





*Looking Beyond Disabilities &  
Breaking Barriers Together*



# INVITING NOMINATIONS FOR 16<sup>th</sup> CAVINKARE ABILITY AWARDS



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ABILITY  
AWARDS  
2018

for ACHIEVERS WITH DISABILITY

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+91 8939675544 | [www.abilityfoundation.org](http://www.abilityfoundation.org) | [www.cavinkare.com](http://www.cavinkare.com)

Our Partners



**EDITOR** Jayshree Raveendran  
**MANAGING EDITOR** Janaki Pillai  
**DEPUTY EDITOR** Hema Vijay  
**ASSOCIATE EDITOR** Suchitra Iyappa  
**ASSISTANT DESIGNER** Mary Pearline  
**DESIGN** Global Adjustments Services Pvt. Ltd

## CORRESPONDENTS

**INDIA:**

**CHENNAI**  
Sandeep Kanabar +919790924905

**BANGALORE**  
Gayatri Kiran +919844525045  
Ali Khwaja +9180 23330200

**HYDERABAD**  
Sai Prasad Viswanathan +91810685503

**NEW DELHI**  
Abhilasha Ojha +919810557946

**GURUGRAM**  
Sidharth Taneja +919654329466

**PUNE**  
Saaz Aggarwal +919823144189

**BHUBANESHWAR**  
Dr Sruti Mohapatra +91674 2313311

**BHOPAL**  
Anil Mudgal +91755 2589168

**ANANTNAG (J & K)**  
Javed Ahmad Tak +911936 211363

**DURGAPUR (WEST BENGAL)**  
Angshu Jajodia +919775876431

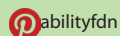
**USA:**  
Dr. Madan Vasishtha  
Ellicott City, Maryland, USA  
+1(443)764-9006

**PUBLISHERS** Ability Foundation  
**Editorial Office:** New #4, Old #23, 3rd Cross Street,  
Radhakrishnan Nagar, Thiruvannamiyur, Chennai 600 041. India  
Ph: 91 44 2452 0016 / 2452 3013  
e-mail: [magazine@abilityfoundation.org](mailto:magazine@abilityfoundation.org)  
[www.abilityfoundation.org](http://www.abilityfoundation.org)  
Published by Jayshree Raveendran on behalf of Ability Foundation,  
27 Fourth Main Road, Gandhi Nagar, Chennai 600 020.  
Ph: 91 44 2452 0016

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40, Peter's Road, Royapettah, Chennai 600 014  
Ph: 91 44 2813 2790 / 2813 1232

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# From the Editor's Desk

*Friends,*

*It is that time of the year for us again: the time that arrives biennially, literally immersing us in Bollywood, Kollywood, Hollywood and every other “----wood” of the movies! It’s the time when we plunge into making yet another India International Disability Film Festival happen – AbilityFest 2017. And this time, our 7<sup>th</sup> edition, no less! Quite a progress it has been! And at the end of the day, our need to make an impact in the sense of values of the world – from both sides of the fence – that of filmmakers and filmgoers. A hugely rewarding exercise indeed.*



*I am sure that there must have been times when we all have asked ourselves – why do films matter so much?*

*Films matters because the film is “us”. We, as a society, use the filmic form to tell stories about who we are and about the society we live in. In a manner of speaking, films are a confirmation of what we are as human beings and the world around us, that concerns us subjectively and objectively. The film form, narrative and styles, be they commercial cinema or short films or documentaries, are a portrayal of our lives in various forms. Films provide us with a language to express ourselves not only across the nation, but also across the world, irrespective of our class, creed, race or economic status. We understand so many cultures and people and lives people lead, through films. We laugh and we cry with them. Human sensitivity at its peak. And until recently, this power unleashed through films eluded people with disabilities – on account of access.*

*At Ability Foundation, we are honoured that we pioneered a disability film festival. We also went a step ahead... the fest has always been held in an ambient mainstream multiplex, every film screened was captioned, ramps inside and outside the cinema house for wheelchair users. And more recently, audio described movies as well.*

*It is thus that this issue of our magazine offers a read on the past and the present. The “was” and the “is” – although there is plenty more to be done for the “ought to be”. However, comparing the “was” and the “is”, I’m most confident about the “ought to be”. And on a sentimental note, the brilliant lil gal in pig tails, of Std 8, who wrote for us about AbilityFest 2005, with a maturity beyond her years, Yashasvini Rajeshwar, has once again, written this stimulating piece for us. Of course, she is now a sprightly career woman, with dreams to achieve and out to conquer the world in her own right. Kudos to you, Yashasvini.*

*This besides, the issue offers more. Pages on awareness, health, tales of courage, leadership traits that need to be nurtured, personal experiences, news from across the world, to mention a few. All put together, for your pleasure and fulfilment.*

**Jayshree Raveendran** ■

# News & Notes

## INDIA REDEFINES BLINDNESS

India has now changed its old definition of blindness that was adopted in 1976, says a notification issued by the Union Health Ministry. As per the new definition, a person who is unable to count fingers from a distance of



Source: Firstpost

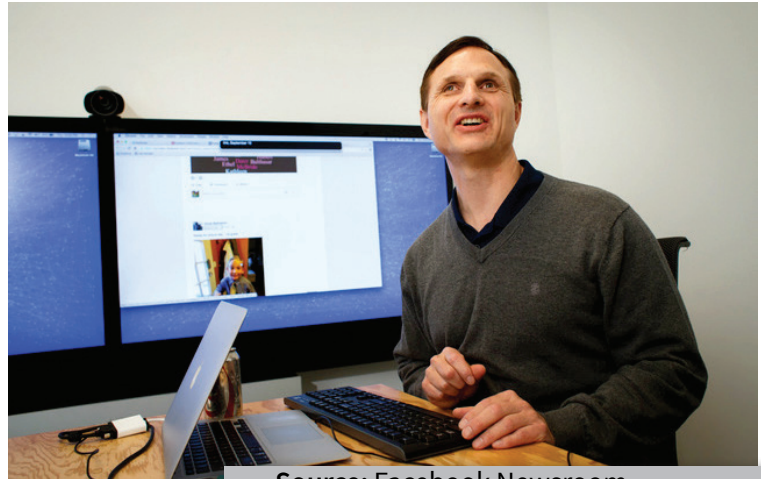
three metres will henceforth be considered blind as against the earlier stipulation of six metres.

India's new definition brings it in line with the World Health Organization criteria. This new definition will also ensure that assistance for blind persons reaches its intended beneficiaries. By this, the population of blind people in India is re-evaluated to be 80 lakh persons and not 1.20 crore persons as per the National Blindness Survey of 2007. The 'National Programme for Control

of Blindness' scheme, recast as 'The National Programme for Control of Blindness and Visual Impairment', addresses the 40 lakh individuals with refractive errors who were included as blind by the earlier criteria. ■

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO ‘SEE’ FACEBOOK

To facilitate access for blind people, Facebook now employs Artificial Intelligence (AI) through ‘Automatic Alternative Text’. It generates a description of a photo using advancements in object recognition technology. People using screen readers on iOS devices will hear a list of items a photo may contain as they swipe past photos on Facebook. For instance, someone can now hear, “Image may contain three people, smiling, outdoors.” Earlier, people using screen readers would only hear the name of the person who shared the photo, followed by the term “photo” when they came upon an image in the Facebook Newsfeed. Facebook will soon add this functionality for other languages and platforms as well. ■



Source: Facebook Newsroom

## DISABLED FARMERS SHOW THE WAY



Source: The Better India

Naman Seva Samiti, founded by Shishir Kumar Choudhary, has helped 17000 persons with disability in 1500 villages across Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan make an independent living from organic farming. In fact, these farmers are now spearheading a campaign to get other farmers in the village to go organic too. An accident in 1999 that left Shishir with 56% disability sensitised him to the plight of the uneducated villagers with disability, thus leading to the establishment of Naman Seva Samiti. ■

## DEPRESSION: LET'S TALK

Guess what's the leading cause of ill-health and disability worldwide? It is depression, concludes the World Health Organization (WHO) from its latest data. More than 300 million people across the world are now living with depression, which is an increase of more than 18% between 2005 and 2015, says WHO.



Source: World Health Organization

WHO's year-long campaign, "Depression: let's talk" seeks to negate the stigma associated with mental illness and get people with depression to both seek and get help. The fact is, for someone living with depression, talking to a person they trust is often the first step towards treatment, recovery and living healthy, productive lives.

Untreated depression and anxiety results in a global economic loss of a trillion US dollars every year by households, employers and governments. There are strong links between depression and other non-communicable disorders and diseases like diabetes and heart disease. Depression is also an important risk factor for suicide. It increases the risk of substance abuse disorders and vice versa.

Depression is characterised by persistent sadness and a loss of interest in activities that people normally enjoy, accompanied by an inability to carry out daily activities for 14 days or longer. In addition, people with depression normally have several of the following: a loss of energy, a change in appetite, sleeping more or less, anxiety, reduced concentration, indecisiveness, restlessness, feelings of worthlessness, guilt, or hopelessness, and thoughts of self-harm or suicide. ■

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## SELF-DRIVING WHEELCHAIRS BEING TESTED AT A JAPANESE AIRPORT



Source: Digital Trends

Panasonic's self-driving wheelchairs are trending at Tokyo's Haneda International Airport, where the wheelchairs are being tested now. Panasonic plans to have these electric wheelchairs in place at major airports across the country in time for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Eventually, these wheelchairs will be available in the market for use by people with limited mobility.

The wheelchairs can be summoned or hailed by a couple of taps using a smartphone app. As of now, the wheelchairs have been programmed to find their way to passengers, take them to appropriate check-in desks and wheel them around the airport according to their requests. Like self-driving cars, Panasonic's autonomous wheelchairs use mapping software and built-in sensors to prevent them from bumping into people, suitcases and other obstacles that are usually expected to be found at a busy airport. ■



## NAVIGATION ON YOUR FEET

Lechal, an innovative Indian brand from Ducere Technologies has introduced a one-of-its-kind product that brings navigation to your feet! The Lechal pods can be used in the Lechal insoles that are placed inside sports shoes. The pods can also be fixed to the Lechal buckles that need to be attached with the shoelaces.

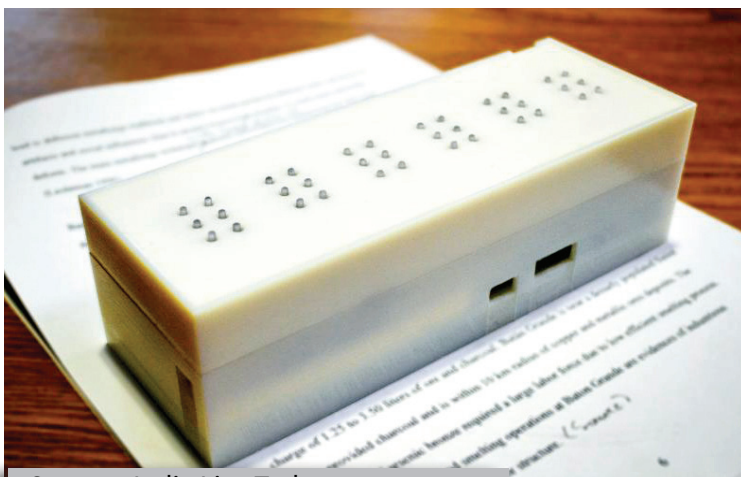


Source: Assistivetechologyblog.com

With Lechal, you no longer need to look down into a screen for directions. Just head in the direction where the vibrations guide you. One of your feet will feel the vibrations depending upon the direction (left/right) in which you need to turn. The hands-free navigation lets you walk or run freely while you enjoy the view. There is also provision

for setting vibratory reminders that will prompt you about your pre-decided stops along the way. Lechal also displays your accurate fitness data through its app. A pair of insoles and pods are available on the Lechal website for \$179. ■

## ‘TACTILE’ CONVERTS TEXT TO BRAILLE IN REAL TIME

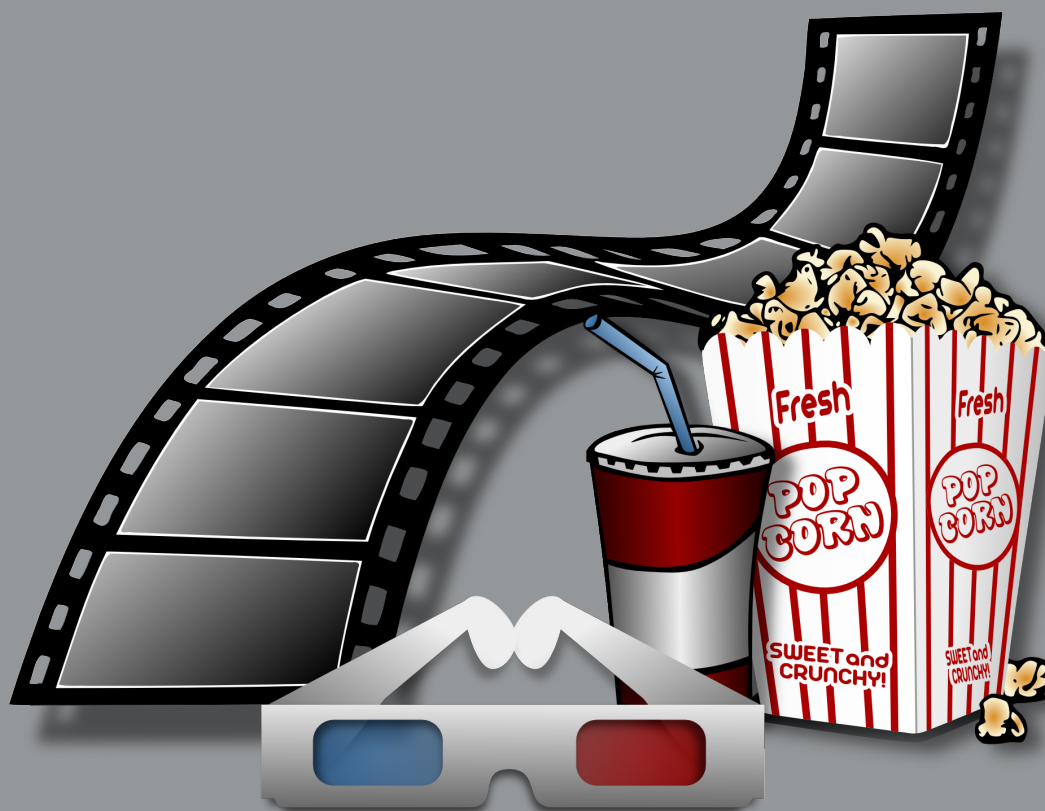


Source: India Live Today

MIT engineering undergraduates have created a prototype of a device, ‘Tactile’, that displays Braille characters of text, using an inbuilt camera. ‘Tactile’ takes a photo of the words and identifies the characters on the page using Microsoft’s ComputerVision API and OCR. Right after that, Tactile’s software converts these characters into Braille, initiating the mechanical system in the box to push the pins up and down in order to display Braille characters.

This device displays six characters in Braille at a time. This device can be helpful not just to read books but also restaurant menus, flyers, brochures, business cards and several documents that are handed to us on the go. ■

# REEL INCLUSION



*The recently concluded 2017 AbilityFest: India International Disability Film Festival brought to the fore a heart warming and evocative experience of inclusion, sensitisation, celebration and much more. YASHASVINI RAJESHWAR traces the far-reaching trajectory of this pioneering film festival which took its baby steps in 2005, and the path ahead.*



Yashasvini  
Rajeshwar

**Come September**, the world breaks into celebration, with cinema-goers and film aficionados queuing up for their favourite festivals in multiple cities around the globe. There is something in the air – a dash of tinsel town, a pinch of expectation, a dollop of anticipation, all tied together by the best actor, director and producer that the world has to offer. Come September, screens come alive in every corner of the world and the spirit of filmmaking takes centre stage, year after year.

Though film festivals have long been a part of cinema calendars, they have gained significant ground in recent times. Today, cinema-goers most often turn to these festivals as opportunities to experience the stories and styles that define the ‘alternate’, and to view films that do not get screened in mainstream theatres. Though Cannes is a familiar name with the common man, a quick reference to Wikipedia will throw up an exhaustive list of almost 70 festivals that make it to the ‘most important’ category. Today, these festivals have mushroomed in every geography... from Macao to Rome, from Istanbul to Moscow. Though Cannes, Berlin and Venice still constitute the Big Three as far as festivals are concerned, many others offer platforms for more specialised local talents to truly flourish. These platforms that seek out the new, the different, the local, the experimental and the opportunities they present, are what truly define the film festival experience across the globe.

Needless to say, India is not far behind. Every year, the Government of India hosts the International Film Festival of India in Goa, the official government platform for such cinema. Yet, it is the International Film Festival of Kerala that gets the highest footfall and patronage from general members of the public. Other platforms specialise in documentary films, children’s films, or other specific genres of cinema. Wherever you go, you can rest assured that there is something exciting around the corner.

Given this proliferation of alternative platforms of filmmaking, it should come as no surprise that these platforms are fast being recognised as powerful channels that espouse a variety of social causes. Perhaps amongst the first to gain traction were festivals dedicated to women’s issues with our home turf hosting the annual Chennai Women’s International Film Festival. It was into this space of specialised film festivals that Ability Foundation decided to venture, way back in 2005.

### **A confluence of minds**

AbilityFest: India International Disability Film Festival was, at its core, a confluence of minds. An indepth meeting with Sri. P.K. Nair, a stalwart in the field of cinema, immediately enforced our shared commitment to excellence and accessibility. In the words of Janaki Pillai, Director of Programmes at Ability Foundation, “though we had nothing to do with cinema and he had no experience with disability, we knew early on that we were out to make this festival the best of its kind.” Thus an extravaganza, dedicated to spreading the message of accessibility, inclusion and the right to

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entertainment came into being. The medium of cinema proved to be the perfect platform to initiate this much needed conversation.

The questions were many. How often did we see persons with disability occupying spaces of leisure and entertainment? Did we have the facilities for blind and visual-impaired, deaf and hard of hearing persons, or wheelchair users to access our theatres and

films? Why was the right to entertainment so frequently and so easily ignored? With questions, fast multiplying, we decided to make a beginning... to start a conversation, to spread awareness, to lead by example and to make entertainment accessible. Thus, AbilityFest: India International Disability Film Festival was born.

Since then, the dialogue around disability has grown a great deal in the country. Back in 2005, the scenario was quite different. It was before the trademark ruling in 2016; before mainstream cinema theatres had subtitles on a regular basis; before questions of access had become a collective voice of concern. With subsequent editions being hosted every other year, the journey has been one of significant learning and growth for all involved. From seeking out disability-related movies from all around the world, to working out the technical specifications for screening, from planning the venue and logistical details to reaching out to the most number of people, AbilityFest has been an exercise in pushing the Foundation's limits just as much as it has been about pushing understanding and acceptance of inclusion in the larger world.

This 'pursuit of more' has never been more evident than in the one-of-a-kind 'Sound of Silence' celebration that was organised by the Foundation, featuring classic and contemporary silent movies as well as ones with live music in keeping with the tradition of cinema of yesteryears. The response was not only phenomenally positive but it offered movie-goers independent of disability an experience they had never had access to before. This year, as Cannes hosts its first disability film festival, AbilityFest has held its seventh edition.

In the 12 years since its inception, the growing interest in AbilityFest and disability film festivals in general has been humbling. Having launched our one minute film competition '60 Seconds to Fame' right from the very first edition, our winners have



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gone on to make their mark in tinsel town. Notably, Thiagarajan Kumararaja, the director of national award-winning Tamil feature film 'Aranya Kandam' was the winner of the inaugural contest in 2005! The successes are also not limited to individuals. Today, mainstream DVDs of movies such as 'Taare Zameen Par' and 'Margarita, with a Straw' include both subtitles as well as audio descriptions, with many others following suit. Stories like 'Barfi!' and 'Kaabil' are being celebrated more and more, and our standard venue partners at SPI Cinemas now host subtitled movies on two days every week across all their screens. The last few years have indeed seen progress.

### The path ahead

Yet, 12 years and seven editions since, the questions have never ceased to flow. With the team forever seeking to push the limits of conversation and involve as many people as possible in the dialogue, there is always much to do. Perhaps one of the most repetitive debates is to do with aesthetics. With film festivals now gaining traction and popularity around the world, there is an increasing association with glitz, glamour and showbiz.

Now, as with every event that's been stabilised, accepted, adapted or replicated, the constant niggling at the back of AbilityFest's collective mind echoes the same words – what else? What more can be done? What next? As with any project of this nature and size, the possibilities are endless. Audiences need to be drawn in further, a larger segment of the population need to be targeted, and disability issues need to be mainstreamed. A community needs to be built, fostered, and nurtured through pre- as well as post-event engagement to ensure that the conversation and dialogue do not peak for only a few

*These platforms – that seek out the new, the different, the local, the experimental and the opportunities they present – truly define the film festival experience across the globe.*

*Over the years, the movies, the intent, and the cause of AbilityFest have come to cement their own name amongst filmgoers.*

days every other year. Perhaps regional languages can see more representation or the festival can find its footing in non-metro centres. There is so much that can be done. There is so much to do. It would seem the possibilities are endless.

Disability issues and questions of accessibility are on a slow but steady path of improvement. More people today are hearing of it, talking of it, and participating in the discourse. Platforms like films and other popular media only serve to aid this process, helping more and more people understand issues and gain perspectives they otherwise would never have known. Today AbilityFest is collaborating with other festivals across the globe, each one dedicated to doing their bit to chip away at the mountain of inaccessibility. For the organisers as well as for the larger debates on disability, it would seem there are miles to go before they sleep. ■



# An encounter with

# vandana

## An insight into Autism

***Coming face to face with a mighty storm and imminent disaster let her feel and understand the deep, gnawing anxiety that her son constantly experienced on account of autism, writes SHALINI JAYKAR.***

Like on any holiday, my husband suggested we go on a long drive to relax our 19-year-old special son. He can be all smiles and sweetness. He can cosy up to us and make us feel on top of the world as parents. And then... he can be all nerves and unnerve us no end. He can go on a rampage and in his deep seated innate anxiety, can tear up things, pull out hair and throw out what comes his way. No one has helped us unravel the cause of his anxiety and I feel so utterly, helplessly outside the sphere he finds himself in, like a big claustrophobic bubble. If something soothes him and keeps him distracted from his anxiety, it is the FM radio music playing in the car – God bless the RJs! A drive is also my husband's preferred mode of relaxation



Shalini Jaykar





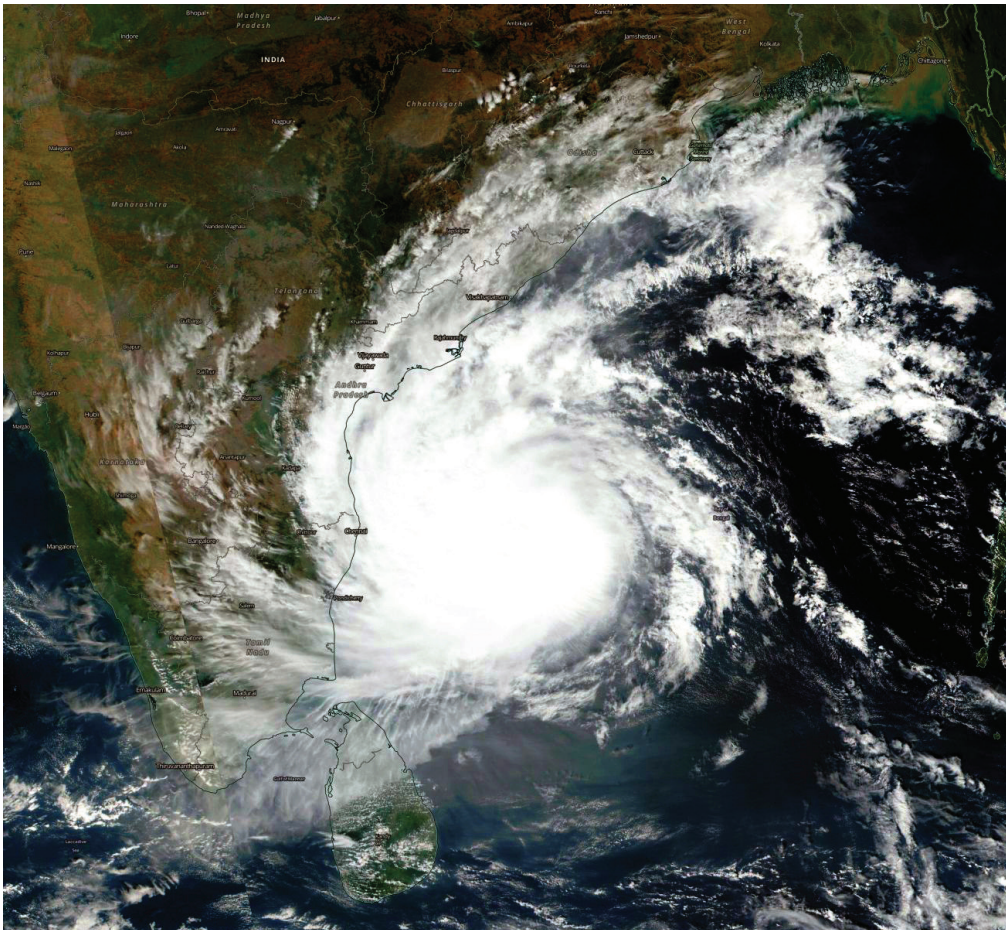
with his control over the steering wheel and accelerator. As for me, I connect with all that is green, tall trees, shrubs and grass. A winning family combo.

But all TV channels were issuing imminent cyclone warnings in Chennai. So I was hesitant. But weighing the odds of a possible problem against the certainty of our son's heightened anxiety at home, we decided to take a chance. We started at 9 a.m. from our Chennai home in a mild drizzle and a hint of breeze. My husband reasoned that the southern outskirts of the city would be safer to drive, away from the predicted area of landfall of the cyclone. We would return by evening when Vardah would have touched Chennai and died off.

The drive was smooth with our son smiling and enjoying the music as we approached Dindivanam. We too switched off our grimmer forebodings to take in the beauty that surrounded us. Soon however, the drizzle grew into a shower and the breeze into wind. We stopped and bought packed lunch at a restaurant. While my husband and son had theirs, I thought I would save mine. It was 2. 30 p.m. and I suggested we return. We took a U-turn...the shower was now a downpour and the wind was howling.

The huge, picturesque Madhuranthakam Lake which held us in thrall every time we saw it looked different today. Were those waves? It was a placid lake usually. We took a while to figure out that the ferocity of the wind was causing them. Back on alert mode, we figured out that we were in the eye of a storm, for once not caused by our

*Where was the fun and the movement he needed? We shook ourselves from our own terror to make some calming noises to him.*



son's anxiety. When smooth steering turned resistant driving, our reflexes perked up. Swaying trees alarmed us and the slates of water pounding on all sides mesmerized us when we reached Chengalpattu toll gate. Though comforted by the presence of fellow travellers, we noticed that traffic was at a standstill even after paying the toll.

It was then that we realized that we were indeed face to face with Vardah with our fate as sealed in solitude as that of all the vehicles surrounding us. To our left was a hill and to the right marsh land. To muster some sense of safety, we parked an ever resistant car in the shade of a goods laden lorry. That is when visibility turned zero and our car started shaking left and right in the howling wind, the likes of which we could never have imagined. And when twigs and branches started hitting the roof the car, my husband suggested we cover our heads with available cloth just in case...my throat parched up and I started getting palpitations. We were each to oneself, not daring to open eyes, ears, mind or windows. Matching his mood to the outside version, my son started getting restless. Where was the fun and the movement he needed? We shook ourselves from our own terror to make some calming noises to him. Of course we would soon be on the move. But boredom and hunger compounded his anxious state and he pulled my hair. I was perhaps not far from pulling my hair myself, in fear and regret. We would certainly be blown away into the marsh, neatly dead with not a soul

*Anything  
can trigger  
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knowing. We were at least entitled to a police search I felt, so I messaged my father and my son's teacher merely mentioning where we were at that moment.

As if in answer to a secret, unuttered distress prayer, a bus parked itself to our right. We felt the presence of a vehicle behind us too. Bye-bye marsh! Through the sheets of water, as I looked intently, I saw the bus was shaking too. What stood still was only time. Was this eternity? How did we spend those long hours? Not snacking, as there was nothing left to munch. I guess we kept on reassuring our increasingly anxious son that the ordeal would end soon. I say I guess because the finer details are a blur now. The car engine was off, the windows closed, there was no cellphone signal...When I randomly suggested we board the bus – though it was an impossibility – our son hitched on to the idea and clamoured to get into the bus. I had to hastily backtrack on my words and repeatedly tell him there was no way



we could even open the doors of our car. He was not afraid like I was. Anything can trigger his anxiety, but when the situation was terrifying, he was not anxious. He was only bored and for us, relieving him of his boredom and restlessness was as dreary a task as making our contingency plans for escape.

At 5.30 p.m., we finally spotted some movement. But I wanted to wait some more in the safety of the bus parked next to us. And finally when the sound and fury of Vardah abated just a wee bit, the bus moved forward. We saw a 20 feet long metal sheet lying on the side of the road where the bus had been. It was a piece of the toll plaza roof. At 6.15 p.m. the vehicles were crawling inch by inch, headlights on. With better visibility, we could see the ravage of the storm unfolding before our eyes: trees uprooted, lamp posts thrown away. Policemen were at work, removing the obstruction to traffic flow. A few cars were crushed by fallen trees. With so much drama outside, hungry and tense, I started throwing up. The road was pitch dark. Should we perhaps move to a hotel for the night? But after having lived through the worst of Vardah, we were anxious to reach home, which we did, at midnight, with no food or water left. I felt giddy with exhaustion.

Anxious, did I say? We had been face to face not only with a mighty storm and imminent disaster, but also anxiety. Deep, gnawing anxiety, like...what my son feels ever so often. And if I was grateful for a rebirth, I was more so for having lived his world, at least for some hours. ■

*I had to hastily backtrack on my words and repeatedly tell him there was no way we could even open the doors of our car. He was not afraid like I was.*

# Less Discrimination More Equality

*Just as feminism seeks to reinforce the equality of men and women by negating patriarchal biases entrenched in society, the disability movement focuses on removing deeply ingrained societal biases against people with disabilities, muses ANGSHU JAJODIA.*

**My views** on feminism have always endorsed equality – a value system I have experienced, growing up in an egalitarian family. For me, feminism is about equality of gender and not about who is stronger or weaker. A quest to prove that women are better than men would be radical feminism and no better than patriarchy in reverse – an ideal I find abhorrent and undesirable.

I come from a family where I have seen my parents as models of equality and feminism in the true sense of the term. My mother has been the primary breadwinner in our family while my father has devoted himself to social service. That does not however mean that my father is less capable than my mother; it was a mutually agreed upon arrangement between themselves.



**Anshu**  
Jajodia



I feel quite enthused that women are now fighting against the patriarchy entrenched in our society since time immemorial. Today, more and more women are getting a good education and entering the job market, something that was systemically denied to their mothers and grandmothers. With attitudinal change, women are no longer confined to traditional gender roles, but rather, are taking up challenging positions in the public sphere and breaking glass ceilings along the way. What rankles me is that despite all this empowerment and focus on equality, our society continues to have double standards that are condescending and demeaning to women.

What's worse is that women themselves are perpetuating this cycle of inequality, wittingly or unwittingly because of ingrained biases which have been reinforced by family and culture. For instance, if you leaf through newspapers and look up the matrimonial columns in the classifieds section, it is not uncommon to find ads where the girl is looking for a groom who earns significantly more than her. This points to a lack of confidence and a tacit submission to male dominance. When we all are fighting so hard for equality, such actions betray the cause and continue to patronise the inequality that women are so much against.

*When I was growing up, I was never made to feel any different; I was treated the same way as any other child.*

## PERSPECTIVE

Recently, I had an interesting conversation with my batchmate from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). She told me that she was looking for a partner who would be able to match her intellectually and connect to on an emotional level. For her, the prospective partner's income was never a criterion, because she was confident that she would be able to provide for her family with her own earnings. This attitude is what I call an affirmative action towards real equality. Make no mistake, it doesn't mean she wants to marry just anybody. She wants to find someone who is doing something fruitful with his life and has an intellectual compatibility with her. How much he earns from his job is immaterial – he could be a professor or an NGO volunteer who earns significantly less than her; what she seeks is emotional and intellectual compatibility. This is what I call real feminism.

### A two-way process

Just as feminism has sought to reinforce the equality of men and women, the disability movement has focused on removing deeply ingrained societal biases against people with disabilities. All of us should be seen as human beings first and be allowed equal access to all opportunities that will enable us to build our capabilities and take our rightful position thereon. Breaking down regressive attitudes is a two-way process and people with disabilities also have a big role to play in contributing towards changing societal perceptions, even though it may seem a little difficult.

Here, I'd like to share a personal anecdote. The incident happened while I was doing my Masters at TISS. When I was allotted fieldwork placement at the L&T Health

Centre at Andheri, my heart sank.

I would have to commute by the ubiquitous Mumbai local, crammed with people like sardines. I had no prior experience of travelling by the local during peak hours. Of course I used to take the train with my friends whenever we wanted to hang out at Marine Drive, but that was always after dinner when the trains would be reasonably empty.

The first day of commute was a nightmare. I was waiting at Govandi station to catch the train to CST – I would get down at Wadala and take another train to Andheri. When the train finally arrived, it was jam-packed and I stepped back in

*All of us should be seen as human beings first and be allowed equal access to all opportunities that will enable us to build our capabilities and take our rightful position thereon.*



horror. I pleaded with my fieldwork partner John to take the next train, but he said the next train would be as crowded as this one. I somehow squeezed into the coach. It was a miracle that I managed to find one square inch of standing space near the door. I was almost buried in the sea of bodies...it was the worst way to acquaint myself with Mumbai's lifeline. Clearly, the first few weeks of commuting to fieldwork were a real struggle for me.

My partner John seemed to have realised my plight, because one day after class, I was told that our fieldwork placement coordinator Shubhada Ma'am wanted to meet me in private. "I am willing to change your fieldwork placement to the BARC Hospital at Anushaktinagar; John has been informing me of your difficulties in travelling. I am doing this specially for you", she told me.

Obviously, she was making this concession on grounds of my 'disability' – a disability that had no bearing on my travel problems, really. I must admit that for a moment, I



was tempted to take up her offer, just to avoid travelling in those jam-packed trains. It was an easy way out, definitely. But then I realised I would deprive myself of an opportunity to learn to navigate the Mumbai railway landscape, however tough it may be. No learning comes without a struggle, my mother had told me long ago. I wanted to grow up and learn to do these things, and the placement at Andheri was a God-sent opportunity to do so and learn more about the iconic city and gather new experiences along the way.

It would have definitely been easier to ditch Andheri and go to Anushaktinagar, but at what cost? At the cost of learning new life skills, gathering wonderful experiences, and the huge cost of perpetuating notions of inequality between the disabled and the non-disabled. So I told Shubhada Ma'am categorically, "I would like to continue my fieldwork at Andheri, even though travel is a problem for me, just as it is for the

*If you leaf through newspapers and look up the matrimonial columns in the classifieds section, we do find ads where the girl is looking for a groom who earns significantly more than her. This points to a tacit submission to male dominance. When we all are fighting so hard for equality, such actions betray the cause and continue to patronise the inequality that women are so much against.*

## PERSPECTIVE

millions of commuters who travel to work in these trains every single day, because I would like to learn how to travel and move about in a new city on my own”.

I now feel it was the best decision I took, because the skills I picked up on the way were invaluable. Looking back, I think I learnt more about navigating through life from my experience with the Mumbai locals than what I learnt in college or within the TISS campus. This skill came in handy when I moved to Bangalore after passing out of TISS, and more recently when I single-handedly took my ageing parents all over Europe, planning everything from travel to stay.

I am not opposed to concessions for the disabled on principle, but what I am against is asking for concessions just to make life easier, even if they are not required. I agree that there are concessions that people with disabilities require so as to level the playing field and not fall back. Such concessions are essential for creating equitable access to opportunities that will ultimately create a more egalitarian society. In school I have taken concessions like sitting in the first bench so that I could follow the class lectures because I am essentially a lip-reader. A visually impaired student would require text-to-speech software or Braille textbooks to enable her to study. A wheelchair user would require ramps and lifts in buildings to ensure infrastructural access just like anybody else.

### The danger of assumptions

When I was growing up, I was never made to feel any different and was treated the same way as any other child by my parents. I have never taken reservations or concessions simply because I did not require them. Nor did I take a concession when I was offered one by Shubhada Ma'am, even though it was quite enticing. I chose to slum it out because I wanted to learn.

I was quite bemused when the parents of a deaf child came to me and told me that their child was having behavioural problems because he was deaf. They had assumed that his deafness was the cause of such behavioural problems, conveniently forgetting that many children who don't have a disability have behavioural problems. The Bollywood film Black shows Rani Mukherjee walking in a lopsided manner when she follows her sister down the aisle, reinforcing an assumption that all visually impaired people walk like that. Assumptions are dangerous. The best of us who really care about equality are unconsciously perpetuating these assumptions in society through our actions, even though they may be well-meaning.

Many years ago, I came across this quote by Plutarch, the ancient Greek philosopher: “What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.” This quote epitomises everything we need to base our lives' ideals and values on, to move towards a society where there is less discrimination and more equality. ■

*Assumptions are dangerous, and the best of us who really care about equality are unconsciously perpetuating regressive assumptions of society through our actions, even though these may be well-meaning.*

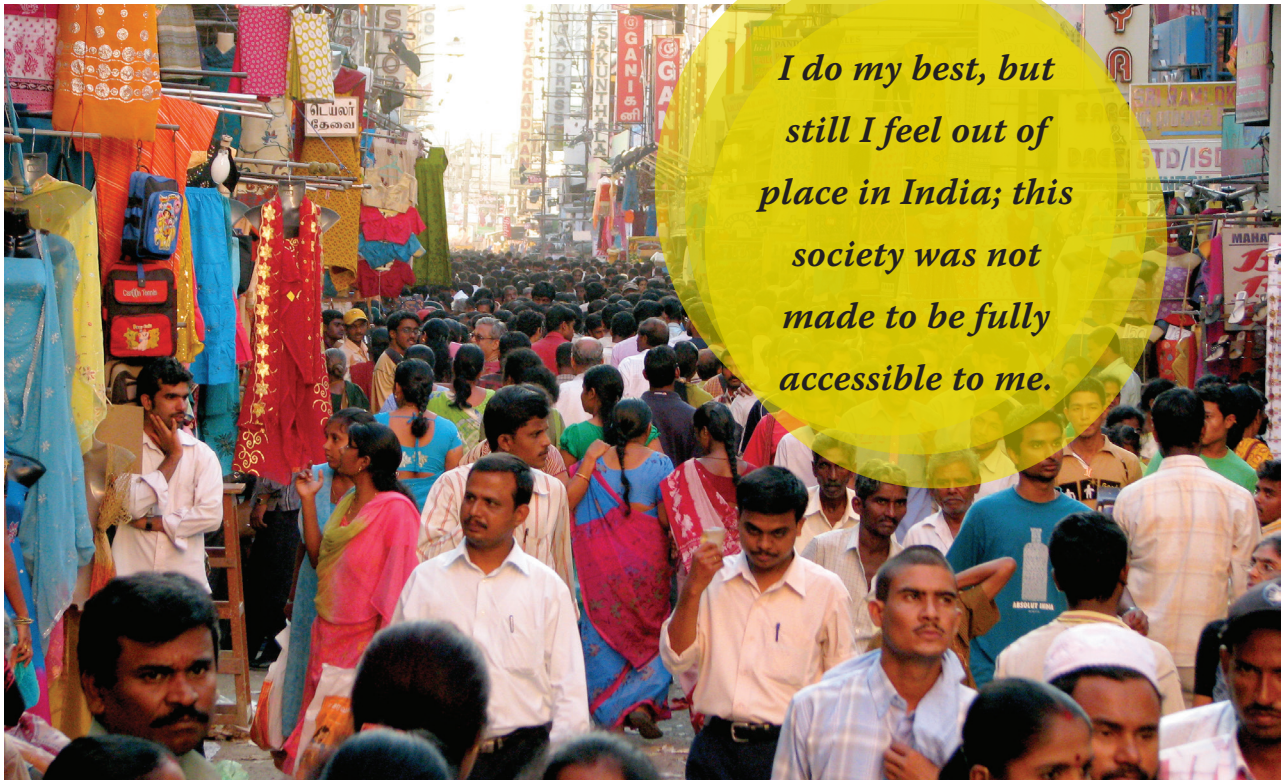


# Let's learn to celebrate differences



Constance  
Hull

*The experience of feeling out of place gives one a better perspective on the subjectivity of disability and difference, muses CONSTANCE HULL from Virginia, U.S.A., who is currently in India on a Fulbright-Nehru research grant.*



**The difference** between impairment and handicap has never been more apparent to me than while living in India. I have come from the United States, on a Fulbright-Nehru research grant to study employment and livelihood for people with disabilities.

In the last few decades, the disability sector has shifted away from a biological perspective of disability where the main goal was rehabilitating the individual towards a biological “normal”. Now, the field tends to favor a social model of disability where onus is placed on society to accommodate different types of people. From this perspective, society must provide adaptations so that a person’s impairment is no longer a barrier to participation.

A handicap is a product of society and materialises only when the dominant culture fails to accommodate those with different needs. Anyone can be handicapped, and we all are, at some point in our lives. Though I am able-bodied in the traditional sense of the word, I am handicapped by my foreignness in India. I look different and my communication is severely limited. I am dependent on adaptations to help me overcome these limitations; I require translators, and when one is not available, I try to communicate with my hands and expressions. I often cannot speak for myself or I might not be talked to at all, because I cannot understand. I do my best, but I still feel out of place in India; this society was not made to be fully accessible to me.

*I do my best, but still I feel out of place in India; this society was not made to be fully accessible to me.*

*A handicap is a product of society and materialises only when the dominant culture fails to accommodate those with different needs. Anyone can be handicapped, and we all are, at some point in our lives.*

Feeling different has given me a new awareness of accessibility. I often follow this train of thought: I struggle to walk on the streets without tripping; I try to imagine what life is like for someone with a motor disability. I struggle to hear and understand when I need to get off a bus or train; I try to imagine the challenges of a person with hearing impairment. I struggle reading signs and menus; I try to imagine the challenges of people with visual impairments. I struggle to be understood with my American accent and lack of Tamil; I try to imagine the plight of people with speech impairments. I look different and am stared at; I try to imagine how a person who might look different – such as a person with Down’s syndrome or cerebral palsy – must feel.

It has taken coming out of my comfort zone, going to a new place, and feeling different from others to gain an appreciation for what I have always taken for granted. I should clarify that my observations are not rooted in sympathy or pity as true inclusion can never be achieved by looking down on people. Rather it is the small chance to empathise, in a way that I never could in the U.S., which has given me perspective on the rights afforded to the majority of society and denied to those with difference.

I recently attended the 2016 India Inclusion Summit in Bengaluru and heard about the power of assumptions. While I can imagine the challenges of people with disabilities to navigate this society, I must not assume that they are unable to or necessarily in need of help. This mentality only perpetuates the “You Can’t” assumption that a person with disability so often faces. This being said, just because challenges can be overcome does not mean barriers should not be broken. Inclusion is intentional and mainstream society must realise the handicaps it imposes on others.

I recognise that my handicaps are minimal and temporary. I have the privilege of returning to a society where I can exist with no handicaps and this is not the case for most people handicapped by society. But my experience of feeling out of place has given me a better perspective on the subjectivity of difference. In truth, the places that I feel most comfortable in India are at organisations, NGOs, and companies that embrace people with disabilities. I feel welcomed here, not judged for my differences but rather understood simply for my humanity. Here, we all have differences and therefore our difference becomes our similarity.

I know that I am a mere visitor in this country and so I accept the handicaps I must face, but I refuse to accept the handicaps that exist for India’s own citizens. Differences are what make us human; they exist in all of us and to varying degrees depending on when and where we are in life. But differences should never be grounds for exclusion from access. We, as a global community, have many lessons to learn from the people that society has perpetually been handicapping. I believe here we will find the key to embracing differences at every level – be it ideology, religion, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, so that differences are celebrated and not feared. ■

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# If Misfortune Strikes

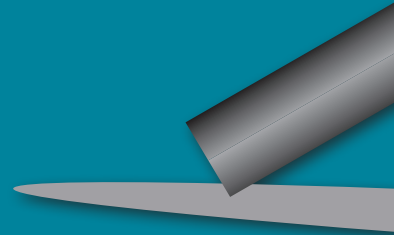


It Can Define You

Destroy You Or Strengthen You

The Choice Is

# YOURS



**Bhaskar  
Patnaik**

*Many a time, the journey of life is hampered by trials and tribulations, but the art of resilience can help us bounce back, writes **BHASKAR PATNAIK**, outlining how we can learn to survive and thrive in changing and challenging times.*



**We sometimes** hear of someone who has had a nervous breakdown, fallen into depression or attempted suicide because of misfortunes in life. This happens because of fear, from feeling lost by the chaos and relentlessness of the problem, or from not knowing how to transit to revival.

Though distress in the face of misfortune is natural, we have to bounce back as soon as possible because a grief-stricken mind can cause devastating results. Resilience can help us recover, and the time taken to recover depends upon one's inherent power of resilience. As Nelson Mandela put it, "The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall".

There may be various causes for our misery. Health issues, death of loved ones, accidents, natural calamities, acquiring a handicap, legal or professional problems,



unemployment, losing one's job, failure, marital discord, social evils, family issues, problems relating to the ahishadvargas (six passions)... this list is only illustrative. Not one, every aspect of human life, from cradle to the grave, impacts us and when there is such an attachment to man and material, there will be consequences.

Stressful situations could lead to sleeplessness, emotional imbalance, shock, anger, frustration, guilt, lack of focus, anxiety, withdrawal from social life,

besides physiological effects like circulatory and central nervous system disorders, high or low blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, hormonal and enzymatic imbalance, etc. As a result, the vitality and equanimity of life is lost, manifesting in various psycho-physical ailments that can ultimately become dangerous to oneself.

### Who is resilient?

Are you resilient when things fall apart? The only way to tell is by analysing how you respond to stressful situations.

Normally, Type-1 personalities are cool, calm, assertive, composed, receptive, empathetic, and capable of handling any eventuality in their lives with humility, dignity and fortitude. They have good relationships, are effective managers and good leaders. Their success rate is very high. On the other hand, Type-2 personalities are aggressive, angry, commanding, demanding, egoistic, and authoritarian. They get stressed out easily, are highly reactive, get exhausted quickly, and can't digest failures. They mess up their lives and are vulnerable to psycho-physical ailments.

Anyone can learn how to survive and thrive in changing and challenging times. Here is how one can develop resilience.

**Accept the problem gracefully:** When there is a breakdown in your life, spend some time in nature, in solitude, or in a place where you could find and heal your emotional scars. Self-contained thinking opens up our mind. Don't think you are the only person in the world with problems. And if you incessantly keep thinking 'Why me?' you will only get trapped in self-pity.

**Don't regret your past:** If the present problem is the upshot of your past mistakes, don't regret or feel guilty. Like everyone, you have had your share of unpleasant,

*As Nelson Mandela put it, "The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall."*

difficult, and heart breaking experiences. The paradox is, the very experiences that you regret would have driven and shaped many of your current interests, passions and values.

**Learn from the crisis:** If you learn from a loss, you have not lost. You must look into your strengths, the lessons and insights learnt from the crisis. Mind you! All the lessons you learned led to wisdom that can only be gained through experiencing life's ups and downs. And remember, a crisis can clarify; it can illuminate brilliant qualities of yourself that you may not have discovered otherwise. Many of us fail to recognise in ourselves that those dark times, far from diminishing us, can give us the most profound gifts of recognising human life in all its messy, painful, courageous and glorifying conditions. We can use those gifts and be a beacon to others in similar circumstances.

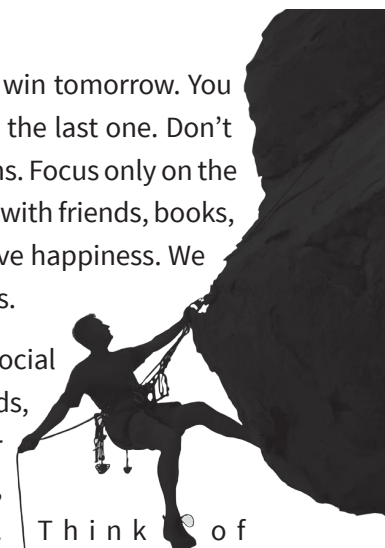
**Deal with the present:** Life changes. If you lose today, you can win tomorrow. You cannot start the next chapter of your life if you keep re-reading the last one. Don't let today's disappointments cast a shadow on tomorrow's dreams. Focus only on the positive moments of the past. When you are gloomy, spend time with friends, books, media, nature, music, members of the family, children and derive happiness. We must have aims, ambitions and desires that match our resources.

**Take strength from society:** Take strength from your social base during troubling times. It could be trusted friends, family, a valued colleague or confidante, a counsellor or spiritual teacher, supportive local community, a doctor, lawyer, a loyal pet or strong faith in a higher power. Think of how others handled similar problems. Sometimes, their critical analysis companions should also play its part in helping people come out of trauma. Persons in distress must be treated with respect, compassion, care and concern. "You can make it"; "You have everything in you to achieve your dreams"; "I'll be there to support you"...

**Work on personal development and emotional resilience continuously:** We should learn to moderate stress instantly. We should not hesitate to consult doctors to seek reprieve from stress. The body needs nutritious food, meditation, yoga, exercises, good literature, and company of good men. As Swami Sri Ramakrishna said, "Whatever you think, that you will be; if you think yourselves strong, stronger you will be. If you think yourselves weak, weaker you will be".

**Don't give in to negativity:** Negative thoughts like "I am worthless", "I am hopeless", "I am a sinner", etc, cause mental weakness. Its remedy lies not in brooding but in thinking of strength. Even a weak mind can be controlled by applying strong will power and regular training. We must know that tremendous power is hidden within

*The art of resilience is not an attribute that is confined to the genetically gifted few. Anyone can learn how to survive and thrive in changing and challenging times. Here is how one can develop resilience...*



## LIVING

us and positive thinking is the only way to bring it out. If negative emotions like anger, jealousy, fear and pessimism are allowed to influence our mind, we could easily get traumatised by crisis.

**Find and handle challenges:** We can deal with hardships effectively if our brain produces enough serotonin, the hormone responsible for dynamism, fearlessness, initiative and character. In order to produce enough serotonin we should find challenges in life. The moment we feel a sense of control, fulfillment, satisfaction or achievement, this hormone is secreted in the brain and it lifts our mood. A high level of this chemical gives power to the mind to control the body.

**Take inspiration from nature, the best teacher of resilience:** Every war creates resilient economies. Normalcy is restored after the devastation of every deadly cyclone. Ravaged trees sprout green foliage. The phoenix rises from ashes and flies high in the skies. There is light after darkness, a new morning, and a fresh lease of life every day. Resilience is the order of nature.

### The destiny of life

We are part of a resolute celestial plan and therefore we came to this world with a purpose. We shouldn't sink or lose ourselves during the course of our life which would defeat its meaning, worth, and purpose.

Many are those who stayed undeterred despite acquiring a handicap. They even went on to display excellence in their chosen fields and became role models for others. They've taken those things that have wounded, battered, and pierced them and transformed the experiences into empathy for others and moved and shaped the world. We have to resolve our problems and come out of it with the help of our intelligence, tact, values, references, identity, habits, focus, beliefs, hope, faith, reason, attitudes, perception, skills, pro-activeness, imagination, courage and determination. However, there are certain problems which cannot be solved instantaneously despite our best efforts. You may try to soften them to the extent possible or leave it to time. Even the deepest wounds heal, and the hardest rocks crumble with the passage of time.

### Cruise on

"Life is inherently risky. There is only one big risk you should avoid at all costs, and that is the risk of doing nothing", said Dennis Whitley. We should alter our interpretation of events in life to have peace and happiness. Life's blows cannot break a person whose spirit is warmed by the fire of enthusiasm. One must not stop. Moving is life. According to Gurudev, "Call someone for help in your journey. If no one turns up, you must go alone because you are always the lone traveler".

So cruise on... you will find you own way out! A new morning of hope lies over the horizon. ■

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from the crisis.  
Mind you! All  
the lessons you  
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wisdom that  
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experiencing  
life's ups and  
downs.*





# REDEFINING WEALTH

***Let's start teaching our children and youth about true wealth, writes DR. KETNA L. MEHTA, Founder Trustee, Nina Foundation.***

We were celebrating Id at our college friend's home. Everyone was relaxed and the conversation flowed easily. Tehmasp Printer started talking about his 27-year-old son Varaz. He told us that after completing his education from an international school and graduating from a Cambridge University affiliated college, Varaz had initially joined his company: International Gemological Institute, and performed very well.

In 2015 Tehmasp had bought a farmhouse in Karjat, on the outskirts of Mumbai, and the family would go there over weekends. One fine day, Varaz informed his dad that he was fed up of the money talk by the rich diamond



**Dr. Ketna  
L. Mehta**



merchants and jewelers and that he wanted to become a farmer! Tehmasp missed a heartbeat. He was grief-struck, and wondered what had gone wrong.

Varaz was certainly serious and started learning about organic farming, permaculture, hydroponics and other new agricultural practices. He philosophised that they would grow vegetables for people living within a radius of 20 kilometres, as energy is lost when vegetables and fruits travel beyond 20 kilometres! This meant that as a full time farmer, he did not want to produce commercially and create wealth. He was not viewing farming as a money making profession. Tehmasp's heart missed another heartbeat at his son's radical point of view.

Hearing this, my instant response was, "Varaz's heart is in the right place!"

This incident also set me thinking. All through our lives we use resources for our own benefit. We assume that WEALTH means a huge bank balance (maybe even a Swiss account), property (farmhouses, weekend villas, exotic holidays), acquisition of top automobiles like Mercedes, BMW, Ferrari; watches, perfumes, garments, shoes, lavish home and office interiors and much, much more.

Somehow, the media and every stimuli that we are exposed to reiterate that this is real wealth and a wealthy person is the one who has it all. In fact, there is a large customer segment called HNI – High Net Worth Individuals.

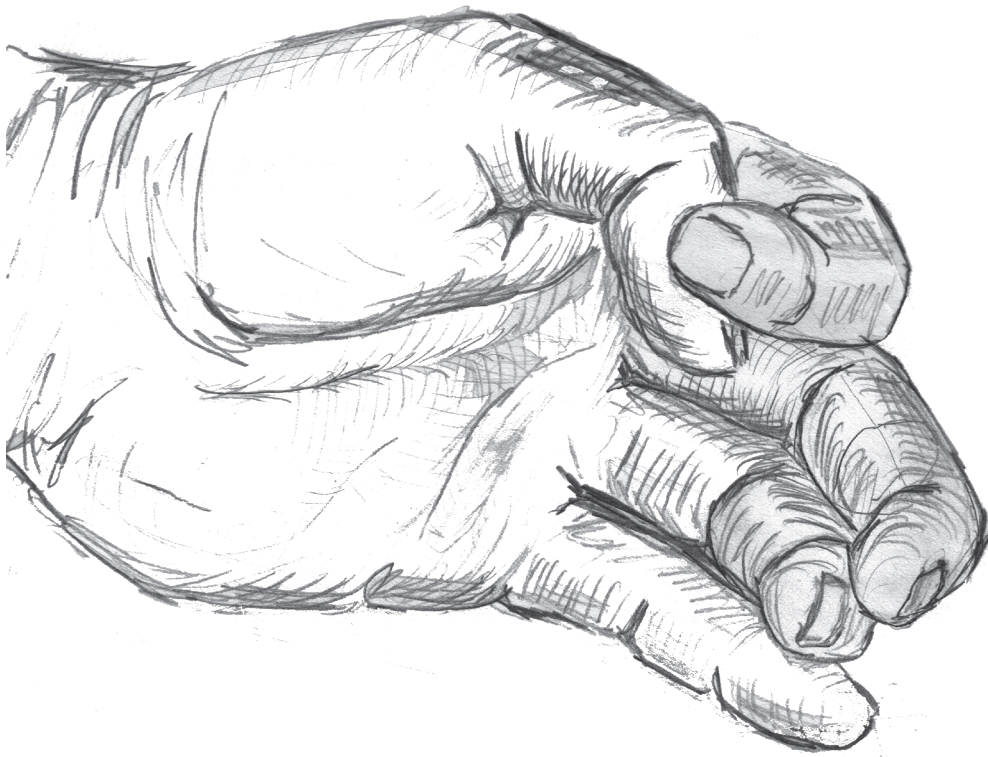
I am an exception. My definition of wealth is to be able to work under the sun, be one with nature, feel and smell the earth, breathe fresh air, walk in the fields, toil with our hands rather than technology, marvel at the stars, sit under a tree listening to the music of the birds and bees, bond with family and neighbours, eat meals prepared from vegetables and grains straight from the fields rather than a refrigerator which kills all nutrients, leave nature to nurture the seeds, watch the seasons change, sing and dance with abandon celebrating harvest time...

Wealth is good, perfect health, a stress-free work environment, a minimalist lifestyle and understanding that the five elements – Earth, Water, Fire, Air & Ether (Akash) are the original blockbuster brands, not the Guccis or Nikes.

Ironically, even after raking in billions, true happiness that the so-called wealthy get is by giving away their wealth for the betterment of humanity! True wealth is where there is no rat-race, no sleepless nights and no one-upmanship.

Let's start teaching and influencing our children and youth about this new definition of true wealth! ■

*Wealth is not about a huge bank balance and top brands. True wealth lies in good health, a stress-free work environment, a minimalist lifestyle and living in tune with nature.*



# THE WIZARD OF RHYTHM



**Meera  
Balachander**

***Gautaman Soundararajan extracts magic from the mridangam. Autism has not come in the way of this artiste's mesmerising performances, writes MEERA BALACHANDER.***

The stage is vibrantly alive. Music fills the air. When the vocalist is done, elegant beats on the mridangam bring the performance to a heart-throbbing end.

Gautaman Soundararajan is truly in his element. He has enjoyed every moment of the hour-long concert and the beatific smile on his face is proof enough. Then he launches into a taniavardhanam: regular beats, then the oddly even ones; loud ones and then a whisper... the audience is mesmerised. And when he brings in his last beats after a roaring crescendo, the applause is spontaneous. The mridangist responds just as spontaneously.

## VIRTUOSO

The occasion was the recording of a programme by Podhigai TV. I shifted uneasily in the chair, in the recording room, for my son was to be the singer and I prayed feverishly that he should do his best. Time seemed to have stopped for me; then I look at Gautaman, the mridangist. The confidence and zeal with which he accompanied my son's singing rubbed off on me too! I focussed my attention on him and think, "Here's a guy who deserves to be in more limelight".



Gautaman would belong to the autistic spectrum, given some of his characteristics, but his physical problems are no less prominent.

Born to closely related parents, 35-year-old Gautaman remained fevered and blue for almost five days after his birth. His bones were underdeveloped, his skull was small. His father, a small town TV mechanic, was totally puzzled. Many medical consultations later, doctors said that there was not much to do for the child, nor to expect from him. The child was afflicted with Carpenter Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder, characterised by fused undeveloped bones.

Gautaman grew up in Virudhunagar. With unclear speech and unexpressed thoughts, frustration set in early. Schooling was ruled out, given his problems. Raised by a loving grandmother, he was violence personified. If anything gave him solace, it was creating rhythm wherever, however he could – a plate and spoon, a board, a door... and singing.

When the family moved to Thanjavur, Gautaman, then 10, was noticed by a music teacher and he started learning to play the mridangam. His frustration vanished as if by the turn of a magic wand. Gautaman had found his calling. He had found his passion too.

Vidwan Ramachandran remembers the intensity of the seven years of teaching and learning. A generous soul who has trained many children with disabilities for free, he recalls Gautaman's bouts of anger in his early days as a student in a group class. The teacher then began going to Gautaman's house for one-to-one practice.

Soundararajan, Gautaman's father, says, "Gautaman has the social intelligence of a 10-year-old. He does not know the value of money. If you show him any note he will say it is a 100-rupee note". When it comes to playing the mridangam though, Gautaman would be accurate to a decimal point! He also responds to audience applause with a dramatic bow, a wide adorable grin and a charming *Namaste!*

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Unusually, Gautaman is also endowed with a melodious voice and an impeccable tune/tone/pitch sense, very amenable to fine variations. He can render a complicated kriti with increasingly complex *sangathees* and bring his performance to a very neat end.

“Gautaman does not talk to me or his mother. He lives in his own world of music. He listens to music several hours a day in the solitude of his room, or watches his favourite Carnatic music programmes on TV. Adds Geetha, Guataman’s mother, “I come from a music loving family. From childhood, I would sing to Gautaman and see the ecstasy it gave him. I would ask him to sing on different Gods on the days particularly associated with them, and now he himself knows these days and their associations. Every morning, he sings from 10 to noon and then again in the evening from six to eight. He has a huge collection of CDs”. That’s his only need and luxury, but the Soundararajans sometimes find it difficult to get him new CDs, given their financial constraints.

Goutaman’s dedication enables him to sing and perform to perfection. The catch however lies in the fact that his teeth are not developed and so his diction remains unclear, which hugely affects his chances as a successful vocalist.

“Gautaman cannot eat hard food. He is not fussy about food. He has not tasted a chocolate or sweet in his life. I mash his food in the mixie. He takes care not to eat or drink whatever may affect his voice”, says his mother. No wonder then, music is his main nourishment!

Gautaman is short statured and some of the facial characteristics are typical to Carpenter Syndrome. “Gautaman speaks to himself and refers to himself in the third person”, smiles Soundararajan. A possible indication of the presence of autistic traits.

I ask Soundararajan if he is subjected to insensitive comments when in public. “He looks like a monkey” is a comment within earshot but Gautaman is not even aware of what a monkey is, let alone why it should be an insult to him! This is not to say that life is a bed of roses for the young man.

Overcoming the odds of his disability with grace, Gautaman is mostly self-sufficient. “I only help him with his head-bath, for his skull is not well fused and his hands do not have the strength to rub his scalp well”, shares Geetha. Given that, how his small hands lend themselves to power-packed performances on the mridangam, is mystifying. Other percussion instruments like the tabla or ghatam that require forceful playing could well be off his radar.

He avidly looks forward to opportunities to perform in public. He has performed under the aegis of sabhas and forums like Narada Gana Sabha, Sri Thyagabrahma Mahotsava Sabha, Thiruvaiyaru South Zone Cultural Centre, Thanjavur and at Republic Day and Independence Day functions organised by the Government of Tamil

*Given the limitations of special students like Gautaman, the role of the teacher assumes greater importance.*

## VIRTUOSO

Nadu and the Government of India. Doordarshan, Sun TV and Puthiyathalaimurai TV have featured him.

Lakshmi Mohan, the well known music therapist from Chennai, ace talent spotter and talent groomer par excellence, whom Soundararajan contacted after reading an interview, values Gautaman's talent immensely. She has invited him to perform at many of her autism awareness concerts. Recalling her first meeting with Gautaman and his parents, she says, "His parents wanted me to promote Gautaman as a singer but I felt that given his unclear diction, it would be unfair to him and the audience. And then, when he has an impeccable talent as a percussionist, why not project that?" A stickler for perfection, Lakshmi would not go against her conscience with half measures and half talents.

Gautaman is a Carnatic music loyalist, partial to male singers. He can spend hours immersed in listening to the likes of Maharajapuram Santhanam, Yesudas or Unnikrishnan and reproduce what he heard faultlessly. Movie classics too are acceptable. 'Orunaalpoduma' is one of his well-essayed songs. He is capable of accompanying stalwarts like O.S. Arun, asserts Lakshmi Mohan. She strives hard to find him exposure. Vidwan Ramachandran concurs with her. To my question if he has taught Gautaman all that needs to be taught, he says, "Yes. Gautaman understands all the intricacies of talas and he can play them perfectly. If some well-known singers give him a chance to accompany them, he would go places!"

Given the limitations of special students like Gautaman, the role of the teacher assumes greater importance, despite the enormous inborn talent. The guru becomes psychoanalyst. Vidwan Ramachandran recalls, "Once I was through with the mohra exercise, I was confident of Gautaman's further progress. I taught him in the company of his more fortunate companions. I believe the teacher and the taught should be

*How his small hands lend themselves to power-packed performances on the mridangam is mystifying!*



on the same wavelength to achieve a moderate rate of success. I have tried to live Gautaman's disability myself to bring out the best rhythm and melody in him".

Life in a small town is totally devoid of excitement. "Thanjavur was brimming with music but we shifted to Virudhunagar because life was otherwise lonely there. My mother, who brought up Gautaman through very hard days, lives nearby with my brothers. They are our moral support", says Soundararajan.

Madurai is the nearest big city. Would it have any openings for Gautaman? Soundararajan has not had much luck there. He himself has had to change his profession, given the irrelevance of TV repairing these days. With indifferent health, having to accompany his son whenever, wherever opportunity knocks, even very softly, like Gautaman's beats, the father is totally in sync with his son, even if deep down his heart misses a beat or two worrying about their future.

When I go for recordings or programmes, it is always a pleasure for me to spot Gautaman's tiny footwear. His bright, welcoming smile assures me that yet another concert will have memorable rhythm and end with standing ovation. ■



*If you show him any currency note, he will say it is a 100-rupee note. But when it comes to playing the mridangam, Gautaman is accurate to a decimal point!*



# AROUND THE COUNTRY IN 18 DAYS



**Yashasvini  
Rajeshwar**

***Lalithkumar Natarajan, founder of Love and Acceptance, a Tirupur-based NGO working with persons with mobility disabilities, has just completed a gritty and spirited expedition on a modified Royal Enfield from Kanyakumari to Khardung La in Jammu Kashmir, which makes him the first paraplegic to complete this route. YASHASVINI RAJESHWAR has a freewheeling chat with him.***





HIMANK  
 KHARDUNGLA  
 TOP  
 NORTH PULLU-14KM  
 KHALSAR = 56KM  
 NUBRASAND DUNES-86 KM  
 SIACHEN BASE CAMP-164  
 16TF 54 RCC

HT-18380FT

KHARDUNGLA TIGERS



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LOVE & ACCEPTANCE

www.loveandacceptance.org

NIEPMD

## TRAILBLAZER

**There is an** urgency in his voice. His sentences come tumbling out in no particular order as he paints pictures of people and places far away and the journey of a lifetime. He colours these pictures with meticulous detail – which side of the road it happened, which person was around, which tunnel was the protagonist of which incident – and at the end of it all, you are handed a rich canvas of experiences fuelled by a strength of will that would put his Royal Enfield to shame. Lalithkumar is fresh from his Himalayan adventure and does he have a story to tell!



Lalithkumar Natarajan was 11 years old when he woke up one morning paralysed. What

doctors later diagnosed as Transverse Myelitis was for the young boy a life-altering moment. With no sensation from the T6 (chest) below, everything that he had dreamt for himself underwent a sea change. With Shah Rukh Khan-starrer ‘Fauji’ airing on TV, he had decided he would join the armed forces. Suddenly, he found himself confined in the family’s modest, middle-class, first floor home, with no access to the outside world and no formal rehabilitation options. It took eight months, before doctors were able to put a name on what had happened to him.

In the many years that followed, Lalithkumar’s life was defined, even scripted, by the very will power that literally propelled him to take on the entire country. “I always get used to the cards I was dealt in life,” he chuckles, even as he rattles off the list of educational qualifications he has raked up since. With inaccessible classrooms and other difficulties making it impossible to keep up with the demands of formal schooling, he sought refuge in the open schooling system, going on to finish his B.B.A. as well. “Back in my B.B.A. days, I made sure to go to all my contact classes. When classes were on the second floor, my friends used to carry me up. Finally, the admin got irked enough to shift all my classes to the ground floor,” he reminisces. When he was told that open schooling qualifications were invalid for the TNPC examinations, he decided to go back and redo his 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade exams. Then,

*Lalith found out the hard way, “there is a difference between dreaming, thinking, aspiring, and actually doing.”*

in true Lalithkumar fashion, he went over and beyond. With an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, today, this young man has finished his B.B.A. and M.B.A., before moving on to an M.Phil., followed by a B.Sc. in Psychology, and a B.S.W. "I am now enrolled in an L.L.B. programme," he chuckles, amused by the astonishment on his listener's face.

Running in the background of these academic endeavours was always the desire for a bike. "Everyone I spoke to asked me to get a Scooty, but I had made up my mind. I would ride a Bullet," he says. Ask him why and the incredulity is writ large on his face. "Which biker wouldn't want a Bullet? Besides, it also brings a certain visibility." Yet, as Lalith found out the hard way, "there is a difference between dreaming, thinking, aspiring, and actually doing." After an experience with a locally assembled Thunderbird ended disastrously, he decided it was time to aim big. For eight months, he pursued Royal Enfield, writing emails daily and doggedly following them up with phone calls. The persistence eventually paid off, and Lalith got a call from a Chennai landline one day. "Truecaller told me it was the Enfield showroom. I knew something had clicked." In April 2015, Lalith headed to the showroom in Chennai to talk to the team and get his dream on the road.

For eight months, the team from Royal Enfield and Lalith went back and forth, discussing what he needed and how they could make it happen. With the help of a strong, committed technical team

from Enfield and his own friends and supporters, the prototype for the sidecar was finally ready. "Early on, I decided I didn't want a tricycle," explains Lalith. "Everywhere I go, I already travel with my wheelchair, my automatic fifth and sixth wheels. A sidecar made the most sense. I could mount and dismount without assistance, and there was space for a light wheelchair and walker. I could be independent." A sidecar was designed, tested, modified and installed; an addition that was greeted throughout the trip with refrains from the iconic movie 'Sholay'. Finally, in September 2016, the bike was delivered. The inaugural long distance drive, from Tirupur to Chennai, took less

*The persistence eventually paid off, and Lalith got a call from a Chennai landline one day. In April 2015, Lalith headed to the showroom in Chennai and get his dream on the road.*





than eight hours. “I had never ridden anything at all before,” says Lalith. “After I was paralysed, I always had the thirst to ride, but I did not get around to acting on it. My very first experience was on a Royal Enfield, a dream come true.”

With the bike in hand, there was nothing to stop Lalith from dreaming big. He had launched his NGO, Love and Acceptance, in 2014, dedicated to aiding persons with mobility disabilities. One of the organisation’s biggest projects, Helping Hands, seeks to provide catheters, commode chairs, and wheelchairs to individuals who require the assistance across the country. Meanwhile, Lalith is also garnering support for his pet project, Centre for Disability Education Employment Advocacy Research and Rehabilitation (CDEEARR), speaking to government organisations and private parties about its importance. An all-India biking trip, he felt, would not only help him explore his own boundaries, but would also serve as a means to spread awareness about spinal cord injuries. Thus, DEAR ’17, Disability Education and Awareness Ride 2017, was born, a tradition Lalith hopes to repeat every year.

The ride saw Lalith start at Kanyakumari, the southernmost tip of the country and finish at Khardung La in Jammu and Kashmir, the highest motorable road in the world. Joined by two able-bodied veteran bikers, Major Venugopal and his son Vishal, the trip began on June 15<sup>th</sup> 2017, three days after Lalith’s birthday and the founding anniversary of the NGO.

*“After I was paralysed, I always had the thirst to ride, but I did not get around to acting on it. My very first experience was on a Royal Enfield, a dream come true.”*

For 18 days, the team biked through the country, speaking of the importance of safe riding as most spinal cord injuries are caused by road accidents. Battling the physical discomfort of sitting for eight hours a day, inaccessible hotels (“every single hotel had a step leading up to the bathroom,” he says exasperatedly), pouring rain and blistering heat, the team went through Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Rajasthan before entering the Capital (“the worst traffic I have ever seen!”). From Delhi, the route took them through Amritsar, Jammu, Srinagar and Leh. On July 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017, Lalith and his companions were atop Khardung La. “It was bliss to as much as see that board in front of me,” recalls Lalith. “That moment was just something else.” Photo opportunities with his bike, wheelchair, and walker later, the team made their descent and celebrated the success of their endeavour. Lalith became the first paraplegic to complete the route from Kanyakumari to Khardung La.

Yet amidst this story of geographical scale, social awareness, and personal boundaries, there is another tale; one of friendship, camaraderie and relationships forged. “Everywhere we went, the bikers’ community welcomed us with open arms. A commander in the army saw us in Kashmir and insisted on riding in my sidecar. Even before the idea of this trip was born, the technical team at Enfield, Aditya and Arnosh and the rest of the team, were fantastic. Also, my friends who accompanied me on the many follow-up visits and test drives...this trip happened because of every friend, old and new, who stood by me these last few months.”

Even when he had a small fall towards the end of his trip, it is what he likes to call a “safe accident,” one that occurred merely ten minutes away from a friend’s house. First aid, local know-how, and a warm bed that night were promised in minutes. “There was so much goodwill through the entire trip, we didn’t have to worry about a thing.”

At age 11, Lalithkumar had wanted to join the armed forces. In the years that followed he has been an English teacher, an employee in a multinational bank, an entrepreneur with an HR consultancy, and he now runs his own NGO. He has chased a string of degrees, fought for his right to independence and mobility, and seen the country on his own terms. He prides himself on his ability to adapt and unwillingness to count on serendipitous miracles to fulfil his dreams. “What is the point in waiting,” he asks.

Eleven-year-old Lalithkumar wanted to spread his wings and seek out new experiences. At 37, they may have changed shape and form, but it seems that some dreams do come true. ■

*“Everywhere we went, the bikers’ community welcomed us with open arms. A commander in the army saw us in Kashmir and insisted on riding in my sidecar.”*





**OVERWEIGHT?**

SLIM?

**OBESE?**

THIN?

**MALNOURISHED?**

**HEALTHY?**

*Childhood obesity tends to impact the confidence levels of a child. Overweight and obese children often become loners. It also affects their stamina, ability to run and puts them at risk for diabetes and cholesterol, and in young girls, the problem of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS).*

**Frequent visits** to the doctor, inability to take part in athletic events in school, lethargy that prevents a child from getting up from bed even to pick up a pencil from the table in the same room, longingly looking at candy and not being able to eat it, not wanting to go out and meet people, loathing shopping at an age when children long to show off their new clothes to their friends, and the weighing machine showing a sharp rise – these are some of the scenarios that call for urgently addressing the ‘elephant in the room’. The issue of childhood obesity is a serious health concern.

Dr. Dharini Krishnan, a dietician with over 31 years of experience has been providing diet consultations to clients all over the world. About thirty years ago, there

were hardly any overweight or obese kids in the country, recalls Dr. Krishnan. Over the last decade and a half, this number has shot up significantly and is now around 2% of the population.

Dr. Krishnan speaks to AISHWARYA LAKSHMAN, highlighting this ominous issue and outlines possible ways to tackle this problem. She asks, “Do we want to go the whole distance like the U.S., and then learn and come back to healthy food habits, or do we want to stop here and turn around?”

*Read on to assimilate her observations –*

**1. Generally, plump children are thought to be beautiful and healthy. When and how does one begin to realize that these children are actually obese?**

If one has to go by a particular standard, it would be the growth chart released by the Indian Pediatric Association (IPA). If a child weighs three times more than he ought to, as per the IPA chart, then there is reason to worry. In practice, unfortunately, no parent abides by the rules of this growth chart strictly, except when they make the mandatory hospital visits, which is until the child attains the age of one.

**2. What are the primary reasons for childhood obesity? Is it hereditary or because of wrong food habits?**

There is certainly a hereditary element, but it is also caused by environmental factors and food habits; rather, it is more of the latter. Moreover, parents tend to buy gifts and dial in food for their kids to make up for not being around and spending time with them. When both parents are working, their kids are often left in crèches or with caretakers and grandparents. Each of these scenarios carries risks. Under the care of grandparents, children often tend to have their way. Caretakers tend to feed them with a lot of rice (thinking they are doing the children good), completely ignoring the importance of vegetables and dal in their diet. In crèches, they might perhaps get healthy home food, but here, the risk of young children eating ordered food/food packets has now crept in.

**3. Once identified as obese, what are the dos & don'ts? What are the foods to be avoided? What are the foods to be favoured, and why?**

Eating home-cooked food is largely healthy for overweight and obese children. A major portion of food intake should involve dals and foods like idli. (Idli has now been classified as the best food in the world and the UN has recently released a video on the same). Plenty of vegetables and high fibre foods low in calories should be included. The spices used while cooking at home can help maintain protein, iron and calcium levels within limits. Natural is the best. Fixed meal times should be followed.

A sedentary lifestyle, obsession over video games, families sitting together in front of the television for meals, purchasing packaged food with a lot of preservatives and



**Aishwarya  
Lakshman**

*Home-cooked food is healthy food. The tendency to eat out or dial in food should be limited to once a week, if at all. Fixed meal times are recommended.*

lack of physical activities should be totally avoided. Foods such as bread, which is filled with empty calories, should be avoided.

From the time they are a year old, children should start eating like adults. Mashing up food and restricting the diet to what the child wants will not work.



**Dr. Dharini Krishnan**

*A major portion of food intake should involve dals and foods like idli. Plenty of vegetables and high-fibre foods low in calories should be included.*

#### **4. What exactly is the difference between "overweight" and "obese"?**

There is a certain weight corresponding to a person's height. In a child, the weight at birth is expected to triple by the end of year one. As the child grows up, if he/she weighs 20 kilos when he is supposed to weigh around 10 kilos, he/she would be overweight, but it's still okay. However, the same does not apply to adolescence (when one is almost 3/4th an adult). However, if he/she were 30 kilos when she/he is supposed to weigh 10 kilos, then it would be reason to worry. If a 10-year-old child weighs 80 kilos, it is certainly problematic. The highest period of growth happens during the period of 0-6 months, 6-12 months and during the adolescent stage and appropriate nutrition patterns determine this growth.

#### **5. How does childhood obesity affect physical and mental health of the child? What are the diseases that obesity puts a child under risk for?**

Childhood obesity tends to impact the confidence levels of a child. Overweight and obese children often become loners. People frequently laugh at fat children and make fun of them which really impacts their social interaction skills. Today, overweight and obese children have no one to talk to unlike earlier. In the good old times, mothers and grandmothers were such buffers. Children who are overweight and obese are also frustrated because of being perpetually deprived of the food they want to eat.

It affects their stamina, ability to run and puts them at a risk for diabetes, built up cholesterol and even causes in young girls the problem of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS). Taking tablets to counter the problem creates further problems like water retention. This is a vicious cycle where an overweight/obese child has health problems and to counter these problems they have to take capsules, which in turn leads them towards further obesity.

#### **6. Can there be emotional/psychological reasons for obesity as well? If so, what can be done about this?**

In the context of people eating when they feel upset, it is alright for this to happen once in a while. However, these portions should be limited. The mind should always be engaged in some constructive work. When hunger hits you, you have that craving. Put your mind onto something constructive all the time. Overweight/obese children are prone to celebrate by binge eating after being deprived of what they enjoy eating. Sticking to regular meal times and eating proper meals with a lot of fruits and vegetables helps.





**NUTRITRACS**, often called ‘calories on the go’, is an app created by Dr. Dharini Krishnan. It is available on Google Playstore for Android devices and has in its database over 2000 food items and helps users calculate their calorie intake from the food they consume. It also provides a summary of their food consumption patterns for a timeframe – be it a day, week, or month. Does it cater to the Indian diet? Yes, especially so. It also suggests recommended calorie intakes based on the individual’s activity pattern.

**7. What is the minimum time that a child should devote for physical activities on a daily basis? What are the recommended physical activities?**

Apart from leading an active lifestyle, every child should engage in physical activity for a minimum of 45 minutes every day. This could be swimming, running, cycling, or if none of this is possible, at least walking.

**8. Any other suggestions, recommendations? What is your advice to young parents and doting grandparents?**

- Grandparents and parents should not bring home junk food too often.
- Parents/grandparents should learn to say ‘No’ to their children when children demand food at unadvisable times.
- The tendency to eat out/dial in/buy in should be limited to once a week, if at all.
- Food should not be eaten out of packets. If junk food is indeed bought, all the children in the house should share the portions, so that no one child consumes the whole thing.
- There can be an outing without food being bought.
- Celebrations can happen at home with home-cooked food.
- Fruit desserts (fruit combinations of various kinds) as opposed to the several other dessert options should be experimented with.
- Parents should take their kids for vegetable and fruit shopping. Children should be included in deciding a healthy menu for the day at home.
- Grow methi and palak in pots in the house.
- Follow Atithi Devo Bhava: Cooking for three people and having five people eat the same. People should share food.
- No eating in front of the TV. ■

*The spices used while cooking at home help maintain protein, iron and calcium levels within limits.*



# THE WHISTLE BLOWER

*Being conductor of a city bus can expose you to the highs and lows of life, and how! Lacing it with humour, MEERA BALACHANDER pens a poignant story on bus conductor Murugan, who eventually finds his place under the sun.*



**Meera**  
Balachander

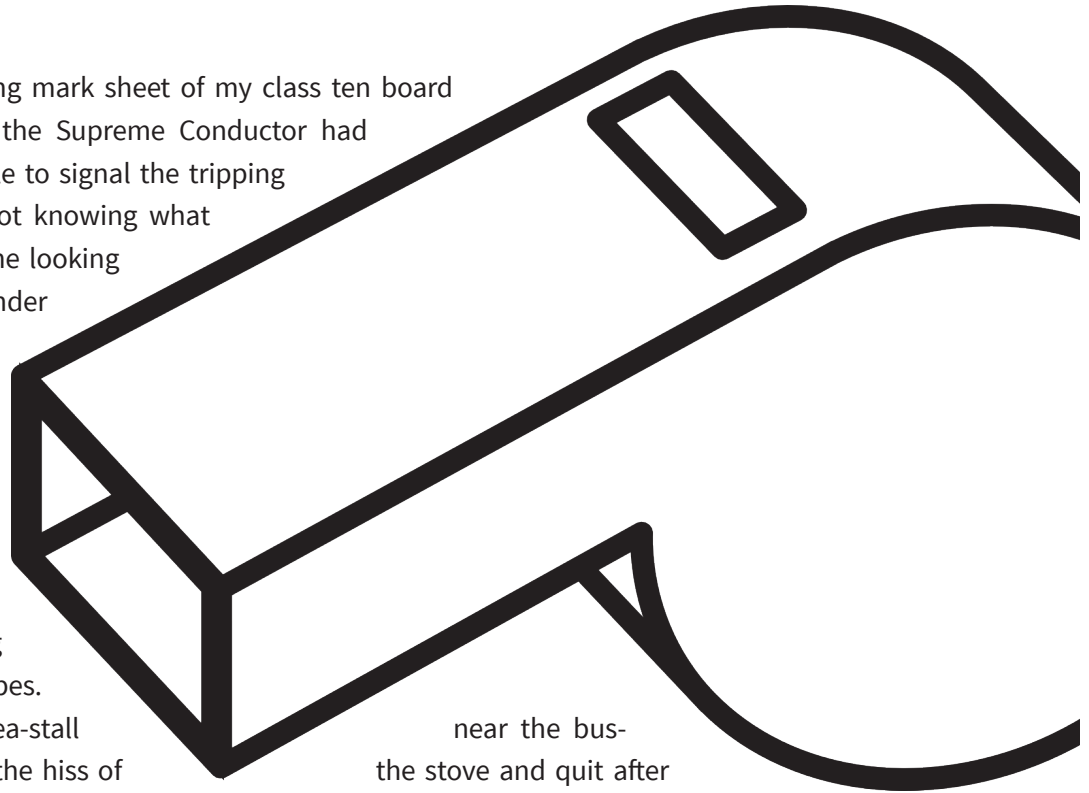
I am Murugan. Not one of those dime-a-dozen Murugans, but the only one with a well turned and twisted moustache, pointy nose, healthy dark chocolate skin and a permanent smile on my face and in my soul. I am a conductor. No, not of the Chennai Choir but of the M54B. Raman the driver and I make a good pair. As our bus winds its way through the congested city and a stretch of its backyard, we too wind, bind, bond and unwind.

When the anemic looking mark sheet of my class ten board exams arrived, I knew the Supreme Conductor had blown a powerful whistle to signal the tripping of my academic trip. Not knowing what to do, I whiled away time looking for enlightenment under the dim lamps of the lanes near my home. The company of the blissfully-drunk-and-sprawled hardly helped. I felt even less comfortable with those haloed 'studying under-the-streetlight' types.

Then I worked at a tea-stall stop for a while, hated the hiss of the first meagre tea stained pay. I was packed off to plough my uncle's fields in the next village. The uncle's teenaged daughter proved more interesting than the oxen and I was duly deported back home. Some unsettling time later, a good Samaritan guided me on a new route. He took me to the city and got me registered with the Employment Exchange. I remember the brouhaha which arose in the family when my appointment letter arrived. My mother was happy, my father disappointed, my sister ashamed, my little brother elated, in that order. "So what", I told my family, "Superstar Rajinikanth began his career as a bus conductor in Bangalore. See where he is today". That was a stunning silencer!

It was a proud moment for me when I was given my uniform, the well-worn leather collection bag and those strips of tickets to issue.

On an early morning trip, when the bus was empty and I was still half asleep, I dreamt of my ascension like Superstar's. From that dim-witted village of my childhood I had come to a city of hoary hoardings. Leaders and sons beamed their laser smiles every two metres. It was not difficult to visualise a life-size cut-out of me, with my knife-sharp nose, well-twisted moustache and my dark skin making its own statement



near the bus-  
the stove and quit after

*My mother  
was happy,  
my father  
disappointed,  
my sister  
ashamed, my  
little brother  
elated, in that  
order.*



bang on the highway. People would say that I was a home-grown Rajinikanth. In that sleepy state, the transition from conductor to superstar seemed seamless but then when Raman applied a sharp brake and I banged my head on the window rail, I could only see stars in my head which reduced the cut-out to reality size – zero. A bus conductor morphing into a superstar! Now it certainly seems less natural than a chrysalis turning into a butterfly. But if He has done it, why not I?

For the next couple of years I did not miss any Rajinikanth movie. I imbibed his mannerisms. I joined a local drama group and accepted all roles to put my Rajini-isms into practice. By 30, I was recognised as the local Rajinikanth. When I visited my uncle's village again, his daughter smiled coyly at me every now and then. She sure seemed to like the way I turned my head and raised my eyebrows. She saw potential in me and surely in herself. She seemed to fancy a secret rendezvous by the haystack. I imagined a duet, a dance-around-the-haystack and the lass's sweet coffee spilling all over my Rajini shirt. Perhaps our paths would cross and merge at an apt junction when the traffic lights turned a promising green. If my ascent to superstardom was guaranteed, the staid old father of this admirer would offer his daughter on a platter! Of course a superstar requires to zealously guard his space while allowing for fans' pulls and pushes. For now it was practice time and her approval was valuable for confidence building.

By 35, I was a pro at Rajini-isms. In the bus, while issuing tickets, while reprimanding the careless footboard travelers and even while giving Raman the 'right' to proceed, I oozed Rajini-isms. My hairstyle evolved with every new Rajini movie. I practiced to

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walk like him, even in the narrow aisle of the bus, to smile like him and to adapt his dialogues to the situations I was in. The staff of my depot was encouraging. They hoped some of the fame I was expecting would rub off on them too. My regular passengers began to call me “Rajini anna”. They drooled over the red towel I casually draped around my neck, over my uniform.

But again, the inaudibly shrill whistle of the Supreme Conductor marked the end of my tentative flight to stardom. No godfather appeared in my life. No director laid his fortune-building eyes on me and said “HE is my new face”. A hollow cloak of imitation was all that remained of the erstwhile me.

A glance at the mirror alarmed me. Middle age was mercilessly overtaking my still fanciful mind. Was that a paunch that I saw? Was my moustache actually turning prematurely white? What were those depressions under my eyes, like my conductor’s bag? And where was that village belle? While I was living my dream full time, her father had gotten her married to the grocer’s assistant, a dim-wit. She deserved it, the infidel!

It was Raman who sobered me down. One day, as we sat eating sambaar rice, he suggested I look elsewhere for fulfilment in life. He was not exactly encouraging matrimony, given his own flat-tyre marriage, but he said, a conductor can aspire to bigger things, career-wise. Once a driver, always a driver, he groaned, but I could one day be a depot chief. My personality, paunch, moustache et al., indicated it, like a forecast. I could command a whole fleet of bus conductors and mint money left, right and centre. My ears perked up and I decided that this would be my new goal. I would get there in another five years for sure.

But the all-seeing Conductor double-crossed me yet again. Even as I traced the route to that elevated post, the schemer Ratnam overtook me with a wily look of triumph and gleefully rubbed his greasy palms together. It transpired that he had been at it doggedly, paid up

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## SHORT STORY

here and there to reach where he had wanted. I swallowed my deflated pride and my non-starter visions of elevation.

I got all worked up because they appointed me on the M54B route. What the hell, I am Murugan, not any lesser being. Why had I been sidelined? Why wasn't I on one of the better recognised routes? Why wasn't I deemed fit to don a decent beige uniform and travel in air conditioned comfort like that cunning Rajesh?

Raman and I had a heart-to-heart talk on route politics. Is it a lucky draw, we wondered, or is it plain hard work or soft luck which allots us bus routes like we are allotted wives or husbands? We heard anonymous whispers that more than gear grease and brake oil was involved in route roulettes. Raman patted me gently on the shoulder and said, "Way to go Murugan. I am stuck at the steering wheel, honking away at stubborn stray cattle and street dogs. I would be a nervous wreck without your warm partnership. Years from now, I will still be a driver, driven crazy by the wretched traffic of this city but you will one day be a ticket examiner and stop my bus. Will you at least smile at me?" It was indeed a saving grace and a secret relief that through all the setbacks in my career, Raman had been a constant. He never failed to give me hope of better prospects even though these prospects could separate us. Great chap!

As usual, Raman's pep talk elevated my hopes. But times are bad. Politics has invaded the depots and every job is tapped and tagged. Except for poor hen-pecked Raman, I have no godfather to push my luck.

Never mind. I anyway dislike the inhumanity that clings to ticket examiners. When that sour-tempered Vijay stops our bus, butterflies dance in my heart and my ticket bag. What is he going to unearth? I can see Raman looking anxiously at me even as a pin-drop silence engulfs the bus. I look at all the passengers in my care and hope I have not missed issuing a ticket here or there. I would hate to see a passenger harassed because of me. I'd rather be happily humane even if promotion eludes me eternally.

Indeed, I like my profession for the human contact. What better place for it than a Chennai city bus? Yeah right, I hear you say, the city bus is a haven for 'contact' bottom pinchers and pick-pockets. That's true, sadly. And when the bus tilts on its side with students hanging out from the footboard like clothes put to dry, I have a tough time looking out for eve teasers. Thankfully it's only twice a day that my heart beats real fast for the large number of schoolgirls in my bus – I mean it beats for their safety.

At the same time, every 5 p.m. trip on this route has the evocative flavour of my own childhood. What a coincidence that I grew up in Manappakkam, that village-fast-turning-into-town through which the bus winds its way to Porur. When I see school children hailing motorcycles, tempos and all vehicles for a lift, my eyes sometimes brim with tears. I have been through that barefoot act too as a child. Little did I know that I would one day ride a bus on the very road, nine hours a day.

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"HE is my new  
face."*

At other times, during non-peak hours, Raman and I enjoy our trips, especially through the less crowded 'backyard' of the city, which really are villages. The bus is rarely full, and we stop for anyone waving a hand at us. Raman is a patient guy, rarely given to road rage. Good for him. Good for his heart. We would certainly not want our M54B to go crashing into the wayside fields if Raman should collapse on the wheel, like that arrogant driver Ramasamy. His heart conked off and he crashed – of all places – into a police station with his busload of passengers. We, Raman and I, don't have a hit to our credit till date. I mean that notorious 'hit from behind' of Chennai buses which causes messy ends to two-wheeler riders. It is important to remain sanguine and composed in our profession. On the threshold of forty, I can say with pride that my blood pressure has remained well within prescribed limits, in spite of the extremely tense moments of the peak hour rush.

There stands middle-aged Lakshmi in a gaudy printed sari holding her sari high in the puddled bus shelter. She is a regular on the 10.45 trip. She makes eatables at home and takes them in big, oil-stained cloth bags to the roadside shop a few stops away. I do not know her family history but I respect her hard work even as I exchange pleasantries with her. I leave a button or two of my blue shirt open – my own signature style. It sure helps my commuters (read female) bond with me, hee hee! Gifted as I am with a timely repartee, I see that for all their projected modesty, middle-aged women

*I have a soft corner for the brave old women, some with a stoop, others with a walking stick, boarding my bus with wares to sell, on their way to the market. They freshen up with the individual attention I give each one, some naughty at times.*



## SHORT STORY

like a personal comment or two from a witty guy with a well-designed moustache, even if he is only a bus conductor. There comes the young mother taking her mentally handicapped boy to school. I make sure they are comfortably seated together. I have a soft corner for the brave old women, some with a stoop, others with a walking stick, boarding my bus with wares to sell, on their way to the market. They freshen up with the individual attention I give each one, some naughty at times. A frail looking oldie puts her basket of mangoes into the bus before getting in. I rush to give her a hand – “Pattamma, mind your hips; this is not an ambulance with a red light on top. Why can’t you sleep peacefully at home and ask your lazy daughter-in-law to do the business?” I admonish her, as I see her settle down in a seat. She gives me a toothless smile and turns her sightless eyes to me as she digs into her worn-out cloth purse and hands me a crumpled note.

Superstar, depot chief and ticket examiner disappear into the dust and noise Raman raises at the sharp turning. I rush to catch some mangoes rolling out of Pattamma’s basket even as she tries to stand up. “Muruga” she murmurs anxiously. A shrill whistle...this time it is not the Supreme Conductor out to put spokes in my way. It’s my own whistle asking Raman to stop to redeem the mangoes and the old lady. She is not addressing me, she is communicating with a more elevated Murugan, but now I know where I come from and where I wish to remain. ■

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# CONTINENTAL BREAKFAST!

***What constitutes “continental” cuisine? It depends on which continent you are in, discovers DR. MADAN VASISHTA.***

My first “continental breakfast” was at the YMCA in New York City (NYC) in the summer of 1968. My friend Sambo from Nigeria and I had gone on a three-day visit to NYC to see the Liberty Statue, the Empire State Building and ride those subways. We had each booked a room for \$4 per night at the Y. This may sound very cheap but it was a bit more than the salary I earned at that time for three hours of work.

The Y had included a “free continental breakfast” in the \$4 package. Sambo and I had a deep discussion about what a “continental” breakfast was. We both agreed that “continental” referred to something big. We expected a huge breakfast.

The next morning, we showered, shaved and dressed in our three piece suits and went to the cafeteria. No, we were not on a business trip, we dressed following the custom in India and Nigeria – to dress formally while visiting a place. We stood out in the cafeteria, for no one but us, were formally dressed on that sweltering hot August day.



**Dr. Madan  
Vasishta**

## SLICE OF LIFE

Sambo and I both took trays and began to load it with whatever we thought we could eat and what we could carry in our bags for lunch. Sambo was ahead of me and when the lady mentioned \$3 something, he raised his hands in despair and showed the lady “free continental breakfast” written on the meal ticket. She spoke rapidly to him and pointed at a donut and then at the coffee machine. Everyone was looking at us as we were holding up the line. I poked a finger into Sambo’s back and signed to him, “Put everything back.” He did. I already had done that as I did not want to be embarrassed.

We left the line, picked up two donuts each and filled our cups with coffee. I wanted tea but was afraid it might not be included in the free deal. Slowly, looking around, we learned we could also get juice, which we did. Sambo also helped himself to two glasses of milk. At first we had felt cheated but we were satisfied when we had our fill.

Now, almost half a century later, in a different continent, I am having a different continental breakfast experience. I am staying in a small hotel, which also boasted of a “free continental breakfast”. After checking in, I asked the manager where and when I could eat breakfast. He said, “At eight, we will bring it to your room”. He wanted to know what I wanted for breakfast. I almost blurted out “donut”, but remembered this was Kerala. He already had written the choices for me; dosa, idly, puri, plus tea or coffee. I chose dosa and tea.

Next morning, I opened my door at eight to see if breakfast was coming. Nobody was in the hallway, so I walked to the front desk. No one was there, either. I walked around shouting “Hello”, but there was no response. After a few minutes, two more guests showed up. They were also waiting for their breakfast. At 8.15, a guy came on a roaring motorcycle with a cloth bag slung on his shoulder. He hurriedly stopped the bike, said something to the waiting guests – now six of us – and asked us to follow him.

We found ourselves in a small dining room in the lower floor. He hurriedly opened his bag and produced small packages wrapped in newspaper and started to serve dosas, etc, in plates. There was also sambhaar and chutney in small, sealed plastic bags. Spoons and napkins appeared soon after. I was able to open the bags, empty them onto my plate and eat the dosa in less than five minutes. The tea also appeared in a cup. It was a good breakfast.

These two continental breakfasts eaten in two different continents, in two different centuries and having two very different kinds of fare were equally satisfying. ■

*He hurriedly opened his bag and produced small packages wrapped in newspaper and started to serve dosas, etc, in plates. There was also sambhaar and chutney in small, sealed plastic bags. Spoons and napkins appeared soon after.*




## 16 வகை அனைத்தும் சிறந்த சுவை

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



# MOST PEOPLE DON'T REALISE THAT PUMPS ARE EVERYWHERE

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