.

Sign language has also opened up and expanded my social life considerably – now I can interact with many people fully and naturally and talk about anything under the sun without the stress of trying to understand and be understood by other people via speech.

10. In India, the government is emphasizing 'full inclusion' for all disabled children. Do you think deaf children can successfully participate in regular schools? Or do you think special schools with full access to communication are important?

There is a lot of research that shows early exposure to sign language is essential for deaf children, regardless of whether they can learn speech, because this leads to many cognitive, social and academic benefits later on in life. In fact, I am involved with a group of scholars who have published several articles pointing this out to a variety of professionals who are likely to have contact with families of young deaf children. One good way of exposing deaf children to sign language early is by placing them in special schools for the deaf, where they can encounter other peers like themselves.

Another benefit of special schools for the deaf, in addition to having full access to communication with teachers, is that deaf children have natural opportunities to develop leadership skills, and in the process, develop a strong sense of identity and self-confidence which will guide them to success in the mainstream.

> *Instill a love of reading in your children by exposing them to many books – this will help them get access to the bigger world.*

11. Any message you might have for parents of deaf children and professionals working with them…

Learn sign language and use it with them; they will be able to communicate with you more fully and have a closer connection. Some are afraid that if they allow their deaf child to use sign language, they will 'lose' their child to the deaf world, but the opposite is actually true. If you communicate with your child in a way that comes naturally to them, they will be more grateful to you in the long term.

Some say that learning sign language is not easy. It does take time, effort and patience, but the end result is very rewarding, and even learning just a bit of sign language goes a long way. There are many ways to learn sign language. For example, contact a local deaf association and ask for a deaf adult who can come to your house and interact with your deaf child and your family regularly.

Also, make sure to instill a love for reading in your children by exposing them to many books – this will help them develop strong reading and writing skills, which will in turn give them access to the bigger world.

12. You attended the prestigious Princeton University for your undergraduate degree. How many other deaf students were there? Did you face any problems competing with hearing peers?

There were two other deaf students with me, that year. There have been other deaf students at Princeton throughout the years and there is even a Facebook group for deaf alumni of Princeton. I didn't really feel like I was competing with hearing peers, since I charted my own path in the sense that I designed my own major in linguistics and was the only one following the curriculum that I pursued.

13. *You are perhaps the only deaf person to get a doctoral degree from the MIT, one of top five universities in the US. What kind of reaction do you get from people when they learn about this unique achievement?*

There was actually one other deaf person who got into a Ph.D. program at MIT at the same time as me and he was my roommate. I am not aware of other deaf people who have gotten a Ph.D. from MIT since then. People are usually amazed when they learn that I got my Ph.D. degree from MIT, but I do not make too big a deal about it and just move on.

> *I am in full support of bilingual education for deaf children. This does not require any technology and does not cost anything.*

14. *What kind of support system, in addition to interpreters, did MIT provide you?*

As I mentioned earlier, I was fortunate to have a group of classmates who were very close to each other throughout school and provided critical support to each other every day.

In addition, my department was very supportive and advocated for me at the university, making sure that I had interpreters for all of my classes as well as events outside of class. It helped that they were supportive of research on sign languages, and encouraged me every step of the way.

15. *There is more and more support for bilingual education of deaf children. What is your take on this?*

I am in full support of bilingual education for deaf children for the reasons that I have given above. Early exposure to sign language confers cognitive, social and academic benefits on deaf children. Being around other children like them leads to a strong sense of identity and self-confidence, which is essential for succeeding in the greater world. Developing reading and writing skills in the native language will give them access to the same world.

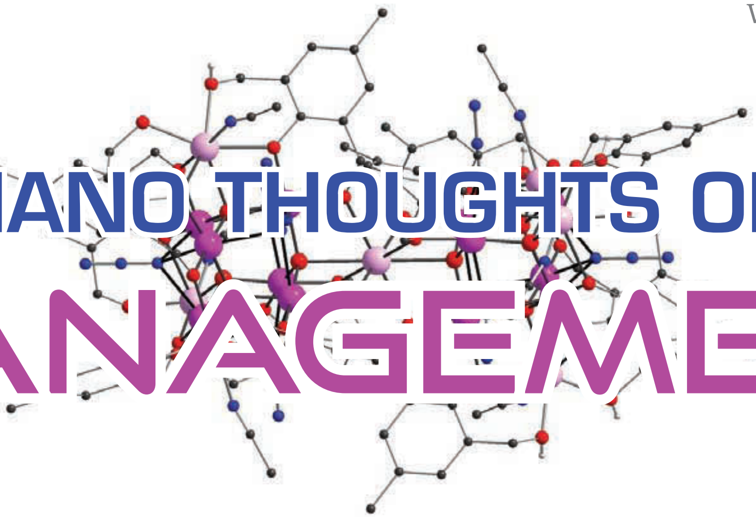
16. *What advice do you have for parents of deaf children in India? What kind of support should they provide them keeping in mind the limited resources here?*

See my response to question # 11 – the message remains the same, even keeping in mind the limited resources that are available in India. In fact, this advice does not require any technology and does not cost anything, apart from going outside your comfort zone to seek out deaf adults, learn a new language from them, and use it with your deaf child at an early age. Also be sure to expose your deaf child to plenty of books, in both sign language and written language, which should be easily available.

17. *Is there anything else you would like to add?*

I believe all of the questions above have pretty much covered everything, so I will stop here!

Interviewer's Note: My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Mathur for taking time from his extremely busy schedule to respond to my questions. I am sure the readers, parents and teachers of deaf children will benefit from Dr. Mathur's insights on deafness-related issues. On a final note, despite being one of the most successful deaf persons in the world, he is humble in a Gandhian way. "A tree with a lot of fruit bows down", as an old Sanskrit saying goes. Dr. Mathur is that kind of "tree".



NANO THOUGHTS ON MANAGEMENT

How can the rewards system be re-invented in organisations in the future? DR. KETNA L MEHTA, Ph.D., Founder trustee of Nina Foundation throws up some out-of-the-box ideas.

Dhaval is someone I know really well as the founder leader of an established advertising company. He has continuously innovated his company 'Family' with fresh initiatives. He refrains from calling his team 'employees' or 'staff members'; he is father, brother and uncle to all.

Let me share three of his innovative practices:

- *Opening new companies in the name of his star members. Getting clients for them to operate from office premises through the use of office systems and earning for themselves! Making them Intrapreneurs.*
- *Ensuring his physical presence and support during the critical times experienced by his employees.*
- *Mediating and reconciling differences in the personal matters of his colleagues.*

All these incentives and initiatives are practiced without any expectations in return. There is no quid pro quo. What it does do in the long run however, is to build tremendous loyalty and a sense of belonging – a superior engagement!

Lots of companies give both tangible and intangible incentives to their employees in the form of 'Rewards and Recognition' for work performance. Motivation and Rewards are interlinked. The more I contribute to my workplace, higher my incentives. The more I go beyond my call of duty, the more significant my list of awards.

Rewards are the positive strokes designed by an organisation conveying that 'You are important, you are appreciated, we recognise you for exhibiting that EXTRA bit and we are happy to give you this bit MORE'.

What is that 'more' which would drive employees to keep accelerating? Why do some 'super' employees put their health, family or social life aside to bring results and outcomes consistently to the workplace, overcoming several personal and

Ketna Mehta

organisational speed bumps to excel in their jobs, which translates into higher profits, bigger contracts, preventing a customer from defecting and upgrading the quality of output.

Can this 'Rewards Steroid' be concocted? Or bought? Or implanted? Is there a formula? It is definitely advantageous to the organisation to multiply these 'self-driven' employees.

What will make people at the workplace consistently outperform and pole vault higher and higher, with mutual benefits, both for the organisation and the individuals. So here are some creative, futuristic thinking on the 'future of rewards'.

1. Flexi-work and flexi-time. A sane solution for overcrowded public transport and bumper to bumper traffic jams in most metros.
2. Attendant allowance for elder care and child care at home.
3. Special emoluments for saving carbon footprints and contributions to save our planet.
4. Woollen garment and diaper allowances for the chilled air conditioning in offices.
5. All medical expenses that enable the employee to keep body, mind and soul charged: Yoga, pranayama, nutritious diet, physiotherapy, gym and fitness training, sports membership, equipment and fees for related activities to be reimbursed. Also, spiritual discourses, classes and training programs.
6. As technology enables us to work 24x7, reimburse all telecommunication expenses including cost of smart phones, Wi-Fi charges, service provider re-imbursements and similar technology which guzzle our pay. Skype, conference calls, video conferencing, FaceTime, webinars, TED talks, YouTube videos, apps and more, now form part of our 'information' arsenal.
7. Medical products like neck support, lumbar jacket, back support, creams for boils and rashes due to continuous sitting all to be reimbursed. It is a new reality where a fancy designation comes with the hefty price tag of carrying out additional activities of a secretary, peon, record keeper, evidence provider and more!
8. Spa, grooming and massage expenses. To look like a million dollars after a four-hour sleep or catching an early morning low-budget flight.
9. A concierge service allowance for odd jobs which frees more time for work.
10. Fully paid detox holidays periodically in a year for de-stressing and regaining the physical and mental energies for excelling in the organisational battleground, once again.

It is definitely advantageous to the organisation to multiply the 'self-driven' employees.

The next time any organisation decides to celebrate achievements by giving away that one more 'Trophy Memento' and laminated 'Appreciation Certificate', think deep and long, liberally borrow some ideas from above (It's free!!!) and be creative. Let's show we truly care and reward the intrinsic value of our people.

WATCH THE PLATE

Indians would do well to revert to our traditional diets dominated by lentils, grains and veggies, as a low-fat, plant-based diet can prevent and even reverse diabetes, YASHASVINI RAJESHWAR learns from Dr. Zeeshan Ali of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), USA.

Dr. Zeeshan Ali strode into the lobby of a popular city hotel on a weekday morning, purposeful and cheery. He shook hands all around, greeting those he recognized. “I’m Zeeshan. I don’t think we’ve met,” he said. “Why don’t you tell me about yourself?” And so began our free–wheeling conversation, an hour of everything from the science behind diabetes to the very unscientific experience of college mess halls. Dr. Zeeshan Ali, it turns out, is not just an expert in chronic disease and nutrition but also a man on a mission and a clear one at that.

The vegan diet, in other words, traditional Indian diet without the dairy, is the path ahead.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) is a USA–based non–profit organization that advocates for preventive medicine through plant–based nutrition, and is dedicated to research and development on lifestyle illnesses through ethical testing and research methods. With an impressive amount of lobbying under their belt, PCRM works to change legislature in medical research and recently opened its own clinic focusing on prevention and the use of food as medication. “There is evidence that a low–fat plant–based diet can prevent and even reverse diabetes,” Dr. Ali asserts.

With India on the verge of becoming the ‘Diabetes Capital of the World’ and the incidence of the disease set to double by 2030, the work of Dr. Zeeshan Ali and his colleagues at PCRM seem all the more relevant. “I often joke that every time a McDonald's closes in the USA, a replacement opens here in India,” he laughs. “If I were to pick the top four evils we are fighting against today, it would be high–fat diets, our focus on meat and dairy products, an overall sedentary life, and the obsessive dependence on processed fast food". This westernization of our diet, Dr. Ali rues, is the root of India's problematic relationship with diabetes.

"Diabetes is a silent killer", Dr. Ali explains. The organization believes the disease is not just a liability for the patient but also for their family and friends, with everyone affected as the diabetic person's body gets weaker with every passing day. "Diabetes leads to numerous complications; not least of all is its impact on our vision, kidneys and the heart", he voices. Dr. Ali's own background of doctoral research in molecular biology has equipped him to understand and participate in research in the field.

With PCRM gunning to make India diabetes–free and reverse the prophecy of the country leading in the number of diabetic citizens by 2030, Dr. Ali and his colleagues advocate just one thing: "Remember, you are what you eat", he urges. Understanding that complicated solutions do not sit well with the fast pace of the average person's life today, PCRM encourages individuals to start looking at medication as an alternative. With the ideal meal focusing on grains, fruits, vegetables and legumes, Dr. Ali is quick to remind me that this was the average traditional Indian plate. "Eat our lentils and beans and greens. Eat the chappathis and rice. Carbohydrates aren't the problem, fat is".

The results of clinical trials and statistics of diabetes incidence around the world are univocal in their stance, PCRM believes. The vegan diet (or, in other words, traditional Indian diet without the dairy) is the path ahead. In a country with an abundance of lentil and vegetable options, India is uniquely positioned to take its predicted future into her own hands and prevent the snowball from rolling down a dangerous slope. It all begins with each of us taking a minute at lunch today to do one thing – watch our plate, not just see it.

"If I were to pick the top four evils we are fighting against today, it would be high–fat diets, our focus on meat and dairy products, an overall sedentary life, and the obsessive dependence on processed fast food".

Legend of the Lights

No pencil can draw it, no colours can paint it and no words can describe it. The aurora borealis is nature's own spectacular light show, muses INDIRA RAMESH.

The Norwegian fjords have always lured me to explore the Arctic. Viewing the northern lights' unearthly colours and sounds in the night sky above a snowy Arctic wilderness is on many a bucket list. Winter is undoubtedly the most special time to explore the wild and untamed Norwegian scenery. The 12–day classic voyage was perhaps the best way to explore the fjords. Much as this corner of the planet can be a place of violent weather and topography both drastic and unforgiving, it is also a place that's mystic and secretive in its moods.

On a scale inconceivable, this mystical beauty that beholds the naked eye is breathtaking in its sublime power. In this kind of grandiose landscape, people appear insignificant, lost in the deep perspective of the scene. This capacity to feel nature's living pulse and experience her direct and natural expression is indescribable. Thawed beneath the aurora borealis, you visualize a celestial valley of lights dancing, and palpitated colours revel on the sky. The lights appear in many forms, from patches or scattered clouds of light, to streamers, arcs, rippling curtains or shooting rays that light up the sky with an eerie glow. Those lucky enough to experience it firsthand would fully comprehend the almost divine attraction that the northern lights possess.

As we cross the magnificent subarctic landscape and step past the 71° latitude towards the North Cape, the northern most point of the continent stands still in the darkest of nights. Clothed with snow capped mountains and a veil of mist, a shaft of sunlight is all that unveils the small picturesque fishing villages in all their native beauty and grandeur.

Above & Below: The spectacular Aurora Borealis

To the locals in the northern parts of Norway, the northern lights are a part of their life, as they light up their night sky in surroundings dominated by snow, rugged mountains and harbours. In this area, the aurora has always been a fertile source for art, mythology and legend.

Many cultural groups harbour legends about these lights. In medieval times, the occurrences of auroral displays were seen as harbingers of war or famine. Aboriginal people believed that the lights were the spirits of their people.

To others, like celebrity scientists, the phenomenon of the northern lights is more of a unique example of just how beautiful science can be!

Well behind these most stunning sights are the problems most challenging to physics. The bright dancing lights of the aurora are actually collisions between electrically charged particles from the sun that enter the earth's atmosphere. These lights are seen above the magnetic poles of the northern and southern hemispheres. They are known as 'Aurora Borealis' in the north and 'Aurora Australis' in the south. The long periods of darkness and the frequency of clear nights in these regions provide many good opportunities to watch the auroral displays.

Indira Ramesh

But it is important to remember that aurora can be a bit of a diva, and she will start the show only when she feels the time is right. Patience is a virtue when chasing the northern lights. But here's how you maximize your chances of sighting an aurora: The lights are most frequent in late autumn and early winter.

For thousands of years, people in the northern part of the world have marvelled at the spectacular and fearful displays that occasionally light up their night sky. Perhaps not so surprisingly, the northern lights have given rise to several legends and symbols linked to it are found in varied places — for instance, on the Sami Shamanistic Drum. The northern lights phenomenon also has several different names in Sami. Among these are Guovssahas, which means "the light which can be heard". Quite poetic, isn't it?

The northern lights let us experience a sense of being at the very edge of the world and getting a rare glimpse into the endless universe that we are all just a tiny part of.

> The aurora can be a bit of a diva; she will start the show only when she feels the time is right. Patience is a virtue.

The Deluge

In the face of massive destruction and the quagmire of despair and helplessness, humane stories of support, generosity and collective goodness come shining through. As the Chennai floods receded, there sprung a fount of hope and brotherhood, writes MEERA BALACHANDER.

The cobra lies all curled up, harmless, inside its basket. Just a while ago, it was hissing fiercely, its hood raised and swinging, terrorising.

It seems like yesterday... or was it a long time ago?

Only memories, impressions, strong sensory inputs, new outlook and revelations remain – like the layers of dust, mud and silt everywhere. And newness too.

We have feared, lived the experience and have narrated it countless times to all who cared to ask. How it all unfolded before our eyes!

It seems like a blur now, the relentless pounding of the rain, the darkness and the dampness, the togetherness of neighbours and then the sudden aloneness, the unaccounted milk packets and water bottles appearing like so many boons, the packet of fruits from somewhere, biscuits, and the buckets of water everywhere; Good

Meera
Balachander

Samaritans taking our photos to assure the daughter on Facebook; helicopters hovering, crickets chirping, frogs croaking in rhythm with the rush of water.

When the road caved in and water pushed the wall inside the compound, we feared the columns of the building could give way. Pack your most important belongings and be ready to be evacuated by helicopter, said a neighbor. Through the grimness of it all, I wondered what indeed was my most essential at that moment. My philosophical musing remained just that, fortunately; for many others, the essential clung to the superfluous and met a watery grave. And then, when we were just two families in the block of 16, I heard robust clapping and prayer singing in total darkness. Dawn will come after the night, however long it may seem to be, see, I reassured my son. The serene glow of a large, ornate oil lamp gifted by a friend saw us through seven nights.

And then it was over. Reeling from the collective mighty whack, individuals, families, shops, roads and districts made attempts to rise back. The Vidyas and Karthiks across the country connected randomly on social media to track the welfare of their cut–off parents and aunts. Sketch pens, notebooks, pencils dried on the terrace. Cushions, grinders, pillows, mixies too. The three cars which parked themselves one on top of the other, jostled by the water, made the parking area of our building a tourist hot spot. The utensil seller's wife sat on the pavement wiping each tea strainer and container. The electrical store dried its wares on the street. The wallet seller on the pavement took stock of her destroyed goods. The provision store was a complete wreck. Insurance? Who would have ever thought that such a calamity would visit us, lamented the shop owner.

Flower sellers, incidentally and incredibly, were among the first to restart business. Even as packaged water 'rocking bottles' crowded every shop, Padmini, the flower seller rocked in her new sari, donated by volunteers. She had lost every belonging, sheltered in a municipal school and now lives in one of the new yellow tents on the river bank. The pavement dweller family, about whom I worried, suddenly appeared one day, with nothing

to call theirs except two small kids. Guess, homelessness, to begin with, made it easier to cope with the disaster.

Pack your most important belongings and be ready to be evacuated by helicopter, said a neighbour. Through the grimness of it all, I wondered what indeed was my most essential belonging at that moment.

Were you affected? How high did the water rise? You see the neem tree, till there. Almost impossible to believe, but for the evidence it has left – the tatters of plastic clinging to the highest branches.

The roar of water rushing is no more. Instead, one hears carpenter's tools rebuilding destroyed wooden articles. The repulsive odor of water stagnation while walking down the stairs is replaced by the smell of fresh paint. New plywood planks occupy the lobby. Bleaching powder adorns the roadside like a long rangoli design. Chennai gods and ladies have got their staple bright yellow 'samanthi' and the scented jathi flowers back. Chennai Corporation was reportedly going bankrupt with property taxes drowning along with properties, and roads with gaping holes burning deep holes in its pocket. The deeply distressed T. Nagar is reportedly qualifying for a smart turn of fortune as the first smart district with sensors in drains, lamp posts and everywhere. But the loss of some became the profit of others - damp notebooks, textbooks and files still dry on pavements to earn the wastepaper collector a few precious rupees.

For the bowl of filthy soup that the courtyard of our building had become, electricity returned – remarkably swiftly, it seems now. I hastened to rescue my jams and pickles spread on the dining table after cleaning the fridge; the TV blared to life and the mobiles were charged once more. Our tryst with austerity was blown out like the candle on the dining table. The brief brush with introspection ended as the landline surged back to life. Fun with bare minimum evaporated as one hastened to recapture one's comfort zone of existence.

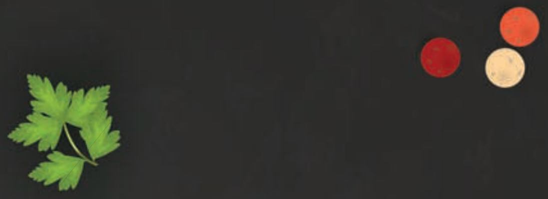
By the time I recovered from the suddenness of it all and the newspapers were back in the stands to give us our daily fodder, I wondered if I had been a sufferer, survivor or spectator. When I got to think of others, charity had breached its banks – individuals, communities, organizations, volunteers, navy, air force, government agencies, all had reached out to the marooned and there were amazing tales of giving and sharing. Mothers, daughters, sisters, sheltered each other. Anonymous kindness had rowed people to safety. In the microcosm of the city that I connect to and the small number of people I interacted with during and after the floods, I was moved by the whole experience, but didn't quite know if the blankets, bedsheets and biscuits that I could share still mattered to anyone.

Watching the kadalaikadai owner repaint its exterior, I wondered if it is not the responsibility of the customers it caters to, to help it reopen. Crowdfunding perhaps? Could I perhaps buy a dozen belts and wallets to prop up the wallet seller?

And then my thinking stopped abruptly as a familiar figure stood before me. It was Pattamma, the wily, toothless, bow-legged old lady. She manages to hook me every now and then to palm off substandard lemons and fruits. I admire and give in to her independence and enterprise, though the source of her wares is dubious. The rains…I began, and she said, yes, I lost everything, flinging her hands high. As I readied myself to offer her some help, she said enthusiastically, "Shall I get you some lemons tomorrow?"

That's the spirit. Vive la vie!

The Adyar now snakes its way calmly, the setting sun reflected in a thousand golden, orange ripples, letting the eerie decorations of filth and plastic on its banks narrate the rest.



Food For Thought

Food, glorious food! VAISHNAVI VENKATESH, a self confessed foodie, talks about her experiences of being a vegetarian traveller.

"Life itself is a proper binge" – Julia Child

Over the years, I've taken Ms. Child's advice rather too seriously. I'm one of those people who live to eat — I begin daydreaming about lunch before I've finished my breakfast. My obsession with food has annoyed everyone who eats to live.

After years of bingeing on Aloo Tikki Burgers and Gobi Manchurians, my first global gastronomical adventure was in Singapore. I was 14 and it was my first trip "abroad". I couldn't wait to feast on all the local delicacies, show off and speak about to my friends back home. We only spent a week in Singapore, and my diet there largely consisted of bread, fruits and Indian food. Any dreams of eating a non-Aloo Tikki burger was in vain as soon as I noticed the contents between the buns. You see, I'm a vegetarian. And if you are one too, then this article will resonate fairly well with you.

Vaishnavi
Venkatesh

Since that trip, I've noticed that while most people put on "holiday weight" when they go abroad, I end up using it as a weight loss technique. It does depend on which country you visit, of course. Singapore, has since then, grown into a very welcoming home for vegetarians, but the same cannot be said of a lot of countries.

I spent one summer in Germany and ended up eating only potatoes and bread. Potatoes in various forms – boiled, roasted, mashed, fried, double fried, etc. There was an E.coli outbreak around the same time and parts of Germany had stopped importing tomatoes, lettuce and cucumbers. Sandwiches were going without it and my dependence on potatoes increased.

So when I returned home, my eyes would no longer light up at the sight of the stubby, starchy, stone-like specimen. Much to my mother's delight, my anti-potato drive lasted several months. This also quashed any food-related ambition I harboured during trips out of India.

I think every vegetarian who's gone abroad has had faccidents (food related accidents). My father once walked into a Tex-Mex place and ordered a hearty bowl of chili, assuming it would just be rajma-without-the-chawal. It was only when a friend pointed out, rather alarmed, that chili is a beef dish, did my dad frantically change his order.

My most frequent faccidents happen in South East Asian countries, where the kind souls add shrimp paste and fish sauce to innocent vegetarian dishes. While I'm sure it does great things to enhance the flavour of the dish, the edible quotient plummets for me.

I think every vegetarian who's gone abroad has had 'faccidents' (food-related accidents).

Then we have the substitutes. I've bargained with many a chef to replace their meat with a more amiable ingredient – mushrooms instead of bacon, potatoes instead of chicken, eggplants instead of fish. In some places, people have obliged with mild amusement. I do believe that I may never be allowed to many other places after these disastrous bargains.

As a final resort, I've now changed my obsession slightly. From wanting to eat food, I've become a food–watcher. I get over five food related channels on my TV and every day becomes a culinary adventure. Some people find cooking to be highly therapeutic. I find watching cooking shows to be even more so.

From devouring Masterchef of every region, to watching shows from different countries, I've picked up random snippets of culinary knowledge. I can tell you when a steak looks medium rare or how to filet a fish without going near one. That said, this lack of finding easy access to vegetarian food hasn't doused my thirst for travel.

If anything, it's made me want to discover more countries and their cuisines – however unfriendly they may be to my palate.

My cuisine conundrum leads me to another train of thought: it is, after all, an issue of access. The lack of access to hearty, vegetarian food makes it difficult for me to explore a culture in its entirety. But if I choose to eat to live, then this becomes just a small blip in my journeys.

I guess it's a matter of perspective. When Julia Child said that life is a binge, she probably meant that I should take life as a hearty feast and indulge myself. It may have been my rumbling stomach that made me misinterpret her line as bingeing being the way to a proper life. :)

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