

More than a helping hand, please, for them

Another International Day for the Disabled has just gone by with nothing more than platitudes being mouthed. Soma Basu takes a look at the scene around and writes....

"You have to stop being a helpless cripple person. You wanted to be beautiful; feel beautiful, powerful, important...." — Joseph P. Shapiro in "No Pity", a book on people with disability in America forging a new civil rights movement.

These simple, yet powerful, words can motivate anyone to conquer all handicaps. But how many actually utter these words? Perhaps the Government routinely did this

disabled. The society automatically underestimates the capability of people with disability and creates social stereotypes, imposes artificial limitations and one is left wondering whether disability can ever be a priority subject?

But, please, look at Preeti Singh and Shivani Gupta. They take pride in their identity as disabled people because they have "overcome" their handicaps. They are working, caring for themselves and making significant contributions to society.

As Shivani sits in her wheelchair holding a brush between the three good fingers of her right hand and painting a piece of silk, one senses the determination with which she has buried her past. "I am thrilled. My paintings are going to be used for printing greeting cards," — she says with joy.

Her warm smile also masks a tragic tale when two years ago she met with a car accident in which she lost her family and which left her spinal cord injured and



Shivani Gupta at work at the National Association for Blind

Hotel. Inherently an ambitious person, Shivani desires to get back to her hotel job. "I was trained in hotel management and I am sure I can do a lot if given the opportunity," she says.

Also pursuing a graduation course from Indira Gandhi National Open University, Shivani loves outings but unfortunately not many places are accessible to her. Hardly any building, restaurant, cinema hall or hotel in the Capital have ramps to help wheelchair-users gain entry independently. And this is only one of the several problems. But Shivani has learnt to smile her troubles away. She is an inspirational disabled person.

When Preeti was just 21 days old, she suffered an allergic reaction to small pox vaccine and lost her vision. Years of treatment failed to yield a favourable result and soon her parents realised that helping her to lead a normal life would be more fruitful. As a result, Preeti today is a success story.

She is the only visually impaired person — at least in Delhi — heading the national marketing operations of a private company selling home products. She is also an aerobics instructor and has been a computer trainer for the blind at NAB. Besides, only this past week she was made convener of Disability Cell set up by the Heart Care Foundation of India.

Preeti modestly attributes her self-reliance to her "very good upbringing". "I was always treated as a normal child and not as someone with a handicap," she asserts. With her initial schooling at Delhi's Holy Child School, Preeti finished her Class X from Open School. While she was studying, love blossomed and she married her "neighbour friend". But life was never a bed of roses. Differences erupted soon after and Preeti, now a mother of two, is back with her ever-supportive parents.

The years in between saw her struggle a lot — finding a job, learning the ropes, and earning for her family. A Class X certificate

also knows that it was only her grit to overcome every hurdle that she is what she is today. She too is an inspirational disabled person — an independent, living image, who has thrown open a whole new job prospect for the visually handicapped persons.

"No one runs a company alone. Like others I too have a nice team. So what if I cannot see, I can use all my other senses sharply," she says humbly.

The disabled persons who are rising up on their own mostly live in oblivion. They are definitely fighters but should not be discriminated as "superachievers". It is perhaps not so much the disabled individuals who need to change, but the society at large. For most part, the Government or charitable groups may be helping people with disability but unless disability as a social problem is

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built up as a people's movement, the tragedy called prejudice will never be conquered.

Everybody has to realise that a disabled person is entitled to every right and privilege that the country, Government or society can offer. Till now what little has been offered to the disabled is by way of charity and not right, says Javed Abidi, who heads the Handicapped Cell of the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation. Unfortunately, all welfare programmes have been service-oriented whereas a sustained advocacy is the need of the hour.

America perhaps is the best example of a disability rights movement giving a new self-definition of disabled people as a group whose primary issues are ones of discrimination and respect and not health, inspiration and charity. In fact, a televised



Striding forward with confidence... Preeti Singh with a helper

and New Delhi at the USIS Centre a year ago proved to be the turning point in India.

Participant Joseph Shapiro talked about how millions of disabled people across America have become full players in a civil rights struggle and how the change in their mind-set is powerful enough to win rights and perhaps, eventually, to convince a nation and the world that people with disabilities want neither pity-ridden paternalism nor overblown admiration but simply a common respect and opportunity to build bonds to their communities as fully respected participants in everyday life.

At the end of the satellite-link dialogue was born an political advocacy group which was subsequently registered as the Disability Rights Group (DRG). This motivated group works with the sole purpose of launching "a multi-pronged aggressive attack to get things done, of expediting matters, targeting people who matter and drawing their attention to vital issues and fixing agendas".

It is perhaps because of their effort that the draft of "The Persons With Disability (Security & Rehabilitation) Bill 1994" is finally ready

The draft exercise was initiated in and, after a gap, revived by the then Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, who appointed Justice Babul Islam Committee in N 1987. Though the report was submitted in June 1988, the change of government as a setback till the Ministry of Welfare again last year and the draft was completed in September this year. It is to provide equal opportunity for security employment, education, training and rehabilitation to disabled persons for participation in national life.

What the disabled population — previously relegated to a minority status — does want is an Act which simply remains paper. What is needed is execution of suggestions like making ramps a man accessory in all buildings, modifying public vehicles and toilets and making disabled-friendly, giving employment to disabled rather than simply reserving them and keeping them vacant.

The able-bodied will have to remember the disabled are equals who contribute to the national economy. The Bill...



Up against all odds... Staircases such as these for 'normal' users are just one of the few hurdles which the disabled face

past week on December 3 — the United Nations-declared International Day for the Disabled — to remind society of its responsibility towards the disabled. But after that, what?

Preeti and her friend, Shivani, are wary of such a question. "Try to understand us," they insist. For that is where the problem lies. The

rendered her limbs non-functional — a condition called quadriplegia. However, the embittered "wheelchair-bound" life has not dampened her spirit to fight and be in the mainstream of social activities.

The 24-year-old is now working in the computer department of the National Association for the Blind (NAB), having had