

Preeti Singh

One Step Ahead, Two Steps Forward

■ EKTA SAHNEY

It is a sight that leaves most people speechless. Dressed in pink leotards, with the music system churning out an insistent foot-tapping rhythm, Preeti adroitly leads the fitness-conscious group through their rigorous aerobics routine. There is something about the instructor that makes you look for that missing piece in the jigsaw. When the intense session finally comes to an end, one realises with amazement, that the aerobics instructor cannot see!

Preeti, an expert in health issues, is the country's only blind aerobics instructor. She could chalk out a fitness routine to meet your specialised requirements, and what's more important, infuse you with the inspiration to stick by it for a lifetime.

Preeti's involvement with aerobics started in 1987, when she was 25. She called up Ms. Veena Merchant after "watching" her on Doordarshan, and told her of her plans to become an aerobics instructor. Soon Preeti had successfully talked Ms. Merchant into training her, and three weeks later, she was doing aerobics regularly. Then came the real test. It was time for Ms. Merchant to return to the US, which meant that Preeti was on her own.

On the day she began as an instructor, a few students unleashed on her, a series of comments, telling her how to go about the process of teaching. Hearing the commotion, the head of the institute intervened and asked the persons with problems to come out openly. When nobody responded for more than 30 seconds, Preeti went on with her lessons. After that day, she has never had any problem with the students. In fact, her experience and success soon prompted her to think of a set-up of her own. The idea bore fruit in March 1988, when she started her own aerobics classes.

What has strengthened Preeti's belief in aerobics is the fact that it has had a significant impact on her complete personality. She says, "I have become more confident — mentally and physically. In fact, I think I have become more patient and disciplined than I was; I can handle things much better now and have more control over my reactions." For all those who've noticed the changes in her, it is only natural to feel inspired to enter the world of aerobics, and exercise *the Preeti way*.

With stress becoming an inextricable part of life today, and people wanting to keep back-aches, muscle-pulls and spondilitis at bay, Preeti's classes provide the right solution.

Says Preeti, "Unlimited time and money are spent by all of us at doctors' clinics and chemist shops. New drugs or treatments are announced everyday for curing ailments. In the hustle and bustle of all this, we have subconsciously forgotten that there is a word like *prevention* in our vocabulary."



When young people complain of hypertension, high cholesterol, overweight, stress and heart problems, Preeti reacts strongly: "How about taking a few minutes off your hectic schedule to take a look at where you stand on the scale of good health and fitness? How about discovering the little care and effort that it takes to remain reasonably fit and stress free? I promise it will not be as bad as constant anxiety, clinics or buying medicines."

When people use lack of time as a pretext to shirk exercising, she makes her point by using simple arithmetic. "Did you know that out of 168 hours in a week, you only need to spend one and a half hours exercising aerobically? Those one and a half hours can keep hypertension, strokes, and heart attacks at bay, as also manage all your stress. I don't think your body is unreasonable when it asks for 90 minutes out of your week's 10,080 minutes, so that it can feel good and give you its best performance. Why don't you give it a try and find out yourself."

It is apparent that Preeti has given it a try and found out. Being a super-fit person, she doesn't stop at just being an aerobics instructor. Currently she markets pickles for a company. She started by selling pickles to almost everyone she bumped into at the National Association for the Blind, and after a month, had established her talent well enough to acquire the right to manage the entire selling operation. Her ability to type and use the computer proved to be a major boon.

Being one of the first students to learn how to use the computer with the speech output, she has worked as a training manager in 1994 for eight months, besides also working as an instructor and counsellor at the National Association for the Blind. However, even after all this, Preeti was looking for an avenue which could substantiate her income from other sources, and help her support herself and her two children completely. Therefore, she started teaching English as well, at the National Association for the Blind.

Today, she is completely independent as far as reading and writing are concerned, but not without



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facing the usual problems any visually impaired would face. She feels that people are helpful, but they have to be told how to help. She learnt how to cook, clean and do the odd household chores. For her, each step was a major achievement and she feels that had it not been for her parents' patient attitude, she would not have been able to live a normal life today.

She loves chatting, listening to old Hindi semi-classical songs, and gathering all sorts of information and data, apart from swimming and eating. Travelling is yet another passion of hers and she has travelled alone to Germany. Today, at 37, she lives with her parents, raising her two small children. She grumbles like a normal mother about the woes of motherhood.

An aerobics instructor, writer, disabled rights activist, a marketing manager — Preeti seems to pack a lot of punch. She laughs heartily when she hears that. "My dictum is very simple", says she, "if one acts positively, the outcome is also positive." The story of Hellen Keller, which was told to her when she was eight years old, inspires her tremendously as she feels that while her own impairment is only visual, Hellen was blind, deaf and dumb. Undoubtedly an optimist to the core, with courage and determination flanked on either side of her, Preeti can easily claim that she has never perceived failure as an obstacle.

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