

Success & ABILITY

India's Cross-disability Magazine

August - October 2016

₹ 30

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**Rocketing
to success**

Radio Udaan
**A path-breaking
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EmployABILITY[®]

2016

EQUITABLE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES
FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



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CHENNAI, 17 & 18 DECEMBER 2016

EmployABILITY is a trendsetting job opportunities fair by Ability Foundation and Lions Club of Madras Padi Shenoyanagar. EmployABILITY serves to bring together discerning employers and qualified persons with disabilities under a unique equal opportunities and non discriminating platform.

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- » Eligibility: Persons with disabilities with degrees from recognised educational institutions with knowledge of English and basic computer skills
- » For registration go to www.abilityfoundation.org
- » Last date for receipt of applications – Friday 25 November, 2016
- » Only registered candidates will be permitted to participate
- » The event includes a one day preparatory training programme
- » For details contact: employability@abilityfoundation.org

EMPLOYERS:

- » To be part of this milestone event, please contact us at careers@abilityfoundation.org

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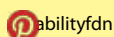
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From the Editor's Desk

Friends,

Divyang! Divyang!! Divyang!!! Were the words reverberating across the country this quarter. So much was said – angry retorts, rejoinders, sarcastic comebacks – to say that there was hue and cry everywhere, to this unbecoming and mortifying word – would still be an understatement. Well, we all did our bit! But, to no avail. Bowing to the “divine” will of the high command, several govt. depts. have accepted and begun to “officially” use the word. I wonder... are the people who have given such a tag, aware of the fact that, while some of us are born disabled, some acquire disability, and still others have disability thrust upon them during this great journey called Life! What happens then? Welcome to the land of divine creatures?! And tell me, friends... if the opposite of disabled (English), is non-disabled, what then would be the opposite of divyang (disabled person, christened divine being, in Hindi)? I, for one, cannot figure it out. Can you?



Be this as it may, I guess I have to see the positive side of things as well. Noteworthy among these is the short film brought out by the MSJ&E, although I must confess that I winced every time the “D” word was uttered: something like 26 times! Atleast, they were talking about the right things insofar as inclusion and access were concerned. So, the detrimental “D” word notwithstanding, if, right measures creep in at the government level, I guess, it would be in order, to just grin-and-bear-it.

In the private sector, things are, of course, progressing in leaps and bounds. I am particularly happy with the newer generation of activists who function with transparency through email and WhatsApp groups.

We also have our cherished 4 – the mighty Paralympians – applauded everywhere in the country... may their tribe increase!

Accessible tourism seems to have caught on in a big way, as our cover story this time reveals.

The number of disabled persons who have begun to aim higher without allowing “the others” to talk them out of doing the things that they believe they can do, is on the increase, more than ever before.

What do you think?

Jayshree Raveendran ■

2nd Edition

INDIA rehab & CARE EXPO

09/10/11 DECEMBER 2016

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Exhibitors from all over India and from abroad.

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News & Notes

Headway

Spinal Rehab Centre established in Chandigarh

The newly established Chandigarh Spinal Rehab promises to be a shot in the arm for rehabilitation of persons with acute spinal injuries or disabilities in North India.

Chandigarh Spinal Rehab, an initiative of Sai Aasra Paraplegic Centre, a Trust registered in Amritsar, is the outcome of three years of spadework, networking and learning from quality rehab centres in India and backed by partners like The Spinal Foundation, a pan-India organization for persons with spinal cord injury.

If people have access to quality rehabilitation immediately after a spinal cord injury, their lives could still be productive and meaningful without loss of years and much trauma. “Chandigarh Spinal Rehab is the first major initiative in Sai Aasra’s mission to fulfil a vital need in Northern India to provide comprehensive rehabilitation services. Built on a foundation of deep faith, this endeavour hopes to make a difference, create awareness and enlist support from society and Government for the proper rehabilitation, imparting of skill sets and dignified integration of persons with disabilities back into the community”, says Daljit Singh, President of Fortis



As of now, the three quality rehabilitation places that exist in India can cater to just 15% of persons with spinal cord injury every year.

Rehabilitation at Chandigarh Spinal Rehab would cover spinal cord injury, brain injury, cerebral palsy, stroke and amputation, to name a few. The outpatient services would also offer therapy-based healing for common ailments like arthritis and pain, age-related conditions, children with special needs and post surgery related issues.

Healthcare, and a Managing Trustee of Sai Aasra. The travails of Manmeet Singh, who succumbed to complications of neck-down paralysis a couple of years ago, sparked the vision of setting up a rehabilitation facility in Chandigarh.

Backed by an experienced team of therapists, independent living skills trainers, peer counsellors and reputed rehabilitation specialists, including doctors available on call, Chandigarh Spinal Rehab will offer inpatient (20 beds) and outpatient services in a holistic manner.

For more, call +91 94892 93077 or email Sunil Raj, Head-Therapy at sunil.raj@chandigarhspinal.in ■



Inclusive Fashion

New @ NIFT, Chennai



A light weight tumbler holder that allows young K Janarthanan to hold a tumbler of coffee in the crook of his arm. A desktop assembly with five detachable containers and a palette that lets him mouth paint without needing to use different sets of trays or containers. Formal shoes that have laces on their visage, but are actually locked by a Velcro patch. A socket on the base of the right shoe to slip his leg into...



For Ambika Raja, who is in rehabilitation following a spinal injury, there is an easy-to-wear sari – the garment looks like a sari, but is actually a skirt with a pallu. Another innovation is a pair of jeans that she can wear all by herself while still seated on a wheelchair, thanks to its side zippers...

These are some of the things in this year's repertoire of Inclusive fashion by the students of the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Chennai. Prodded on and collaborated by Ability Foundation, this marks the third year of an inclusive fashion initiative. Students of NIFT-Chennai opting for this project teamed up to create a range of fashionable clothing and accessories, keeping in mind independence, comfort and beauty.



As NIFT-Chennai's Dr. M. Vasantha, who coordinated this inclusion projects puts it, "This project is not about sympathy, but exposure to a market segment that the fashion industry is largely unaware of, and our students ended up learning so much. An increasing number of persons with disability are now keen on fashion and aspire to look good and dress well. They seek fashionable clothing and accessories, but are not able to find what they specifically need. So inclusive fashion is a market that is begging to be tapped".

The students' creations - both clothes and accessories are evaluated by a three member jury on criteria that includes understanding of the need, concept development, prototype and the final garment or accessory. The creations are rated on comfort, fit and finish, and aesthetics. ■

NIFT, Chennai.

New @ Rio Inclusive & Eco Friendly Medals



In addition to featuring braille, medals at the Rio Paralympics had a tiny device within them, which make a noise when the medal is shaken, allowing visually impaired athletes to know if the medal is a gold, silver or bronze medal; gold has the loudest noise, and bronze is the quietest. The medals were created by the Brazilian Mint. The Rio 2016 Paralympic Games (7-18 September 2016) featured 4,350 athletes who competed in 528 medal events across 22 sports.

Meanwhile, in line with Rio 2016's commitment to sustainability, the gold used for the medals was extracted without using mercury, and produced in adherence to strict sustainability criteria, from mining to end product. The silver and bronze medals were produced using 30 per cent recycled materials. Much of the plastic in the ribbons used to hang the medals around athletes' necks came from recycled plastic bottles. The rounded cases that hold the medals were made from freijó wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), while the medal trays were made of certified Curupixá wood. The podiums were designed to be reused as furniture after the Games. ■

Source: <https://www.paralympic.org>

TV programmes to become more accessible?

Through a directive, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B), Government of India, has asked television channels to allocate more time to programs for persons with disabilities. This directive has been issued to broadcasting bodies such as the Indian Broadcasting Foundation (IBF), News Broadcasters Association (NBA), Association of Regional Television Broadcasters of India (ARTBI) and the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI). The directive calls for inclusion of the facility of providing subtitles in their programs to make it accessible for people with hearing impairment. The ministry has also directed television channels and broadcasters' associations to submit details of the steps taken to ensure the inclusiveness of all citizens in sharing information and entertainment. This directive is part of the ministry's Accessible India

Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), launched by I&B minister Arun Jaitley in December 2015, to increase the participation of people with disabilities in day-to-day practices.

Earlier, the ministry had met officials of the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disability to discuss the advocacy and dissemination requirements for the Accessible India campaign. In the meeting, areas where the support of the I & B Ministry was needed such as increased frequency of programmes for persons with disabilities in TV channels, showcasing films on achievements of persons with disabilities through public and private TV channels, inclusion of subtitles for people with hearing disabilities and audio facility for people with vision disabilities had been highlighted. ■

Source: *Livemint*

Match that!

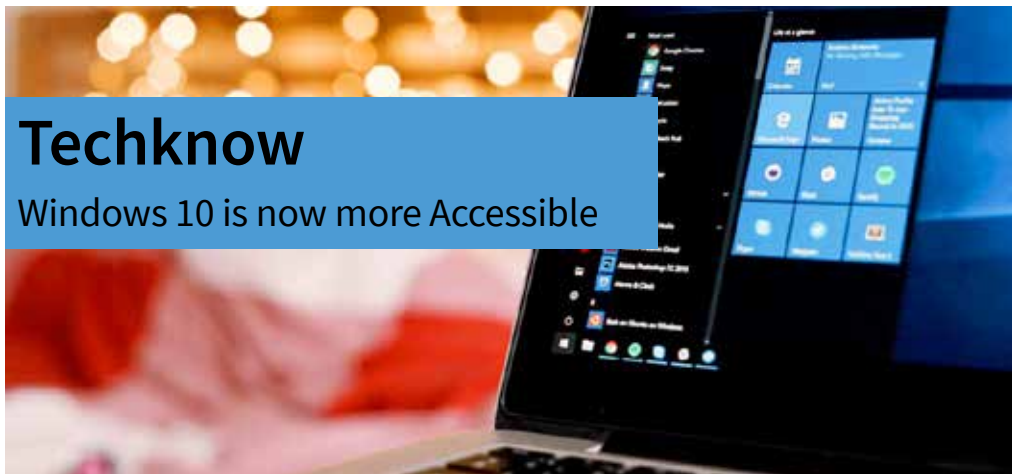
A matchmaking App for people with disabilities

67% of people with disabilities in India do not find a life partner. The Inclov app could help alter the scenario. This matchmaking app focuses on people with disabilities and health disorders, and matches people on the basis of cure availability, medical condition, level of independence and lifestyle choices. Inclov is fully accessible to people with visual impairment through screen reader and talkback. People with visual impairment, retina

disorder, cerebral palsy and colour blindness, among many others, can easily access this app without any dependency on friends and family members. Features that promote safety for women include security measures like mobile verification, email verification, profile curation, first name only display and in-chat feature. Taking screenshot is not allowed on Inclov so as to avoid cyber crime.

Not just for people with disabilities, Inclov may be accessed by anyone who believes in equal opportunities to find love. This inclusive matchmaking app was developed by a visually-impaired person. Inclov is now available on Google Playstore. To know more, visit: <http://www.inclov.com/> or e-mail kalyani@inclov.com or call +91 124 400 8464. ■

Source: *The Hindu*



The Windows 10 anniversary update, unveiled in July, has brought in major accessibility improvements to cater to the estimated one billion people with disabilities in the world

Sample this. Changes in the Narrator screen reading tool in Windows 10 include faster text-to-speech voices, from 400 words to 800 words (roughly) per minute and new languages including Arabic and Nordic languages. Keyboard commands in Narrator will also be more synchronized to users of other screen readers and some keyboard interactions have been simplified to ensure better ergonomics, making them easier to type.

A new navigator mode called the Scan mode has been introduced. It can be turned on with a press of CAPS LOCK and SPACE. For instance, when in Scan mode you can press SPACE to activate an item of interest, such as when following a link on a web page or pressing a button in an app.

Narrator now supports six levels of verbosity for giving more details about the characteristics of text. The user can cycle through these modes by pressing CAPS LOCK + CTRL + (PLUS). For example, at Verbose mode 0 (zero), we would hear just the text; at verbose mode 1, we would hear if the text is a heading, and so on. Narrator would also gives us more control

over how much punctuation we hear when reading text using the CAPS LOCK+ALT+(PLUS) and CAPS LOCK+ALT+(MINUS) cycle through the settings.

Many applications in Windows 10 offer automatic suggestions as we enter information. Narrator will now give a verbal hint with an audio indication when these suggestions are available. And of course, the user guides and documentation have been updated.

Since, developer tools are essential in creating accessible experiences within their apps and websites, the Visual Studio App Analysis tool was updated to help developers find, triage and fix accessibility errors like flagging controls that don't have an accessible name. Support for Mnemonics within Universal Windows Apps (UWA's) allowing for better Access Key customizations have been improved. For example, the developer of a shopping app can now assign a custom Access Key like P that can be activated by pressing ALT then the letter P, in order to activate the purchase button. ■

Source: <http://globalaccessibilitynews.com>



Indian team at Cybathlon 2016

Rise Legs, a team from Bangalore, India participated in the prestigious and pioneering Cybathlon 2016. Gayatri Kiran reports.

Here is a piece of heartening news – Rise Design Lab, a social enterprise based in Bangalore participated in the Powered Leg Race of the Cybathlon 2016. The Powered Leg Race features pilot technology users competing on parallel tracks along beams, slopes, stones and stairs. Pilot users (as the actual athletes entering the event are called) with above-knee amputations using any kind of passive or active prosthetic device can participate in the race.

The Cybathlon was a pioneering international event organized by ETH Zurich for athletes with disability, with the athletes using bionic assistive technology such as robotic prostheses, brain-computer interfaces and powered exoskeletons. It is the first international professional competition

of its kind and took place in Zurich, Switzerland, on 8 October 2016. While traditional Paralympics bars participants from using powered assistive aids and appliances, Cybathlon actually encourages use of robotics, computers and powered assistive devices, to raise awareness on the latest such assistive devices available in the market and the devices that are needed, and to bring together on the same platform, researchers, manufacturers, sports persons and other end users of these devices.

Team Rise Legs for Cybathlon 2016 included Arun Joshua Cherian and Rohan George Mathew as Team Lead and Supporting Team members. The two pilots (competing athletes) were Prajwal Basavaraja and Nagesh Chowdappa. Competing with the best team in the world, Team Rise Legs managed to get



Rise Legs is a prosthesis made from naturally grown Rattan cane (like bamboo) as primary material for an integrated pylon and foot device that is cost-effective, lightweight and compliant. This assistive device has thus been made affordable, light, and accessible, even while keeping intact its effectiveness. With Rise Legs, amputees can have a better quality of life. They can not only walk for long stretches of time, but can also run, play and dance. Rise legs are up to four times lighter in weight than similarly priced products. Due to the elastic storage of strain energy in the foot, Rise Legs are biomechanically efficient to ambulate with, allowing for k3 and k4 level activity. Pilot users of Rise Legs have completed 5km walks, dancing, and weight training. Many users have also been using the legs successfully for over one and half years in farm terrains. The Rise foot is made of carefully selected, specific species of cane from Indian forests. Rise Design Lab works with local artisans in the cane industry to craft these legs based on scientific templates. In the process, this initiative has also been providing local artisans with better income too. ■

two top sports, with Chowdappa and Basavaraja getting ranked 7th and 8th respectively in the finals. Someone who is strong in body and mind, Prajwal is a 25-year-old student doing a visual graphics course in Bangalore. A keen bodybuilder who has taken part in several competitions using Rise Legs, Prajwal is keen on diversifying into other sports. Meanwhile, Nagesh, a 30-year-old Team Lead at Infosys BPO in Bangalore, has been given multiple awards by his organization for his work. Nagesh is a very active, motivated and independent individual keen on making his mark in sports.

The selection of the two pilots was a very rigorous process and included psychological and physical evaluation of the candidates' suitability for the event.

Selected candidates had to meet physical strength and endurance criteria, besides psychological attitude and motivation to go through the entire event.

Team Rise Legs gives credit for their progress to the immense support given to them by other sports professionals and agencies like PLaY Arena, which let them recreate the Cybathlon track course in their space, Potential Health Development and Invictus Prime, Bangalore who are helping them create and execute tailor-made strength, conditioning and nutrition programmes, besides various national and international agencies.

Way to Go, Team Rise Legs! ■



rocketing to SUCCESS



Apurva Varia

Apurva Varia is Mission Director, US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Research Institute near Washington, D.C. He is perhaps the only deaf person in the world to be in such a critical and responsible position in such an eminent government agency.

Apurva lives in Ellicott City, Maryland State, with his wife Kalpana and their two children, Darshan and Shivani. They form a quintessential American family leading a very busy life, as their pre-teen children attend school, play soccer, swim and participate in extracurricular activities. In an interview with DR. MADAN VASISHTA, Apurva Varia responds to questions on how he arrived at this position. His answers speak volumes for the humble, sincere and frank person that he is.

1. Parents play a vital role in shaping children’s career and personal growth. What role did your parents play in shaping your successful career?

My parents played a major role in shaping my education towards a successful career. For example, my late father and my mother used to sit with me and patiently teach me vocabulary lessons almost every day and showed me how to pronounce each word. My mother firmly believes that reading is a very important part of education and daily life. Therefore, she encouraged me to read various books, not just to enhance my vocabulary and comprehension skills, but also to learn about science, politics, government, finance and other current subjects. She urged me to read newspapers right from an early age because she considered that learning about current events, politics, government, finance and other areas would increase my knowledge, which in turn would come in useful in college and also in my career in the long run.

2. You have engineering degrees. What are their areas of focus? What made you opt for these degrees?

When I was growing up, I used to build various things using Lego. That was a lot of fun and challenging too and this sparked my creativity. Also, I loved to break things apart because it seemed so much fun. That is one of the important characteristics of



Madan Vasishtha

I was thrilled to see the space shuttle lift off from the launch pad and roar through the sky. That is when I fell in love with space.



an engineer because it is important for an engineer to understand why and how a part breaks down and determine a way to fix or improvise a part. That is when I began to think about being an engineer.

It is thus that I hold a Bachelor of Science degree in Mechanical Engineering which focuses on designing and building products and a Master of Science degree in



Aerospace Engineering which focuses on designing and building airplanes, rockets, and spacecrafts.

Here is my story about why I chose NASA. Once, when I was flipping channels on TV, something caught my attention. It was a space shuttle resting on the launch pad to be launched in the next few minutes. I was so intrigued by the astronauts in the cockpit getting ready to go into space. I grew even more excited when the countdown started with “T-10 seconds, T-9 seconds...” and so on, until it reached “0 second”. I was thrilled to see the space shuttle lift off from the launch pad and roar through the sky. That is when I fell in love with space. I decided then and there that I wanted to be an astronaut. I even wrote a letter to Johnson Space Center (JSC) in Houston, asking if they would accept a deaf astronaut. A few days later, JSC responded saying that while they might not accept a deaf astronaut at that point of time, they might well do so in the future.

I knew, of course, that it might not happen in my lifetime. However, I was thrilled when I went to the cleaning room at NASA Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC) and saw the flight hardware that would go to space. That was the closest thing I could touch then.

3. Have these degrees helped you in your career? Or did you have to get additional education and in-service training to reach where you have reached today?

Yes, both degrees definitely helped me in my career at NASA. They provided me useful tools and experiences to be successful in my career. Here, I want to emphasize that

I enjoy being a leader, a motivator and having more responsibilities.

my undergraduate study at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) required five co-ops (a.k.a. cooperative education programs or internship jobs) before graduation. I worked at the Laboratory for Laser Energetics under University of Rochester, NASA Langley, NASA Goddard Space Flight Center and Xerox. The valuable work experiences at these places taught me a lot about the engineering process and about working with a team. Without the co-ops, it would have been difficult to find a job that requires prior job experience. As always, I still continue to learn every day on the job. The learning never ends.

4. You are now a director at NASA. Did you ever dream that you would be working in such a high-level position? Or, considering your disability, does your own success surprise you?

I had not really thought about working at a high-level position. When I began, I thought I was just going to work as an engineer for the rest of my career. However, while working on several projects and working with team members, I realized that I wanted to experience and also had the capabilities for more challenging positions as I enjoyed being a leader, a motivator and also having more responsibilities. Many other paths too opened up. I also had my mentors' encouragement. All this led me to become a Mission Director.

However, I am not surprised by my own success, as I have worked very hard to become



I would urge deaf people to think positively and know that they can do anything, despite other people always telling them "you cannot do this or that."

a better engineer and mission director. Ultimately, in my opinion, hard work and commitment are the only ways to reach a dream – which I did.

5. Are you satisfied with your achievements or do you feel you have higher rungs to climb? Why and what more?

That is a tough question to answer. It all depends on what goals I set out to accomplish. Working at NASA has been one of my great achievements... that was really my true dream.

Now, my goal is to become a better (or perhaps, the best) Mission Director at NASA, by learning not just about engineering but also project management and financial matters, besides developing political savvy.

Another of my important goals is for people to recognize that a deaf person can have a high-level career. When I enter a conference room, I want people to see me as a deaf

person who can do anything. I believe that it would take time for people to realize it. An article like this is one way of spreading such awareness.

Finally, I do not think that anyone would be completely satisfied with just one's professional achievements. I believe that one has to measure one's own success by also being happy in his/her personal life. That is the ultimate achievement.

6. Are there other deaf people in NASA who are in high or higher position(s) than you? If not, what made you rise higher than them?

There is one deaf person in a higher position than me. That person is a supervisor who manages several people under him.

A deaf student needs to experience socializing with students with hearing because he/she will have to work with people with hearing in the working world.





7. Has there been any specific support system that helped you achieve your goals? If you had been in India, do you think you would have achieved what you have achieved in the US?

The American with Disabilities Act (ADA) does provide for assistance such as interpreters, TTY and videophone interpreting which have benefited me greatly in achieving my goals right from school through college/graduate school and career. For example, having interpreters at college and in my workplace gave me full access to communication, which in turn enhanced my knowledge. Not all knowledge finds place in books.

It is difficult to assess whether India has a good support system that includes interpreters, video interpreting and other services. However, I do believe that if India gets a law similar to ADA, then the quality of services will greatly improve and this will certainly be a huge advantage for deaf people.

8. In addition to interpreters, what kind of support system did RIT provide you?

RIT provided excellent academic and personal support services such as interpreting, note-taking and counseling/tutoring. The interpreters at RIT were awesome as they were able to interpret technical information to my level of understanding. Note-taking is a valuable source of information because sometimes interpreters may not interpret everything due to a professor's speed of communication, or difficulty in copying diagrams or formulas written on the board. As for support services, I had tutoring in engineering classes as well as in my English classes which helped me gain knowledge

My mother believed that it was important for me to communicate verbally if I was to have a successful career.

and assistance with homework. My discussions with my counselor too provided me with a lot of information about classes, co-ops and career opportunities.

9. Did your parents and siblings sign with you when you were a child? Please describe the communication system used in schools you attended in your early years.

My mother believed that it was important for me to communicate verbally if I was to have a successful career. My mother and sister sign a little, but we communicate

well. However, right from elementary school through high school, I utilised the assistance of sign language interpreters, who were an invaluable asset.

10. What is your advice for deaf people in India who do not have the American support system (“the land of the opportunity”)? How can they realise their dreams?

I would really encourage them to think positively, and earnestly know that

they can do anything, despite other people always telling them “you cannot do this or that”. I would advise them to search for opportunities that may help them have better services that they need. I encourage them to reach out to others, especially to supportive people who can help or guide them towards better opportunities.

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

I started learning sign language when I was in 1st grade. In fact, I learned two different sign languages: Signing Exact English (SEE) and ASL. The reason I had to learn SEE was because my school was located in Texas and my school curriculum required SEE. I learned ASL later, in high school. Sign language played a major role in my education, employment, and social life. For example, using ASL helped me understand written English better and improve my vocabulary skills. For my employment, since plenty of technical words are used at meetings, I use Pidgin Sign English (PSE) that is a combination of SEE and ASL. PSE allows me to understand technical information in a grammatical structure like SEE, besides understanding concepts in a visual way like ASL. In fact, I frequently ask interpreters to use PSE because PSE can effectively relay



I was integrated into a mainstream school when I was young and I was able to get good services



English idioms that are frequently used by people with hearing, in order to understand and respond to them without any misunderstanding.

12. 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?

Yes, deaf children should be integrated into regular schools. I was integrated into a mainstream school when I was young and I was able to get good services. However, I recommend that regular schools have a critical mass of deaf students instead of one or two deaf students, so that they can provide mutual support to each other. On the other hand, since I have never attended a special school, I would imagine that a special school would provide a learning environment where deaf students may have less social challenges than in a regular school.

However, I strongly emphasize that a deaf student needs to experience socializing with students with hearing, because he/she will have to work with people with hearing in the working world.

13. Tell us about your family. How and where did you meet your wife? What role did your wife play in your career? (Behind every successful man, there is a woman.) What about your children? How do you all communicate with one another?

I met my wife at the National Technical Institute for Deaf, Rochester, NY. She has played a major role in my success, because she gives me a lot of advice and always tells me to think positively. We have two hearing children: 13-year-old Darshan and 10-year-old Shivani. We communicate in total communication that includes both ASL and spoken English. I primarily use sign language communication with my family since I do not read lips well.

I primarily use sign language communication with my family since I do not read lips well.

14. What is your message to parents of deaf children and professionals working with them?

To parents I would say, do not let anyone say that your deaf child cannot have a high-level job. As mentioned earlier, my mother worked with me almost every day and made sure that I would be successful in anything I undertook. Some parents may not be comfortable using sign language at home or at school. I would tell them that sign language would provide a lot of opportunities for their children's future, because knowledge stems not just from written communication but from verbal communication as well.

If your deaf child wants to have a good job, I would strongly encourage him or her to

I would also tell them that each and every path to success in life has obstacles. But one can overcome the obstacles by working hard and seeking help.

discuss with professionals on careers, colleges, etc., so that he or she will have an idea of how to get a good job, and how to overcome obstacles in his/her journey.

15. What is your advice to parents of deaf children in India? What kind of support should they provide them, keeping in mind the limited resources here?

My advice to parents of deaf children is to work with them on school lessons and to encourage them to work harder. As for dealing with the challenge of limited resources, my mother too faced a similar situation. She did not use any technology to teach me. In fact, she used library books, vocabulary books, and newspapers to educate me to be successful in life.

I would also tell them that each and every path to success in life has obstacles. But one can overcome the obstacles by working hard and seeking help. There is nothing wrong in seeking help as it greatly improves the chances of success. I would further say that "Deaf People Can Do Anything" and nothing should stop them from dreaming. Be strong, be an advocate, and life will be GOOD!

16. Is there anything else you would like to add?

I just want to say that anyone can find success if he/she is dedicated and committed to working hard.



The Rise

Life after spinal injury

There are any number of inspiring stories of brave and determined men and women who rebuilt their lives with determination and creativity after the trauma of a spinal injury, writes Saaz Aggarwal.

It is one of the most unfortunate conditions of human suffering. It is also one of the most expensive to manage. Spinal injury happens suddenly, unexpectedly, changing lives overnight... forever. The most common causes of spinal injury are accident, fall from a height, or sometimes a physical attack. The realisation dawns with pain, shock and disbelief. Rehabilitation and regaining a meaningful life is a long process.

“My life is over now!”

“Why did this happen to me?”

In time, the deadweight of grief, horror, loneliness, and the shame of being a burden on others is replaced by a range of more positive feelings. There is a certain spirituality in thinking: “Well, this is where I am, this is what I have, this is the way things are. Now what do I do next?” There are any number of inspiring stories of brave and determined men and women who rebuilt their lives with the determination and creativity unleashed by this force.



Saaz Aggarwal





Sujatha Burla was twenty one and preparing to travel abroad for further studies when a car crash on the way to Shirdi with friends resulted in her spinal injury. After an initial period of depression, she started using her computer skills and learnt how to trade on the stock market. She then began a tailoring business at home, later became a motivational speaker and this resulted in her being invited to host a celebrity talk show which made her a television celebrity herself.

Deepa Malik is another celebrity spinal injury patient. After her injury, she ran a restaurant and took up biking. An army wife, she involved herself with garnering support for wives whose husbands were facing action on the border. She also took up sports and became a star for India in international sporting events.

Bajrang Suthar fell from a height, and after years of depression, she was slowly encouraged to take up writing and drawing. Over time, an astonishing talent emerged and Bajrang's paintings are continuing to evolve, ever more intricate and beautiful.

Sanam Karunakar lost both her parents and two dogs in the car crash which crippled her. She had the courage to rebuild her life gradually and today, twenty years later, she has her own family as well as her own business that is into tending and training of pets.

For a spinal injury patient, to be cared for by a loving family is a definite advantage. Some of these successful individuals, however, have been their own source of courage and determination. Each one of them started with an idea, made plans and somehow gathered the resources to implement them. All received inspiration from others who

For a spinal injury patient, to be cared for by a loving family is a definite advantage.. It is lack of knowledge that creates the depression, not the actual injury.



taught them what they needed to know to cope. For instance, Deepa Malik particularly remembers Arun Sondhi who taught her wheelchair skills.

“It is lack of knowledge that creates the depression, not the actual injury”, says Shivjeet Singh Raghav, patient education coordinator and peer counsellor at Indian Spinal Injury Centre (ISIC), and a patient of spinal injury himself. He adds, “A patient arriving in the centre is in a state of trauma. The family is also in shock. Gradually, they see the options possible and things start looking better. Within a few days, patients and their families start learning how to cope with their disability. They are made independent to the maximum possible degree.”

Understanding spinal cord injury

“Think of the brain as a telephone exchange,” explains Dr. H.S. Chhabra, Chief of Spine Service and Medical Director at ISIC. “The spinal cord is like a cable. If the cable is transected 2km from the exchange, only those telephones outside that radius will lose their function. Similarly, when the injury is further away from the brain, less is the disability and better the prognosis.”

It is extremely important to start management right at the time of the accident. Pre-hospital care is one of the most important components that impact the extent of damage. 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. After that comes a process of evaluation and the decision on whether surgery is necessary.

Spinal cord injuries are generally are of two types – complete and incomplete injuries. When at the time of the injury all sensation and movement below the level of the injury are affected, it indicates that the spinal cord cells may have been completely destroyed and patients generally don't recover their sensation and movement. But if sensation or movement persists, there is a chance that the patient will recover.

Rehabilitation holds the key

Surgery can prevent further trauma in the case of incomplete injuries whereas in a complete injury, patients are advised not to go for surgery and take the route of faster mobilisation and faster rehabilitation, which will reduce the length of hospital stay and will ultimately cost less.

A person brought into ISIC with a spinal injury would routinely go through an 'acute' phase and a 'sub-acute' phase, after which active rehabilitation starts, a process which would last for about four weeks. This covers a comprehensive, psychosocial, sexual and vocational rehabilitation by a team that includes doctors, counsellors, psychologists, vocational therapists and physiotherapists. Lifelong follow-up is essential to ensure that medical complications and emotional stress are managed well.

ISIC, India's first spinal rehab centre

For a large number of urban Indian patients, the Indian Spinal Injury Centre in Delhi is a place which gives hope and cheer and brings them up close with high-achieving role models through the long months of their recovery and rehabilitation.

It is Major H.P.S. Ahluwalia who spearheaded the establishment of the ISIC. In 1965, he was part of the first Indian expedition to reach the peak of Mount Everest, India being the fourth country in the world to send a successful expedition. Just a few months later, he was called to the front in the India-China war; he took a bullet in





the neck and this resulted in spinal injury, leaving him crippled for life. The shock and trauma were followed by different levels of rehabilitation at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in the UK.

It is crucial to start management right at the time of the accident.

Acutely conscious of the lack of such facilities in India, he worked for many years to create the same, eventually getting together a group of friends to set up ISIC in 1983. After a long struggle, the centre modelled on Stoke Mandeville, finally became operational in 1996.

MAJOR AHLUWALIA'S ADVICE TO PEOPLE WITH RECENT SPINAL INJURY:

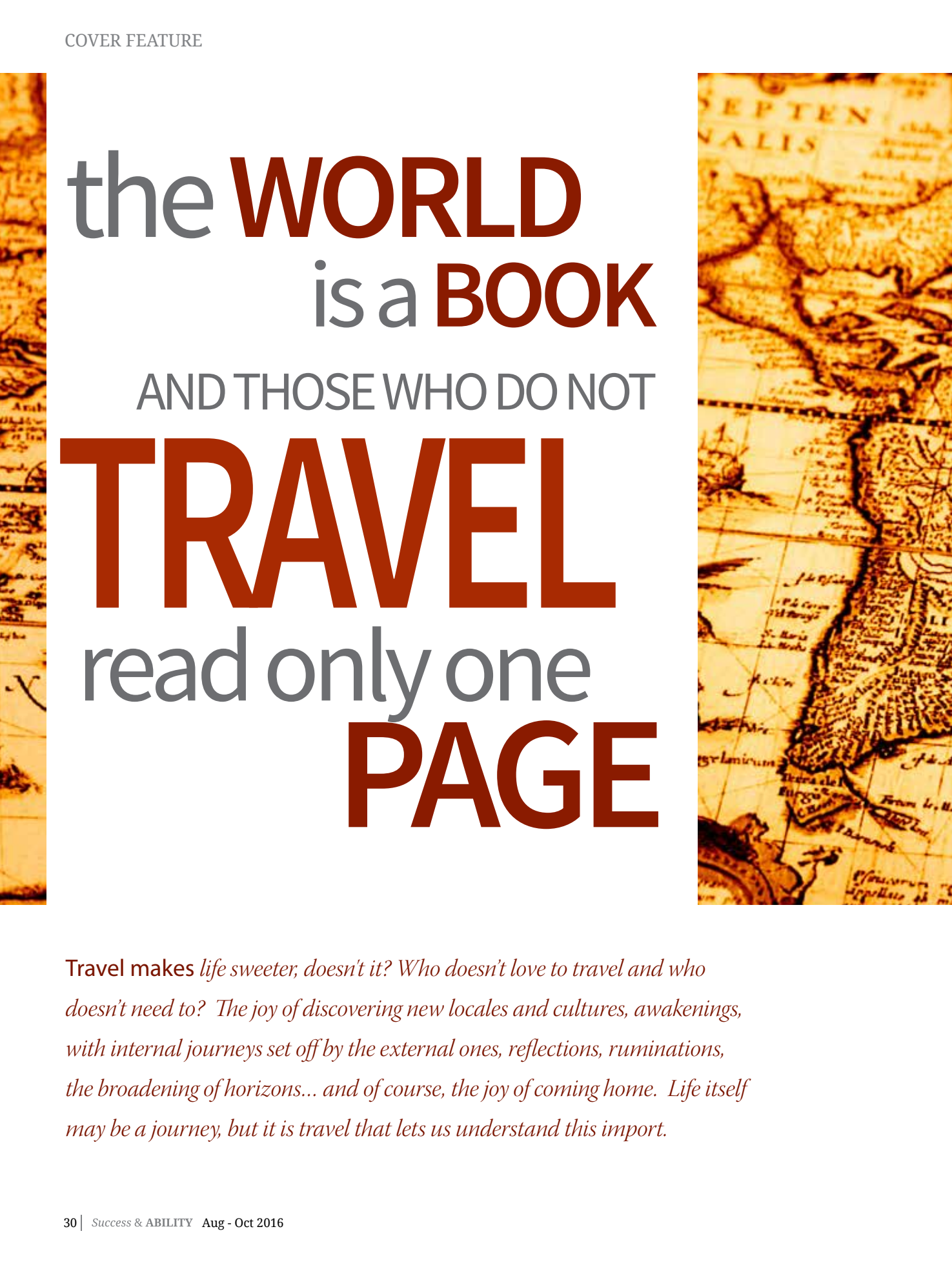
- ▶ You will certainly need medical inputs. You must have excellent doctors to do a medical intervention. A very high order of spinal surgery may be essential for further processes to be done – but not everybody who has spinal problems needs surgery. In my experience, seven out of ten do not need surgery.

- ▶ After the medical aspect is taken care of, rehabilitation is

essential. You may have lost the use of various parts of the body. Now you must learn how to make use of whatever is left.

- ▶ If you sit alone in a room and cry, nobody will come to you. Anyone in this position will soon realise this. 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.
- ▶ Set goals for yourself. If you want to do a thing and work towards it and do it, you will get tremendous confidence in yourself. ■



A vintage, sepia-toned map of the world, likely from the 17th or 18th century, serves as the background for the text. The map shows continents, oceans, and various geographical features with Latin labels. The text is overlaid on the map, with the words 'the WORLD is a BOOK' and 'AND THOSE WHO DO NOT TRAVEL read only one PAGE' in a mix of bold, dark red and grey sans-serif fonts. The word 'TRAVEL' is particularly large and prominent.

the **WORLD**
is a **BOOK**
AND THOSE WHO DO NOT
TRAVEL
read only one
PAGE

Travel makes life sweeter; doesn't it? Who doesn't love to travel and who doesn't need to? The joy of discovering new locales and cultures, awakenings, with internal journeys set off by the external ones, reflections, ruminations, the broadening of horizons... and of course, the joy of coming home. Life itself may be a journey, but it is travel that lets us understand this import.



Someone on a wheelchair on the seashore; a visually impaired person exploring a heritage monument; a child with disability at a theme park... these are sights hardly ever seen in the country. But this status quo looks set to change, if the exciting developments happening in the country and around the world are any indication, writes Hema Vijay.



Hema Vijay

For far too long, the joy of travel has remained inaccessible to millions of disabled persons in the country, no thanks to the widespread apathy towards their accessibility rights. Now however, we may sit up and soak in some good news. A number of initiatives are bubbling up here and there, opening up vistas to the world of travel and adventure to persons with disabilities.

One such great endeavour is “Planet Abled” in Delhi, which organizes customized tours and workshops, specifically catering to the needs of disabled persons. In fact, Planet Abled had even organized a solo tour in Uttarakhand through Haridwar, Rishikesh and the Jim Corbett Park for young Bikash, a visually impaired person from Guwahati, who sought the experience of travelling alone. Meanwhile, “Explore Differently” in Chennai organizes short trips in and around the city for people with disabilities, such as wheelchair walks at tree parks, museum tours, etc., making use of an accessible bus with lift mechanism to pick up and drop people, roping in support staff that includes a special educator.

Making travel and tourism accessible is not just the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do.



Meanwhile, there is “Umoja”, an online travel portal for persons with disabilities that lets one find and book hotel accommodation to meet specific accessibility needs. The portal describes accessibility features of the accommodation and its facilities right down to the centimeter. Umoja had earlier hit the headlines for organizing a wheelchair accessible beach holiday in Goa for 25-year-old graphic designer, Sai Kaustuv Dasgupta of Andhra Pradesh. Umoja has been pushing for making Goa the country’s premier, fully accessible holiday destination – be it transport or the accessibility of the tourist spaces – and is coordinating with the people concerned – both the Government and private enterprise. Umoja is now coming out with a comprehensive, online wheelchair



user's Guide to Goa (with video walkthroughs), that would help wheelchair users and their families find accessible hotels, restaurants, bars and tourist attractions, besides transportation in and around Goa. Next on the anvil are similar accessibility guides for persons with visual and auditory impairments.

Then there is “Accomable”, started by Srin Madipalli and Martyn Sibley based in London that lists over 500 accessible places in 40 countries including India, and is looking to expand its listings across transportation, specialist equipment hire, contacts of nearby medical suppliers, etc.

Travel: No More Bugs?

Sites like Accomable and Umoja do list out accessible hotel facilities. However since accessibility measures are not yet in place all along the route, the tour operator is unable to organize transport and accommodation and make the experience of the site/activity accessible as well.

Planet Abled carries with them a mobile ramp. They assign a ‘travel buddy’ to each participant. When needed, special permissions are sought and obtained. They also engage support staff like sign language interpreters and sensitized curators to guide blind persons to touch and sense the exhibit or the architecture, as well as trained volunteers.

Meanwhile, Umoja has decided to partner with those in the transport sector to ensure that the entire ecosystem is accessible. For instance, Umoja partnered with Bangalore based Kickstart Cabs to bring Sai Kaustuv to Goa by road. Going one step ahead, now, Umoja has roped in a local taxi operator in Goa, convincing him of the business opportunity that accessible taxis would open up for him. To make his taxi accessible to wheelchairs, Umoja connected this operator with Ferdinand Roderick, India’s

“This taxi run by a local taxi operator is already on the streets and within a week of its new avatar, has had six bookings and numerous enquiries from people planning to visit Goa. We had told him, if you do make your taxi accessible, we will link you with customers”

most experienced adapted vehicle modifier based in Mumbai. “This taxi is already on the streets and within a week of its new avatar, it has already had six bookings and numerous enquiries from people planning to visit Goa. We had told him, if you do make your taxi accessible, we will link you with customers”, shares Yeshwant Holkar, co-founder and CEO of Umoja. To make vehicles accessible, they are retrofitted with hydraulic or manual lifts, with or without self-driving options.

Business, not Charity

Obviously, much has changed since the epic 84-day, 19000 km, 40-city road tour ‘Breaking Barriers’ of 2011 when wheelchair users Arvind Prabhuo, Nishant Khade, Sunita Sancheti and Neenu Kewlani, checked out the accessibility of tourist destinations across India and shared their experiences through a coffee table book, ‘Beyond Barriers – Incredible India Tour’ and an accessibility audit (of infrastructure, facilities, transport, car parking, and even activities and attitudes, which had brought to light a rather wanting state of affairs across the country.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the tourism industry is yet to wake up to the fact that the disabled want to, and can afford to take up leisure travel and activities. As of now, most of these inclusive travel initiatives have been spearheaded largely by people who have taken it up as a mission. For instance, Neha Arora started Planet Abled, when repeatedly confronted by the lack of accessibility her family faced when they set out on trips and leisure activities - her father being visually impaired and mother having an orthopedic disability. 24-year-old Aditya Sharma, who started “Explore Differently”, has cerebral palsy. Accomable founders Srin Madipalli and Martyn Sibley have spinal muscular atrophy (SMA). Yeshwant’s yen for Umoja was sparked off by a very dear family friend, a wheelchair user affected by polio, who had spoken to him about how difficult it was for her to travel. “Later, after I graduated and was looking around for business opportunities, I researched and found that there were ever so many disabled people like my friend, and the market out there was huge”, says Yeshwant.

So, is the Indian tourism industry missing an opportunity? Note that the popular travel guide Lonely Planet mentions that 50% of people with disabilities would travel more if accessible facilities were available. Don’t also forget that there are one billion disabled people across the world (UN WHO statistics), many of whom are empowered, and can afford to travel. Don’t forget either that when you ensure access for the disabled, you also cater to the elderly and to young children, who together amount to 46% of our population, not to mention medical tourists from India and abroad. It doesn’t make sense to ignore such a huge market.

“To bring in widespread accessibility, the Government can do something; activists can help bring about laws; civil society can help. But ultimately, the formula for change

Don't forget that when you ensure access for the disabled, you also cater to the elderly and to young children, who together amount to 46% of our population, not to mention medical tourists from India and abroad.



lies with business models”, says Yeshwant. He points out that for many years, many charitable organizations have been working on the field, with limited success. For accessibility to happen in a widespread manner, we have to see it as a business opportunity, that making travel and tourism accessible is not just the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do. “When I tell hotels that there are 2000 wheelchair users (and ever growing) registered on Umoja who want to visit an accessible holiday spot along with their families, then the hoteliers and others are of course wanting to bring in accessibility at that spot”, he says astutely.

Five major hotel chains have already aligned with Umoja – Marriot, Taj, Oberoi, Lemon Tree and Sarovar. Besides them, individual properties of Hilton, Leela, ITC, etc too figure on the Umoja platform, making for 150 hotels in India and the UK. “We estimate that 134 billion US dollars is the market size of accessible travel, including restaurants, transport, etc.” The Umoja business model is such that it works out free for the end user, with a certain commission paid by the hotels wanting to be registered on it, because they see good business opportunity here. Meanwhile, also helpful is the fact that the Indian Railways and Indian Airlines offer concession in fares for disabled persons.

Accessible Getaways

In India, we do need to fast expand on the number of tourist sites that have been made accessible by the authorities concerned. Heritage destinations have seen a start in this, but nature destinations lag far behind. For instance, while India has a zillion beautiful beaches, no beach in India has a permanent pathway leading up to the wave front to let people using canes or wheelchairs come face to face with the surf, something that is seen in many beaches abroad. Not only does this deny the local disabled their due, this also excludes ocean-loving, cash-rich foreign tourists with orthopedic challenges. Moreover, India is also yet to see a leisure space that is specifically designed for people with disabilities, like a Morgan’s Wonderland, with the exception of small initiatives here and there, like the Touch and Smell Garden in MSSR Foundation’s campus, Chennai.

But the heartening fact is that change has begun. The road ahead looks good...

Morgan’s Wonderland, Texas: A theme park designed keeping in mind the needs of people with disabilities.

Disney World, Legoland & Holiday World: Theme parks with access features, and many rides for people with disabilities.

Tate Modern Museum, London: Offers wheelchairs, touch tours, audio-guides and a sign language multimedia guide.

Fatehpur Sikri: Ramps, Braille sign boards, special toilets and ticket counters, dedicated parking.

Taj Mahal, Agra: Nine ramps in the complex, and wheelchairs.

Sanchi Stupa, Bhopal: Tactile walkway, Braille information plaques, beepers, Braille map, wheelchair pathway.

Lakshmana Temple, Chhattisgarh: Tactile pathway, Braille sign boards.

Beaches: Hanauma Bay (Honolulu, HI), Kailua Beach Park (Honolulu, HI), Ludington State Park (Ludington, MI), Rehoboth Beach (Delaware), Silver Strand State Beach (Coronado, CA), Manly Beach (Australia), Tuscany (Italy)...

***From Sources.** Please verify the accessibility status before you plan your trip.

An Accomable Experience



India is now home to Accomable (www.accomable.com), an innovative venture that helps disabled people and the elderly find and book accessible holiday accommodation.

London-based Srin Madipalli and Martyn Sibley have spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), but this has not deterred them from travel and adventure. After getting fed up with the difficulties in finding accessible travel services, last summer, Srin and Martyn co-founded Accomable. Now, Srin spearheads Accomable while Martyn steers Disability Horizons, among other things.





Srin Madipalli

Srin had earlier co-founded the online publication Disability Horizons with Martyn, who is an influential voice in the world of disability, media and travel and is adept in using social media and e-campaigning towards inspiring, informing, and changing the world for disabled people. Srin and Martyn had met as children, when they were part of a support group for children with SMA.

Within a year of its launch, Accomable has raised record funding from private investors. Accomable now has offices in the United States and boasts of over 500 accessible properties in over 40 countries worldwide. Accomable now has an Indian presence too, with the recent launch of its first accessible hotel rooms and holiday



accommodations in India, with 19 listings in quality hotels in some of the country's most popular destinations, including Delhi, Agra, Pune, Mysore, Kolkata, and Mumbai.

Srin was formerly a corporate lawyer at a large and prestigious international law firm in the City of London. He worked there for four years, before leaving to do an MBA at Oxford University, with a focus on entrepreneurship. There he taught himself to code websites and was able to build the prototype for Accomable himself. He was featured in an award winning short documentary produced by a New York filmmaker on enabling accessibility and his journey to build Accomable. The film was shortlisted at the UN Enable Film Festival in New York.

Incidentally, Srin had graduated from King's College, University of London with a first class degree in Biochemistry and received the university's nomination for the best undergraduate in the UK's Science, Engineering and Technology student awards.

When he is not being a corporate lawyer or an aspiring entrepreneur, Srin loves to travel and experience adventures of a more extreme kind in their wheelchair accessible form! Some past adventures have included scuba diving, flying a plane, wheelchair trekking through mountains and a camping safari in Africa. In the second half of 2010, he took some time out from work to go travelling around the world for four months and consequently takes a keen personal interest in trying to encourage disabled people to travel more.

The first real eye-opening experience was when I took six months off from my job at a law firm to go travelling in 2010. It was extremely difficult to find information on adapted accommodation and transport.

Srin Madipalli shares his thoughts on why he started Accomable, the challenges he has faced along the way, and the plans he has for the year ahead. Here is the story of Accomable, in Srin's own words.

"The first real eye-opening experience was when I took six months off from my job at a law firm to go travelling in 2010. It was extremely difficult to find information on adapted accommodation and transport. A lot of times it involved hours of searching online, taking a major risk and hoping for the best. While I enjoyed the challenge, it also felt very frustrating and I'd often just like the planning to be easy!



During that trip, I realised that many of the frustrations I felt could be solved by technology and by creating online products with reliable information and a means of booking. Such systems have revolutionised travel for other customer sectors, so why not for the accessible travel market?

In 2011 I co-founded Disability Horizons, a blog which brings together anyone with a disability, and discusses everything, including travel. I saw this great community of people who felt the same way, people who wanted to feel confident travelling and look forward to their holiday.

In 2012, I left my job as a lawyer in London, and put myself through an MBA at Oxford and taught myself to code, so I could build the website for Accomable. The idea is to make everything as transparent as possible for customers looking for accessible hotel rooms and vacation rentals. This is important, because one of the biggest challenges people with disabilities face when travelling is fear and feeling nervous, particularly if they've had bad experiences with accessible accommodation in the past. So for each property on Accomable, its accessible features are clearly listed and verified by us, from step-free access and roll-in showers to height adjustable beds and the presence of ceiling, mobile or pool hoists. Some of our properties also offer specialist equipment like bathroom commodes or wheelchairs to use or rent. Tech is great in this respect, because it also means we can get properties to verify access using photo and video which we can share with our customers on the site.

We recently raised record funding from some of London's top tech and hospitality investors, and are using this money to grow Accomable and offer even more quality, accessible properties to our customers.

I'm particularly pleased that we've launched 19 new properties across India with many more on the way. As a child I would travel to India with my parents to visit family



One of the best things about my job has to be getting feedback from our customers. We work closely with everyone who books our accommodation to ensure they're not only confident about their holiday, but really looking forward to it.

every year. In terms of accessibility it wasn't easy but people were so kind and helpful that I still really enjoyed each visit, and am looking forward to staying in some of our accessible properties in Kolkata, Mysore and Mumbai.

One of the best things about my job has to be getting feedback from our customers. We work closely with everyone who books our accommodation to ensure they're not only confident about their holiday, but really looking forward to it. This is because many people who have a disability can be very nervous about travelling because they've had bad experiences in the past (booking accommodation which turns out to be inaccessible is definitely not unusual and something I had experienced several times myself). So it's brilliant when we get in touch with customers after their trip and hear what a great time they've had.

For the year ahead we want to make Accomable even bigger with hundreds more accessible properties in India, Asia and worldwide. We're constantly looking at ways to innovate - working with Uber to offer wheelchair-friendly taxis; using video technology to ensure all of our hotels are accessible to our exacting specifications; and building community areas on our website so customers can find out more about travel with a disability and about the accessibility of their travel destination.

We hope to welcome you to Accomable soon!"



Travelling Together

Planet Abled is an exciting new start-up tour operator based in Delhi, that is facilitating and custom-making inclusive tours and solo trips for people with any kind of disability.



Neha Arora

When Delhi-based Neha Arora was growing up, travel was largely limited to school picnics and trips to grandparents' houses. Her father being blind and mom a wheelchair user, Neha hadn't got to travel much because of access barriers. Sometimes Neha and her family would travel a good thousand miles or more, only to confront that their destination was not accessible after all.

Not one to resort to despondence, Neha reflected, "There might be many other people and their families facing the same problems". And the idea of Planet Abled was born, a firm that would facilitate and custom make inclusive tours for people with all kinds of disability. She researched on the same for two years, doing ground work and feasibility studies and eventually quit her job with Adobe to launch this start-up. Planet Abled now operates with a team of five and a pool of 60-70 travel volunteers.

It is a start up with a huge vision: To let people with disability travel and experience the world with as much ease, flexibility and convenience as a person without any perceivable disability can.

The journey is on. Planet Abled's first tour was in January 2016, a heritage walk in Mehrauli Archaeological Park in and around Qutub Minar, New Delhi. It now conducts heritage tours, food tours, pottery workshops, poetry sessions, museum tours, custom tours for family and group of friends, and even solo tours. Just recently, Planet Abled had organized a solo tour (in Uttarakhand) for a visually impaired young man; the tour itinerary was decided upon based on his interests and end-to-end travel arrangements were made after a complete access audit. A trained travel escort was provided to him and the people involved in the hotel and transport arrangements were sensitized beforehand to provide him a wholesome happy travel experience.

The group tours are inclusive, with the disabled travelling along with those without medically proven disabilities. Trained volunteers travelling alongside provide assistance needed by the disabled; there are also needed resource persons or support

My vision is to enable everyone to travel together, whether or not they have a disability



Lack of accessible toilets is perhaps the biggest challenge.



staff like sign language interpreters for the hearing and speech impaired. Activities are planned and arrangements made to let visually impaired persons experience the new place and culture. For instance, Planet Abled ropes in sensitized curators who guide visually impaired participants to get close to the structures, touch and perceive them. Planet Abled also organizes regular outings such as coffee meet-ups, karaoke jam sessions etc, and is also working to bring adventure and sports into their realm.

Pilot Trips

So, how does Neha go about organizing these trips? How does she sort out the accessibility hitches that exist all around us? “Old heritage buildings have accessibility issues and there are no accessible toilets available at most places, which is perhaps the

Travel brings in visibility, which creates awareness and spurs society towards access and inclusion.



biggest challenge. At times, there are no ramps available, no Braille signage, etc. Another challenge is in finding hotels with multiple accessible rooms so that everyone can stay together”, shares Neha.

So when a tour is planned, Planet Abled visits the place beforehand, audit it, identify barriers and plan needed access solutions, such as taking a ramp when the destination lacks it, getting special permissions for access, etc. For instance, for the Garden Festival Tour, conducted by Planet Abled in association with Delhi Tourism, Neha got special permissions for blind people to touch and smell flowers and plants and thus experience the garden.

The need for travel

The more disabled people travel and venture into public spaces, the more is their visibility, which gives the disabled more mind-space and say in society. Travel thus raises awareness on the sizeable number of disabled persons out there in society and the need for ensuring accessible travel for all. A step in this direction was Planet Abled’s recent Metro event in Delhi, wherein scores of disabled persons travelled on a Delhi metro train coach, on a one-hour ride that included fun and entertainment activities.

For long term sustenance, though, any initiative has to be profitable. So what’s the business model of Planet Abled? Says Neha, “People with disabilities lead a normal life with regular jobs and college education and can pay for their travel themselves. But, as of now, to spread the word on accessible travel, we share a bit of cost ourselves as well. For people who can’t afford, we get their travel sponsored at times, if possible. People can also gift a tour to their friend/family member, or to a stranger, for that matter”. ■

*We just go by
the mantra
of making it
possible, no
matter what.*

Climb Every Mountain



Of all the paths you take in life, make sure a few of them are dirt.

I truly believe in the above quote. Most of us, I suppose, have at one time or another, had the impulse to leave behind our daily routine and responsibilities and seek out, temporarily, a new life. With this thought, a few weeks back, I decided to go in search of dirt.

In writing this article, I give words to the most memorable journey of my life. I, a 90% patient of cerebral palsy, decided to trek from Mcleodganj to Triund. My trekking actually began right at Delhi – when I ran for a bus from Kashmiri Gate Metro Station to ISBT. I ran nonstop with the crowd.

SIDHARTH TANEJA



Life is about chasing dreams... and Sidharth Taneja relives the exhilarating and challenging trek he undertook from Mcleodganj to Triund.

Driving along the beautiful mountains through some sharply turning roads, we reached our hotel 'Pink House' in the morning. 'Pink House' was right down in the valley. To our surprise, the hotel's reception lobby was on its roof. This hotel had a 50-step stairway, and here again, I was ramping up for the final trek. When I opened the balcony door, a stunning view welcomed us. The mountains came at us from a great height and seemed to be descending infinitely. Small hotels and houses were located here and there in the mountains and ours was one of them.

We explored Mcleodganj the entire day, trudging through its narrow roads. We started from the Dalai Lama Temple and then visited the monastries, the market, and so on. As night approached, the city was all lit up. We roamed around the same market for four to five hours to find someone who would help us get a room at Triund hills. Finally, we were successful.

Sitting at the roadside and eating momos and mushroom was an awesome experience. Even though the market was crowded, there was a sense of peace. The reason for it was the people of this place – they were so humble. All through the night we kept looking at the mountains that we would reach after trekking.

The next day, we started at six in the morning. Our most responsible teammate Tanviji tried to guide us, but he took us the wrong way. Here, I want to thank the Himachal Government for placing direction boards in the forest, with the help of which we got back on track. After walking a few meters, we encountered people descending from the higher reaches of the mountains. Their faces expressed a huge question mark when they saw me: A patient of cerebral palsy, trekking with the support of two friends? He is like an alien walking on earth.

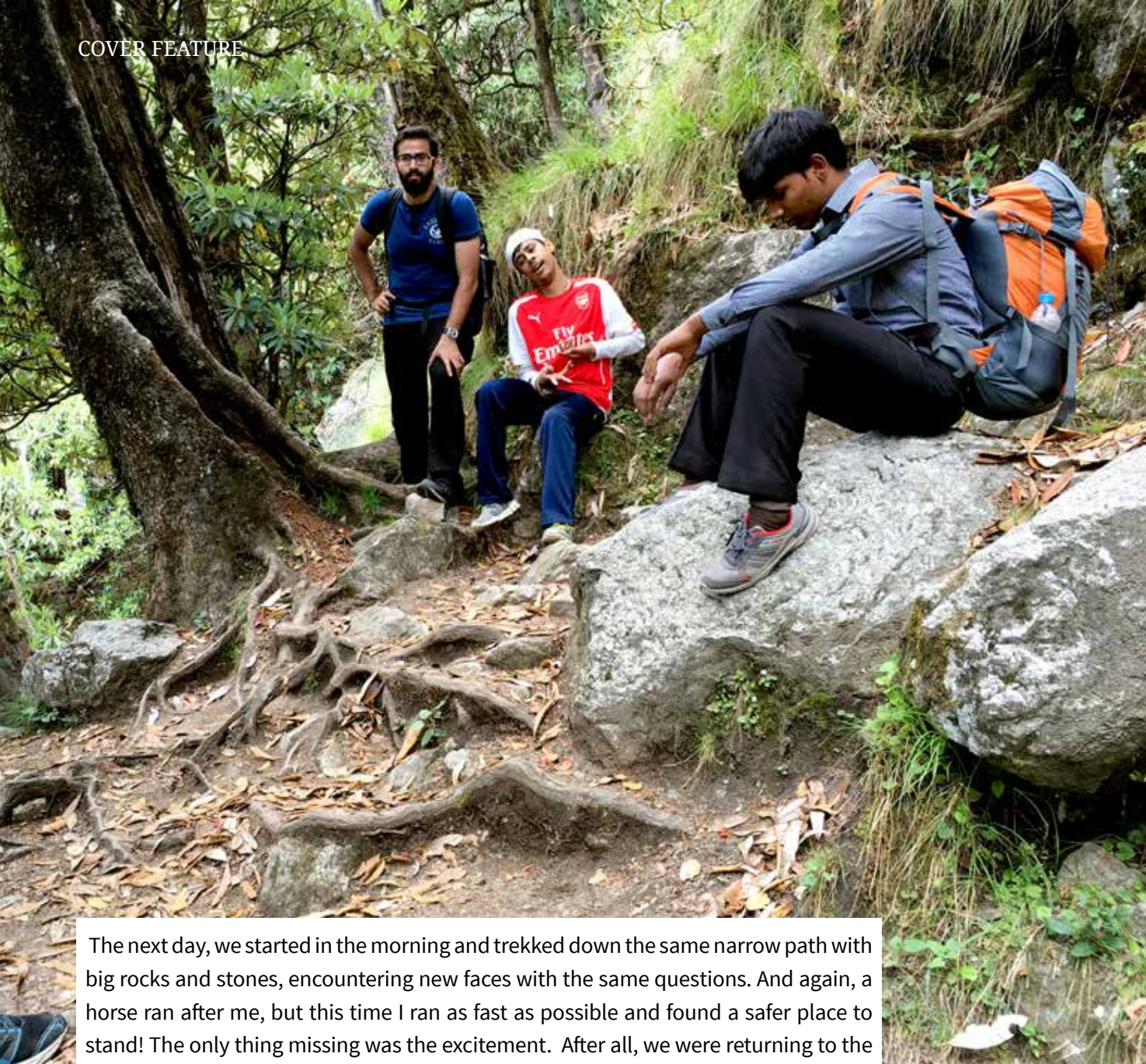
Some of them stopped by us and said, “Upar math lekejayo, bohot steep hai” (Don’t take him up, it is very steep), and I said to myself, “Koi na, pohchjayenge” (Don’t worry, I will make it).

During the trek, some of the people I encountered were very discouraging, while others said that I was an inspiration. Acceptance and rejection of suggestions is a matter of choice, and I chose to be positive. After trekking halfway, we reached the “Magic View Point” of Maggie. From there, when I looked back, I was like “Oh, was it really me who covered this rocky path!” The way my friends, Hulk a.k.a. Sanchit, Lara Croft a.k.a. Tanvi, Punjabi Kukkad Hardik, and my helper Mukesh had supported me was beyond expectations.

Horses were being used for traveling up and down, for transferring food and other essentials. The trekking path was very narrow and the horses often ran over the path. At one point, I fell down and my horse ran over my leg and I thought, “Ye sabne bataya ke steep hai trek, magar kisi ne ye nahi bataya ki ispe ghode doudte hai.” (They told me the trek was steep, but no one told me that horses ran on the path)! The trek was tough, but the view that I encountered all through the trek was so attractive that I never felt tired. As I was trekking for the first time, the trek was tough for me. When we reached the summit in the evening, I was like “abigayaarabigaya bas.” (I have made it).

From the summit, the view was more than awesome. Below us, there were small houses; at the back were snow-capped mountains staring at us, accompanied by a clear blue sky. The beautiful scene was worth all our pain, wounds, and struggles. The scene was even more spectacular and priceless at night, when the snowcapped mountains shone. The moon displayed its strength with so much luminescence that the entire city seemed lit up.

*They told me
the trek was
steep, but no
one told me
that horses ran
on the path!*



The next day, we started in the morning and trekked down the same narrow path with big rocks and stones, encountering new faces with the same questions. And again, a horse ran after me, but this time I ran as fast as possible and found a safer place to stand! The only thing missing was the excitement. After all, we were returning to the same loop of life where we wouldn't see the sky and moon the way we had earlier.

When I began the journey, one of my relatives had told me, "Tu paagal hai, trekking normal log nahi karta, tu kya karega?" (You are crazy. Even 'normal' people are unable to trek. What will you do?) So the moment I returned, I called this same relative and said, "Mujhe nahi pata normal log kar pate hai ya nahi, magar maine trekking karli." (I don't know if 'normal' people are able to trek or not. But I have done it.) After all, life is all about chasing dreams.

I end this chronicle with my favorite dialogue – Main udna chahta hoon, daudna chahta hoon, girna bhi chahta hoon ... bus rukna nahi chahta. (I wish to fly, run, even fall... I just don't want to stop.) ■

*I wish to fly,
run, even fall...
I just don't
want to stop.*



Building a better working world



Ernst Young (EY), a global leader in assurance, tax, transaction and advisory services, takes pride in playing a critical role in building a better working world for their people, for their clients and for the community. The insights and quality service EY delivers help build trust and confidence in capital markets and economies the world over. EY develops outstanding leaders who team to deliver on their promises to all of their stakeholders.

Terry Thomas, Innovation Center Leader and Partner - Operations, Advisory Services, has gone out of his way to ensure that every inch of the office space of Ernst Young's Chennai division is totally accessible and barrier-free, setting a superlative standard for corporate offices across the country. Not only that, he has embarked on a successful and pioneering policy of inclusion that is based on empowerment and equal opportunities, rather than charity. In an exclusive interview with Success & ABILITY, Terry Thomas shares with us the systems and practices at EY that make it such a great equal-opportunities employer.

1. Please share some insight into Ernst & Young's work philosophy and vision.



Terry Thomas

All that we do at EY is driven by our 'Vision 2020', which we launched in 2013. One of the enabling pillars supporting Vision 2020 is 'Highest Performing Team' – that takes into consideration diversity and inclusiveness (D&I) as an important element. Typically, D&I is predominantly seen in the context of gender diversity, the element of inclusiveness (of persons with disabilities or from economically backgrounds) tends to be overlooked. At EY, we wish to reinforce and equally focus efforts on inclusiveness and gender diversity.

2. Do you have a recruitment policy on inclusiveness (of persons with disabilities)? Please elaborate.

We don't have specific policies on inclusiveness. However, our recruitment teams are routinely sensitized on the subject. One of the additional steps that we have taken, for example, is the inclusion of Kalasalingam University that offers engineering programs for students with speech and hearing impairment, to the list of select institutions where we conduct campus recruitments.

3. How have you managed to promote inclusiveness internally?

I believe this needs to be driven from the top, and reinforced with supporting measures. One of the supporting measures we have taken, is the training imparted on international sign language to the team members WHO are to work with new recruits with hearing impairment, so as to aid communication and enable the employee with hearing impairment, feel comfortable. This has helped the quicker and successful integration of the hearing impaired persons with the rest of the team; recruits with hearing impairment are as much part of EY as anyone else. We are currently into the third cycle of recruiting people with hearing impairment and have so far been impressed with the level of their commitment and willingness to learn.

4. When you advertise for vacancies, do you add a line about being open to hiring persons with disabilities?

We don't advertise for vacancies. We do however inform our recruiting agencies that we are an equal opportunity employer and are open to diversity hiring, across gender and abilities.

5. Over the last few years, if you have recruited persons with disabilities, please specify the numbers.

We have recruited six disabled persons. We are keen on recruiting more people from the group, based on job fitment but find it a challenge to source such candidates.

6. At EY, is recruitment of persons with disabilities driven as a CSR initiative or as an equal opportunity/diversity policy?

No. Recruitment of persons with disabilities is driven by our diversity policy. Our CSR programmes focus on supporting and facilitating communities around us to make this world a better place to live in. Through our CSR programs, we channel our efforts into three key areas that are aligned with our business strategy and critical to improving and expanding market economies, which are:

- Entrepreneurship – supporting and celebrating start-up companies as they create opportunity and contribute to the growth of the society.
- Education – developing skills and broadening access to make sure the next generation has the skills it needs to make a positive impact.
- Environmental sustainability – minimizing our impact on the environment.

Hire people with disabilities, you will never regret it. There can be other pay-offs from it as well, as is true with all diversity initiatives.



I believe inclusion has to be driven from the top, and reinforced with supporting measures.

7. What are some of the different positions that have been filled by persons with disabilities at EY?

People with disabilities have been placed in our consultancy division, cyber security division, and in our innovation centre.

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

At the end of the day, we are an equal opportunity employer, and we look at persons with disabilities just the same as we look at anyone else in the organization. We don't alter job profiles but ensure fitment while hiring. Interestingly, the persons with disabilities are as keen as in not being treated "Special", as much as we are. Here is what one of our recruits with disability told us, "We are happy for what you have done for us today (the first day, when we welcomed them into EY), but we don't want to be special from tomorrow. We want no concessions. We just want to be treated on par with everyone".

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

When EY's Chennai office was constructed, we had reached out to Ability Foundation and asked for accessibility standards, and every aspect of it has been incorporated into our office infrastructure and interiors, right down to our washrooms. So, as it is, we have a totally accessible office space.

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

It is just the same, there is no preferential treatment. We demand that all of our employees, be they disabled or non-disabled, measure up in terms of performance. We believe that this philosophy not only helps resource scale up, but also integrate into the organization more effectively.

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

It is just the same; disability is not even a factor of consideration. As I said, we are an equal opportunity employer with no differential treatment given to anyone.

12. Do you have any training programme, especially or exclusively for employees with disabilities? Could you tell us what these are?

We do not have any special training programs for our employees with disabilities. But we do work in partnership with the respective colleges, by sharing feedback and suggestions on the areas and the skill (of students) that their students need to be equipped with, in order to make them more qualified for the job.

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

We do hold sign language workshops for teams that would be working with new hires who have hearing impairments. To our delight, we have found that not only do our employees enjoy the process, but a few leaders have also emerged from such programs who take on themselves the integration process. They go out of the way in communicating with the new recruit with hearing impairment, and help him/her integrate into the team.

14. What has been the reason for the focus on hearing impairment, among the spectrum of disabilities?

It was a strategic decision, to ensure that the integration and inclusiveness process is smooth. We wanted to begin with recruiting people with hearing impairments and then expand to recruiting people with disabilities that are more challenging.

15. Is there a feedback system within EY that may be used by employees with disabilities to share with the management their experiences at the workplace? If cases of discrimination have been reported, how have these been handled?

We do have a general feedback mechanism that applies to everyone. In addition, we do try to get feedback informally from casual conversations and network groups.

People with disabilities have been placed in our consultancy division and in our innovation centre.

16. Has the inclusive approach that you have been practicing found its way into policy? Please elaborate.

Our inclusive approach is in alignment with our Vision 2020. Having said that, we do not have a policy around inclusiveness. Till date it has been largely voluntary, and driven by a soft push from the top.



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

Very good. Fundamentally, we see no difference between a person with or without disability. They perform as well or even better than others without disabilities, and their attrition rates are almost zero.

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

It is the leadership in an organization that can truly make it work; to ensure it is not seen as an obligation but a moral responsibility and contribution to building a better working world.

19. Likewise, what would you say to corporates who are hesitant about hiring persons with disabilities?

Give it a try, you will never regret it. And then, there can be other pay-offs as well, as is true with all forms of diversity initiatives. For instance, when we went to Kalasalingam University for the first time, our recruitment team did not know how to communicate with the interviewee. Therefore, they got into a huddle and quickly designed an e-interview tool. Today, the same tool has evolved and is being used across the organization for all our hiring!

20. 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?

Be confident, you are just as good as anyone. Also realize every person born on earth has some disability or the other. To quote Teri Garr, "When you hear the word 'disabled,' people immediately think about people who can't walk or talk or do everything that people take for granted. Now, I take nothing for granted. But I find the real disability is people who can't find joy in life and are bitter." ■

*Be confident,
a disabled
person is
just as good
as anyone.
Also realize
that every
person born
on earth
has some
disability or
the other.*



When the voice knows NO BOUNDARIES

Conceptualised and created by six visually impaired friends based in different cities of the country, Radio Udaan, an online radio channel is reaching out to listeners across the globe, giving the visually impaired not just a voice but also a social network that keeps them connected, updated, and empowered, writes YASHASVINI RAJESHWAR.



**Yashasvini
Rajeshwar**

What happens when a government employee, a civil services aspirant, a political science graduate, and a smattering of private sector employees come together? A radio station is born. What happens when the six-member core team is blind? Radio Udaan comes to life.

With a listenership of over twenty thousand people spread across a hundred countries, their influence extends from Australia to Israel and from Canada to Bangladesh – every entrepreneur’s dream.

Radio Udaan was conceptualised and created by a group of six friends across the country. Radio Udaan quickly became an internet-based site for dedicated information dissemination, a specialised platform where one could learn about and debate issues of disability and one of the few media platforms that gives people with disability a voice. Seeing that disability impeded even highly

“We set out to sensitize mainstream audiences but soon realised that we needed to sensitize disabled people first.”

qualified professionals from being represented in popular media, the way forward seemed crystal clear. At Radio Udaan, people with disability have the right to a point of view, one that so many take for granted.

Danish Mahajan, one of the founding members of the project, is straightforward and matter of fact about their success. “At Udaan, we don’t care much for awards and formal accolades”, he begins. “Every positive story is a success. We have empowered five hundred RJs, touched base with five thousand people who have participated in our shows and reached out to so many thousands more. We have stories of older listeners who conquered the monster of touchscreen technology just to listen to our shows. We have testimonials of how we helped people recover from depression. We have come to represent learning and experience”. Apart from the formal recognition that has flown in aplenty, Udaan’s success is unquestionably rooted in the spirit of empowerment, exposure, and silent revolution.

This is definitely not to say that the going has been easy, a smooth journey free of hassles and bumps. “We set out to sensitize mainstream audiences but soon realised that we needed to sensitize disabled people first”, Mahajan explains, adding that they are now open to non-disabled radio jockeys as well. “If we can work under them, why can’t they work under us”, he muses.

With a listenership of over twenty thousand people spread across over a hundred countries, Radio Udaan’s influence extends from Australia to Israel, Canada to Bangladesh.



“Elderly listeners have conquered touch screen technology just to listen to our shows.”

The team at Udaan set out on the task of creating awareness and proving to the disabled community that being a radio jockey is a perfect part time job. “However, the top three issues on our list of challenges are different”, he continues. “Finances are a huge worry since we are digging deep into our own pockets. This means we cannot afford too much equipment or high-end technology. Secondly, because Udaan is a voluntary effort, we have found that interest tapers off with time and personal commitments take a front seat. This impacts the work we can put out. And finally, we would love to have the cooperation of our listeners. The older we get, the less feedback we seem to be receiving!”

“We have empowered five hundred RJs, had over five thousand people so far participating in our shows, and reached out to so many thousands more.”



Since February 2014, Udaan has hosted a zillion hours of air time (with Danish himself having hosted 300 shows, each an hour long), and organized two conventions. It has now become a force to reckon with as a pressure group. “While we have been able to push the NGO sector considerably, we are still working our way to influencing government policies”, Mahajan says. He adds, “One can listen to Radio Udaan 24/7. We broadcast our programmes from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. and rebroadcast them the following day from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. Music is broadcast during the rest of radio time every day”.

The list of names of community leaders he rattles off is impressive, with details of the conversations and the promises made rolling off his tongue effortlessly. With their sights set high, the Udaan team hopes to reach out to remote parts of the country and introduce them to the power of technology.

The next few years look exciting. New RJs will come on board. Internet users and therefore listeners, will increase. Change will be ushered in. Radio Udaan will live up to its name, one that inspires hope, celebration, fresh beginnings and a new lease of life. ■

LET'S GO CARBON-NEGATIVE !

Inspired by Carbon-Negative Bhutan, DR. KETNA L MEHTA, Ph.D.,
Founder, Nina Foundation makes a case for India adopting
the sustainability paradigm – in policy and practice.

A fantastic and mind blowing TED video was recently shared by my old Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies batchmate on our WhatsApp group. The eloquent speaker was Tshering Tobgay, the Prime Minister of Bhutan since 2013.

Primarily, Bhutan is well known for developing its own GNH (Gross National Happiness) as opposed to the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as an economic metric. Countries around the world have gradually accepted and adopted this unanimously.

The PM proudly wore their country's traditional costume (Gho), and made an impactful presentation, communicating in impeccable English. Some of the revelations in the PM's talk were:

- Bhutan is the world's only carbon sink – it absorbs more CO₂ (Carbon dioxide) than it gives out.
- The only country whose largest export is renewable energy, Bhutan sells hydroelectric power.
- In keeping with the Buddhist ideal that humans and nature share a symbiotic relationship, 72% of the country is forested, and it is in their constitution that 60% always will be.



SUSTAINABILITY

The Bhutanese environmental pledge is part of the concept of GNH, whereby the treasury measures progress against four pillars:

- Sustainable development
- Environmental protection
- Cultural preservation
- Good governance.

In fact, Bhutan has gone beyond Carbon Neutral, it is Carbon Negative. A huge hurray for this commendable feat by a tiny kingdom on the global map! While climate change is top on the agenda for most developed countries, here is a small country that has gone beyond 'talks' and 'discussions' and become a carbon sink. Even Bhutan's policy towards tourism is a cautious one and works on the concept of 'high-value, low volume' tourism that keeps a control on the quality and quantity of tourists coming into the country.

Going Green

A carbon sink is a natural or artificial reservoir that absorbs, accumulates and stores some carbon-containing chemical compound for an indefinite period. The process by which carbon sinks remove carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the atmosphere is known as carbon sequestration. The foremost natural carbon sinks are plants, oceans, and soil. Meanwhile, 'sustainable' alludes to something that can be continued, or a practice that maintains a condition without harming the environment, such as the practice of 'reduce, reuse and recycle'.

Forbes India recommends some sustainable practices that India must make mandatory:

- Implement the ban on plastic bags.
- Water harvesting.
- Fish farming.
- Sustainable tourism that involves the well-being of local communities, protection, and management of cultural and natural assets, and limiting environmental impact.
- Sustainable forestry.
- Solar energy subsidies.
- Installation of water meters in residential buildings, so that people may be charged according to their consumption.

Small, simple and continuous acts like these, by each and every one of us, will restore the glory of our 'Mother Earth', which, so far, is the only place we call HOME. ■



Dr Ketna L Mehta

Bhutan has gone beyond Carbon Neutral, it is Carbon Negative. A huge hurray for this commendable feat by a tiny kingdom on the global map!

"Avalukkendru Or Manam"

A mind of her own

Aishwarya Sriram, 34, is no unknown name in autism circles. She can sing, sketch, draw on the computer and most importantly, she can solve 1000-piece jigsaw puzzles like a dream. The 'Puzzle Queen' has been featured in many dailies and has been interviewed and honoured many times. Aishwarya is gifted with prodigious memory, unique spatial intelligence and the ability to foresee events. However her best gifts are her totally amazing parents, B. Sriram and Girija. They work as a team and have risen from strength to strength with the passing years, discovering their daughter and rediscovering their own selves in the process.

Avalukkendru or manam – 'A mind of her own', is a labour of love, creativity, humility and a strong social message. This book in Tamil, a true magnum opus, consists of selected jottings from Aishwarya's extensive five-year journal. Far from 'fighting autism' with her diary, Aishwarya lives her autism in style.

Aishwarya calls herself 'Aisi' in the third person – a typical autistic trait, for the greater part, and also refers to herself in the first person. Her daily activities,

like yoga, walking, cycling, cooking and washing clothes in the machine are mentioned by her more than once. Puzzles solved, outings with her family, music class, exhibition of her puzzles, meeting with celebrities, who are well...just as human as she is, and yes, her tummy aches and episodes of fits and anger (which she calls autism), all find place in the book. Most endearingly, the epicurean that Aisi is, good food brings out the music in her (20-4-2010). Aisi loves trinkets like key chains and does not hesitate to pinch one or two when the occasion presents itself (2-8-2015). The scolding that follows and her resolve not to repeat her crime also figure, only to end up creating more havoc when she sees a chance. Aisi's description of her house Ashraya,

Meera Balachander finds 'Avalukkendru Or Manam' to be a book that gives readers valuable insight into effective special parenting.

pecially redesigned for her by her parents, and the vegetables grown in her garden come as a whiff of fresh air. Aisi also has a quirky sense of word association and rhyme which are delightful to read. (If I do not do yoga I will put on weight; when you put on the

weight, the cooker whistles). Her fear of dogs and love of cats, described graphically by Aisi, make us smile. A spot of political update (1-6-2014) and (11-

Author:

Aishwarya Sriram

Publishers:

Amarabharathi

Price:

Rs. 250/-

5-2015) adds variety. The incident of the cleverly planned search for a pair of hidden scissors and its aftermath is hilarious (29-8-2014). On asked about the challenges she faces, Aishwarya's reference to her fits and how autism limits her expression is deeply touching (11-6-2015). Aishwarya has her own code of conduct (13-14-2014) wherein she lists the dos and don'ts of a good child – and good parents!

The book reproduces pages in Aishwarya's handwriting, keeping intact her syntax, or the lack of it. However, the Srirams have captioned most entries and added footnotes to explain situations, and their daughter's use of words. These additions to the diary complement Aishwarya's output and also show how the Srirams cherish each thought and feeling of their daughter.

The Srirams have done their best to keep alive whatever skills and

knowledge Aishwarya acquired during her academic and vocational learning. Totally in sync with their daughter's day-to-day life, diary writing seemed a good way to help reinforce her writing skills. At a fixed time each day, Aisi is encouraged to remember events of the previous day and write them down, spicing them up with her feelings and ideas, even though expression of thoughts and emotions does not come easily to an autistic child.

The output has surprised the parents more than once, for instance, Aishwarya's unique (tele) graphic expression, her ingenious shortcuts in combining Tamil and English syllables (21-8-2013) and her twisting of tales. At times, Aisi reveals in written words what she covers up with her silence (13-6-2013), wrenching her parents' hearts for scolding her.

The Srirams have seen and lived autism at close quarters. Autistic children are often difficult to understand and handle, but give them love, treat them with reverence and patience, and involve them in your day to day life – and they are bound to blossom. This is the message conveyed by the Srirams through Aishwarya's diary. ■



Meera
Balachander

Aishwarya's sketches – realistic, childish, esoteric and abstract, have been carefully reproduced in the book. The Srirams' relentless efforts to bring out the best in their daughter come through beautifully in this sensitive book.



What started off as Do-It-Yourself projects eventually ended up as Just-Do-It projects, but nevertheless, they made for a great bonding exercise and taught her so much about relationships, patience, perseverance and perfection, writes VAISHNAVI VENKATESH.

If you want a thing done well, do it yourself - Napoleon Bonaparte.

Quoting Napoleon might be a good indication for you to predict where this article is headed. I moved into a new house a few months ago... I wouldn't really call it new, as it looked well lived-in, but it was still a new experience for me. After spending most of my life in houses inhabited by family, this was my opportunity at figuring things out. From how frequently one changes the bedcovers to why the nooks and crannies of the kitchen need to be spotless...moving houses did a world of good for my inflated ego and spoilt-brat upbringing.

The most exciting aspect about moving houses for me was the shopping it involved. I don't mean furniture or drapes or any of the usual stuff. This house came furnished and one could live contentedly. But we live in a city that has an IKEA. And if you've ever been to an IKEA, then you'll realise soon enough that you don't just go to shop at IKEA. You buy an experience. You buy potential fights with your partner. But most importantly, you buy a ton of stuff that you absolutely don't need.

And that's how my love for the DIY started. I saw tiny cushions being sold at a ridiculously low price, so I had to have them. Then I saw fabrics that were itching to be sewn into covers for the said cushions, so they tagged along as well. I should probably mention here that I've never sewn anything beyond buttons and minor tears in clothing. But it was DIY, so why not.

The fabric was just the beginning. I saw shelving units that somehow brainwashed me into thinking that they can be stacked on each other to form a chic cupboard. There were tables that I simply had to have, given how cheap they were. There

were a few table lamps that needed to be adorned on the said tables. In short, we came home with loot that nearly made us look like folks who've decided to build a house from scratch.

The best part began after we stepped into the house with our loot. Everything in IKEA needs to be assembled. Their motto ought to be Napoleon's aforementioned quote, actually. Assembling tables and lamps and shelves can't be too bad, I thought. And then I saw the packaging. A lamp that I could've sworn was spherical was packed in a rectangular flat box. A table that should've been standing upright was encased in a slim square box. There were instructions for everything, of course, but they resembled the picture books that you give two-year-olds to keep them occupied when they're getting anxy.

After a game of rock-paper-scissors to decide who gets to assemble what, we set to work. The eerie silence of two people trying to assemble furniture should be the background music for a commercial depicting a happy marriage. We had with us, a dandy set of tools (also courtesy IKEA) and we were confident that we could do everything ourselves. That was when trouble began...

A nail would be astray or the table would look wonky. The lamp didn't quite look spherical and we didn't have anything to store in our shelves! After hours of struggling, we resorted to the internet where kind souls who've been there and done that, had uploaded videos on how to Do-It-Yourself, but they were of little help. We thought we'd divided the work amicably, but small critiques of the other person's work would set us off and make us defensive of our shoddily put together items. We finally decided to give this a rest and start over the next day.

As with anything that becomes unappealing after the first rush of excitement, all our DIY projects ended up getting neglected for a fair amount of time. Procrastination took over and we decided our house looked very kitsch with a wonky table and half assembled lamps. It was the fear of having unannounced guests over that got us back on our feet to complete the projects in a frantic rush. What started off as Do It Yourself, turned into Nike's philosophy of Just Do It.

It's been a month since we've moved in and I'm happy to say that our DIY projects are all completed. The table stands proud and the lamps are lighting up our lives. The entire process taught me so much about myself, relationships, patience, perseverance and perfection. I think everyone should give DIY projects a shot. Start small, build a shelf or a table perhaps. Try doing it with family, it works excellently as a bonding exercise. Would I do this again? Absolutely. After all, we have that chic cupboard that's still empty and waiting to be filled with more projects! ■



Vaishnavi
Venkatesh

I think everyone should give DIY projects a shot. And try doing it with family, it works excellently as a bonding exercise.

16 வகை அனைத்தும் சிறந்த சுவை

உங்கள் உணவை மேலும் சிறப்பாக்க,
நாங்கள் ஆவக்காய், தொக்கு, எலுமிச்சம்,
பூண்டு, தக்காளி, இஞ்சி போன்ற 16
சிறந்த ஊறுகாய் வகைகள் தருகிறோம்.
அத்தனையும் ருசித்துடுங்கள்.





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