

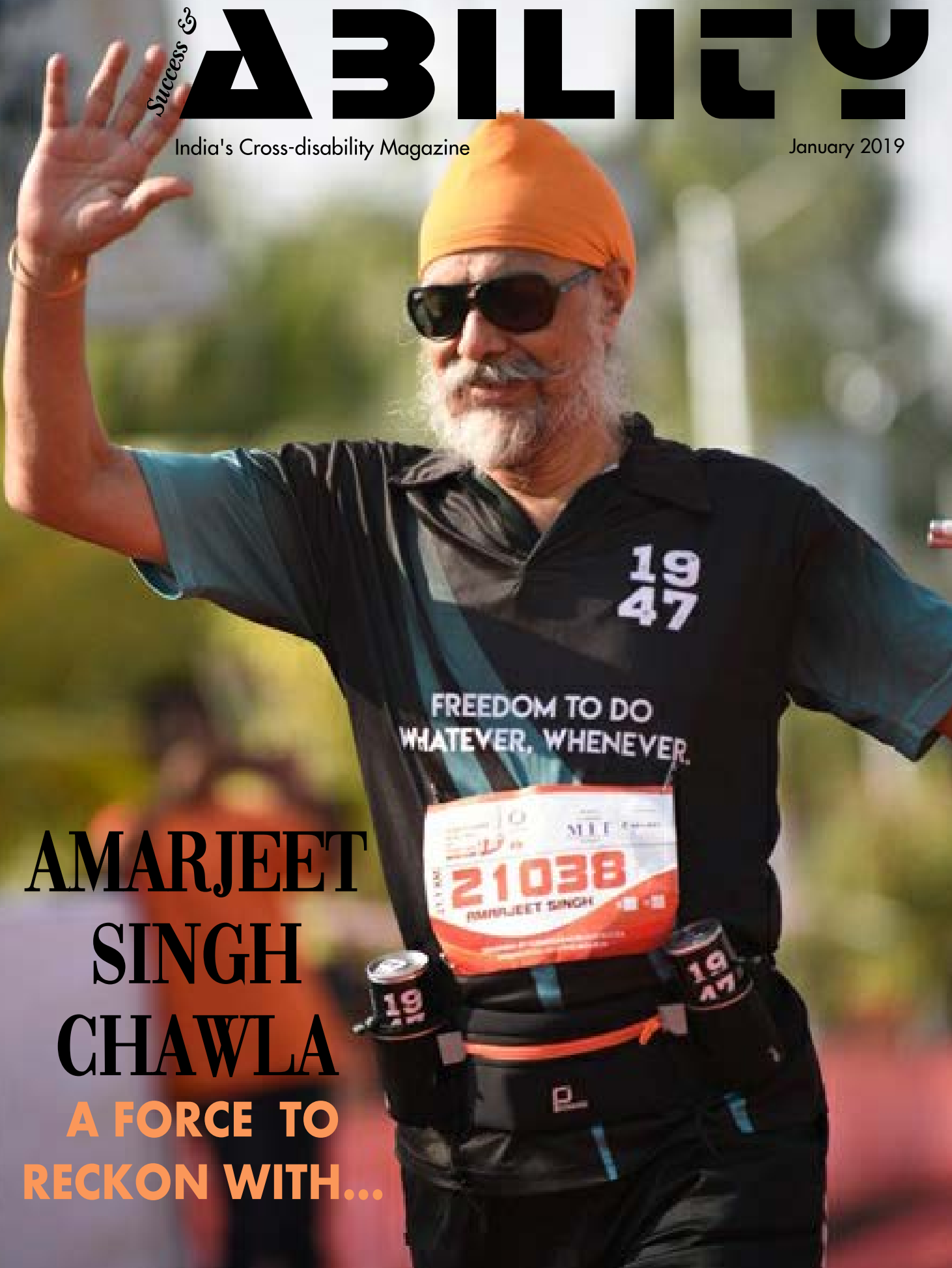
Success &

ABILITY

India's Cross-disability Magazine

January 2019

**AMARJEET
SINGH
CHAWLA**
**A FORCE TO
RECKON WITH...**



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WE'D REALLY LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU

Whether you are a person with disability,
or a parent or a friend or just someone who cares,
we look forward to getting to know you and your concerns.

You are just a click away!



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From the Editor's Desk



Friends,

Here's to a brand new year! Cheers. A fresh start. A new chapter in our lives that waits to be written. Old norms to be questioned. New answers to be discovered. New experiences to be savoured... Perhaps some good and some not so good. Each one leading to a more transformative year of self-discovery. We need to today, carve out a quiet interlude for ourselves, in which to dream. Only dreams give birth to change.

Generally, a year's end is neither an end nor a beginning but a continuous on-going process, with the wisdom of the experience that the days gone by, has instilled in us and the changes that have been brought about.

People with disabilities have seen the good and the not-so-good. We are aglow sometimes, and we deplore sometimes. That said, what has struck me, is the paradigm shift in approach and the outlook of many, towards life itself. We are not satisfied with fulfilling just our bread and butter issues. We want more... out of life. It is not just about survival any more... nor the rudimentary basics of living, such as education and jobs. It is more. No matter what our economic status, we want adventure, sports, quests, pursuits, proving to ourselves and to others, what we are capable of. In short, the inclination is more towards the joy of living, than towards just living. Sports has jumped to the fore... basketball, tennis, mountaineering, marathon running, et al. We bring you the Sporty Sikh in this issue. Here is a man, who has run a hundred marathons and is heading towards his 101st one. Neither his lack of sight nor his age dampens his gusto! All he wants is to spread his message wherever he goes: "Do not ever typecast us. We do not fall into the spaces you have pre-arranged for us. We can do just as much as you can, given the choices we need."

Of course, side by side with this, this new year too... the old order continues. Along with that, we all go further. The impact of promoting diversity and celebrating that diversity is paramount and can, in no way, be underestimated. Neither can the ultimate triumph or accomplishment be underrated. There will always be higher peaks to conquer... thus too, we shall march onto year 2020.

Jayshree Raveendran

News & Notes

SINGGLASSES!

Here is an invention that can hugely improve the learning process of students with hearing impairment in classrooms.

SignGlasses, a company based out of Salt Lake City, UT, has come out with a pair of glasses that screen a miniature video of a sign language interpreter on one side of the lenses, signing in real time whatever the teacher voices in the classroom. The sign language interpreter or processor needn't be present in the classroom. While the student wears the glasses, a clip-on mike that comes along with this product is



worn by the teacher, and the same is transmitted to the interpreter. The person or the processor can be observing the teacher from a remote location through a webcam, and sign everything the teacher says.

SignGlasses comes with a host of advantages. Its software lets students take time stamped notes, and these notes are searchable too. Students can also watch the videos later, such as for studying for exams and for doing homework at home. Important parts of the lectures may also be bookmarked. These glasses are currently being tested by deaf and hard of hearing students at Idaho State University and Brigham Young University, Idaho, and are planned to be used regularly from the forthcoming semester.

Source: Assistive Technology Blog

UN REPORT ON DISABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) has released its flagship report on Disability and Sustainable Development goals for the year 2018. The report, called, ‘Realization of the sustainable development goals by, for and with persons with disabilities’ can be accessed at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/publication-disability-sdgs.html>

Over 200 experts from UN agencies, international financial institutions, research institutions and organisations working in the disability sector contributed to this report. The report covers new areas for which no global research had been available previously, such as the role of access to energy to enable persons with disabilities to use assistive technology. It also contains the first global compilation and analysis of internationally comparable data. Reviews of legislation from 193 UN Member States were conducted and analysed for this report to highlight good practices and to assess the current status of discriminatory laws on voting, election for office, right to marry and other facets. More than 12 major databases of disability statistics, from international agencies and other organisations, were analysed – covering an unprecedented amount of data from over 100 countries. In addition, more than 1.2 million data points of crowd-sourced data have been examined.

The report calls for new approaches and tools to work for and with persons with disabilities, mentioning that despite the strong commitment expressed by the international community to an inclusive, accessible and sustainable 2030 Development Agenda, persons with disabilities continue to face significant challenges to their full inclusion and participation in society and development.

Source: United Nations

BRAIN PACEMAKER!



There's good news on the anvil. In the future, disorders like epilepsy and Parkinson's disease may be treated by simply implanting a 'Brain Pacemaker'. This device, the 'wireless artifact-free neuromodulation device (WAND)' can modify and stimulate the brain with electric current as programmed, much like the pacemaker used in hearts. The device can function autonomously and can record, monitor and stimulate electrical signals in the brain, allowing it to prevent neurological flashpoints like seizures.

WAND has a broad spectrum of activity and recognition and can simultaneously record/stimulate activity from 128 points in the brain. WAND was developed by a team of scientists at the University of California, Berkeley. In a demo using monkeys, the scientists got WAND to recognise and delay the monkeys' arm movements. Following this successful trial, the scientists plan to build intelligent devices by incorporating learning in a closed loop platform, which will lessen the need for monitoring through external devices or by physicians.

Source: Success & ABILITY News Bureau

ENABLE FUND FOR ELECTED OFFICE

Why is there very less representation of persons with disabilities in governments across the world? Why do we hardly ever see candidates with disabilities stand in elections? Experts reckon that one of the reasons for this could be that people with disabilities are likely to face greater costs when campaigning for elected office than their non-disabled counterparts, because of the extra expenses they incur in travelling for canvassing and other such efforts.

Well, now, to level this uneven playing field, in a landmark move, the British government has launched a fund to support candidates with disabilities standing for electoral office. An interim fund worth 250,000 pounds has been launched to help cover disability-related expenses of candidates standing for elections. This fund, called the 'EnAble Fund for Elected Office' will run until 2020. Transport support for mobility impaired candidates, British Sign Language interpretation for hearing impaired candidates, and specialist equipment such as screen reader software and transcription of campaign material into braille may be availed under this fund. Besides this fund, the UK Government is also undertaking a programme with disability stakeholders to assist political parties in supporting disabled candidates.■

Source: Success & ABILITY News Bureau

Marathon Man

100 & GOING STRONG!



The 'Sporty Sikh' a.k.a. AMARJEET SINGH CHAWLA, is blazing a trail in marathoning, his enthusiasm and pace only accelerating with age as the years go by. In an interview with the stalwart, HEMA VIJAY finds out what it is that spurs him on.



Hema
Vijay

It all began rather unassumingly. Amarjeet Singh Chawla was at a family function, in Asansol, when he received a text message from the National Association for the Blind (NAB), an invitation to be part of the seven-kilometre run at the Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon (SCMM) 2004, of which NAB was to be a beneficiary. Due to macular degeneration, Chawla's sight began deteriorating from the age of 13, leading to complete loss of sight by the time he was 40. For Chawla, who was 48 years old then, life was meandering on. His bread and butter came from the small lottery shop that he ran at Malad in Mumbai, while his wife ran a small insurance service business.

“My wife and I visited NAB to enquire about the event and then and there I decided to go for it, just to prove to the world that blind people aren't incapable”, shares Chawla.

This was the starting point. An adrenaline rush then set in. Following the SCMM 2004 run, Chawla decided that he had to do something bigger. He enrolled himself for the half-marathon, i.e., a 21.0975 km run, at the SCMM 2004. He practiced vigorously for this and roped in an escort to run with him. On 16, January 2005, at the age of 49, he ran his first half marathon, completing it in about two hours. Chawla reminisces, “Completing my first half-marathon with such good timing meant a big deal to me. I decided to run more marathons”.

There's been no looking back since then. His life started getting punctuated by half marathons, the punctuations falling closer and closer together with time. When he completed his 25th half-marathon, at Pune, he thought of setting a target for himself. He became fixated on completing 101 half marathons. “101 is a shubh number”, he says. Curiously, his 101st half marathon, slated for 20 January 2019, will be at the 2019 Tata Mumbai Marathon (formerly the SCMM), where it all began. His 100th half-marathon was Mumbai's Powai Run on 6 January 2019.

“From 2005 to 2016, he ran about 60 half-marathons across the country. In the last couple of years, he has been averaging about 20 half-marathons a year!”



From running about 60 half-marathons across the country between 2005 to 2016, in the last couple of years, he has been averaging about 20 marathons a year! The 'Sporty Sikh' as he is affectionately called, has so far run 100 half-marathons and 59 10 km runs, besides a few ultramarathons, that are longer than the traditional 42.195 km run of marathons. This includes his 50 km run (in 12 hours) at the Mumbai Ultra Marathon 2016, and a 57 km run (also in 12 hours) at the Mumbai Ultra Marathon 2017.



Besides, Chawla has also completed several treks in the Himalayas and Sahyadri ranges that have taken him to the Sar Pass, Saurkundi Pass, Kedarnath Trek, Valley of Flowers, Jaisalmer Dessert Trek and Dalhousie to name a few. He has also completed the famous 300 km Mumbai-Shirdi rally walk. In 2009, he became the first blind person to scale the Dolma Pass (Mount Kailash) at 19,830 feet in Tibet. "I could've tried for the Everest base camp trek, but I didn't have sufficient funds, nor a proper escort", he rues. Then there are his exploits in swimming – Chawla won the 50 m freestyle gold at the 'All India Swimming Competition for the Disabled' in Mumbai in 2004.

It is of no matter then, that Chawla who turned 63 on 5 January 2019, has no intention of hanging up his boots any time soon.



"I am not the only one in his 60s to be running marathons", says Chawla. "I have come across many marathoners in their 60s or even older – Malkiat Grewal, Amar Chauhan, Bibiji, Aunty 72+2 a.k.a. Primila Hingorani, Venkatraman Pichumani, Kiranpal Singh Dhodi and many more". It's just that they all happen to be sighted.

Lack of availability of escorts prevents Chawla from preparing/training for marathons by running

“The thought of completing the run, the cheers of fellow participants and onlookers, and the urge to outperform myself prod me on and keep me going.”

long distances. Runners with visual impairment run marathons with escorts, the escort and marathoner holding the edges of a 10-inch rope and running in tandem, with the escort guiding the marathoner as to when to turn, when to change direction, step up/down, etc. “The only training that I do is on-the-spot jogging, holding the railing of the staircase at my house and *Pranayam*. On the marathon days, I don't take up any specific preparation. I just wake up, get ready, have bread-and-butter with tea, and pray to God to give me the courage and the power to complete the marathon”.

Now, many runs later, Chawla doesn't face the ‘escort crisis’ that he once did. There were times when escorts used to opt out at the last moment, leaving him high and dry or proved too pricey. “However, with more people in the running community knowing me; there now are many who are happy to escort me”.

When Chawla started running, he had to bear all the cost that marathoning entailed, including the registration fees, the cost of travel and lodging both for him and his escort, as well as buying expensive energy drinks. In recent years, however, the waiver of the registration fees by some organisers and sponsorship of his marathon





“ By running a demanding marathon, I demonstrate to the world that blind people aren't any less than sighted people. We don't deserve compassion or pity, just an equal standing in society and some support and assistance.”



expenses by an energy drink brand in 2018 proved to be a huge relief for him. Chawla hopes that he will find similar sponsorship for the year 2019 as well.

Yet, running marathons has not been financially rewarding. “In very rare cases, some marathon organisers award me cash prizes. But that has happened just twice or thrice”. So, Chawla continues running his lottery shop and has lately entered the insurance service business, to earn his livelihood.

Chawla has been conferred with the ‘International Sikh Achiever's Award (Sports) 2017’ from the Sat Sri Akal Charitable Trust, among other awards.

The secret of his success? “There's no secret as such. I just work hard on the basics fundamental for every runner or sports person. Of course, God's grace, the support of near and dear ones, my willpower, the desire and craving to do more, and the thought of proving to the world that disability doesn't make a person weaker spur me on”.

There was an instance during the BNP Endurathon 2015, when he took a fall after he had run some eight kilometres. Left with deep bruises on his knees, he was asked to discontinue the race. Predictably of course, he did not give up and ran on to complete the entire 25 kms.

Running a half-marathon is great. Completing a few is remarkable. But completing a ton of them... that's quite amazing! What is it that empowers him to take on run after run, and cross one

milestone after another? Chawla says the motivation for this lies in the messages that marathons help him to communicate. “First and foremost, by running a demanding marathon, I demonstrate to the world that blind people aren’t any less than sighted people. In fact, people with disabilities

can outperform the so-called “normal” people. We don't deserve compassion or pity, just an equal standing in society and some support and assistance from people as and when needed”, he says.

“Another message that I try to spread is the message of fitness. If I can run, you too can run. It needn’t be marathons, just run your bit, or do any kind of physical activity to lead a healthy and fit life”.

Along the way, there have been several fan moments with the celebrities he adored.

Kapil Dev escorted him for about a kilometre during the Dream Run of SCMM

2004. Anil Ambani escorted him for a stretch in the Standard Chartered Mumbai Marathon 2006. The Vasai Virar Mayor’s Marathon 2014 brought him up close with Sachin Tendulkar, with Sachin felicitating him on stage. The 12-hour Mumbai Ultra 2017 run brought him face-to-face with Milind Soman.





He quips, “That run is memorable for another reason. After running past 33 kms, my escort got injured and he couldn’t continue the run. Then, five Pinkathon girls came forward and escorted me for the next 24 kms. That day I ran 57 kms”.

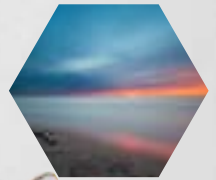
Chawla recalls the range of responses he has received from fellow runners. “Many of them cheer me throughout my journey. Many say they are proud of me and have been inspired by me, and that they got dissuaded from giving up the run by seeing me run on. Some come to me for tips and insights for running.” On the other hand, there have been those who react differently.

“Once, during a run, I heard a couple of runners wondering aloud how an old, blind person like me could stay ahead of them. One of them overtook me and slowed down right in front of me. Due to that, I banged into the guy and we both fell. There are also people who look at me during or after the run, but don’t come forward to exchange pleasantries. Of course, I can’t see this, but my escorts inform me”, he shares.

What’s next? “My next goal is to hit 151 half-marathons, and run abroad, if I can find the sponsorship. Apart from that, I hope to attempt bungee jumping, skydiving, river rafting, and the Everest base camp too, if I get the sponsorship”. There are no full stops for the Sporty Sikh. Kudos! He simply gets younger and more spritely by the day! ■

Traveller's Take

YOU CAN MAKE ACCESSIBLE
TRAVEL A REALITY!



Spurred on by reflections on accessibility during her trip to Thailand, SRUTHI S RAGHAVAN outlines how non-disabled citizens, as tourists, can encourage and prompt service providers and stakeholders of the travel industry to make the travel experience accessible to all, including people with disabilities.



Sruthi S
Raghavan

“**Y**ou see, but you do not observe”, Sherlock Holmes’s famous quote came to my mind when I was on one of my many shopping trips in Bangkok. Thanks to my ignorance, on earlier occasions, I had failed to notice how a global tourist destination can be inaccessible to its own residents.

It was one sunny morning when I travelled from the quaint province of Rayong in Thailand, to the bustling and vibrant city of Bangkok. I would have regarded this three-hour road trip as another insignificant interlude, if not for the revelation that came in the end. It was not the journey, the destination or the objective of shopping that made it memorable, but a realisation that had been eluding me and therefore making me oblivious to



what was happening around me.

When I reached the city and was about to take the stairs to enter a glitzy mall, I noticed a small crowd near the metro station and faint music coming from it. I walked up to the crowd and saw two teenagers strumming their guitars, much to the delight of the crowd. The guitarists seemed immersed in the music they played. Only when they turned to respond to the applause and acknowledge the coins offered to them did I notice that they were vision impaired. Shooing away all my

thoughts on poverty, literacy levels and other dynamics of the country, I began to wonder if these bubbly teenagers had been inside the glitzy mall that was in front of them. When my eyes trailed the path from the station to the malls and other attractions nearby, I noticed for the first time the many physical barriers that make these places inaccessible for people with disabilities. And I found myself thinking about the resident disabled population who may or may not have experienced their country's inherent and built-in attractions that are visited by tourists from all over the world. Most importantly, I thought about what a non-disabled tourist like me could do to drive a change.

“I thought about what a non-disabled tourist like me could do to drive inclusion and accessibility without resorting to activism or advocacy.”

Thailand has a thriving tourism industry. A simple Google search reveals that the direct contribution of the travel and tourism industry to the country's GDP was 9.2% in 2016 and the industry's contribution is expected to grow by 6.7% per annum by 2027. Foreign visitor spending in the country alone amounts to 79.2%, but domestic spending is only 20.8%*. The latter figure does not tell you however, whether or not the resident disabled population contributes to the domestic spending percentage. According to the International Labour Organisation, currently 3% of Thailand's population is disabled*. If their contribution to the industry as a tourist or otherwise is restricted, it can be economically disadvantageous to the country.



*Travel & Tourism. Economic Impact 2017 Thailand. Published by the World Travel & Tourism Council

However, the Thai government has been taking steps in the right direction in empowering its disabled population. Thailand is party to all key international



treaties and has legislations and policies in place to address the key concerns of her disabled population, such as discrimination, women and child safety, employment, etc. Additionally, there are several local and international charitable foundations that work towards the larger goal of empowerment in all spheres.

While it is evident that cities like Bangkok have accessible metro systems, wheelchair accessible taxis and disabled-friendly public restrooms, numerous challenges

continue to exist, especially concerning public attitude towards disability.

A number of tourist blogs, forums, websites and other platforms have travellers with disabilities discussing their experiences in Thailand. Sympathetic, friendly and helpful locals who are ever ready to assist the disabled are frequently

“Today, there are several adventure and tourism companies dedicated exclusively for the comfort of people with disabilities. While this is noteworthy, it must be kept in mind that this does not exclude the other service providers from making their services accessible.”

mentioned. It is true that the Thai people are some of the warmest and friendliest in the world, but their sympathetic approach to disability is steeped in cultural beliefs and superstitions. Stigma and fatalism from misinterpreted religious beliefs are some of the commonly cited reasons for this behaviour. While sympathetic assistance may be meted out to foreign tourists, a sense of fatalism could impede the enabling of accessibility, which could be detrimental to the growth and empowerment of local residents with disabilities.

It made me wonder how one can contribute to this cause without necessarily resorting to activism or advocacy. A few ideas struck me, from the perspective and role of a traveller.

Here are some small steps we can take to initiate change:

1. Firstly, start observing your surroundings and how accessible they are...right from airports, hotels, roadways, public transport, tourist attractions, malls, etc.

2. Look for ramps, wide lifts, tactile paving, colour contrast strips, etc. If you spot one of these, think about why they are there and what purpose they serve. This way, you also get to understand disability.



3. When you make hotel or airline bookings, make enquiries about how accessible the services are. Ask questions about how these features, if any, serve disability requirements. This could perhaps indirectly drive demand for these accessible features.

4. If you come across service providers who have incorporated features to accommodate people with disabilities, take a minute to appreciate them and provide positive feedback. A small token of appreciation can trigger more progress on the same path.

5. If you are a blogger or writer, or if you simply choose to write feedback or comments in a forum, make a mention about the accessibility features you observed.

6. Word-of-mouth continues to be a powerful marketing tool, even in our times. If you find a truly accessible tourist location or service, recommend it to your friends and family.



7. Lastly, use any tools and resources that may be available to you within your professional capacity to spread the word on accessible travelling.



Today, there are several adventure and travel companies exclusively dedicated for the disabled to experience exotic locations. While this is noteworthy, it does not exclude other service providers from making their services accessible. Travel aficionados might drop bread crumbs along their journey that encourage service providers to make the travel experience accessible to all, including those with disabilities. Undoubtedly, our voice has the ability to drive an impact on the lives of people with disabilities across the world. ■

An aerial photograph of a tropical cyclone, showing a distinct eye and spiral cloud bands over a dark blue ocean. The sky is a hazy, light brownish-orange color.

DISABILITY & DISASTER

Disaster – a word that resonates worldwide across news outlets, almost on a daily basis. From natural calamities (hurricanes, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes) to man-made catastrophes (wars, acts of terrorism), disasters often result in loss, pain and suffering. Recovery from disasters can take years, if not decades. The human cost of disaster is often the most painful and irreplaceable one, which is why global agencies are becoming more proactive in early intervention and risk reduction.

The past few months saw a morbid mix of disasters in many countries. From the earthquakes and subsequent landslides in Japan, to wildfires and hurricanes in the USA, to the devastating floods in Kerala and Nagaland, millions of people were displaced and homes destroyed. The extensive coverage of most disasters often flash images of people being rescued and evacuated from dangerous surroundings. Priority is often given to those who are more grievously injured, as well as vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly. However, people with difficulties in mobility, those who may not be able to hear sirens or see the imminent danger around them are as vulnerable. Media coverage of disasters often overlooks people with disabilities, despite a growing voice for inclusion. Does this lack of coverage indicate a lack of preparedness?

A quick bout of research tells me that this is, in fact, untrue. The United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006, wherein Article 11 specifically dealt with “Situations of Risk and Humanitarian Emergencies”. In brief, the article directs that every country that signs the agreement needs to ensure that there are measures and mechanisms in place that can assist and protect persons with disabilities, during emergency situations.

The Government of India, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme has created an in-depth toolkit (that can be easily downloaded from the Internet) that focuses on risk reduction and disaster management for people



Do we, as a country and as society, have mechanisms in place to assist and protect persons with disabilities during disasters, wonders
VAISHNAVI VENKATESH,
sharing pointers on the way ahead.

“With each disaster, communities have united and risen against adversities; however, this resilience is praiseworthy only if it is inclusive.”

with disabilities. Although the toolkit looks to be a decade old, it is comprehensive in that it covers all the basic and essential requirements for relocating and rehabilitating people with disabilities; specifically, the toolkit speaks the language of Universal Design, which is imperative when planning for inclusive relief camps. More recently, a news article indicated that Kerala is the first state to have established a training component for people with disabilities in planning for disaster risk reduction. Braille brochures, sign language, audio and video signs were utilised in the training. The training also included identifying the best ways to rescue wheelchair users during earthquakes, when mobility is severely compromised.

Interestingly, despite evidence of an extensive training programme in Kerala, there are few reports on whether the training was actually successful during the evacuations during the recent Kerala floods. Two NGOs specifically focused on rescue and rehabilitation of people with disabilities – the Divyang Foundation and the Nipman Foundation. Both these organisations identified essential requirements (such as wheelchairs) and worked towards procuring them.



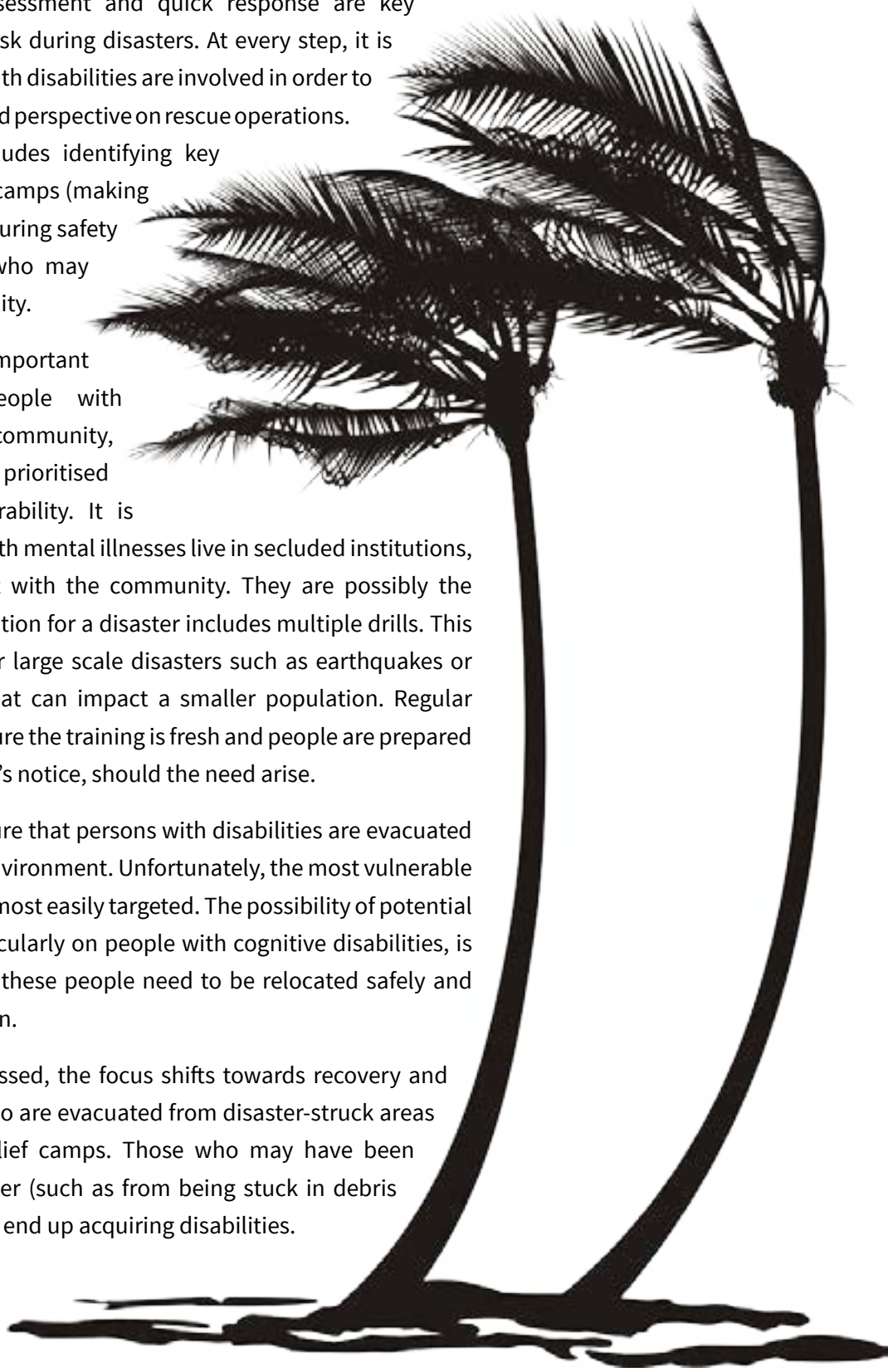
Therefore, planning, assessment and quick response are key indicators for reducing risk during disasters. At every step, it is imperative that people with disabilities are involved in order to provide the most educated perspective on rescue operations.

The planning stage includes identifying key requirements for rescue camps (making them accessible) and ensuring safety of passage for people who may have difficulty with mobility.

The assessment stage is important for identifying all people with disabilities living in a community, such that rescue can be prioritised according to the vulnerability. It is often seen that people with mental illnesses live in secluded institutions, with little or no contact with the community. They are possibly the most vulnerable. Preparation for a disaster includes multiple drills. This is applicable not only for large scale disasters such as earthquakes or floods, but even fires that can impact a smaller population. Regular evacuation drills will ensure the training is fresh and people are prepared to evacuate at a moment's notice, should the need arise.

Quick response is to ensure that persons with disabilities are evacuated and relocated to a safe environment. Unfortunately, the most vulnerable populations are also the most easily targeted. The possibility of potential sexual misconduct, particularly on people with cognitive disabilities, is very high and therefore, these people need to be relocated safely and preferably with a guardian.

After the disaster has passed, the focus shifts towards recovery and rehabilitation. People who are evacuated from disaster-struck areas often seek shelter at relief camps. Those who may have been injured during the disaster (such as from being stuck in debris following an earthquake) end up acquiring disabilities.



Rehabilitation and recovery can become a slow process, made slower if there is a lack of awareness on how to help the person cope with his loss of function. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is one of the most commonly occurring mental health conditions following an act of imminent danger. Providing mental health support is therefore as vital as physical support. This support also needs to be sustained, as people have been shown to develop symptoms months after the disaster has passed.

We have always prided ourselves on our resilience – the ability to get back our bearings despite difficulties. With each disaster, communities have united and risen against adversities, in order to support one another. However, this resilience is praiseworthy only if it is inclusive. Involving people with disabilities in every step of designing and execution of the risk reduction plan ensures that the community is actually working together. Giving a voice is as important as lending a helping hand, and the more the stories we hear from people with disabilities who have battled and overcome disasters, the more prepared we become to ensure that history does not keep repeating itself. ■

“Planning, assessment and quick response are key to reducing risk during disasters. At every step, it is imperative that people with disabilities are involved.”





A way FORWARD

How do our next generation legal minds view the impact of the RPD Act, 2016, on the lives of people with disabilities? What is the way forward? KEERTI SURANA, a 1st year law student at Jindal Global Law School, shares his thoughts.



As an intern at Ability Foundation, I was assigned to look into ‘The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPD) Act, 2016’, and share my perspective on the way forward, for this edition of ‘Success & ABILITY’.

The RPD Act, 2016, followed up by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017, together known as the Disability Law, seeks to protect persons with disabilities from various forms of discrimination, increase measures for effective participation and inclusion in society, and ensure equality of opportunity and adequate accessibility. The law has paved the way for a shift from the earlier ‘charity-based approach’ to a ‘rights-based approach’. Having ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), a conscious effort was made by the Government of India to draft the RPD Act to adequately address several issues in detail, such as the discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities, one of the key points taken up by the UNCRPD.

Nevertheless, a law may be good by itself, in its standing, but it is no good if it fails to find substantial support in implementation methods. I am convinced that this move to a ‘rights-based approach’ would necessarily need to be backed by a purposive interpretation of Article 15 of the Constitution to include ‘disability’ under the phrase ‘place of birth’. A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has been filed in the Supreme Court (W.P.(C) No. 000725 - 000725/2017) by Nipun Malhotra, the CEO of Nipman Foundation, to advance this very cause, among others.

I believe that laws are made to provide a framework and to channel efforts to achieve desired objectives. The law is a pointer towards what society should be, and it can only do so much to provide that basic framework. The Disability Law makes it mandatory for people to think and do what they otherwise might not have. It is up to us to uphold the spirit of the law and mould our ideas and efforts to align with that spirit. The law is of no use if we are not able to think of rational choices and make rational decisions.

While reviewing the Disability Law, it struck me that, to give effect to the true spirit of law, it is of key importance to set aside our ableist biases. The first baby step we can take towards this is to stop using ableist language. These are some common ableist words we use in casual conversations – ‘crazy’, ‘insane’, ‘lame’, ‘dumb’, ‘retarded’, ‘imbecile’, ‘idiot’, ‘maniac’, ‘nuts’, ‘psycho’, ‘spaz’ and ‘invalid’. Each

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of these words, when used frivolously, are extremely insulting to people who find themselves with physical and mental disabilities. It is important that we realise that language is a tool of oppressive systems. Being aware of this can help us recognise how pervasive ableist language is, and to discard it. It must be understood that people with disabilities are not medical problems, but merely the product of a social construct, just because they have certain limitations that prevent them from doing all that we can do. Let it be understood that they are not suffering because of the disability *per se*, but because of the unjustified prejudices of the world.

Next, we should recognise that most propagation of stereotyping happens because of the repetitive hammering of ‘an apparent underlying connection’ – such as ‘disability is a cause of villainy or meekness’ and *vice versa*, or that ‘disability is something to be mocked at’. I believe that, as responsible citizens, it is our duty to raise our voice against such irrational portrayal and stereotyping of people with disabilities.

Third, let’s do away with the ‘othering’ of people with disabilities. Let us not see people with disabilities as objects of pity or sympathy, but rather, let us do away with the curbs, such as lack of facilities and opportunities, that prevent people with disabilities from leading a normal life.

Furthermore, let’s remember that disability is not a homogeneous concept, as it varies from person to person. Seen through a microscopic lens, one person will always be more, or less disabled than the other, in terms of their relative capabilities. The right attitude to adopt is, “So what if a person has a disability? It doesn’t matter.”

Finally, I believe that there is no point in reviewing just the law for matters in the domain of sociology. We need to review society too, and that can be achieved only by reviewing its components, i.e., individuals. Therefore, as we progress, we need to constantly review ourselves. Unless change is from within, it is not stable.

I am hopeful that in the very near future, the courts, through their purposive interpretation, and more importantly, the civil society, will accept people with disabilities as equals. I have. ■



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up!



What stretches, shrinks, flies, crawls, and heals, among other things? MEERA BALACHANDER takes you along an intriguing thought trail.



There she goes again...peering at it for the fifth time in ten minutes. We are on our morning walk and this gesture of my friend bothers me. Is she in some kind of an ordeal? Does each glance at her watch to distract her thoughts? Or is she simply timing each step taken with precision? Whatever... To me, the presence of watch wearers warrants wary watchfulness. I feel they aren't masters of their destinies, even if it is a matter of a couple of hours. I grew up seeing my dad always in command of his time, be it taking the doggie to the vet before catching a train or solving my small problem with the teacher before going to his office.

We are all given the same 24 hours every day. The varied textures they take are fascinating to mull over, if you have the time, that is.

Observe time at a busy traffic junction. It is ticking at breakneck speed, negotiated with great difficulty by the motorists, of

two and four-wheelers, and the hapless bipeds. Time luxuriates in the white cat's majestic snooze atop the tree.

Time sizzles, most often to a crisp carbon, when the family is in a mad rush to exit in different directions. What about that time, haha, which squirmed when the class teacher just stood there, test papers in hand, a wicked gleam in her eyes! Or time, the crucifier, which made me run for my life, baton in hand, to the harrowing jeers and cheers of the Yellow House. Time was that ultimate redemption when the colicky baby (and the husband) finally shut up and fell asleep. Remember that cake – and the crushed dream – when time chose to switch off the oven prematurely. Time rushed when the dear one had to say bye, time despaired at the doctor's crowded clinic.

Is time money? Or are time and money equals or opposites? Squeeze one and stretch the other, splurge one, save the other!



Time is game for more. Like money, one can have time, make time, spend time, buy time, lose time, steal time... Time tells, time proves, time ripens, time heals. Is time money? Or are money and time equals or opposites? Squeeze one and stretch the other, splurge one, save the other! Overspend either and you get that sinking feeling...nothing like everyone having a pocketful of one and a clock-full of the other at all times! But then life would hang loose, with nothing to pursue, unless one sits under the Bodhi tree stubbornly awaiting results. What would life be with nobody busy? What would time tables, time frames, time limits and time management do? Time-tested truths and methods may well secure the conservative

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mind, but it is those who make their own rules who get called ahead-of-their-time. Handheld devices were perhaps not in the poet's range of vision when he rued that no one had the time to stand and stare.

Isn't it amazing how relative time is? The fluid sands of time, as opposed to, the precise flow of sand in an hourglass, the exactitude of time during a natural phenomenon, and the subjective feel of an endless night of insomnia. A geologist thinks in eons and an Olympic athlete in nanoseconds. For a microbiologist, time is what a simple bacterium takes to turn into a superbug. Our mythological characters lived effortlessly

for four thousand years even as time was parceled in yugas. One is granted a moment in the limelight versus an eternity in disgrace while most of us drum away time in the most routine, humdrum way possible.

It's just right versus wrong time(s), right?

Spiritual gurus say the time we are given here and now is to get promoted to the next birth, hopefully with good marks and a decent karmic CV. My friend, an IT professional, says we are all here simply to toggle about, browse, surf and kill time in a million different ways and hit exit thereafter.

And while the back of my mind screams, 'time up!' and I hasten to find my concluding line, my 'time' consumed mind chances on this bit of the Speaking Tree: Time does not exist on its own. It is a convenience created by the human mind.

Or rather, an inconvenience, I would say, especially next to a watch wearer. ■



16 வகை அனைத்தும் சிறந்த சுவை

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

