

EXERCISING MIND OVER DISABILITY

My meeting with Preeti Brown was an unforgettable encounter—it was a rendezvous with a person of remarkable courage and strength.

Preeti was an absolutely normal child. Everything was fine. She was admitted in a school. But day after day she would bring her homework, copied from the black board, always incomplete. Initially, she was rebuked for being careless and lazy.

She was otherwise an intelligent and obedient child. So when this continued, her parents got alarmed and took her to an eye specialist. The doctor diagnosed that Preeti's optic nerves were damaged due to, perhaps, a reaction to small pox vaccine that was administered to her as a child, hence she was suffering from failing vision.

Preeti, with strong support from her family, attended a normal school and studied upto class VIII at Loretto Convent. She wanted to complete her Xth but since she needed special attention and time from her

She broke the sight barrier with her remarkable courage and an irrepressible urge to do something. Today, Preeti Brown is the capital's most popular aerobics instructor



PHOTOGRAPH: PRABHU SINGH

teachers because of her handicap, the school found it difficult to keep her. Undaunted, she completed her Xth through correspondence. Later, she married her neighbour—she has two lovely children—Fiona, seven-and-a-half years and Mark, six years. Her parents stayed all through with her and helped her bring up her two children.

Though happy and settled, a desire to do something, to be something was constantly nudging at her heart. She was always fascinated by fitness. The programme "Keep Fit" by Veena Merchant hit the T.V. screen in the early '80s. Preeti heard of this and went to Veena Merchant and told her that she wanted to become an aerobics instructor but had very poor vision. Could she take her on? Veena took this up as a challenge.

Preeti learned aerobics very fast and soon started her own classes. She could demonstrate, call out instructions, but because of

poor vision, she could not correct the movements of the students. Here her brother Sandeep stepped in. For the last three years, besides taking her to the class, he has been helping her in the class. No wonder Preeti is at a loss for words when she talks of Sandeep.

Preeti has achieved tremendous success as an aerobics teacher. She conducted classes at St. Thomas's Church, and at a house at Anand Lok in Safdarjung Enclave.

A year ago, she moved into her own house—Madhuban, in Trans Yamuna Colony. She now takes only one class at the Aroma Slimming Centre.

But now Preeti's restless spirit is thirsting for new areas. She wants to do something for those with no vision. She feels strongly that fitness not only helps in building up a strong and healthy body but it also builds up one's confidence and all round personality. This belief took her to the

National Association for the Blind (NAB), where she has been taking aerobics classes for the blind, free of charge.

Help and encouragement are coming along. Preeti was awarded the Ashoka fellowship sometime ago by an American foundation. This is given to people who are innovators and wish to develop something but cannot afford because of financial constraints. She will get Rs. 1,000 to Rs. 1,200 every month.

Preeti also realises the importance of qualifying herself further. She is right now doing her graduation from IGNOU. She took up this in spite of the fact that no audio tapes of the course material are available. Again the material is being taped for her by family members and friends.

Preeti says that she does not consider herself a handicapped person. Whenever an inner urge surges through her to do something, she decides to take the plunge. She feels that there is no harm in