

Success &

# ABILITY

India's Cross-disability Magazine

April - June 2017

call of the Arts  
music

dance

films

theatre

photography

fashion





## 16 வகை அனைத்தும் சிறந்த சுவை

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





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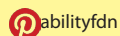
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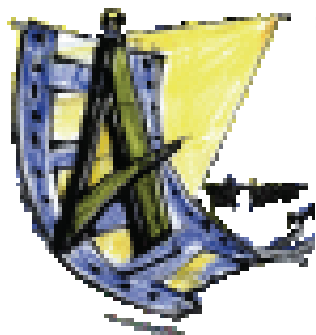
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# From the Editor's Desk

*Friends,*

*Talent. Joie de vivre. Self confidence. Freedom of expression. And all those other things that bring out the best in us. To aim high. To reach for the stars. As people first. Talented people seeking to show the world their capabilities, their achievements, their successes, to goad others to follow suit – they are the ones we bring to you in this issue of Success & ABILITY.*

*The artist in us has the tendency to interpret our disabilities in new and profound ways. No matter what our disability – to steadfastly follow our dreams. For every one of us – disabled or non-disabled – art is a powerful way of self expression and fashioning one's identity. Art and culture have the ability to show the world a completely different “us”. An aspect of us as artists. And as artists, we seem to have that extra competitive advantage to project our art to the rest of society.*



*For people with disabilities, art and culture is also about dealing with the barriers that society invariably puts in our way, as well as the discrimination that is many a time associated with our disability. Art and culture provide a platform for us to show our mettle. Putting us in a different league, a different world; a heavenly world, where we forget our problems and seek to look beyond them and enjoy the sheer heavenliness of the art form that fascinates us.*

*Creative solutions, fresh perspectives, new ideas and dynamic ways of communication, moving the needle in a new direction: these are what Buse Gowda, Sangeeta Gala, Nidhi Goyal, Pranav Lal, Dr. Hemachandran Karah and Pradeep Kumar have done – bringing with, and showing us their determination to break barriers and make possible the seemingly impossible – which in turn – motivate several others to follow and set a trend for more to follow. Between the covers of this issue, you will discover the real-life happenings of these spunky individuals, who defined their own extraordinary achievements in music, dance, cinema, theatre, fashion and a host of other exceptional areas.*

*And more of such spunky individuals are brought to you from this year's recipients of our CavinKare Ability Awards. Sandwiched amongst these are what you always look for and look forward to in every issue of Success & ABILITY.*

*Our next issue is to be all about the movies...that crazy, infectious, much loved universe of world cinema that AbilityFest: India International Disability Film Fest will bring you. I would welcome your inputs and suggestions on this in advance. Do mail. Look forward!*

Jayshree Raveendran



THE AWARDS



# To Dare Dream Do



Yashasvini Rajeshwar





***The glitzy 2017 CavinKare Ability Awards night was more than a celebration of ability. It showcased a community willing to accept, include and grow, writes YASHASVINI RAJESHWAR.***

As cars stream into the CavinKare Ability Awards function every year, there is a deep sense of anticipation and expectation. People can be heard whispering to each other, trying to guess what the evening will have on offer and what the line-up will be. Regulars induct the newcomers into the awards night experience by going down memory lane, recalling stories of past awardees. The air is rife with tales of grit, determination and *joie de vivre*. The CavinKare Ability Awards presents “life in a capsule,” as Jayshree Raveendran, Founder, Ability Foundation, describes it. Needless to say, the CavinKare Ability Awards, 2017 was no different, except for one significant detail.



## THE AWARDS



Soon after popular singer Anuradha Sriram opened the evening with a poem by Tamil poet Bharathiyar, Janaki Pillai, Director - Programmes, Ability Foundation took the stage, beaming with pride. This year marked the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the Awards, a milestone that simultaneously seemed like ‘already’ and ‘only’, a reminder of everything that has been achieved and everything that remains to be conquered.

“Both Ability Foundation and CavinKare have grown because of the awards,” C.K. Ranganathan, CavinKare’s Founder Chairman reminisced. “So many people read *Success & ABILITY* and get inspired. It changes lives, gives them determination. It shows that our purpose has not only been clearly defined, it has also been served”. And yet, every year, the team seeks to grow, to evolve. Every year, the ceremony is not only testament to this shared purpose of inclusivity and acceptance, but it is also a personal challenge to be bigger, better, more.

With the iconic Right of Persons with Disability Bill passed in Parliament in December 2016, issues of disability rights and activism have become increasingly central to public conversation. While organisations and activist groups have been creating waves for many years, this year’s Awards ceremony provided a platform for celebrities to lend their voice to the cause. The best indication of this widening discourse came in the form of Shankar Mahadevan’s ‘*Garv Se Jiyenge*’, a single with subtitles and sign language interpretation, featuring persons with disability along with able-bodied individuals. The hopeful note of the song set the pace for what was to come.

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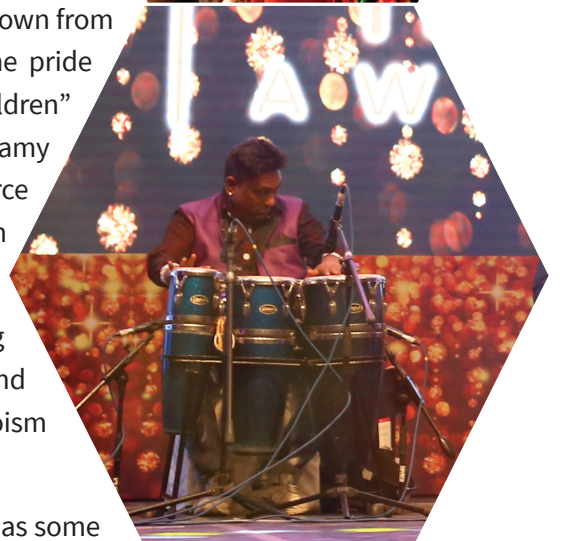
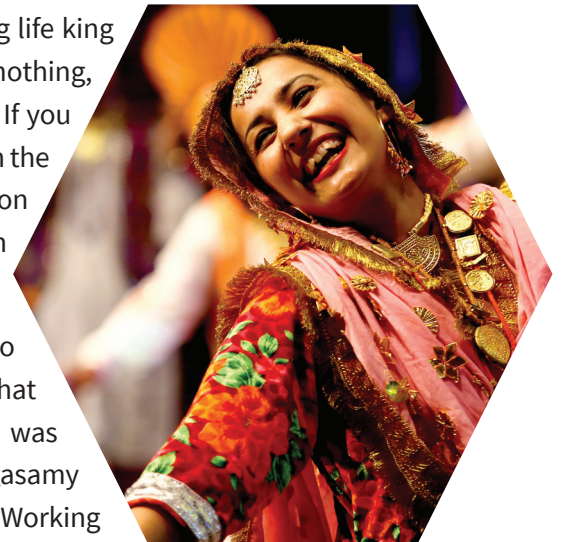
The evening was filled with a plethora of awards. The first on the list was the Special Recognition award given to Divyanshu Ganatra who lost his eyesight at the age of 19, going on to becoming a role model and icon not just for the blind but for mankind at large. Divyanshu's life is a message of passion, of living life king size, of ensuring that dreams, laughter, adventure and spirit stop at nothing, least of all disability. "I have only lost my eyesight, not my dignity. If you want to know about me or my disability, just ask. The problem lies in the attitude, not in the disability", the audience heard Divyanshu mention in his introduction, a statement of confidence and determination that set the tone for all that was to come.

The second award of the evening was the Eminence Award given to individuals with disability who launch their own organisations that go on to create ripples in society. This year's Eminence awardee was K. Murugasamy, founder of Tirupur School for the Deaf. Murugasamy seemed overwhelmed by the recognition that has come his way. Working tirelessly in the textile town of Tirupur, Murugasamy's school has grown from a handful of students to a large, well established institution. The pride on his face was evident when the presentation showed "his children" compete with 'normal' schools and emerge victorious. Murugasamy himself is deaf, not letting this stand in the way of being a source of hope for a generation of local youth and deaf children from impoverished backgrounds.

This year's Mastery awards were conferred on four outstanding individuals – Sai Kaustav Dasgupta, K. Suguna, Pooja Gupta and Jaskaran Singh – the embodiment of steely grit, positivity and heroism in the face of all odds.

Sai Kaustav Dasgupta, crippled by osteogenesis imperfecta as well as some hearing loss, had a perennial smile on his face radiating serenity. Steeped in spiritualism, this young man has set aside his own suffering to make himself a contributing member of society. This multifaceted personality broke into a mellifluous bhajan on stage much to the delight of the audience.

Suguna's tale was one of serendipity and talent culminating to transform a blind peanut candy seller into a Tamil teacher at reputed private school. "I want to do a Ph.D.", Suguna was heard saying in her video profile, a wish that was instantly granted by Mariazeena Johnson, Pro-Chancellor, Sathyabhama University and Chairperson of the CavinKare Ability Awards 2017. "She will be my first Ph.D. student with disability", Dr. Johnson announced to thunderous







applause, once again reflecting the university's commitment to inclusive, accessible education.

The third winner, Pooja Gupta, stole many a heart with her tale of grit. Not letting ataxia and life in rural environs stop her, the girl is an officer in a private sector bank and the sole breadwinner of her family. Pooja has cast away the shackles

of disability and all pervasive gender bias to emerge as an inspiration to many. "I feel like a film star", she revealed shyly, as flashbulbs popped and people rushed to congratulate her for the award she received.

The final awardee for the night, Jaskaran Singh, ensured the ceremony ended on a thought provoking note. A quadriplegic as a result of an accident that killed his family, this IIT-IIM student used the stage to make a strong point. "While we celebrate the success of every Jaskaran, there are many with spinal injuries who are confined by poverty. I hope the Awards ceremony does not continue forever. On the other hand, its success will be best reflected on the day it becomes unnecessary. When you have complete inclusion, you won't need exclusive awards."

Interspersed between the awards presentation were refreshing displays of music and dance, showcasing various inclusive groups from around the country, proving that skill and performance are not deterred by disability. 'Pehli Baarish' led by playback singer and activist Ritika Sahni from Mumbai belted out classic Hindi numbers as the crowd swayed to the lilting tunes, and the dancers were not left far behind. Whether John Legend's 'All of Me' or the energetic, infectious beat of the bhangra (even Jayshree Raveendran got pulled into grooving on stage!), dancers with and without disability shook a leg and how!

This year's Awards night included moments when well wishers who were part of the audience were invited to say a few words about their close association with the

*Interspersed between the awards presentation were refreshing displays of music and dance, showcasing various inclusive groups from around the country, proving that skill and performance are not deterred by disability.*

event. Singer Sriram Parasuram probably spoke for many in the crowd when he said “Being here warms me, renews me until the next year. Words cannot capture what this experience means”.

Inevitably, we turn to numbers to determine the grandeur and success of any event, and the statistics of the CavinKare Ability Awards 2017 were impressive. According to Terry Thomas, Innovation Centre Leader and Partner – Operations, Advisory Services, Ernst & Young (who validate the awards), this year saw 180 nominations streaming in from across 20 states in just over 20 days. Yet, the CavinKare Ability Awards 2017 was in truth, a reflection of its people – the organisers, the winners, and the audience. It represented a community willing to accept, include, and grow. It echoed a commitment towards, in the words of Jayshree Raveendran, “Rights, dignity, equality; to live, laugh, love; to dream, dare, do”.

# True confessions of a CKA Awards Representative

Saaz Aggarwal

**The first** CavinKare Ability Awards ceremony I attended was in 2007. In December, the previous year, I travelled for the first time to meet people who had been nominated for the award. And that year, none of my nominees won the award.

None of them won the award the following year either. It was terribly depressing. The people I had met were seriously disabled and they were leading admirably fulfilling lives, some taking care of themselves and their families and even contributing to others with similar disabilities. I had felt overwhelmed and awestruck by the way they had come to terms with what life had dealt them and proceeded to get on with it. Surely it was my fault that none of them had won the award? What was it that I was doing wrong?

It took me quite a few years to stop worrying about who would win the award and start noticing that the CavinKare Ability Awards were impacting our society

Along the way, my nominees began winning awards too. I realised that it wasn't because I had figured out the right way to portray them. Because every year I was still meeting astonishing, amazing disabled achievers who would not win the award. It was still depressing, but by this time I had come to understand that an award is much more than the glorification of the chosen few. At a personal level, the awards were adding depth to my own life by introducing me to some of the most







*Today, there is more awareness of the inherent ability in each of us, whether disabled or not – and of the inherent disabilities in each of us, whether ‘fully-abled’ or not.*

wonderful, admirable people I have ever known; people who have been role models as I tackled the relatively insignificant problems of my own life. But much more than that, an award that makes its presence felt, as the Cavinkare Ability Awards does, penetrating society across India.

In the 10 years that I have travelled into the interiors, and met families and friends of those who have been nominated for the award, I have seen a gradual evolution in the way we perceive and interact with people who have disabilities. There is more awareness of the inherent ability in each of us, whether disabled or not – and of the inherent disabilities in each of us, whether ‘fully-abled’ or not. There is less pity and more respect for disabled people as individuals with their own individual needs and capabilities; dreams and disappointments; rights and responsibilities. There is a much greater awareness of the possibilities, and a strong determination to continuously seek new solutions. Emerging technologies have certainly played a role in these attitudes. And the Cavinkare Ability Awards have been an important catalyst in creating a more nurturing environment than we had in the past.

*HEMA VIJAY meets this year's Cavinkare Ability awardees.*

# CavinKare Ability Mastery Award

Jaskaran Singh

**This young** man has risen like a phoenix from the ashes. Meeting all problems head on, dealing with emotional scars as well as physical ones, he is now a star student of the prestigious IIM-Bangalore, having gained admission with a CAT score of 99.04 percentile.

A car crash in 2012 turned his world upside down; Jaskaran lost his entire family while he sustained a cervical level spinal cord injury that left him paralysed neck down, with no control over his limbs, fingers, bowel, bladder, and body temperature. It was a bleak phase in his life. A turn-around began when his friends and alumni from IIT-BHU pooled in and funded his treatment at the Indian Spinal Injuries Centre (ISIC), New Delhi. There, surgeries and months of healing and therapy helped him recover limited movements in his hands, fingers, and his ability to use a wheelchair.



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Today, Jaskaran is not only a student at IIM Bangalore, but also a student representative of IIM-B's Office of Disabled Services (ODS) that works towards enhanced inclusion and accessibility on campus. For instance, persons with disabilities are now allowed to use ergonomic keyboards while taking CAT exams, something that was denied to Jaskaran when he took his. Likewise, he wishes to collaborate with the ODS in other IIMs in creating an online platform for knowledge sharing and addressing various types of accessibility needs, to ensure seamless integration of persons with disabilities entering the IIMs.

As a member of IIM-B's 'Vikasana-Teach to Transform' programme, he personally tutors and mentors children of the institute's support staff. That's not all. Jaskaran is committed to spreading awareness about prevention of spinal cord injuries and increasing access to rehabilitation for people with disabilities. He is also a peer





mentor to persons coming under spinal cord injury. “Helping the newly injured to cope and move on in life has been fulfilling and meaningful to me”, he says.

What is this gritty young man’s source of strength? Jaskaran credits this to his “parents, friends and Divya (Parashar) who is like a mother to me”. Divya Parashar is the Rehabilitation Psychologist at ISIC Delhi who mentored Jaskaran’s recovery and rehabilitation after his accident. He adds, “I never told my parents how much I loved them. This is my way of expressing that love – by moving on the path that they showed me”.

Jaskaran also enjoys watching movies and sports. According to him, “Sports teaches us more than it’s given credit for – to be graceful in defeat, magnanimous in victory, and never to give up”.

*This young man has risen like a phoenix from the ashes, meeting all problems head on, dealing with emotional scars as well as physical ones.*

# CavinKare Ability Mastery Award

K. Suguna

**Not long** ago, she was hawking peanut candy in a suburban railway station in Chennai. Today, she is a highly respected and popular teacher at one of the city's best schools.

Financial necessities forced Suguna, an exceptionally bright student, to sell candy for a living, along with her husband Elumalai, who had been her classmate at school. Recognising his wife's potential, Elumalai encouraged Suguna to study through correspondence even though they were struggling to make ends meet. In between selling candy, Suguna caught up with her books and went on to acquire a B.A. degree in Tamil in 2012 and a B.Ed. soon after, from the Annamalai University. However, the schools she approached weren't willing to give her the teaching job that she sought. They had not been willing to look beyond her visual impairment.

Suguna's luck finally changed when a kindly commuter noticed her teaching her children at the railway station. He introduced Suguna to Sujith Kumar, the founder of Maatram Foundation, who in turn introduced her to Nirmala Krishnan, Principal, Mahindra World School. She recognized Suguna's capacity and instantly recruited her as a Tamil teacher offering admission to her two children in the same institution as well.



*Financial necessities forced Suguna, an exceptionally bright student, to sell candy for a living.*





Today, Suguna is up before the crack of dawn, to cook for her family in order to get to school by 7.45 a.m. She is one of the most efficient and popular teachers and has been lighting up the lives of many young students at the Mahindra World School.

“Sight is the only thing I don’t have. I can do pretty much everything else”, she says. She further claims, “Giving deserving, disabled people employment is good not only for the disabled, but for society. Give us the opportunity and we will show you what we are capable of”. In fact, today, Suguna is the main breadwinner of her family.

A gutsy woman with a ready smile and a positive outlook, Suguna’s classes are never boring. Her primary grade students love her classes. “I often tell stories to help children imbibe values. I think they like that”, she says, a smile on her face.

The sky is clearly the limit for Suguna. She is presently pursuing her Masters in Tamil Literature. Today, when she advises her students to work hard to achieve their dreams, citing her own example, her students are readily convinced. This teacher is a role model no student can be indifferent to.

# CavinKare Ability Mastery Award

Pooja Gupta

Life hasn't been easy for Pooja. The nature of her disability went undiagnosed for a long while, until it was eventually found to be ataxia, a lack of muscle coordination. Pooja's mobility is limited. She is unable to move her legs, her hands are weak and thin and so are her fingers. Her condition has been deteriorating and her limbs have got weaker over the years. Apart from this, Pooja has been facing issues with her throat which has made it tough for her to talk, drink water and swallow food. Her condition also makes her feel suffocated at times.

Despite the plethora of challenges brought forth by ataxia, the negative, discouraging attitudes that she often encountered and the financial challenges that she and her family faced, this young woman has been forging ahead in life. Now the sole breadwinner of her family including two other physically disabled siblings, Pooja is an inspiration to all who meet her.

Pooja reveals that her alma mater, Ahir College in Rewari in rural Haryana was rendered accessible to her, thanks to the singular effort of the college principal. When Pooja enrolled at the college, the principal had a ramp constructed to a room on the ground floor and ensured that all Pooja's classes were conducted there. In contrast, the bank building where she currently works doesn't have a ramp to facilitate wheelchair access. It's a sharp contrast ... "Access stems from attitude I guess", Pooja says.

Not only did Pooja clear her M.Com. degree exams with elan, she was the first in her college to pass the National Eligibility Test (NET) and Junior Research Fellowship



*Despite the plethora of challenges brought forth by ataxia and the negative, discouraging attitudes that she often encountered, this young woman has been forging ahead in life.*





(JRF) programme. She later appeared for the Indian Banking Personnel selection (IBPS) and Bank PO exams, getting recruited by Punjab National Bank in July 2014, where she is now a star employee. Pooja constantly appears and clears various exams conducted by the bank, which has benefitted her professionally. The secret of her success? “I go beyond exams and study to understand the structure and concepts of the subject thoroughly”, she says after a moment’s thought.

To top it all, this efficient, capable young woman is all set to appear for the Indian Administrative Service exams. And given her amazing track record, she is certain to succeed with flying colours!

# CavinKare Ability Mastery Award

Sai Kaustuv Dasgupta

The positivity, gentle smile and radiance on his face lend an aura to his personality. His charm is infectious, his positivity palpable. Not surprisingly, Sai Kaustuv Dasgupta's motivational talks at Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning at Puttaparthi attract students and others alike.

A multi-faceted person, he is a graphic designer, singer, composer, motivational speaker and the author of 'My Life, My Love, My Dear Swami' an inspirational book that has been translated into Telugu, Malayalam, Oriya, Gujarati and Hindi. He has released two audio cassettes, 'Maa' and 'Arghyo', an MP3 audio album 'Jaya Vijayee Bhava', besides a DVD 'Sai Sangeeta Sudha'.



But then, Sai Kaustuv Dasgupta is always ready to do more, despite the limitations posed by osteogenesis imperfecta (causing an 80% disability) and the resultant brittle bones. He moves around using an electronic wheelchair. He executes his graphic design work flawlessly, managing to operate a mouse to type on a virtual on-screen keyboard with just two mobile fingers in his left hand. Ever hungry for more, this young man wishes to raise awareness on accessibility across the country.

Someone who lives life to the fullest, Sai Kaustuv went on a solo tourist trip to Goa, having won the 'All India Wheelchair Wanderlust' competition organised by Umoja, an accessible travel agency. Not just that, during the event, Kaustuv's suggestions for making Goa accessible was sought by the State Commissioner for Disabilities, Anuradha Joshi.

*My ultimate goal is to make India accessible. But first, we have to raise awareness across the country on what accessibility is and on the need for bringing in accessibility. A small change in outlook can make a difference. It doesn't cost much.*



## THE AWARDS



“My ultimate goal is to make India accessible. But first, we have to raise awareness across the country on what accessibility is and on the need for bringing in accessibility. A small change in outlook can make a difference. It doesn’t cost much”, he says, adding, “I also want to spread this message through graphic design on a virtual level”.

Besides raising awareness, Sai Kaustuv has also helped implement accessibility on the ground. For instance, he was instrumental in convincing the local municipal authorities to build a ramp at the newly constructed Chitravathi river ghat in Puttaparthi. Along with a few like-minded friends, he has founded a group ‘Accessible Puttaparthi’ that has embarked upon making Puttaparthi a model accessible pilgrim town. “We must make it possible for disabled people to access public places on their own”, he says. The signature smile and beam on his face is intact.

# CavinKare Ability Award for Eminence

K. Murugasamy

**Born in** a poor farmhand family in a village in Tirupur, there was a time when he was taunted and tormented. Deaf, without speech, he was written off, as he struggled to acquire an education and find his place in the world. Today, K. Murugasamy stands tall as an icon in society.

The turning point of his life is entwined with football...the exhilaration he faced while watching a local non-disabled football team, the Union Football Club, the renowned football club of yesteryears in Coimbatore. Learning the game by watching them play and eventually playing along with them and later, even captaining this team, Murugasamy earned a place in the National Football Squad for the Deaf. Around the same time, he was impacted by the sight of deaf children bogged down in child labour. He resolved then that he would help create a level playing field in the country, a world where deaf kids would have access to all opportunities that non-deaf children do.

Thus Murugasamy went on to establish the 'Tirupur District Sports Association for the Deaf', which has helped train scores of deaf youngsters in sports, facilitated their participation in district, state and national level meets, and given them access to various government welfare schemes. He then founded the 'Tirupur School for the Deaf' that provides free education in Tamil and English medium streams to deaf children. It focuses on speech therapy, language skills, lip reading and hearing improvement, thus empowering generations of youngsters in carving out personal



*I wish everyone in our country would learn the basics of sign language. This would bridge the communication gap experienced by millions of deaf Indians.*



## THE AWARDS



and professional lives for themselves. Students who pass out of this school have found employment as computer designers, photographers and factory workers in the industrial units in Tirupur and Coimbatore. Additionally, he plans to establish training centres, colleges and old age homes for the deaf. Murugasamy dreams big, and he sees to it that his dreams get realised.

This pioneer also has a soft corner for the environment and has embarked on a mission of planting and nurturing a lakh trees in and around Tirupur. So far, he has planted 5000 saplings, roping in students of Tirupur School for the Deaf and members of the respective village Panchayats for the ongoing maintenance and care of the saplings.

Murugasamy's message reveals his personal angst. "The biggest challenge I faced in my various endeavours was in communicating with the world at large. Like in countries abroad, I wish everyone in our country would learn the basics of sign language. This would bridge the communication gap experienced by millions of deaf Indians", he says.

# CavinKare Ability Special Recognition Award

Divyanshu Ganatra

**He has** been breaking barriers every step along the way, never letting visual impairment or societal attitudes stand in the way of his magnificent dreams... Today, his adventurous exploits are legendary, so too his professional achievements.

Clinical psychologist, corporate trainer, educationist and researcher Divyanshu Ganatra is the Managing Partner of Yellow Brick Road that works in the fields of education, corporate training and counselling. On the adventure front, he is the first blind person in the country to do solo-paragliding. He is a mountaineer and scuba diver as well. Most recently, he became

India's first visually impaired person to complete a tandem bicycle expedition from Manali to Khardung La, the highest motorable road in the world. Divyanshu started the 'Adventure Beyond Barriers Foundation' to promote adventure sports among persons with disabilities.

Divyanshu lost his eyesight at the age of 19 to glaucoma. He didn't let it break his spirit. He rejected the mundane vocations suggested to him and became a successful IT professional. Later he returned to college to study psychology; he had to fight for this, as he was initially denied admission by the college for being visually impaired. After graduating, he founded 'Yellow Brick Road' and the 'Adventure Beyond Barriers Foundation'.

While Divyanshu agrees that there have been some positive developments in travel and adventure options for disabled persons in recent times, he notes that they



*Get the disabled and the non-disabled to learn, play and work together. This will inspire the creation of widespread accessibility.*



## THE AWARDS



don't cater to disabled persons with low incomes. "I believe in inclusive travel, not segregated travel", he says. There is no excuse for a building, a destination, or a service to stay inaccessible, he opines. "A person building a five-star hotel can obviously afford to build ramps and other access features. It does not cost much more to build in accessibility".

He believes that the prevalence of inaccessible infrastructure and services stems from a lack of awareness, because the general population has not been exposed to the disabled community. "If you haven't seen or interacted with people in wheelchairs or people without sight, you are not likely to consider access features for them. This scenario is what we are trying to turn around. We are trying to get more and more disabled people to go out there, do things, and have more visibility and mind space", he voices.

Divyanshu also rejects the idea of sensitisation workshops. "Change cannot be created at workshops. It can happen only when people are inspired to create change". He suggests, "Get the disabled and the non-disabled to learn, play and work together. This will inspire the creation of widespread accessibility. Because, if my friend has a disability, I would automatically want places to be accessible to him and would take the initiative to have it done". ■

# HCL

## Inclusion ensures long term SUSTAINABILITY



*Inclusion Matters @ HCL Noida*

*HCL Technologies Limited, an Indian multinational that offers services like IT Consulting, Enterprise Transformation, Remote Infrastructure Management, Engineering, Research and Development and Business Process Outsourcing figures on the Forbes Global 2000 list and is among the top 20 largest publicly traded companies in India. With offices in 34 countries including the United States, France and Germany, it is headquartered in Noida, India. This tech major has earned a reputation as a caring concern too, not just a successful one.*

In an exclusive interview with Success & ABILITY, Chitra Shyam Sunder, General Manager, Diversity and Inclusion at HCL Technologies, shares with us the firm's inclusive work philosophy and practices. An MBA graduate from Bharathiar University, Chitra has worked in different areas of HR. Her current role involves strategising and



**Chitra**  
Shyam Sunder



## CARING CONCERN

implementing gender inclusion, cultural integration, work-life balance and PwD assimilation initiatives at HCL. She voices, “Inclusion is not just good for business, it is also the right thing to do to ensure long term sustainability”. Read on...

### **Please give us some insight into HCL Technologies’ work philosophy.**

HCL Technologies believes in ensuring respect for each individual and creating a sense of ownership among employees across the globe. Our philosophy ‘Employees First, Customers Second (EFCS)’ guides all our actions. This philosophy drives us towards creating a unique employee organisation, creating and sustaining an inverted organisational structure, ensuring trust, transparency and accountability in all that we do and encouraging a value-driven organisation culture. We believe that real value lies in the relationship created between customers and the provider.

### **At HCL, is recruitment of persons with disabilities driven as a CSR initiative or as an equal opportunity/diversity policy? Please elaborate.**

Our Equal Employment Opportunity policy and approaches are made known to employees and key stakeholders through our website, diversity portals and campaigns. We ensure equal opportunities irrespective of gender, nationality, disability, sexual orientation, religion or ethnicity and ensure fairness of all processes right from hiring to compensation, retention and career advancement.

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

An unbiased recruitment policy and work environment makes an organisation an equal opportunity employer, wherein opportunities are given to employees based on their abilities, irrespective of their gender, caste, race, sexual orientation, disability, etc.

### **When you advertise for vacancies, how do you communicate your willingness to hire persons with disabilities?**

All our job openings are open to all vendors, and this of course includes vendors who support us on disability inclusion. We focus on the ability of a candidate to deliver a role, not on the disability. Our recruitment team works with partner organisations like Silver Linings, Enable India, Ability Foundation, V-shesh, NASSCOM Foundation and Noida Deaf Society who help us identify the best fit and right talent for our organisation, and also conduct awareness/sensitisation sessions when required. As you know, HCL participated in EmployABILITY 2016 in Dec’16, Ability Foundation’s job fair that opens up career opportunities for persons with disability.

### **Over the last few years, how many persons with disabilities have you recruited?**

*Employees with disabilities perform just as effectively as their counterparts when provided with assistive tools or aids.*

At HCL, over 150 employees have voluntarily declared themselves as Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), of whom 34 have been hired in the last nine months. These employees are deputed to various locations of HCL around the globe, the majority of them being in India.

### **What is the orientation process you follow while assigning persons with disabilities, jobs that have hitherto been unassigned to them?**

Our focus is not on the disability, but on the employee's ability and role-fitment where his/her ability can be leveraged. We also sensitise and train co-workers who would be working with employees with disabilities. Such sensitisation enables team members to empathise better and support colleagues with disabilities.

### **Have you ever needed to alter/add to existing office infrastructure, equipment or processes to accommodate an employee with disability?**



*Inclusion Matters @ HCL Bangalore*

We have done basic infrastructure assessments/audits to ensure a barrier free work environment in all our facilities. Most of our large campuses follow basic accessibility guidelines from the infrastructure perspective. In facilities where we have many persons with visual impairment, we have laid down tactile paths. Whenever any employee faces location related challenges, we provide support for relocation to an alternate office facility, based on business requirements. And when special requests are brought up by employees with disabilities, we follow the guidelines of reasonable accommodation to enable them, as one solution may not address varied needs.

*Just initiate an assimilation process and you will see your company's ecosystem transform and accommodate disabled persons beautifully, as inclusion is not just good for business but is also needed to ensure long term sustainability.*



**Once you recruit a person with disability, how do you orient existing staff who would be working with the new recruit?**

Ability Connect is an employee network at HCL that helps advance the cause of employees with disabilities by suggesting policies and programmes to support inclusion and growth. The recruitment team and others involved in our hiring process are trained to be sensitive and inclusive while conducting the process.

**At HCL, how do compensation packages and opportunities for career growth for employees with disability compare with those of non-disabled persons in equivalent roles?**

Our Equal Employment Opportunity policy and approaches are made known to employees and key stakeholders through our website, diversity portals and campaigns. All our job openings are posted internally. Compensation parity checks are carried out regularly to ensure parity.

**Please describe how you ensure that every person at HCL Technologies is on the same page regarding disability awareness and inclusion.**

The organisation and its leadership strongly believe in disability inclusion. Our employees endorse this as well. From time to time, we hold disability awareness programmes for both management and co-workers. Apart from the ones which continue throughout the year, we organise many advocacy events on World Disability Day. Recently we partnered with Gift-Abled Innoventures to provide sensitisation training for our employees. And then, Inclusion Matters @ HCL is a one-of-its-kind experiential learning workshop which the Diversity CoE organised in partnership with Gift-Abled Innoventures at three of our major campuses in India viz. Chennai, Bangalore and Noida. This workshop sensitised employees on how it feels to be a person with disability, how they use technology in their daily lives and how an employee can assist persons with disabilities.



*National Award Winner - Vimala Thalapatih*

**What feedback system does HCL offer employees with disabilities to report instances of discrimination, if any. How have these cases been handled?**

Any employee who feels she/he has been subjected to discrimination can write to HCL's Ethics Committee. One can also use the Whistleblower policy to report unethical practices. All complaints are handled by the respective committee with utmost confidentiality. Through a mandatory training programme, all our employees

are provided with details of the redressal mechanism at HCL so that employees are aware of whom they may approach if and when they face harassment or discrimination.

**What is your message to persons with disabilities (with job-appropriate qualifications) who seek jobs, on equipping themselves to compete on par with non-disabled peers?**

Accentuating abilities and strengthening and positioning the same more prominently is an imperative for persons of every minority group, and this is true for persons with disabilities too. Further, seeking out workplaces that are inclusive and appreciative of their contributions would go a long way in enabling persons with disabilities to contribute to the best of their abilities.

**Describe your overall experience in hiring persons with disabilities. What has been its impact on your company's performance?**

We have observed that employees with disabilities perform just as effectively as their counterparts when provided necessary assistive tools or aids. Also, we find that the idea and acceptance of inclusion gets stronger in teams that induct persons with disabilities. While we partner with organisations like Ability Foundation to identify the best fit and right talent for our organisation, access to a larger PwD talent pool has been an area of challenge. We believe that we have just made a beginning and have a long way to cover in this journey of inclusion.

**What would you say to corporates hesitant about hiring persons with disabilities?**

Persons with disabilities form a significant chunk of our society. It is the duty of every responsible organisation as well as every individual to provide equal opportunities and not discriminate against them. Here is a simple suggestion for those who are yet to begin this journey of inclusion: Just initiate an assimilation process and you will see your company's ecosystem transform and accommodate disabled persons beautifully, as inclusion is not just good for business but is also the right thing to do to ensure long term sustainability. ■



*Inclusion Matters @ HCL Chennai*

*Access to a larger PwD talent pool has been an area of challenge as far as hiring is concerned.*





# Serve & Win

## Leading from the front

***Exemplary leaders go beyond the call of duty and serve silently, reflects DR. KETNAL. MEHTA, Founder Trustee, Nina Foundation, while sharing anecdotes on some of them.***

My late father dedicatedly served a public limited company, the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), with body, mind and soul. He would often go beyond the call of duty. On several occasions, we, his family, have been witness to his 'extreme' love for his company.

Whilst he was IOC's Terminal Manager at Trombay and IOC's union went on strike, he, as the leader stayed put at the terminal for four days and three nights – with no

bath, no proper mattress for resting, and a swarm of blood thirsty mosquitoes biting him badly. In fact, there was even a threat of IOC's oil tankers being blown up, which would have been a major disaster. My father went beyond the call of duty only out of pure love for his company. He did not get an extra penny, medal or recognition for such devoted service.

We have seen him work on many a Sunday too. As children, we have accompanied him to his office on several Sundays. My father wouldn't hesitate to take official phone calls at home, be it early morning or late night; he would also carry his work home. He handled the pressures of work with a sense of enjoyment and without any expectations. Though there were times he missed promotions on account of not having engineering or post graduate degrees and felt disappointed by it, this never dampened his spirits for too long.

I came to hear of another such exemplary leader recently, while meeting some friends over lunch.

This person, a Branch Manager in a public sector company – the Oriental Insurance Company Limited, was in a meeting with some customers in his cabin, when a staff member knocked on his door and rushed in, trepidation writ large on his face. The Branch Manager excused himself and stepped out of the cabin. He was informed that the staff washroom was overflowing with sewage water, the administrator was refusing to call the authorised plumber and the enraged union was threatening to go on strike as they could not use the washroom.

The Branch Manager silently walked to the washroom. He removed his shoes and socks, waded into the ankle deep sewage water, took a hand pump and started clearing the muck, working continuously until the washroom became ready for use. Once done, he washed his hands with soap and water, and stepped out without a word. He then pulled on his socks and shoes and returned to his cabin and continued his meeting. No sermons, no chest thumping, nothing – he hadn't done this for applause, promotion or trophy. It was 'Servant leadership' at its best; he had solved the problem and averted a major face-off between the union and the management. This incident came to light word of mouth, through staff members who had personally witnessed the incident. No newsletter, journal or publication reported the 'silent' leader and his devout action.

Such 'divine' leaders act from a deep calling within their hearts, simply because it's the right thing to do in that situation.

We bow and tip our hats to such exemplary, unique leaders. ■



**Dr. Ketna  
L. Mehta**

*Such 'divine'  
leaders act  
from a deep  
calling within  
their hearts.  
They take  
the lead and  
serve, because  
it's the 'right'  
solution in that  
situation.*



# Call of the Arts



*Dance, drama, music, photography, films... our cultural landscape has never been this diverse. Or vibrant. Who would have thought of a stand-up comedienne a couple of years ago? And disabled? Not a chance. Indeed, the genre of art and culture, long out of bounds to those with disability, now includes some incredibly*



*talented professionals. Outstanding men and women who have rewritten the definition of courage to reach the pinnacle of creative expression. Exploring uncharted territory, they have shattered stereotypes and defied the impossible, to become cultural icons. Today, triumphant, joyful, reveling in their passion, their art has not only altered attitudes, but also opened minds and hearts.*

*They are our highly accomplished cultural ambassadors. HEMA VIJAY brings their stories to you.*



Buse Gowda

# Dance like a flame

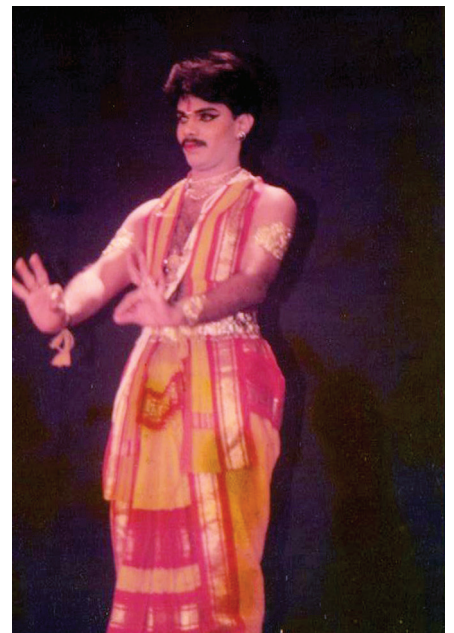
***Buse Gowda, the first ever blind person to become a top-notch classical dancer, is today not just a globe-trotting artiste, but also a guru to many.***

It is quite tough to catch Buse Gowda for a conversation...he is a very busy man. Performances, teaching, workshops...after all, he is the pioneer who started it all, the first ever blind person to learn and master one of the most challenging of all classical dance forms – bharatanatyam. Forty years old now, he is already a legend. He has floored the world with mega choreographies like *Swordfight* and *Panchvakthram* as also his shorter pieces on *Krishna*, *Thillana*, etc. Recognition has tumbled in too. This includes a National Award from the Government of India for creative work in the field of art (2000) and the CavinKare Ability Award for Mastery (2003), besides a host of honours like 'Natya Kala Kaushala', 'Kala Premi' and 'Mayura'. He is also an auditioned artiste of Bengaluru Doordarshan and a familiar face on radio and television across Karnataka.

Buse is a master at his art. Across the world, both his solo and group performances leave audiences stunned. Recently, Buse Gowda and his troupe including five visually impaired and 10 non-disabled bharatanatyam dancers trained by him performed at the inauguration of the Blind Cricket World Cup 2017 at the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium, Delhi. The spectators, estimated to be 8000 people strong, were left wondering which dancer was blind and who wasn't. And so has it been across borders – be it at the 2014 Kannada Convention in the USA and the UK, or his performance at the Association for India's Development (AID), Boston. As on date, he has given over 1500 performances across the world.

“For a non-sighted person to learn dance, a lot of patience is needed because the process is long; one has to feel the posture, repeat it, and then get it corrected. In the initial stages, I did have some fear of falling and of stepping out

*What I need  
is student  
involvement;  
performances  
will follow.*



of the assigned space. My body needed some tuning to move in the way demanded by classical dance. With practice, everything fell into place”, says Buse.

“As a dance teacher, what I need is student involvement; performances will follow”, he shares. Buse fine-tunes his teaching methods according to the needs of the student, using props like guiding ropes and speaker settings, to ensure the all important stage orientation. “The student has to feel and observe the teacher’s posture and replicate the same while the teacher has to observe and correct the student constantly; it is a long process and needs individual attention”. His advice for budding blind dancers? “It takes several years of dedicated practice and involvement to learn the art. Give it due time. And continue with your education. The confidence and the capacity for concentration that one develops while training in bharatanatyam will give you strength in your other endeavours too”. Buse himself acquired a degree through distance education. “While almost every audience we have performed for vouches that the professionalism of our group is unimaginable and unprecedented, in my opinion and experience, a career in dancing doesn’t support a livelihood. The remuneration from performances is uncertain”, he confides. It is the travel agency that he runs that sustains him financially.



One of Buse Gowda’s initiatives to pass on the joy of bharatanatyam to the huge visually disabled community in our country include Articulate Ability, a programme through which he trains blind girls in institutions like Samarthanam and Deepa Academy in Bengaluru.

Buse Gowda became blind at the age of five due to an accident, but he did not let it deter his passion for dance, eventually mastering bharatanatyam, especially abhinaya. The story of how young Buse Gowda, then an eight-year-old student at the Ramana Maharishi Academy for the Blind in Bangalore, persuaded Ashok Kumar, who was just then establishing his school ‘Natyanjali’ to teach him to dance is now legend. Well known too is the anecdotal story of how he asked Ashok Kumar to hold the pose, felt his posture and duplicated it, leading to the evolution of what he describes as ‘touch and learn’ technique.

While Natyanjali went on to create an international trend in teaching the blind to dance, Ashok Kumar regards Buse Gowda as his Guru, as he was instrumental in showing him how to teach bharatanatyam to those without sight. However, a grateful Buse insists, “It is because of my Guru who gave me free training that I am what I am today”.

*The confidence and the capacity for concentration that you develop while training in this classical genre will empower your other endeavours too.*



# Nidhi Goyal

## Humour is the best policy!

***Through laughs, this witty, dynamic and exuberant woman has made many in the country reconsider regressive notions of disability and gender.***

**She prods;** she questions. She makes you check your premises, introspect on your actions and inspires you to change forever. All this, while raising a laugh. Meet Nidhi Goyal, Mumbai-based visually impaired stand-up comedienne, disability and gender activist, trainer, researcher and director of the Sexuality and Disability Program at the non-profit organisation 'Point of View'.

It has been just over a year since Nidhi started doing stand-up comedy. Already, she is a much sought after professional, having performed in major cities in India and across the globe – Geneva, Paris and Kathmandu, to name a few. She has also appeared in Aditi Mittal's popular YouTube video series 'Bad Girls' that features women doing unconventional work.

A chance meeting with filmmaker, activist, stand-up comedienne and co-founder of the Delhi-based feminist human rights organisation CREA, Pramada Menon, propelled Nidhi along the stand-up comedy path. "I was narrating one of the comic-tragic disability related incidents that occurred in my life. She laughed and told me to get into comedy".

Nidhi made her debut at a live show in Calcutta commemorating the International Human Rights Day in December 2015. "I knew I was on the right track when at the end of my performance, a lady walked up to me and said: I was laughing heartily. At the same time, I was feeling bad as this is exactly how I have been behaving", she narrates. Nidhi takes cues from her own experiences and that of others with disabilities. She draws an insight from every conversation. "I jot it down... I am always ready to prop it up, tone it down, or modify the script along the way".



*A happy,  
down-to-earth  
disabled person  
full of laughs?  
That prompts  
a rethink.  
Sensitisation  
therefore happens  
at several levels.*

In one of her acts, Nidhi narrated an incident when census officials came knocking at the door of a visually impaired friend. “My friend pointed out that the official hadn’t asked if there were any disabled people in the house. However, when she mentioned that she herself was blind, the official’s response was, ‘But madam, you said you are employed and a mother, no...? How can you be blind?’ My friend replied, ‘Bhaaisaab, to have a baby, I don’t need eyes”. Nidhi’s narration had the audience in splits, but at the same time, it made them think about their own attitude to disability.

This is how her comedy act works. Audiences walk in for entertainment. In the span of 10 to 35 minutes that this gutsy woman takes over the stage, they become introspective, and are inspired to change forever. “Finding a woman, a blind woman at that, walk up on stage and do stand-up comedy unnerves most audiences at first. As a society, we have been primed to see people with disabilities as objects of pity, or objects of inspiration. Disabled persons are either assumed to have miserable lives or glorious, inspiring lives”, Nidhi points out.

A happy and down-to-earth disabled person full of laughs? That comes as a surprise to most audiences. Sensitisation therefore actually happens at several levels and not just from the anecdotes that prompt introspection. To begin with, the ‘otherness’ gloves get gently pulled away. Ideas such as ‘some niches of life are not for disabled persons’ get demolished. People get encouraged to look at themselves, the way they see disability and treat disabled persons – prodded by laughs, not sermons or sticks. Meanwhile, for someone who is already on the right track, it is empowering.

Along the way, Nidhi attacks all the demeaning and insensitive attitudes we unconsciously harbour – from over-curiosity, running away and false sympathy to downright discrimination. While she sees stand-up comedy as a powerful tool for her activism, Nidhi’s work spans research, writing, campaigns, advocacy and art, besides design and delivery of accessible training programmes across India and across impairments. Readers can access the comprehensive online resource ‘Disability, Gender, Sexuality and Violence’ that she co-authored for Point of View at [www.sexualityanddisability.org](http://www.sexualityanddisability.org)

Nidhi strongly believes that humour effectively demolishes regressive attitudes and inspires people to change because it is non-confrontational, non-threatening and non-pedantic, unlike a speech or a training workshop. She says, “I enjoy performing stand-up comedy. Everytime I crack a regressive attitude through a joke, this positivity bounces back on me”.

A conversation with Nidhi reiterates that comedy is perhaps the most cerebral of creative pursuits and the most powerful form of activism.

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# Pradeep Kumar Music moves mountains

***From Natwal village in Gurdaspur district of Punjab to A.R. Rahman's music conservatory in Chennai, this talented young man has come a long way. Beating both handicap and poverty, today he runs his own academy, teaching music to scores of people.***



When a young Pradeep Kumar, just out of school, told the people in his village that he was going to learn music from Oscar awardee A.R. Rahman in Chennai, they scoffed at the idea. Besides coming from a family that barely managed to make ends meet, Pradeep was completely crippled by polio that had affected both his legs and therefore his mobility.

However, ignoring this negativity, Pradeep persuaded his parents to send him to Chennai to pursue his dreams. Once there, he was on his own – alone in a new city, far away from home, a place where people spoke an altogether different language, and with no assurance of job or education. The only thing going for Pradeep was his passion and determination. He had long decided that he would make his career in music, no matter what it entailed.

Today, it has been five years since he landed at KM Music Conservatory at Arumbakkam in Chennai, where he learnt to play the piano, the harmonium and guitar, besides Hindustani music. While Pradeep was familiar with vocals thanks to singing along with the radio back home, he had never before touched an instrument like the piano. “People use both feet (to tap levers) while playing the piano, which I could not. Initially, my teachers were apprehensive and advised me to think of some other instrument, but I decided that I would practice and master the piano”, he shares. So much so that now he can play some very challenging pieces like Mozart’s *Rondo Alla Turca*. Pradeep would arrive at the conservatory at 8.a.m., well before classes began, and practice right up to noon, stunning everyone including A.R. Rahman. The master musician was so impressed that he gave Pradeep an

*Don't go by what  
the word sees or  
says... go by your  
heart and make  
your dreams  
come true.*



opportunity to perform and subsequently a video of this was posted on YouTube, which Rahman shared with many. Rahman also gave him a scholarship to learn music free of cost at the KM Music Conservatory.

Soon, Pradeep decided it was time he weaned himself off the financial support extended by his brother, a security guard in Malaysia. He made the bold decision of starting a music training centre 'Indian Music Academy', in Avadi, on the outskirts of Chennai, borrowing money from friends. It was a one-room tenement and Pradeep waited for his first student. Eventually, to encourage Pradeep, a friend enrolled his daughter for Hindustani vocals. The quality of his teaching spread word of mouth and the reputation of the academy grew. Today, the academy has expanded to three rooms and has 55 students on its rolls, aged between six and 50.

"This is only the beginning. My dream is to establish the best and the biggest music school in the country, where anybody can learn music, whether or not they can pay fees", he says, utterly confident that he will succeed. "When I told people in my village of my dream to learn from A.R. Rahman, everyone laughed. But now, I have done it. Not only do I earn my living from music, I also send some money to my family and it feels good. God has given me a lot. Now I want to give back to society", he says.

What irks Pradeep though are the disparaging glances directed at disabled persons. "Not many people come forward to help me negotiate steps in public places. They just grimace at my struggles. While it hurt me, I soon told myself: Don't go by what the word sees or says... go by your heart and make your dreams come true", says this motivated 28-year-old.

*Pradeep Kumar was on his own – handicapped, alone in a new city far away from home, where people spoke an altogether different language, and with no assurance of job or education.*





# Pranav Lal Frame of life

*This blind photographer doesn't just perceive his surroundings using esoteric technology, but also captures its beauty for the world.*

“I wanted to be able to share my perceptions with people. That’s why I got started with photography”, says Pranav Lal, one of the most intriguing photographers you will ever meet. Pranav Lal cannot see, but he perceives his surroundings, thanks to the ingenious use of technology.

Pranav assembled his first photography gear using his laptop with a webcam, video glasses (glasses embedded with a camera with a wide angle fish-eye lens) and some fabulous software. “It works like an artificial eye. This gear computes the image into sound, which I hear through my headphones, and these signals are sent to my visual cortex. It is a completely non-invasive artificial eye...” he shares.

The technology that he uses is an augmented reality device called the vOICe (OIC referring to Oh I See). It’s virtually a prosthetic eye. Using software, it converts images to sound and maps the environment. The vOICe is the brainchild of Dutch physicist and inventor Peter Meijer. Pranav came across this pioneering physicist’s website [seeingwithsound.com](http://seeingwithsound.com) and his photography odyssey was firmly on track.

This is how Pranav uses the vOICe. He wears the video glass and a bone-conduction headphone. The headphones cover the ears only partially to include the natural sounds in the vicinity. The object then gets mapped by



*When schools refused to let him opt for the science stream, Pranav taught himself computer programming. Today, he is a successful cyber security professional.*

the corresponding sound panned on to a horizontal plane; if a sound is heard on the left headphone, it implies that the object is on the left, and vice versa. The height of the object is indicated by the pitch of the sound – the higher the pitch, the higher is the object. The level of light on the object is indicated by volume – the louder the sound, the brighter is the object. Pranav says, “A person’s visual cortex responds to these impulses in much the same way it responds to signals from the organic eye, because of rewiring of the neural pathways”. Understandably, it is not easy to comprehend what the vOICe says. However over time, Pranav has become expert enough to decipher the sound he hears on the vOICe so as to frame and shoot it on a digital camera or an iPhone. He thus captures visual vignettes – from gleaming flowers in a garland shop to the reflection of light on a stream, people in conversation, architectural intricacies, and even minute details like the stiff hair on an elephant’s trunk.

Pranav’s photographs reveal finesse and excellent composition. One wonders how his technique evolved to such perfection in the absence of sight. He shrugs it off saying, “I tried a lot of things, and kept interacting with the user community (of vOICe) and fine-tuned my technique”. While he can change the settings of his camera, he prefers not to. “I don’t really need to do it. What I prefer is framing the shot”, he says .

His blog [techesoterica.com](http://techesoterica.com) gives you a very clear understanding of how he sees, as well as how to assemble and use this ‘artificial eye’, not to mention the intriguing photographs he has been shooting, accompanied by some vivid descriptions.

Incidentally, it was while doing his MBA degree that he got hooked to photography. “The laptop I bought had a webcam. I started playing around with the software and thus began my exploration with vision”,

he shares. Moreover this 37-year-old’s hobbies also include reading and writing short stories. He travels extensively and posts photographs in his blog for all to enjoy. It has to be mentioned here that his parents played a supportive role, helping him set up his own science lab at home, so Pranav grew up experimenting with science.

Pranav informs us that his travel companions assist him with captioning the photographs. Using geo-tagging on his phone, Pranav marks pictures by location and gets the images described by persons who have been on the spot with him when he shot the picture.

Pranav is currently working on bolstering software to tag and automatically describe the photographs he takes so that they remain tagged even during their transfer from camera to a drive.

It is a formidable task. He says, “I was thrilled to learn that wordpress had a plugin that used Microsoft Cognitive Services API to automatically describe images. The describer plugin however did not give me location information, therefore I rolled my own code in python. I have created a utility that queries Google for location and the Microsoft Cognitive Services API for image descriptions and writes them on a text file. I had tried to embed the descriptions in EXIF tags but that did not work”.

This tagging application seems a tough proposition, but you get the sense that the day is not far off when Pranav will crack it. After all, this young man just went ahead and taught himself computer programming and rose to become a successful cyber security professional, when schools refused to allow him to opt for the science stream. Then of course, he is a blind man who has learnt to perceive the world around, capture its exquisiteness and taught the organically sighted to see.



# Dr. Hemachandran Karah Striking a Chord

*Dr. Hemachandran Karah, a professor of literature and poetry at IIT-Madras, is a keen violinist whose musical odyssey began as a literary one.*

“I don’t really know what the violin does to me... It takes me back to my childhood. In that world, I am curious, self indulgent and above all willing to be corrected!” declares Dr. Hemachandran Karah, Asst. Professor, Department of Humanities, IIT-Madras. And sure enough, it was his literary pursuit that prompted him to take up playing the violin.

It all began with Dr. Karah’s research on how the Italian violin became a key Indian instrument, whilst doing a Ph.D. and eventually writing a book on the subject. In order to gain first hand information, he enrolled himself at the KM Music Conservatory (KMMC) and as a result, the litterateur is now a musician too!

In order to understand the transition, Dr. Karah decided to start with learning western classical music and then move on to the Indian classical genre. “The most challenging part of learning to play the violin is in getting a good tone. Also, the ability to read music is imperative to the study of western music. I handled it by enrolling into a course on Braille music at the Hadley School for the Blind in the USA”, he shares, musing, “Musical instruments become integral to an artist’s self, his body included. Until that point, musical instruments may not bring out one’s voice and all the other inner predispositions”.

Dr. Karah finds several parallels between western classical and carnatic music. For instance, just like the growth of Carnatic music being entwined with temples, western classical music’s origin and growth was with the church. However, there are



*Music has the capacity to connect the rational brain with the intuitive, and when this happens, our cognition and consciousness evolves to a higher plane.*

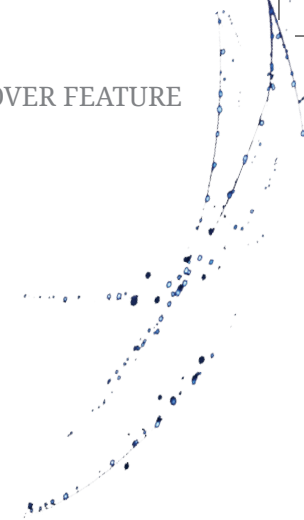
divergences too. “Harmony is integral to western classical music – it is about how the violin or any other instrument responds to the piano, to the soprano and how it harmonises with 30 other violins, whereas with Carnatic music, *manodharma* is important – it is more of an individual’s musical expression”, he avers.

Drawing from the synergies, Dr. Karah says, “Be it the music of Ilayaraja, saint Thyagaraja or western classical composers, it has the capacity to connect the rational brain with the intuitive. At that moment of appreciation when these two aspects of our persona get connected, our cognition and consciousness evolve to a higher plane”.

Dr. Karah reckons that much like how our connection with English gets enriched by our roots or our native Indian languages, our sense of tonality too is enriched by a rich crossover between Indian and western modes of musical expressions. He explains, “Ilayaraja, Burman and Rahman offer us a rare glimpse of this tonal mix. When the violin was introduced to the Indian musical scape, it was more or less the queen of baroque music in the West. In no time, the violin began yielding itself to the Indian raga tradition. Rasas such as *bhakthi* became native to the violin, and the western notion of polyphony gave rise to something like *bhakthi* on the violin. So, the first Indian violinist would have had to invent a new register, or a brand new violin requiring a novel mode of playing. As you see, this is nothing less than an act of genius. An exploration of such novel moments is going to be extremely interesting. I may or may not end up writing the book. However, a journey towards it should be fun in its own right!”

Dr. Hemachandran Karah’s education began at the St. Louis School for the Blind, Chennai, after which he completed his B.A. in English from Loyola College and M.A. in English from Hyderabad University. He followed it up with a Ph.D. on the theme of autobiography and disability from the Cambridge University. Returning to India, he had a four-year stint at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), after which he took up teaching at IIT-Chennai. As an academic Dr. Karah likes to address the representation of disability in literature and culture. His graduate students are given assignments that reveal that disability is not necessarily a physical or cognitive challenge, but a way to look at the world and that disability is both a human condition and a source of special knowledge.

Summing it up, Dr. Karah says, “We all have diverse capacities, vulnerabilities, orientations, weaknesses and desires. In a sense, disability embodies such propensities. For example, a unique sign language universe facilitates deaf people to introduce cultures that do not excessively rely on verbal speech. Blindness demands a culture of description from society. Blindness is also a powerful metaphor. A good many human expressions such as romance, *bhakthi*, belief, and the like rely on such a metaphor. As a student of literature, I am keen on exploring such connections”.



*Disability is not necessarily a physical or cognitive challenge, but a way to look at the world; it is both a human condition and a source of special knowledge.*



# Sangeeta Gala

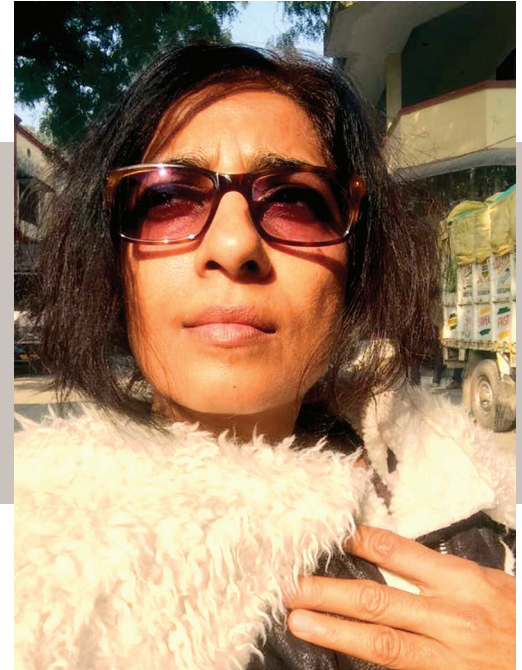
## Reel Achievements, Real Heroine

***This sensitive, expressive and dynamic lady is one of the critically acclaimed associate directors in the Hindi film industry today. Sangeeta Gala has not only enabled society acquire a better understanding and communication with persons with hearing impairment, she is also fighting for their rights.***

“I have always loved cinema – the drama, colour and the larger-than-life quality it exudes”, says Sangeeta Gala. Born with a hearing impairment which affected her speech, Sangeeta has always been a visually oriented person. “I have never needed to hear dialogues or have subtitling”, she says. When she expressed her ambition of being in films, people asked her, “How can you? You are deaf”. But her desire never wavered, discouraging attitudes notwithstanding.

Today, Sangeeta is an Associate Director with filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali. She has also emerged as the default facilitator and trainer for Bollywood actors who enact roles involving hearing or speech-impairment; actors trained by her have gone on to give realistic and acclaimed performances. Among the projects she has been involved with include Barfi!, Black, Devdas, Sawaariya, Ravaan, Khamoshi and many more landmark films. Her inspired professionalism won her recognition including the 14<sup>th</sup> NCPEDP-Shell Helen Keller Award and the CavinKare Ability Mastery Award 2014.

“My mother and father ensured that I got excellent education despite trying family circumstances. Though society saw my disability as the result of past sins, my parents saw me as a gift from God”, Sangeeta shares. She graduated in psychology from Jai Hind College, Mumbai. A multifaceted person, she went on to compete at the Deaf



*Movies are my life. Fighting for the rights of the deaf is my mission.*

Olympics (1985) and began teaching communication skills and sign language at the Bombay Foundation of Deaf Women and the Helen Keller Institute. But deep inside her, a passion for films was still burning bright.

In 1996, one of Bhansali's talent scouts spotted her and brought her to his notice. Floored by her animated gestures and expressions, flair for communication and inspired manner of teaching, Bhansali and actor Nana Patekar invited her to train Nana Patekar in the film *Khamoshi*. Sangeeta's foray into films had begun.

"It was a miracle, making an entry into the film industry at that age. I was 35 years old then, with a five-year-old son", she says, adding, "I expected *Khamoshi* to be my first and last film. My thinking was that there weren't going to be too many films centred on deafness". However, Bhansali drew her back into films. Having noticed her creative inputs, time management skills and decision making on the sets of *Khamoshi*, he invited her to be an assistant director in his films. There has been no looking back ever since.

While Indian cinema has lately taken to portraying people with disabilities a little more positively, are they as professionals welcomed into the film industry on an equal footing? Sangeeta shares that in her experience, disabled persons are not really welcome in the film industry and that they are expected to prove their mettle much more than a non-disabled person. "People in the film industry see it as a matter of inconvenience to have disabled persons on the sets. They don't want to deal with the risk of people in wheelchairs tripping over wires, arranging for their transportation, etc", she says. She shares that she herself had felt isolated when she first set foot in the industry. "I was not privy to information that was shared among the others, not invited into discussions happening on the sets", she shares. The gyan that Bhansali gave her then changed her outlook, she adds. "He told me: Nothing in this world comes easy. Each of us has to fight for ourselves. Don't expect things to happen on their own".

Besides, Sangeeta has gone beyond celluloid, championing causes as and when she encounters them. For instance, when she learnt that no action had been taken against the persons who had sexually abused deaf girls at the foundation she worked with, she personally filed an FIR against the abusers and spent time and money to unearth evidence to present to the police. "These kids are highly disturbed, they don't know how to speak up or report such crimes", she says, beseeching more people to come forward to help the victims rebuild their lives and bring the perpetrators to justice. Likewise, she ensured that hearing impaired kids got to represent themselves in Mudra Group's video of the Indian National Anthem in sign language, which has gone viral now. She is one of the leaders of the team that is fighting against irregularities at the NHHI Bandra Government Institute for the Deaf. "Movies are my life. Fighting for the rights of the deaf is my mission", she says.

*When she expressed her ambition of being in films, people asked her, "How can you? You are deaf". But her desire never wavered, such discouraging attitudes notwithstanding.*



# Joe Ikareth and Murielle Gallois-Ikareth **Wear your Attitude**

***Haute couture that's accessible, easy to wear and allows easy movement? Kottayam-based fashion designer Joe Ikareth and his wife Murielle make this possible through their MoveAbility line of clothing.***



Finding trendy, accessible, independent-use everyday clothing has always been a challenge for persons with disability. Now, you can place an online order for these comfortable, specially designed garments by connecting with Joe Ikareth and Murielle Gallois-Ikareth through their website [www.moveability.in](http://www.moveability.in)

“Once a person gets in touch with us online, we can work towards clothing solutions according to their abilities”, he says. What’s more, the inputs of Ikareth’s wife Murielle, a creative movement therapist ensures that the fashion wear Joe designs allows easy movement, not just great looks. “Moving even a small part of our body is a wonderful way of expressing and accepting who we are. Clothing made to ease movement celebrates this”, shares Murielle. During the process of design, Murielle helps Joe understand the extent of movement his creations would enable or restrict. According to Joe, “We observe how the body interacts with itself and its abilities and develop patterns for clothes based on those movements”.

Joe, who graduated from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Delhi, started off with a collection for dancers in Paris. This designer has always been fascinated by movement and his designs celebrate that. When he returned to his home state of Kerala, his collaboration with dancers of various Indian genres prompted him to create outfits for them.

Later, his daughter Tilotama inspired his foray into accessible, independent-use clothing. Tilotama has limited mobility in her arms due to damaged nerves. As she grew up, this started challenging her independence – getting ready, using the washroom and other everyday activities. The thoughtful father soon began to create beautiful, accessible, movement-friendly, independent-use clothes to cater to her special needs. It started with something as simple as larger cuts. Joe soon evolved

*Joe began to create beautiful, accessible, movement friendly, independent-use clothes to cater to the special needs of his daughter.*



a number of design elements to make fashionable clothes for young Tilotama that enabled her to dress independently, move freely, even dance. Eventually, Joe and Murielle launched 'MoveAbility Clothing' to extend accessible fashion wear for the disabled community.

MoveAbility Clothing provides clothing and accessories solutions for people with diverse disabilities, people who have prosthetic legs, paraplegia, amputated limbs and limited arm movement. Joe and Murielle work with cotton and blends, use velcro strips and magnets as fasteners, flexible waist bands and asymmetric cuts to shift the focus away from body disproportions. Joe also develops clothes with nanotechnology fabric, fabric that don't require much ironing and fabric that don't stain. He also understands that there is more wear and tear on clothes used over prosthetic limbs and overcomes this snag using design elements like multiple layers and larger cuts. Today, MoveAbility Clothing is creating waves beyond India and has attracted many overseas clients. MoveAbility has also been venturing into community initiatives like workshops for transforming existing clothes into adapted clothes and developing networks among persons with disability.

A classy designer, Joe Ikareth was a finalist at the Danish Business Cup 2015, and among the top 25 at the NORDEN-Nordic Innovation Living Challenge at Copenhagen with his Danish partner Jeanette Kaeseler Mortensen. He has designed plus-size clothes for Cobblestone Gallery in Sussex, England.

As Joe and Murielle point out, dressing and undressing being intimate everyday activities, being able to do these without anybody's assistance and wearing well designed clothes at that, lets disabled people have a better identity of themselves. It also changes the way the world looks at them. ■

*Being able to dress and undress independently and wear well designed clothes lets disabled people have a better identity of themselves and also changes the way the world looks at them.*



# DISABILITY IS A DIFFERENT ABILITY IN

# CINEMA



G. Dhananjayan

*G. DHANANJAYAN, film producer, national award winning author, columnist and founder-dean of the BOFTA Film Institute in Chennai, traces how Tamil and Hindi cinema have helped advance inclusion in society over time.*

There were times when movies presented disabled people as objects of pity or even comedy, a different breed whose condition subject them to isolation. Such characters were shown to be weak and seeking pity. Of course, such ‘otherness’ merely reflected the social attitudes of the time. This began to change during the 60s and 70s when mainstream society started becoming more inclusive of disabled people. Cinema, by shaping the way its subjects get viewed, had the power to advance this process.



Today, in mainstream cinema, disability in the lead character adds importance to the character, and is used as an important tool to attract the audience and achieve commercial success. Disability has actually become an ability of the character, enhancing the appeal of the film.

Going back to history, A. Bhimsingh's film *Bhaga Pirivinai* (1959) showed the lead character, played by Sivaji Ganesan, having a paralysed left hand. The story revolved around him overcoming struggles despite his disability, finally finding happiness.





The film inspired people with disability to believe that they too can aspire for a great life, just like non-disabled persons. *Oonche Log* (1965) and *Major Chandrakanth* (1966), both based on the same Tamil play, presented a blind retired army major in a majestic role and garnered huge respect for blind people. The Kamal Haasan and Sujatha starrer *Uyarnadhavargal* (1977) presented the life of a deaf and mute couple, their struggles in society and how they achieved greatness through their deeds.

Since then, several films displaying disabled persons' ability were made, enhancing their image in society. Kamal Haasan successfully presented the love story of a blind young man in *Raajaparvai* (1981) and created the right impact. He then presented a commercial potboiler *Apoorva Sagotharargal* (1989) which revolved around a dwarf. If people had dubbed dwarfs as jokers until then, Kamal Haasan's film revealed how they are heroes in reality, thus bringing them respect.

Director S.J. Suriya in his film *Vaali* (1999) with Ajith Kumar showed how a deaf and mute young man could be more intelligent and powerful than his identical non-disabled brother. In the same way, Director Radha Mohan's *Mozhi* (2007) presented Jyothika as a deaf and mute young girl with strong convictions who does not seek sympathy from anyone in leading her life.

*Disability has actually become an ability of the character, enhancing the appeal of the film.*

Several other films featuring disabled characters like *Kasi* (2001), *En ManaVaani* (2002) and *Perazhagan* (2004) were made. They became huge hits, as the audience could relate with the characters, their pain and their achievements.

The film *123* (2002) presented the interesting lives of three disabled friends (one is blind, the second is deaf and the third is mute) and how they go about winning their lady love. In a way, the film celebrated disability and proclaimed that disability is not a disadvantage. Films like *Mayuri* (1985) and *Dancer* (2005) went one step higher and presented real-life disabled dancers (Sudha Chandran and Kutty respectively) on screen and gave them the glory that they deserved.

If the Hindi film *Taare Zameen Par* (2007) has shown that children suffering with dyslexia are in no way less than normal children, that they are just differently

talented and that parents and teachers must identify and nurture these children's talents instead of pushing them to pursue regular education, the Tamil film *Haridas* (2013) presented an autistic child becoming a marathon winner, encouraged and supported by his parents and teachers. The film strongly established that autism is not a disease to brood over and that such children just need extra affection and care, not sympathy. Both these films became critical and commercial successes for portraying children with disability effectively and providing a sense of hope.

The highly appreciated Hindi film of 2005, *Black* starring Amitabh Bachchan and Rani Mukherji portrayed the relationship between a man suffering from Alzheimer's disease and a blind and deaf girl, and how he helps her succeed and fulfill her parents' wishes. The film *Paa* (2009) was based on a rare genetic condition, progeria, where one begins aging from a very early age. The film beautifully narrates how Amitabh Bachchan, suffering from this rare disease shares a heart-rending relationship with his father, played by Abhishek Bachchan and triumphs towards the end of his life in bringing his mother (Vidya Balan) and father together. The bilingual film, *Thozha* in Tamil and *Oopiri* in Telugu (2016) showed how a quadriplegic billionaire played by Akkineni Nagarjuna realizes the importance of life and relationships over money and disability along with his caretaker played by Karthi. All these films strongly highlighted



*It is gratifying that most films featuring disabled persons as lead characters have become commercially successful and are well received by the audience.*





that disabled protagonists have the ability to understand every relationship in their life, value them, and are no less heroic in their deeds.

While Director A.R. Murugadoss and Suriya's *Ghajini* (2008) showed how a disability like short-term memory loss can be overcome through intelligent methods, Director Vijay and Vikram's *Thaandavam* (2012) presented how a blind protagonist takes on people who have wronged him, using the technique of echolocation. Director Thiru and Vishal's *Naan Sigappu Manithan* (2014) showed a person with sleeping disorder (narcolepsy) overcome his difficulty and take on his nemesis by adopting right techniques. The recent hit *Naanum Rowdy Thaan* (2015) beautifully presented the life of a deaf girl and her resolve to take revenge despite her disability.

Director Vijay and Vikram's *Deivathirumagal* (2011) narrated the life of Krishna (Vikram), an intellectually disabled person who has the mental ability of a six-year-old and made the audience laugh and cry with him. This film demonstrated how disabled persons can think intelligently and make the right decisions.

While Director Raju Murugan's *Cuckoo* (2014) is a beautiful love story of a visually challenged couple, giving hope to everyone, Director Rohin Venkatesan's recent hit film *Athey Kangal* (2017) showcases the life of blind people and the intelligence they

*Though cinema began by presenting disabled people as objects of pity, over time it has dramatically changed its perspective and today, cinema portrays them as able, strong and intelligent protagonists.*





apply to lead a normal life. Malayalam blockbuster *Oppam* (2016) revolved around a blind man played by Mohan Lal, who becomes witness to a murder and his struggles with the police. The Hindi film *Kaabil* (2017), like *Cuckoo*, tells the love story of a blind couple played by Hrithik Roshan and Yami Gautam. The film made a huge impact with its powerful message that blind persons cannot be taken for granted and that they deserve the same respect as normal people.

The most gratifying aspect has been that most films featuring disabled persons as lead characters have become commercially successful and receive very good response from the audience, as they are able to identify, relate, appreciate and feel empathetic towards such characters.

Though cinema began by presenting disabled people as objects of pity, over time it has dramatically changed its perspective and today, cinema portrays them as able, strong and intelligent protagonists, who can take on anyone and achieve their mission. In fact, presenting the life of a disabled person taking on his nemesis has become a success formula in films. The outlook of writers and filmmakers on disability has changed fast, and today, there is greater respect for disabled people on screen, not just in real life, as persons with disability too have success stories just like non-disabled persons. ■■



# Super Shuttler

*Meet Manasi Joshi, one of India's most dashing sportswomen. A person who lost her leg following an accident in 2011, she has risen swiftly to rank among the world's top three female para badminton players. She seems all set to bring in more laurels to the country, writes HEMA VIJAY.*

This young woman has been on the international parabadminton circuit for just a little over two years, but has risen swiftly to become the world's third best female para badminton player (Badminton World Federation ranking). What's more, she's scaled such heights alongside a 10-hour job as software programmer with a Mumbai-based firm, squeezing in fitness workouts early in the morning and finding time for para badminton during weekends and between 9 to 10 p.m. every night. Imagine the heights she would reach if she could focus on her game full time!



Hema Vijay





Picture Credit: 'Rising Above' calender, Mission Smile.





Manasi lost her leg in an accident in 2011 when a truck hit the scooter she was on. As a result of a delayed operation, her leg couldn't be saved. Remarkably, Manasi harbours no bitterness or negativity over this. "It was acceptance which pulled me through the ordeal. I could either cry and sit back, or accept it as reality and forge ahead. And my family has constantly encouraged me", she says.

**A winning attitude**

With physiotherapy, Manasi got back on her foot and learnt to walk afresh. She soon began using a prosthetic leg and got back to playing badminton, against non-disabled players at that, and even won several matches. The first of them happened in August 2012 at an intra-company badminton championship organised by the Mumbai firm she was working with, where she came first in women's singles.

Soon, her friend Niraj George, an international para badminton player himself, suggested that she play the nationals, and Manasi went on to win a silver medal at the 14<sup>th</sup> National Para Badminton Championship (2014); she followed this up with a silver medal in the BWF 2015 Para Badminton World Championship at Stoke

*Manasi has risen swiftly to rank among the world's top three female para badminton players, even while holding a 10-hour job as software programmer!*

Mandeville, England; silver medal in SL3 Singles and bronze medal in women's doubles at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Irish Para-Badminton International 2016; bronze medal in SL3 Singles and bronze medal in women's doubles at the Asian Para-Badminton Championships 2016. In March this year, she had a great run at the Spanish International Para Badminton Tournament (2017), where she won both the women's singles exhibition matches she played which got her a gold medal. In the same tournament, she teamed up with Julie Thrane for the women's doubles and won a bronze; and partnering Sugil Abbas reached the quarter finals of the mixed doubles game. This speaks volumes of her consistency, adaptability and match-winning potential. Manasi has now moved up from 17<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> in doubles ranking and to 3<sup>rd</sup> in mixed doubles ranking.

Clearly, her rise has been meteoric. What made this possible? "I guess it is through

hard work and because I had been a badminton player even before the accident. It is all about learning how to adapt..." she says, and proceeds to add, "Badminton is the game I love, a game I have been playing since I was a six-year-old and I will do all it takes to master it, with or without a leg".

Manasi has recently relocated to Ahmedabad to take up a bank job, as office hours are less demanding and allow her to find more time for badminton practice. "I can't afford to train full time. As it is, whatever I earn goes into financing my game – my prosthetic leg, club fees, quality shuttles, travel and accommodation at various tournament venues in the country, nutritious diet, etc., and this excludes expenses involved in playing international-level para badminton".





## **Struggle for support**

Indeed, while Manasi spent around 1.13 lakh rupees from her own pocket to travel to Beijing for the highly rated Asian Championships 2016, she had to resort to crowdfunding to travel to Alcudia in Mallorca for the Spanish International Para Badminton Tournament (2017).

Since Manasi cannot afford to train under a professional coach, Manasi's coaching is handled by her brother, a badminton player himself. "He is doing his Masters in Baroda and drops in on weekends. My brother studies videos of games of top international players and coaches me", says Manasi, adding, "India lacks para sport coaches and physiotherapists at the state level and district level, which is where players get to practice round the year".

Manasi has applied to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment – Department of Disability for funds for a lighter prosthetic leg used by international players, as the sports ministry doesn't have such a scheme. She is hopeful of a positive response. A light weight prosthetic leg costs eight lakh rupees. The one that Manasi plays on currently is very heavy and doesn't allow enough movement. "Playing on a lighter leg will improve my game by 20%, as it will allow more sideway and backward movement, and will let me move quicker and stay energetic longer", she explains. Manasi also seeks authorisation from the sports ministry to let her access facilities and support at government stadiums at timings that don't clash with her job.

If one considers the whopping amounts spent by the Sports Ministry to support shooting and badminton in the year leading up to the Rio Olympics – 1.71 crore rupees on shooter Heeru Sidhu and 3.84 crore rupees on badminton players Saina Nehwal, P.V. Sindhu, K. Srikanth, Jwala Gutta, Ashwini Ponappa and B. Sumeeth Reddy – it seems grossly disproportionate that the entire Paralympic team received funding of a mere 40 lakh rupees, many point out.

Manasi says, "The amount of work put in by para sportspersons is actually much more than able bodied sportspersons. And expenses incurred by para sportsmen are far higher, as prosthetics, equipment and physiotherapy cost quite a bit. And in the end, para sportspersons who manage to succeed are said to have 'beaten all odds'. I find it demeaning that such 'odds' exist".

Recently, the management of Para Badminton has been handed over to the Badminton Association of India (BAI). One hopes they extend as much support and finance to promising para badminton players like Manasi as they do to non disabled badminton players. Encouraging companies to sponsor players through their Corporate Social Responsibility platform is another possible way ahead.

*It is all about learning how to adapt. Badminton is the game I love and I will do all it takes to master it, with or without a leg.*



Analysing the situation, Manasi says, “Para badminton players need representation which will open the door to funding, more awareness, accessible infrastructure, trained coaches, etc. We need government support at the local level where most of us get to play round the year. So many young people contact me asking how they could get into para badminton. If we tap this interest, we might discover great players”.

Never one to rest on laurels or be intimidated by hurdles, Manasi is now gearing up for the 2017 World Championships coming up at South Korea. Her short term objective is to consolidate her position among the top five international players, even as she sets her sight on winning a medal for the country in the 2020 Paralympics at Tokyo. Clearly, Manasi thinks BIG. To the nation’s delight, she doesn’t let anything stop her from achieving her goals, time and again.

Oozing style and grace, Manasi also made news earlier this year, when she appeared in the sleek 2017 calendar produced by Mission Smile, as a part of their project ‘Rising Above’. “Society sees disabled persons as heroic or pitiful. I want to bridge that gap”, Manasi declares firmly. ■

*Society sees disabled persons as heroic or pitiful. I want to bridge that gap.*





If you think visiting a school for the deaf in India is easy, well, think again. Or maybe forget the whole idea. Let me share my experience without revealing the names of the city or the school I approached, for this story could play out in any government school in any Indian city.

Last year, while in city 'X', I planned such a visit to get a perspective on education for the deaf in India. I requested my host's secretary to fix an appointment with the principal of the deaf school. We learned that I had to get permission for the visit from the Director of the city's Social Welfare Department, and for this, I had to personally visit his office.

Thus did the odyssey begin!

I made it to the Director's office after two hours of travel. The office was located in a building that looked ready to collapse. There were hand-painted warning signs on every wall: Danger, Do not enter... Nevertheless, a number of people were working in each room. I found the office of the Director. There were four men, young and old, sitting in front of typewriters and computers, talking to each other quite seriously.

My entrance was greeted with the same expression that people have when unwanted visitors knock on their doors in the middle of dinner. When I told them that I was deaf in response to their questions, they looked puzzled. I asked the Director's PA to write down his questions. "What do you want?" he wrote.



**Dr. Madan  
Vasishta**



# Tripping on Red Tape

***Forget the red carpet...our government machinery continues to roll out red tape. Dr. Madan Vasishtha wryly recounts his harrowing experience.***

“I need to meet the Director to get permission to visit the ‘Y’ school for the deaf”, I said.

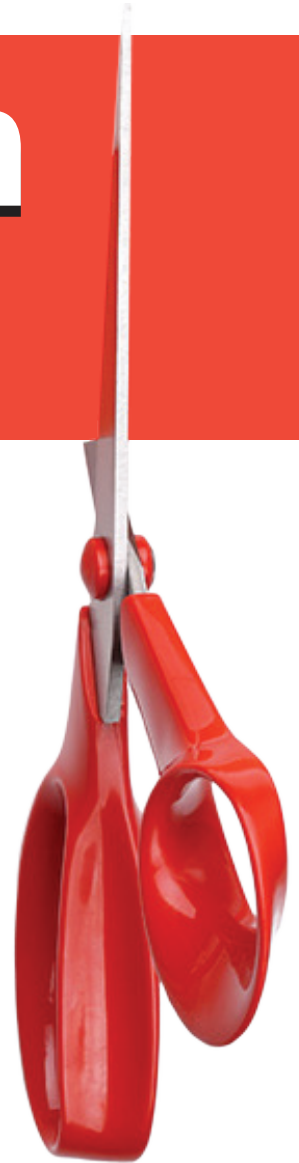
“Why do you want to see the school?” he scribbled back, after conferring with the three men around him.

“To enhance my knowledge about education for the deaf in India”, I responded impatiently, and gave him my business card. He examined it with care and the other three guys crowded around him. After they had finished the examination, the PA asked me to sit and wait. I waited.

Soon, four lunch boxes of various dimensions showed up on the PA’s desk. They began to eat their community lunch. I was forgotten. I just sat there.

After lunch, the PA summoned a peon, who looked ready for his siesta and asked him to go to the Director’s office. The peon returned within two minutes and without saying a word, sat down in his chair again.

After about 10 minutes, I was called into the inner sanctum of the Director. He was well dressed and was very polite. I explained why I was there and hoped that he would ask some follow-up questions. There was no response. I then asked him several questions about schools for the deaf. There was no response for this too, so I stopped my monologue. His expression clearly showed that he was getting tired of me.







*This story  
could play  
out in any  
government  
school in any  
Indian city.*

Finally, he rang a bell, which prompted the PA to enter the room. After listening to the Director, the PA courteously asked me to follow him. He took me through several corridors to an office, only to find that the occupants had gone out for lunch. The PA told me to come back in half-an-hour.

I returned 25 minutes later but the PA was missing. He ambled in after a full hour. He saw me and remembered why I was there. He did not apologize for the delay and just asked me to follow him to another office. There, I was asked to write an application letter to the Director, which I did. The PA scanned through it, marked it as 'Approved' and handed it to the peon. The peon carried it back to the Director's office and returned, giving the application to me. The Director had initialed it.

I was then told to go to the office where we had gone earlier. I submitted my 'approved' application. The person examined it and then shook her head sadly. We conversed with each other by writing notes and learned the following:

- The person who issues permits for visiting schools was not there.
- I needed to add the purpose of my visit to these schools (I did).
- I needed to change the dates of my proposed visit to February as it takes a week to issue a permit (I did not ask the reason for it).
- I could pick up the permit the following week.

I was tired and angry by then. More than half the day had gone by and I was still at square one. Eventually, it was agreed that they would have my permission slip ready when I would return to that city after two months.

However, two months later, when I stopped over in that city, I did not have the time or the courage to visit those corridors of power and procrastination. I often wonder if my permit slip is gathering dust among the piles of files in those offices! Or, was it ever issued? ■

# MOST PEOPLE DON'T REALISE THAT PUMPS ARE EVERYWHERE



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