

Blind? So what?

By Harveena Herr

SHE is a tall, slender, 32 but looks 26. She plays the sitar, she dances, she is a qualified aerobics instructor and a proud mother of two. She is blind. The last mentioned is the least important fact about her.

I had heard of her and mentally called her "the violet". If you recall Jane Taylor's poem:

"Yet thus it was content to bloom

In modest tints arrayed

And there diffused a sweet perfume

Within the silent shade."

Imagine my surprise when I met a graceful young woman who chattered nineteen to the dozen and seemed to have taken her handicap in her stride. Preeti Brown, unlike most of us, is living life to the fullest.

Preeti is from Chandigarh. She was six-and-a-half-years old when the teachers started getting annoyed as she wouldn't copy her homework from the blackboard. As in any other family, she says, "someone would say, beta please fetch that pair of shoes from inside." She would go through the whole house and return quite puzzled as she couldn't find them. Some aunt would impatiently say, "This child is so careless, she has buttons instead of eyes."

An endless series of doctors followed, much to the annoyance of the impatient

Preeti. "When that whole lot crowded over me, I had to resist a strong urge to push one of them over," she bubbles. The diagnosis: Preeti's optic nerves were partially paralysed and she could lose her sight completely in as little as a week or as long as 30 years! "All that I was worried about was having to wear glasses," she laughs.

She studied up to class eight in Loreto Convent, Delhi, and

was asked by the school authorities to leave. She did her high school privately after that. She is at present doing her graduation from the Open University (IGNOU).

In 1985, Veena Merchant's popular programme "Keep Fit" was telecast on morning TV. Preeti found that she had a suppleness of movement and enjoyed doing the workout. She met Merchant who was

initially reluctant to take her on even as a student. Preeti's determination wore Veena down.

After a couple of months Merchant had to go to America and the chief instructor was also going out of town. A replacement was badly needed. Preeti piped up saying she could handle it. Disbelief, shock and amazement greeted this proposal. The chief instructor, however, decided to give her a try and asked her to prove herself. Over the next few days not only did she prove the point but also had the entire class dancing to her tune - literally!

"It's others who feel I have a problem. I have never felt that way. I've been out dancing and jumping. Most other handicapped people have something missing. It is not created by them but by their environment," says Preeti.

She strongly feels that the blind should not be segregated. "After coming out of those special schools it is not only difficult for them to adjust to society, it is equally, if not more difficult, for society to adjust to them. All the blind associations are going to hate me for saying this but I have never studied in a blind school. And I'm reasonably well-adjusted, don't you agree?" she chuckles.

She attributes this confidence, to take on life headlong to her family. Preeti's parents

and brother were and continue to be her source of strength. "I was never treated differently. Nothing extra for me, no allowances, no embarrassment on my account. After all, it is the parents' outlook which reaches out to society. If they treat the child normally, so will the world."

She has been counselling parents of blind children at the National Association for the Blind. She enthuses them with optimism. It is after seeing her relating so well to every aspect of life that they begin to realise that having a blind child is not the end of the world.

She wants to take this counselling a step further with Project Vishwas. The idea behind the project - very dear to her - is preparing the society to accept handicapped people. "Society as the individual wishes to leave it at 'help'. Instead, there should be interaction. We all have to help each other if we live in society - so why do we enlarge on helping the handicapped?" She hopes to make it a real organisation one day - when she has the funds.

She has the will to succeed - "I cannot be second best at anything I have to, at least, be perfect!"

(Communique Features)



"Pink beauties"

Pic: O. P. Gupta