



I have managed to fulfill my dreams many times over and live life on my own terms'

By Preeti Monga
Delhi

It is more than two decades ago that I first heard people referring to me as a positive person. At that point, I remember, I was feverishly struggling with life and even mustering up a smile was personal torture. Yet, if I could still smile, it was because of my parents.

I am 53 today. My visual disability was discovered at the age of about six, after constant complaints about my school work from teachers. I was instantly rushed to our family doctor who diagnosed my approaching blindness.

It must have been a shattering experience for my parents but they kept it away from me. The atmosphere at home was normal and brimming with love and happiness. I was singularly free of anxieties and the fear of disaster did not destroy my confidence in any way.

Stationed in the remote township of Agartala, the capital of the northeast state of Tripura, and with little access to specialised support, counselling or guidance, my parents had absolutely no idea about how to bring up a blind child.

All they did was to rely on their own good sense. For a while, they toyed with the idea of sending me to a school for the blind, but none of the schools they visited satisfied them and they fortunately abandoned that option.

Instead, following their instincts, my parents brought me up just as they did before the disability came to mark my life. They taught me everything they needed to, in ways that were innovative and simple. For instance, my mother would close her own eyes and develop effective ways to teach me.

I was lucky, therefore, to be among the few disabled people who had a family that did not waste time in finding ways to get me to accept my disability and make the most of the other positives I possessed.

It was because of close family members that I could journey through life without having to face segregation and rejection alone.

This, of course, does not mean that it was smooth sailing all the way. Challenges became part of my life. The first major setback came when I was thrown out of school at the end of Class VIII on the argument that because I was blind I was a source of disturbance for the other students.

My formal education came to a standstill since no other regular school wanted to admit me, despite the best efforts of my parents. Blind schools were the only other option. But because their standards were so low they were not a viable option.

Without formal schooling, what were the choices before me? I was sent to learn music since it was said that if one loses one's sight, one is automatically bestowed with the gift of being musical!

For the next eight years I learnt the sitar and completed a diploma from the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. Unfortunately, I never understood music sufficiently and failed completely at it.

By this time I had grown up into a young woman with all the dreams that youth brings with it. Like women of my age, I too wanted a good marriage, kids and a reasonably comfortable home.

But it seemed the world had other ideas. Because I was blind I had no right, it seems, to hold on to the simple, down-to-earth aspirations of human beings everywhere.

That lesson was brought home when the hunt for a husband began. I had a host of men who were friends but no one wanted to marry me. An arranged marriage seemed out of the question. Suitors would arrive and back off the moment they found that I had vision impairment.

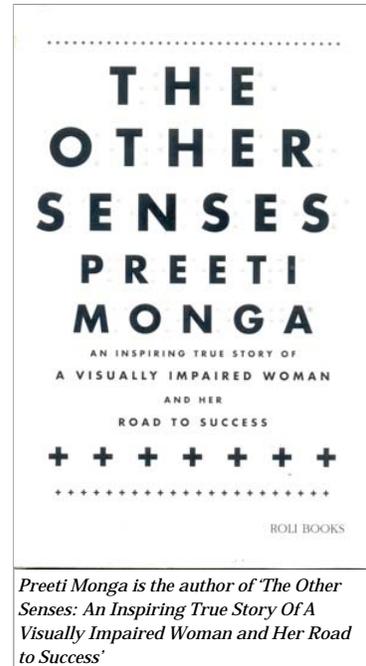
People would throw sympathetic words and pitiful glances in my direction. They would suggest that I marry a blind man or someone from a very disadvantaged background.

But I didn't want to do this – not because I did not want to marry a blind or poor man but because I wanted to at least be able to like the person I chose to share the rest of my life with.

That was a period of pain and humiliation in my life. Finally, in 1982, I met and married my first husband. But it was a marriage that headed straight for the rocks from the very beginning.

By 1986 – I was a mother of two then – I knew I had to do something to get the children and myself out of the mess we were in. But this meant that I had to first become economically independent. With only a Class 10 certificate by way of educational qualifications to my name, it seemed that chances of getting a job were very slim indeed.

The only skills I possessed were those of being a good homemaker and a reasonably good typist with some very basic knowledge of music. It took me a



whole year to figure out a way to earn for myself.

I then struck upon the idea of becoming an Aerobics instructor. Within six months, I had my own classes running smoothly.

In 1993, I finally separated from my first husband. The children and I moved back into my parents' home where I was once again unconditionally supported by my parents as well as brother and sister-in-law.

In 1994, I took up a full time job at the National Association for the Blind as a resource person and a computer teacher. From there I moved on to getting a job as a marketing and sales manager with a food marketing company.

It was here that I met my second husband. Although he was almost ten years younger to me, I knew he was just the person I was searching for all these years. In the year 2000, I joined Dr Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital, Daryaganj, as head of public relations and slowly began to get drawn into training, counselling and patient care.

Looking back I realise that years of struggle and repeated failures left me with a profound sense of fearlessness. Garnering the strength to hang on, no matter what the situation, was my recipe for success.

I felt that the time had now come to share this valuable insight with others and that led me to launch a non-profit called Silver Linings Trust.

It sets out to motivate, inspire, train, guide and counsel people with disability in order to empower them to merge with the mainstream and help them lead fulfilled, meaningful lives.

The road of life has been long and tortuous one, but finally today I have a sense of peace. I believe I have managed to fulfill my dreams many times over and live life on my own terms.

(Preeti Monga is the author of 'The Other Senses: An Inspiring True Story Of A Visually Impaired Woman and Her Road to Success' (Roli Books). – Women's Feature Service