

PHOTOS: KAUSHIK RAMASWAMY



An aerobics instructor who now works with Katha, Preeti Monga's mother taught her nothing is impossible, not even for the blind

makers of this country," explains Javed. "There is an urgent need to strike at the roots of this neglect to enable the disabled."

Fortunately for Javed, the message appears to be finally reaching those who matter. The changing mindset was evident at Umang '99, a cultural festival staged exclusively by disabled children from across the country at the West Zone Cultural Centre, Udaipur, recently. As Vishwas Mehta, the Centre's Director, put it: "These special children don't need sympathy, but encouragement to flourish."

But does society treat disabled children as special? No, says Abraham, and he should know. "They are dumped into special schools so that the parents can wash their hands off their responsibilities," says the Sanskriti Award winner. "Special schools should be done away with if society has to get used to disabled children."

Disabled children, in fact, do better in regular schools. Like Palanisamy Sekhar, 29, a doctoral student at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and bud-

that paralysed her from sho down and changed the Welha life forever. Having studied Management at Pusa, Shivani working with Maurya Sherator Delhi, before the accident took. After she bounced back, though wheelchair, she hit a wall of tance at Maurya. Clearly, the had no place for her. "It is not as businessman father was not the me," says Shivani. "We are we but still, economic independence important for me."

This setback made the 30-year practising Buddhist take to pai flowers. The vibrancy of their co not only "infused life" into her also brought her fame and, importantly, financial independence. In 1996, she went to the Duk Cornwell Spinal Treatment Cer London, and learnt about peer c selling. It was also in London that saw the disabled lead normal li "They party in wheelchairs and have their girlfriends sitting on t laps," Shivani remembers. Back India, Shivani joined the Indian Sp Injuries Centre in New Delhi as a counsellor. Three years into the she is already restless. "I want open a placement service and hope do so in a big way in the new miller

They Don't Need No Pity

When you stop to spare a thought for the disabled on Dec. 3, remember, the last thing they want is your patronising attitude. **VIMMY SAHAY** reports on those extraordinary people who have proved disability is no handicap

George Abraham was barely 16 when a relative came visiting. Not used to having a disabled person around, whenever he would speak to George, he would raise his voice a couple of octaves, till George interrupted him to say, "The problem is with my eyes, my ears hear well and my mind's functioning normally." George is partially blind.

Today, at 41, George is a satisfied man. He has done what he had set out to do. But disability did make his journey difficult. He was lucky to have parents who never discriminated between him and his younger brother. So much so that his mom, who passed away in 1980, even before George could graduate out of St Stephen's College, Delhi, wanted to write his biography because "she believed in me."

"It is unfortunate that in this country the disabled are viewed as people with a low intelligence level," laments the one-time student of applied mathematics. Life till college was easy, but as George stepped out of the protective confines of his home, he realised that his disability was indeed a handicap. Not for him. But for the blinkered world. What really stung him was the pity he evoked from friends and relatives. "I soon realised nobody was going to help me, so I decided to launch a career in advertising because it involved creativity."

Heeding a friend's advice, he removed 'visually impaired' from his bio-data and on the third day of his job search, he landed one as an Account Secretary with the Advertising and Sales Promotion Company (ASP) in 1982. There was no looking back after that. Two years back

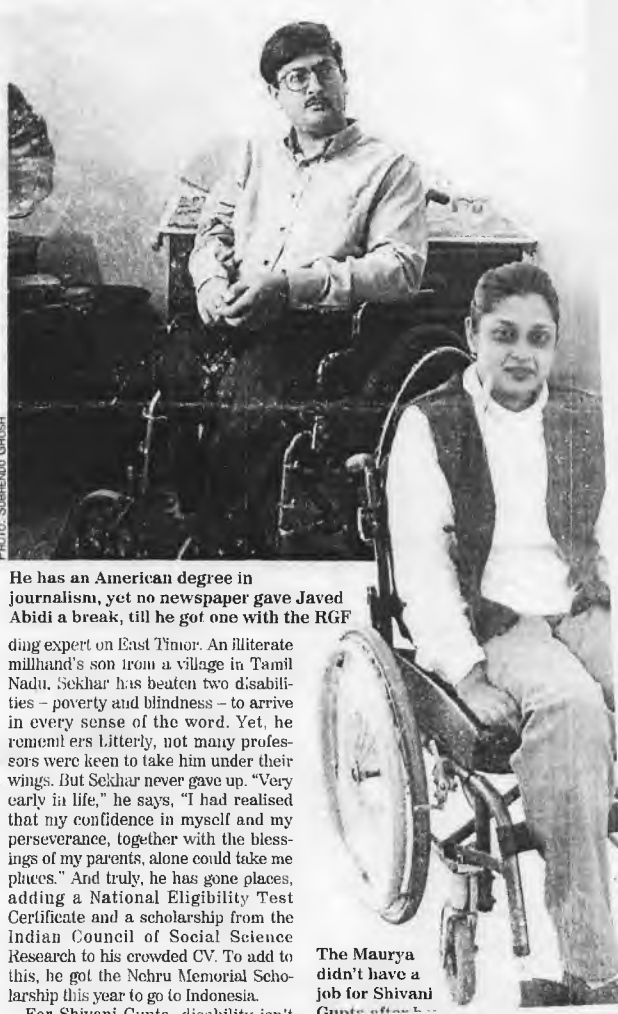
It was only when George Abraham removed 'visually impaired' from his bio-data

he began freelancing as a communications consultant besides getting involved in other activities to help fellow disabled persons. One such activity was sports for the visually impaired and George's crowning moment came when the World Cricket Cup for the Blind last year earned him a bouquet of accolades.

If George learnt the harsh lessons of life while on a job hunt, Javed Abidi, 35, woke up to them at the tender age of ten in Chicago. A victim of spina bifida, a debilitating disease that's kept Javed wheelchair-bound as far back as his memory takes him, he was taught his most important lesson by a doctor in Chicago. "You are on crutches and you will remain on it," the doctor had said. "Don't waste your time. Live with dignity and learn to live on your own." Today, Javed means it when he says: "I stopped finding my life tragic after seeing the unconditional respect the disabled got in the US." The experience changed Javed's priorities.

So, though he cleared his pre-medical exams after school, he disappointed his father by opting for English Honours at Aligarh Muslim University. In 1985, he returned to the US to enroll with the Wright State University, Dayton (Ohio), for a Master's degree in Journalism and Communication. When Javed returned, he was oozing with the confidence that he would simply walk into a newspaper job.

What awaited him, though, was a rude shock. "Nobody wanted to give me a job. I was not even given a chance to prove myself." His first break came in 1989 when *City Scan* gave him a chance to freelance. But it was only in 1993 that Javed got his first full-time job with the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, which he left last year after setting up its disability wing. Today, he's the Executive Director, National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People (NCPEDP), a disability rights advocacy group. "I joined this organisation because I realised that our 60 million physically or mentally disabled



He has an American degree in journalism, yet no newspaper gave Javed Abidi a break, till he got one with the RGF

ding expert on East Timor. An illiterate millhand's son from a village in Tamil Nadu, Sekhar has beaten two disabilities - poverty and blindness - to arrive in every sense of the word. Yet, he remembers Litterly, not many professors were keen to take him under their wings. But Sekhar never gave up. "Very early in life," he says, "I had realised that my confidence in myself and my perseverance, together with the blessings of my parents, alone could take me places." And truly, he has gone places, adding a National Eligibility Test Certificate and a scholarship from the Indian Council of Social Science Research to his crowded CV. To add to this, he got the Nehru Memorial Scholarship this year to go to Indonesia.

For Shivani Gupta, disability isn't

The Maurya didn't have a job for Shivani Gupta after...

