

## Common Cause

SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 1999

## A fighter to the core

Preeti Monga has successfully challenged the limits of her visual impairment

by AASHEESH SHARMA

**P**REETI Monga was an aerobics instructor for 10 years, she has launched a new product in the market and made it a success and confronted a public sector bank when it refused to open a current account for her only on the ground that she was blind.

Monga also went on to become the manager, marketing and resource development, at Katha, after being thrown out of Loreto Convent in Standard VIII because she could not see and disturbed her class.

Monga has been bestowed with honours like the Manav Sewa Award, Vocational Service Award, Neelam B Kanga Award and, more recently, the Inner Flame Award.

"The fact that I've got all these awards is ironic. Most of them respect the fact that being visually impaired, I am doing things that I am not supposed to do. But I feel that it is not me who is blind, it's people who have a problem of perception," she says.

This indomitable spirit to take on projects that she likes has its roots in an upbringing that encouraged her in every possible way. "It has a lot to do with my upbringing. I was never discouraged by my parents to learn anything that caught my fancy. I learnt swimming, cycling and Indian classical music. I even tried my hand at fabric painting and embroidery, but failed! All my mother did then was to bring me a knitting kit," she remembers fondly.

Monga's eye problem was discovered in 1965, when she was six years old. "I was not keeping up with my school work. Doctors, hospitals, medical examinations and medication became a part of my life for the next seven years," recalls Monga.

She continued studying in regular schools since there was only one government school for the blind in the Capital then. "Also, the conditions there were far from ideal for educating disabled children, especially girls," she says.

Though not a particularly bright student, she managed to keep in the top 20. Till, in class VIII, she was thrown out of school. "It was a depressing and humiliating moment. On the grounds that I could not see and disturbed other classmates, the school authorities prematurely throttled my school life. I went through great emotional trauma after that and it put a stop to my conventional education," she says.

Going by the popular perception that if one sense was absent, the others would be stronger, Monga learnt Indian classical music at the Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. But she was not keen on making a career out of it. "I was a below average student of music. I did my *Visharad* at Gandharva, learning Kathak, Manipuri and Bharatnatyam without learning to differentiate between a *sa* and a *re*. And to be a professional musician in India, you need to create," she says.

Monga has two kids from her first unsuccessful attempt at matrimony in 1982. "Economic independence became a priority for me after the



A unique world vision: Preeti Monga

divorce. Without any formal education, I was helpless. So I completed my matriculation from the National Open School," she says.

A bad marriage and the need to support herself and two children, left her searching for a passage toward self-sustenance. "In September 1987, Veena Merchant, president, USA Shape, was visiting the country in connection with Keep Fit, the first fitness programme to be aired on Doordarshan. I saw an avenue of self-employment in aerobics. The fact that I myself needed to be in shape also helped," recalls Monga.

The next step was persuading Merchant to take her on as a student. It took exactly three

hours. "She first wondered how I could follow her instructions, but finally gave in when I refused to move from her office and insisted that I already knew my jog, twist, jump and kick," she says.

Three months later, Merchant was ready to go back to the US. It was then that she gave Monga an opportunity to become a teaching instructor. "The students were horrified at the thought of a visually impaired instructor. Some of them pointed out my mistakes after my first lesson. Then Merchant challenged each student to try their hand at teaching, and none lasted there for 30 seconds as an instructor," recalls Monga.

After working with Merchant for three months, Monga started her own aerobics class in the basement of the St Thomas Church. She con-

tinued there for the next 10 years. She also joined the National Association of the Blind to help visually impaired children.

"Aerobics is the greatest step in the process of mainstreaming. With aerobics, the blind can achieve total muscle fitness, control over their bodies and freedom of movement. Even in employment, the disabled person has a better chance of getting a job if he at least looks like a normal, capable person," she avers.

Such confidence paved the way for a marketing job, Monga was employed as a saleswoman for Granny's Pickles. Within days, Monga had out-sold all the other salesboys, put together. She was made the sales manager of the company and headed a team of nine sales executives and also launched her own product there—a popcorn preparation called Preeti. She also met her second husband, Ashwini Monga, here.

But Monga burnt her fingers by venturing into a partnership with the pickle firm. The partner allegedly took advantage of her disability and swindled her out of her share. Monga is still fighting a legal battle for that.

Monga won an important battle for the visually impaired by approaching the National Human Rights Commission on being denied the right to open a current account by the State Bank of India. "I had to approach the commission since the bank officials said there was no way I could open a current account. '*Koi tareeka hai hi nahin*' they reasoned," she remembers. Today, visually impaired people can open accounts at any public sector bank they like.

A chance meeting with Geeta Dharamarajan at an awards ceremony led to Monga's present responsibility at Katha. Her tasks include resource mobilisation for the NGO and communicating with the media. "Instead of cribbing about your disability and lack of employment opportunities, I have believed in making the best of what I have," is Monga's mantra for life. ♦