

Success &

ABILITY

India's Cross-disability Magazine

January 2018

A TECHNOLOGICAL EXTRAVAGANZA CALLED **CYBATHLON**



LESSONS FOR LIFE
from child's play

INCLUSIVE CYCLING
Manali to Khardung La!

AbilityFEST Revisited

The Editor's Desk



Friends,

The “Goodbye 2017” and “Hello 2018” messages flood our mailboxes and WhatsApp. No more greetings cards delivered by the postman. The point to be made here is that the march of time has become the “whoosh” of time. Such is the bullet like speed of technology. Whizzing past us before we have time to blink.

Technology has propelled us to the future at an even more furious speed than time itself. Does it make sense to you? Nevertheless, we need to keep pace with the tempo or get left behind. So here we are, bringing you, the cyber “Success & ABILITY” – containing in itself – amongst other interesting articles – a lead feature on “The Cybathalon”.

“Success & ABILITY” will now be mainly available online, in its digital version, and as a monthly, not a quarterly as before. For one, so much is happening both in the disability sector and in the mainstream world, that we are no longer content to keep the same slow and steady pace of a quarterly print magazine. A digital version thus, seems more befitting and in tune with the times we live in, to be accessed not only from our website, but FB, WA, et al.

While of course, we shall bring you several newsworthy articles from the country and overseas, we really need your conscious involvement. Do send us write-ups of various kinds – ranging from events, hilarious happenings to profiles of trend setters and icons, corporate inputs, new gadgets, quick help tips... the lot. Sky is the limit for diversity. It's your choice. So do go click clack click on your keyboards and send us by e-mail/WA, any/everything you want said. Soon, please. Will look forward to hearing from you at your earliest.

Let our words be heard as far and wide as possible, in this cyber world.

Digitally yours :-)

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A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Innovative minds and firms across the world are pioneering futuristic and enterprising assistive technology, heralding an era when disability is truly irrelevant. The Cybathlon isn't just bringing this to the world's gaze, it's also adding pace and power to this progress, finds HEMA VIJAY.



**Hema
Vijay**

The Cybathlon. It's a technological extravaganza. A celebration of the human spirit. It's where futuristic assistive technology meets and platforms the innate human impulse to be citius, altius, fortius — faster, higher, stronger — it's besides the point whether one is disabled or not.

A trendsetting and exciting international championship that

kicked off in 2016, the Cybathlon is a competition for people with disabilities, supported by the latest and most advanced assistance systems and gadgets, including robotic technology and mind reading software.

Imagine maneuvering a computer game employing only your brainwaves, with electrodes embedded in your cap detecting

brain activity and transmitting the electroencephalograph (EEG) readings to the computer, which interprets it as thought commands and executes the game moves. Wow! And that's only one of the exciting technologies already in use! Participants of Cybathlon 2016's Brain-Computer Interface (BCI) Race may have been the pioneers, but this technology will eventually spill over to wider everyday use. Not too far away is the day when this technology will enable people with quadriplegia to control a computer, a robotic arm, or a wheelchair.

That's the ultimate agenda, actually: to take latest assistive technology from labs to lay users. In fact, Cybathlon tasks were designed to represent typical situations that people with disabilities encounter on a daily basis.

Informally called the Bionic Olympics, Cybathlon includes six intriguing challenges – Functional Electrical Stimulation Bike Race, Powered Arm Prosthesis Race, Powered Leg Prosthesis Race, Powered Exoskeleton Race, Powered Wheelchair Race and the Brain-Computer Interface Race.

One does wonder, just how different is a racing pilot in a powered leg prosthetics race from a blade runner in the Para Olympics? Oceans apart, actually. In a powered leg prosthetics race, you will encounter racing pilots (as the para athletes participating in the race are called) wearing exo-prosthetic devices (worn externally) with powered

joints – combustion engines are forbidden, though. As for the race itself, it's a quick sprint and an obstacle course up the stairs, slopes and over gravel, which would grade not just the athlete's pace and skill, but that of the gadget's functioning and efficiency.

Likewise, the powered arm prosthesis race, an event for racing pilots with forearm amputations, brings out the dexterity of the actuated (motorised) and fully autonomous exo-prosthetic device the pilot is fitted with, as he would be handling objects that require different grips while moving ahead in the race. Meanwhile the functional electrical stimulation bike race has pilots with spinal cord injuries riding bikes powered by stimulation to their legs, with the race having both sprint and endurance components. The powered exoskeleton race has pilots with spinal cord injury and leg paralysis outfitted with a full exoskeleton device and walking through an obstacle course. The powered wheelchair race has wheelchair



www.cybathlon.ethz.ch/

users navigating steps, elevations, and various surfaces! And of course, the brain computer interface race has pilots with complete loss of motor function below the neck, racing each other in a computer game.

During the races, the pilots operate the devices entirely by themselves, which tests the reliability and the independence value of the assistive device as well as the skill of the pilot in using these devices. So the training required of the para athletes is rigorous,

notwithstanding the high flying technology. While traditional Paralympics bars participants from using assistive gadgets, Cybathlon actually advocates use of savvy assistive gadgets. So when a racing pilot wins a competition here, the pilot as well as the firm or lab behind the assistive technology bag medals.

The Cybathlon with its official tagline, 'moving people and technology', has ignited innovative minds to arrive at futuristic technology. Innovators across the world are now anyway

WHEELCHAIRS FOR THE SEA AND SAND

Wheelchair users can now access soft terrain like sand, grass, snow and gravel, and even make the move from the seashore to the sea and float on it, with WaterWheels®. Using simple technology such as floating armrests and oversized wheels,



source: <http://www.accessrec.com/waterwheels>

this gadget has opened the world of leisure and the outdoors to wheelchair users. This wheelchair has six parts – a frame, two armrests and three big and broad tyres; there is also a safety harness to keep the wheelchair user secure. This ergonomic wheelchair can be assembled and disassembled in less than a minute, and without any tool. This wheelchair allows for reclining and has three possible positions, which may be taken up by pulling a chain on the back.



COVER FEATURE

arriving at fabulous assistive technology that lets people with disability experience more independence, productivity, fun, sports, entertainment, and of course, more effectiveness in the everyday activities of life. The Cybathlon has added pace to this progress by spurring firms to outdo one another and produce more effective, quicker, convenient and classy assistive gadgets. For the layman, this championship is an eye opener on the array of exciting assistive technology that is available, here and now.

The Genesis

Cybathlon took shape in 2013, when Robert Riener, Professor of Sensory-Motor Systems at ETH Zurich, initiated it as a platform for the development of everyday-suitable assistance systems. Cybathlon goals include

That's the ultimate agenda, actually: to take latest assistive technology from labs to lay users.

the promotion of research, development and implementation of assistive technologies for people with disabilities, a lively exchange between technology developers, people with disabilities and the general public, disseminating information about the possibilities and limitations of current assistance systems, and finally, to encourage the discourse on inclusion and equality of people with disabilities in everyday life.

Organised by Swiss University ETH Zurich at the SWISS Arena in Kloten near Zurich, Switzerland, in October 2016, the first edition of Cybathlon saw the entry of 74 athletes in 66

ROBOTIC EXOSKELETON LETS THE PARALYSED WALK



Phoenix, a robotic exoskeleton can help the paralysed walk again, even if the person has waist down paralysis. Costing around USD 40,000, the suit manufactured by SuitX, returns movement to wearers' hips and knees with small motors attached to standard orthotics. Wearers can control the movement of each leg and walk up to 1.1 miles per hour by pushing buttons integrated into a pair of crutches. The suit weighs 27 pounds, is modular and adjustable to suit individual heights and needs. A battery pack worn as a backpack powers the exoskeleton for up to eight hours.

source: <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/546276/this-40000-robotic-exoskeleton-lets-the-paralyzed-walk/>

teams from 25 countries. Registrations for Cybathlon 2020 have now begun.

The Indian Story

A team trained by Bengaluru-based Riselegs that designs and manufactures prosthetic legs and mobility devices made of cane, participated in the powered leg prosthesis race of Cybathlon 2016. The Riselegs team included inventor and Founder of Riselegs

Arun Joshua Cherian as Team Lead, Rohan George Mathew as Supporting Team Member and two racing pilots Nagesh Chowdappa, an IT professional, and Prajwal Basavaraja, a body builder. Chowdappa and Basavaraja got ranked a creditable 7th and 8th respectively in the finals of the race.

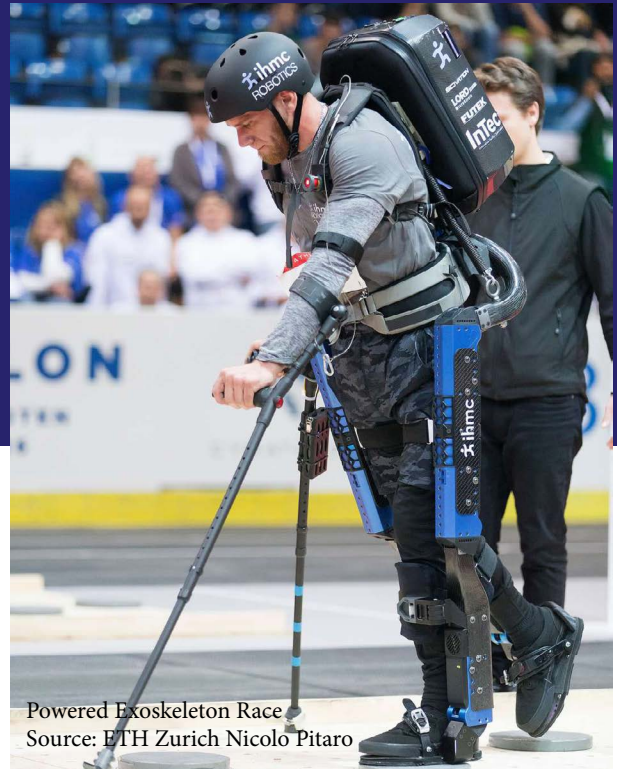
One of the many pluses that came to light from Cybathlon 2016 was the fact that Riselegs' cane prosthetics used in the championship cost just a few thousand rupees, while the kits used by their corresponding competitors cost multiple lakhs of rupees!

Futuristic Assistive Technology

Powered exoskeletons that let people with paralysed legs walk, 3D printed wheelchairs to suit every individual's specifications, wheelchairs that move on commands interpreted from brain activity signals sensed by an app, inexpensive 3D printed prosthetic arms for growing children, the Greta App that gives audio description of films,

electronic glasses that let the legally blind see, ultrasound technology for finger-level control of bionic arms (including playing the piano), cochlear implants that stream sound directly from smart phones without needing an external device...

Today, audacious innovation is happening at mindboggling speed, and new prototypes are being designed and placed on the market quicker than ever before... Here is a tantalising glimpse of a few of the amazing assistive gadgets out there.



Powered Exoskeleton Race
Source: ETH Zurich Nicolo Pitaro

BYTE-SIZED THOUGHTS

... FROM VAISHNAVI VENTAKESH



Vaishnavi Venkatesh

For the past few years, AbilityFest has been receiving a unique genre of films. While we have always received inspirational films from around the world, this unique genre makes us reflect on more than just the nature of the film, but also the realm of

possibilities. This genre consists of films made on disability and technology.

While watching these films, I have often wondered if it is real, or science fiction. Bionic arms, exoskeletons that replicate the function of human muscles, eye-tracking technologies that help people communicate...the list goes on. At first glance, it is always awe-inspiring. But

SMART GLASSES THAT LET THE LEGALLY BLIND SEE



Source:
<https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/20/these-amazing-electronic-glasses-help-the-legally-blind-see.html>

Here is an invention that will enable people suffering from eye conditions like Stargardt disease, optic atrophy, macular degeneration and glaucoma to see again. The eSight3 glasses have a price tag of about USD 10,000. Many who use the eSight3 today are able to read books and street signs, see objects from afar and know what their friends' and relatives' faces actually look like. In other words, they are able to see the images that loss of central vision had denied them. The eSight3 looks like a visorlike headset and houses a high-speed, high-definition camera that captures what the user is looking at. The device uses algorithms to enhance the video feed and displays the video through eSight's OLED screens in front of the user's eyes. A 24-times zoom enhances the image. The wearable headset has Wi-Fi and HDMI capabilities to stream digital content and transmit pictures and videos.

Today, audacious innovation is happening at mindboggling speed, and new prototypes are being designed and placed on the market quicker than ever before.

a second and perhaps, even a third glance later, I begin to reflect on the intent and the impact of having such technology trying to “break” barriers.

At the outset, I absolutely believe that some inventions have been a breakthrough for people with disabilities – an innocuous application like SMS on primitive mobile phones became a revolution for people with hearing and speech impairments to communicate. Voice-to-text technology (and text-to-voice, like JAWS) opened doors to a whole world of knowledge for people with vision impairments. And with each passing day, we are seeing sleeker and improved wheelchairs that can be handled by the person using it – making them less dependent on others for navigation. Just the other day, I read about wheelchairs that can climb stairs – something that we need for most of our disability-unfriendly-buildings.

With each passing year, these technologies get more sophisticated and user-friendly, enabling people with disabilities to lead independent lives. Today, we have a bionic replacement for underdeveloped or amputated limbs. We have “smart glasses” that help people with visual impairments “see” by breaking down

SOUND PROCESSORS AND IMPLANTS THAT NEED NO STREAMING DEVICE



Source: <https://techcrunch.com/2017/07/26/apple-and-cochlear-team-up-to-roll-out-the-first-hearing-aid-implant-made-for-the-iphone/>

Apple has teamed up with Cochlear to make Cochlear's Nucleus 7 Sound Processor that can now stream sound directly from a compatible iPhone, iPad or iPod touch to the sound processor. The device also allows those with a surgically embedded implant to control and customise the sound from their iPhone. The implant has been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Just like headphones or another Bluetooth-enabled device, as soon as the implant is paired up with the iPhone, it can be controlled using the iPhone's volume controls. So, for example, when a phone call comes in, you can hear that call at the volume settings within your implant. The new Nucleus 7 comes with a longer battery life and is also smaller and 24 percent lighter than its predecessor, the Nucleus 6 Sound Processor, making it ideal for small children with hearing loss as well.

the objects in the direct line of vision, into simpler, black-and-white images. We have exoskeletons that are so advanced that people who were previously confined to wheelchairs can now attempt to walk. In fact, we have Cybathlons that have sporting events for people who use such advanced assistive technologies.

It really does sound like we are progressing into a world that's blurring barriers for people with disabilities, doesn't it? And yet, I write about all these developments with a bittersweet note. Are physical barriers the only ones that exist in society? And is the

Imagine maneuvering a computer game employing only your brainwaves. Not too far away is the day this technology will enable people with quadriplegia to control a computer, a robotic arm, or a wheelchair.

intent of developing these devices truly just to empower persons with disabilities or are we trying to create a "perfect" world with no disabilities?

While researching for this article, I came across a viewpoint stating one possible intent behind creating assistive technologies. It suggested that technology be so seamless, that we shouldn't know that the person has a disability. While the viewpoint might just be from the perspective of building a great quality product, it is deeply unsettling. We do know of people with disabilities. Are we

LUKE ARM RETURNS THE FUNCTION OF A LOST ARM



source: <http://www.mobiusbionics.com/the-luke-arm.html>

Luke Arm is a modular prosthetic arm that is configurable for different levels of amputation including transradial, transhumeral and shoulder disarticulation. It has 10 powered degrees of freedom including a powered shoulder, a humeral rotator and wrist flexor with ulnar/radial deviation. The multiple powered degrees of freedom can be moved at the same time. The hand has many preprogrammed grips using four individually controlled degrees of freedom. The hand also includes a sensor that provides grip force feedback. The Luke Arm is resistant to light rain and dust. The Luke arm can be controlled by input devices like surface EMG electrodes and pressure switches, intuitive wireless IMUs etc. The clinical team and the client work together to develop the input configuration that best meets the client's needs.

If people choose to use technologies that might give them more independence, that is their choice to make. And if they choose not to employ an assistive device, we still need to create a world where they can live as comfortably as possible.

I know I ask a lot of rhetoric questions here, but I also believe strongly that technology is about choice. A person with hearing impairments may be introduced to a variety of cochlear implants, but whether they would like to use it or not is a matter of personal choice. Forcing someone to adapt just so they can “fit into” what we deem as an “able” society is worse than the barriers that they ordinarily have to overcome.

Before we begin to break physical barriers, we need to break our own perception barriers. We need to learn to accept, be inclusive and integrate people of all abilities and disabilities into society. If people choose to use technologies that might give them more independence, that is their choice to make. And if they choose not to employ an assistive device, we still need to create a world where they can live as comfortably as possible. That is, and always will be, our reality. ■

trying to imply that they require technology in order to seamlessly integrate with society? Shouldn't society integrate them irrespective of the technology available?

CINEMA & THE JOY OF INCLUSION



ABILITYFEST® 2017

The celebration of diversity is what life is all about, enthuses SHANTHA GABRIEL, after experiencing AbilityFEST 2017: India International Disability Film Festival, staged at Chennai.

It's that awaited time of the year, but alas, it comes but once in two years! The very thought of spending the better part of a day, or a part of it, at SPI Cinemas is so relaxing, but this relaxation is, for me, quite unlike my experience while watching a commercial hit. The films I look forward to seeing are not only entertaining and informative, they also heighten my awareness about disability and I find myself



**Shantha
Gabriel**



relaxing in the celebration of diversity which is what life is all about! Clearly, there cannot be a better way to learn, than through the popular medium of cinema.

Collating films from all over the world must be a difficult exercise and I congratulate the Ability Foundation team who take on this onerous task. The movies from global film festivals sensitise us to issues with their beautiful portrayal of life and disability. I was so pleased to hear that AbilityFEST has reached a stage where major international producers are eager and forthcoming to showcase their films at this fest, for they recognise the scope and presence it enjoys.

In their opening remarks, Revathy Asha Kelunni, the Festival Director and Jayshree Raveendran, Festival Chairperson and Founder Director, Ability Foundation, drew attention to the objective of the film fest and indeed all the work of Ability Foundation in travelling further and further on the road to inclusivity. What better way to do this than making possible accessible movies through techniques like captioning and audio description?

Bringing in the latter to the Tamil blockbuster, 'Vikram Vedha', a gripping story with Vijay Sethupathi and R. Madhavan in the lead roles, and in such a manner that everyone in the theatre could experience it together was a great step forward in this direction. The film's audio description commentary was brilliantly paced to match the

Clearly, there cannot be a better way to learn, than through the popular medium of cinema.

M. Gunasekharan, a visually impaired person, watched an audio-descriptive version of the superhit 'Vikram Vedha'. He reviews the film for The Hindu MetroPlus.



“An experience I’ll never forget

I’m a huge fan of crime movies and I try to watch as many crime thrillers as I can. Yet, no recent film has absorbed me the way Vikram Vedha did, especially after I watched its audio-descriptive version on Wednesday. There were no scenes where I had to wait for someone to explain to me what was unfolding on the big screen. The joy of experiencing a film along with everyone else in the theatre is something I will never forget.

This pleasure was double-fold because of the investigative nature of the film. With even a small image or a visual clue changing the proceedings of the investigation, crime thrillers are usually the toughest films for us to watch. For instance, I watched Nibunan, another crime thriller, recently. In the film, its villain had a unique pattern while taking out his enemies, and while everyone in the audience felt thrilled with the twist, I had to wait until the film got over to be explained what had happened.

That’s why this recent screening of Vikram Vedha was a pleasure. The scene where Vikram (Madhavan) investigates how his friend Simon (Prem) got killed by Chandra (Varalaxmi Sarathkumar) was so much more enjoyable

because of the audio explanation. He finds out how a gun was placed on Chandra’s hands to make it look like she had shot him. I found that fascinating.

I enjoyed the songs of the film as well, especially the ‘Tasakku Tasakku’ number. A lot of our new kuthu songs have become so difficult to understand that we hardly get to enjoy them. But this song was different and fun because we feel like we’re in North Chennai when we hear it.

I’m also a fan of Vijay Sethupathi. I’m actually a huge Rajini fan, but I’m enjoying Vijay Sethupathi’s movies because of their socially-conscious nature.

Another film where I felt like I had missed out was Pa Paandi. I enjoyed the film so much, yet its most beautiful moments — when Rajkiran finally meets Revathy and spends time with her — was told using images with just music playing. I wish there was someone who had worked on the audio descriptive version, so that we could have enjoyed the film thoroughly.

I hope many more films are released with audio-descriptive versions so that film buffs like me don’t miss out on the fun.

(As told to Vishal Menon) ”

Courtesy: The Hindu MetroPlus

exhilarating speed of the changing scenes of the fast paced action film and, contrary to my initial fears, far from intrusive. I must also confess that when I tried to follow the film with my eyes shut, I found the commentary so very helpful and absorbing. However, I did not do so for long for I just had to see! I wasn’t blind after all. This realisation hit me a few minutes later... Unlike me, those who could not see did not

have the option I had. Ability Foundation's objective to enhance awareness about disability and sensitise people clearly scored a point with me in that moment!

The film festival which had begun on the morning of 11 September was formally inaugurated that evening and the heart-warming 'My Hero Brother' from Israel truly set the tone for the festival. An award winning film, it was about a group of remarkable young people with Down's syndrome who embark on a trek through the Himalayas, accompanied by their siblings. The going gets tough and that's when we see how the tough get going! Siblings, families, bear the burden, sometimes literally having to carry the young person with Down's syndrome across a difficult patch. Frustrations, though transient, are evident, loud demands for attention are heard, mothers back home are suddenly missed and immediately longed for, the physical pain and hardship of a very strenuous trek across the mountains are acutely felt in every limb, and horseback ascent is often very tempting as an alternative. Yet, through all this, the human nature of the individual with the special need is sharply etched. Do we not go through similar emotions? And in as much as that is true of this group of young people, even more so is the tender love and care of the brothers and sisters. The latter humour the young, encourage them, don't always indulge them, they know when to be firm and when to coax and cajole. In short, they treat them as they would, any other younger sibling. The deep bonding between siblings and between families whose experience with disability is similarly demanding resonates within us long after the film draws to a close after the achievement of a successful trek! This heart-warming film opens new horizons and deepens our understanding of people with special needs and their families.

'A Normal Life' from the USA was one of my favourites. I love it when deep emotions are portrayed ever so quietly, with no great action but hidden worlds of meaning in every word, move or thought. This sensitive and moving semi-autobiographical film by 19-year-old writer director Alex Herz is the story of a young man who is leaving for college soon and worries about the independence of his brother with Down's syndrome. The family unit, where the mother is anxious about what her son watches on his mobile and cannot quite agree with her elder son who tries to make her accept that his younger brother needs to be left alone sometimes as all young lads at that stage need to be, a father who is a man of few words and can see the situation

The audio description commentary was brilliantly paced to match the exhilarating speed of the changing scenes of the fast paced action film, and contrary to my initial fears, far from intrusive.



Producers speak



A section of the audience

from both sides but is reluctant to express this view, the two brothers who love each other very much, unfolds itself over 73 minutes of tremendous sensitivity and a quiet understanding of human nature. The bond between the brothers is obviously deep, and the young man's desire for his brother's independence and his rightly felt concern that he should be allowed to grow up like any other boy far outweighs his being excited about going to college.

The documentary from India, 'Two Feet to fly' was the only documentary I saw. This narrates

how six amateur runners break free from their shackles by taking to running. When one of them suffering from a debilitating throat problem sings "I have a dream", albeit in a husky whisper, we know what it means for each of them to have struggled, to realise their dream. The film is a celebration of the indomitable human spirit to surge against all odds.

'Dan and Margot' from Canada initially had me confused and disappointed, for it felt like it was heading nowhere. Soon, I could see that this was precisely what Margot was struggling with in her life. Suffering from obsessive figments of her imagination – does Dan exist but only in her mind – and her fears, it wasn't surprising that the film conveys this through a fragmented format. A powerful film, 'Dan and Margot' offers an intimate look into the life of a young modern woman struggling to reclaim the three years of her life that she lost to schizophrenia. Margot gives a voice to many relatable stories of mental illness as she demonstrates a person's right to fail, living with one's past traumas and hope, the key to human existence. As the film draws to a close, Margot's sheer courage, sense of freedom and achievement come shining through as she finally makes it to Australia.

'The Quiet Ones' from England is a cleverly crafted film and truly had me foxed till the end. A teacher at a deaf boarding school is brutally murdered and the suspects have been narrowed down to four students. Who did it? Could detective Clarke and psychologist Dr. Barton reveal the murderer's identity before it was too late?

'At Eye Level' from Germany was the closing film at the festival. The organisers couldn't have come up with anything more tender and powerful than this. Winner of three

The festival has reached a stage where international producers and directors are eager and forthcoming to showcase their films at AbilityFEST, for they recognise the scope and presence that it enjoys.

CINEMA

awards, the film makes you want to cry at many turns; not out of sorrow, as much as out of a sense of anguish at the brutal, bullying attitude of the taunting school and board mates; and then, with mixed emotions, as it speedily cruises through the life of the charming young boy, and through all his bitter shock and painful tantrums, and his calm, daring, short statured father who is so delightfully caring and sensitive. Michi, 11 years old, lives in a children's foster home and one day discovers who his father is. But when he eventually meets his dad Tom, it's a shock for him as Tom happens to be a dwarf. In this poignant story, Michi struggles with the embarrassment and shame he feels, while Tom does his utmost to accept the challenge of fatherhood. The one thought that lingered

long after the film ended: while we cannot choose our parents, Michi had that rare option very strangely presented to him, after he turned his back on, what was, a period of bitter disappointment that had thwarted all hopes. Yet, that brief slice of his life with Tom had taught him lessons in love. The choice Michi then makes, to remain with a dad who could be only 'at eye level', is deeply moving. I left the cinema hall overwhelmed.

The opportunity to connect, to meet people who have braved all odds in real life was a huge dividend of the four days of reel life! I was more than delighted and grateful to have met Angshu, a hearing-impaired young man, who stands tall at academic conferences reading papers based on his own experience of learning to speak from his mother. His academic progress was truly amazing and to think, as he himself put it, he had started off by not being able to speak and all he does now is to speak, and how! I could not but help seek out this articulate person whenever possible, at every turn, just to imbibe his cheer nature and warmth.

AbilityFEST 2017 was for me, a splendid opportunity to reflect on the uplifting power of disability and the hope it holds for all of us. It takes me one step further down the sensitisation road, where I'm made aware, yet again, to be always conscious of equal opportunities, diversity and inclusivity. It gives me a great opportunity too, to catch up with all my friends at Ability Foundation. Through this article, I acknowledge their work with gratitude and appreciation. This is a team that spreads a rare breed of commitment, for it comes with high energy levels and an even higher degree of enthusiasm!

Even as I reflect and ruminate, I wait to be on board again in 2019! ■



Exposure to sign language

The opportunity to connect, to meet people who have braved all odds in real life, was a huge dividend of the four days of reel life!

PUSHING BOUNDARIES, CELEBRATING INCLUSION

YASHASVINI RAJESHWAR muses on the true meaning of inclusion, looking back at her happy experiences at InSync #M2K2017, the second edition of the inclusive tandem cycling expedition on the demanding route from Manali to Khardung La.



Yashasvini
Rajeshwar



*Photographs by Amrit Vatsa



It was in Sarchu, I think, my favourite moment of inclusion. A few of us decided to brave the cold and climb a small hillock to watch the stars. The Milky Way was in clear sight and even the slight shiver in our bones couldn't stop us from staring in awe, as the galaxy unfolded above us. We were a motley bunch, strangers till a few months ago, all bound by the common purpose of inclusion, adventure and pushing boundaries. Everyone was quiet that night atop the hillock and yet, I had never before felt a stronger bond of understanding.

The occasion was the second batch of InSync #M2K2017, organised by Adventures Beyond Barriers Foundation (ABBF), a Pune-based non-profit that uses adventure sports as a platform to promote inclusion of persons with disabilities. After Divyanshu Ganatra, founder of ABBF (winner of Special Recognition Award at CavinKare Ability Awards, 2016), became the first blind cyclist to complete the route on a tandem cycle last year, the team decided that they needed to do this again, albeit on a bigger and better scale. Thus was born the dream for India's first inclusive tandem cycling expedition, a journey that saw 24 cyclists pedalling from Manali to Khardung La, the world's highest motorable road. The route, involving five mountain passes, was demanding to say the least. Often, there was a hardly a motorable road in sight. Participants largely camped in tents and cycled an average of 50 kilometres a day. Of the 24 participants, six were blind, three were amputees, and the others were non-disabled cyclists who had pledged themselves

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to the cause of inclusive sport and accessible adventure. It was in this context that 24 individuals – participants and crew – found themselves in Manali one August morning and set off on the second batch of the expedition.

Much of the work that ABBF does lies in the exploration of individuals. Founded on the belief that strong individual relationships can surpass systemic hurdles and societal stereotypes, the organisation seeks to foster a sense of empathy, camaraderie and understanding on a personal level. No surprise, then, that the biggest inclusion moments on InSync had little to do with the act of pedalling. Stargazing at Sarchu, sunbathing in Lato, braving minus six degree weather to take guided loo breaks at Whiskeynalla – the strongest moments of inclusion lay in the everyday happenings, when individuals went about their business and did what they had to do, helping the people around them in the process. It lay in the realisation that getting out of your tent when there is frost and ice on top of it is a task for everyone, independent of disability!

The realisation that the expedition provided challenges for everyone lay at the core of the entire experience. With the youngest participant aged 15 and the oldest at 69, the range was vast. Professions varied from teachers to executives to motivational speakers to journalists to manufacturers. The crew included a full-time doctor and photographer, along with the ABBF team, who were responsible for ensuring the safety and comfort of the group. There were breakdowns and epiphanies on a daily basis, as every individual went on a journey of growth, self-realisation and discovery—both personally and collectively.

As for me, my story was a little different. As the one long-distance team member, I had a unique positioning of being the insider-outsider.

I had spoken to everyone but not met anyone. I knew ABBF's ethos like the back of my hand but hadn't been a part of any of their big events thus far. I was a stranger and

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yet I was not. Coupled with my writer mind, it gave me the opportunity to step back and observe, and over time, revel in the success that was on exhibition in front of us.

In the pictures of a blind cyclist and a sighted ABBF support crew member dancing to celebrate the successful crossing of every pass, lay the true meaning of inclusion. In the barely noticeable pause in conversation to guide friends past tent poles and ropes, lay the true meaning of inclusion. In conversations about how the cold caused limbs to swell, making it difficult to fit the prosthesis, in instructions on how many steps a blind cyclist could take outside his tent and in which direction, to go on an unguided night-time loo break, in listening to multiple phones' screen readers harmoniously add to the cacophony of conversation lay the true meaning of inclusion. As I sat in the far recesses of the tent at Sissu, I saw this group of recent strangers dance together to 1980s Hindi hits. Mother-daughter, husband-wife, friends, they all jived and shimmied and just bobbed around. Some were sighted, others were not, some had legs, others did not. All those were entirely immaterial to the joy of Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar up in the mountains. In those notes and the laughter lay the true meaning of inclusion. ■

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PLAY & LEARN



Meena
Bhatt

Sometimes, we learn important lessons for life from child's play, discovers MEENA BHATT.

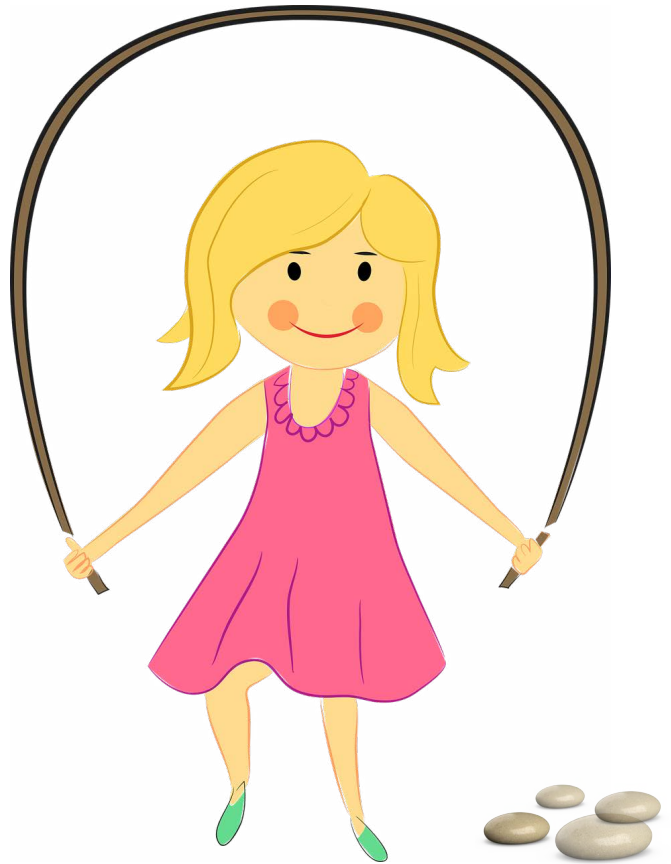
One bright morning, Minali, Neena, Monica, Reeta, and Rekha were playing pebbles. Minali soon bade her friends goodbye. She had to rush back home as a lot of preparations were to be made. 'Guddi' was to be married in 15 days. Guddi was Minali's beloved baby doll. And guess who the groom was? It was Neena's baby boy doll 'Gudda'. The girls had planned the wedding ceremony for just the day after their term end examination. Though both were excited about the celebrations, Neena did not worry much as she had little to do. As was the norm, all the preparations for hosting the marriage rested with the bride's family. Minali had to do everything...make wedding cards, stitch clothes for Guddi as well as Gudda, prepare the food menu, order for a pandal and call a pandit to perform the wedding rituals. Minali did all of this with a cool mind and on the 'Big Day' she was all set to welcome her guests.



REFLECTIONS

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The garden in her courtyard was beautifully decorated with flowers. She had made good use of her mother's fine bordered lace saris to make a pandal. It was simply amazing to see the place so well decorated with flowers, saris and torans. The musical notes of the shehnai playing through a small cassette player added to the exotic ambience. The air was full of excitement, but Minali was enveloped by a feeling of anxiety and grief. Suddenly, she was saddened by the thought of Guddi leaving home. Minali had learnt from a very young age that girls had to live with a different family when they grew up. They had to adjust and make themselves part of that family thereafter. So was the case with her doll, Guddi. For a moment, she felt guilty for having planned such an occasion, where, after all the pomp and show, she had to give away the most beloved part of her life



to someone else. However hard she tried, she could not control her tears at the moment of parting from her beloved doll.

Days passed and soon a month was gone. One day Minali visited Neena's house and she was shocked to see her doll lying in a corner of her house. The two friends had a high pitched argument. Neena called her doll a 'lame doll' as she had only one leg. Minali could not tolerate her doll being ill-treated. She could not forgive her friend for this. Why did this happen? Why did Minali need to have a big fight with Neena for the sake of a doll? Or was Guddi merely a doll for her...?

Guddi was more than a daughter to Minali. In those days, girls of her age played with dolls and modeled themselves into the role of a mother. Minali too got a doll from her elder sister. Right from the day she got the doll,

Minali developed a unique bond with it. It was not just a doll but 'Guddi', her beloved child. Minali had worked tirelessly for her. Every day she would return from school, put her school bag in the cupboard, and finish her lunch and then when her mother took an afternoon nap, Minali would rush to the verandah where she had made a beautiful house for Guddi. The doll's house was equipped with all the amenities available in those days. All this was not only designed by Minali but also made by her, and so it gave her immense joy.

The doll was beautiful, blonde, and blue eyed with chubby cheeks. She was simply a bundle of joy. Minali loved her so much that it did not matter to her that her doll did not have a leg. At this tender age, Minali had become a caring mother to her doll. At times, some of her friends would make fun of her doll, while others would give her a piece of friendly advice to change her doll for a new one. But, for Minali, it was all about companionship and unconditional love. Minali had shared several silent moments of togetherness with her. She had never thought about what her doll did not have.

Minali soon grew up to be a young and beautiful girl. Her parents found a match for her and got her happily married. Then, once again, it seemed that her life had something in store for her. After two years of her marriage, she gave birth to a wonderful bundle of joy. Everyone in her family was overjoyed to welcome a baby in their family. Minali, as always, wanted to be the

best mother to her little son. She was happy to hold her darling baby, caress him and sing lullabies to him.

Days passed and she was happy seeing her son grow up. To Minali, her son was 'Raja' or King. All seemed to be fine, until little Raja started struggling to take his first steps. Minali crossed her fingers hoping that nothing was wrong with her son. But that was not to be. She soon realised that Raja could not babble like other children of his age. Minali's intuition forced her to consult a doctor. The test results turned her world upside down. She could not believe what the doctors had to say about her child.

Raja was diagnosed with a rare disability that would prevent him from doing much in his life. He could have challenges to walk, as well as to talk. Minali sunk into deep grief for days together. Her husband overcame his grief by spending more hours at work.

Minali gazed at her son as he gave a tender smile, little knowing what was in store for him. Minali recollected her memories of Guddi and the days she spent with her. "Well, maybe it was for this day that God prepared me a long time ago", she thought. Minali made up her mind that she would not rest till she proved the



doctors wrong. She thanked 'Guddi' for preparing her to face all the taboos cast on her son by society. She disregarded the opinions that every visitor had to give about her Raja. To her, he was just the same as any child of proud parents.

Day after day Minali worked for him. She researched on his challenges and the medical and therapeutic interventions available. Her husband and family too contributed in these efforts and supported her every step of the way.

Raja had autism too amongst other disorders. He learnt to walk very late and faced a lot of challenges in verbal communication.

Yet, Minali, full of hope, talked to him tirelessly. She kept telling him that he was as important as any other child. She was well aware that like children who are judged and applauded for their scores in examinations, Raja attempted an examination every single day of his life and surprised all those who worked with him with amazing results. Be it a gold medal for a 25 metre race or the wonderful digital paintings that he created with the help of ICT, his achievements used to go unnoticed by the so called "mainstream", but to Minali and her family it was a triumph... the joyous outcome of all the efforts they had put in to enable him to get the applause that he deserved from society.

This difficult journey also taught Minali some important life lessons and empowered her with the power of positive thinking. Minali strongly attributes her growth as a mother to two important people in her life – her baby doll in her childhood and Raja. Day after day, Minali unfailingly embraces her beloved son with one important message... "I am glad you belong to me."

**This is the real life story of Meena Bhatt, mother of a child with autism. ■*

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