

Reach for the Stars

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The disabled are a community by themselves, roughly forming 10 per cent of the population of the subcontinent. The 21st century is here, and yet the word 'mainstreaming' is only a topic of discussion. Don't you think it is about time we the disabled catch the bull by its horns and slide into this mainstream ourselves?

A bolt from the blue

Here is a real life story. 35 years ago, the middle-class parents of a six year old little girl were informed by the ophthalmologists, "your daughter is going to be totally blind in a few days time". I'm sure, those of us who are in any way familiar with disability of any sort, will somewhat understand what the statement meant to the parents of a lovely little girl, for whom they had great dreams and plans. For the benefit of those who may not be familiar with a situation like this, I would like to share what this meant. It meant complete disaster and despair, shock and trauma, their world crashing down into darkness and hopelessness, leaving them completely confused - a girl child for one thing and to further complicate the situation, especially in this part of the world, a blind girl! I am sure we all can now picture the condition of these parents.

This was my first introduction to disability. The only life, which I had, was to go through without the gift of sight. This is an insight into one home where disability had struck, but it is needless to mention this is exactly what takes place in every such home on which any form of disability descends.

What next? Where do we take her? How do we bring her up? "Even if she is going to be blind we still would want to make sure our daughter grows up into a wonderful, happy and talented young lady" - these were the thoughts of my parents.

"Take her to a blind school" - was the only answer they got from everyone. This solution didn't sound worthwhile. Led by their excellent sensibility and determination, they convinced the school principals and



port system and worked hard, putting in all their efforts and energies and succeeded in keeping me within a regular school system up to the eight standard!

An unwelcome shift

The first major hurdle came when I was asked to leave my regular school due to my vision impairment. The school authorities told us that because of my blindness, I was a major source of disturbance to the class! This was the first experience of being actually pushed out of the mainstream of society. I was expected to be put in my rightful space i.e. a blind school, where the society felt, I should learn to belong. My parents once more battled against all odds but this time without success. Ultimately they took me to the only blind school in Delhi, so I could continue my formal education somehow. Once again their instinct and the advice of a sensible doctor refrained them from imprisoning their daughter in the black whole of segregation.

A successful stint

Although regular and formal education was never to be, other avenues were sought and successfully pursued. Today at 41, the then six year-old, works as the Head of Public Relations at Dr. Shroff's Charity Eye Hospital, Daryaganj. She is happily married with two lovely children and runs her independent home. **The crux of the story is that no matter how often the society weeded me out of the mainstream, both my family and I together planted me right back into it, by enriching this process with appropriate and workable support systems.**

Paving the way

We have for centuries blamed the society for not accepting the disabled into the mainstream. Though this may

always. We the disabled have a major role to play in this game. It is not that the society hates us or doesn't want us around, the problem actually lies in the ignorance and misinformation about disability at large. The disabled have an advantage over the non-disabled in the society in this respect. They have a clear insight into both the disabled and non-disabled world. They are familiar with disability, as they themselves live with it and they also very much know the world of the non-disabled via their family and friends. Stepping into unknown territory is definitely more difficult than reaching out into a familiar one. So, it would be logical and advisable for the disabled to take the first step towards building the bridge to cross over into the mainstream. The sooner we understand this simple logic the easier will be the integration to be achieved.

It all begins at home. I understand that it is extremely difficult for the affected person and the family to overcome the trauma and to look ahead. But life anyhow is a tough game and so one needs to learn to accept the disability and start to recognize the abilities, which are left behind. A simple count of the 'cannot do's' as well as the 'can do's' will immediately bring to light the fact that, the cannot do's list is much shorter than the can do list. Once you have identified the abilities, you need to make specific and concentrated efforts to sharpen and highlight the same.

Positive attitude for positive gains

Once this exercise is in progress the disabled person along with his/her family begins to focus only on the abilities, as a result slowly the trauma transforms into hope and excitement, most certainly taking those affected into becoming positive people. The moment you feel positive about the disabled person, you begin to infect people around you. Slowly yet surely, people around you also forget to focus on the disability and they start taking the first step of including the disabled person into their day to day activities. For example, when I am alone at home the milkman doesn't think twice before delivering the milk and taking the payment from me. This was not so the first time he came to know of the fact that I was blind. The change in his attitude took place only after my mother explained to him that there was no problem in handing me the milk bottles and getting paid by me. She told him that although I could not see with my eyes, I had developed my other senses to see in my own special way. In the beginning the milkman displayed amazement, later it turned into admiration and now it is just the done thing. He knows I am capable of many things and also the fact that I need help in some others. There have been times when this very gentleman had come to me asking for help in many ways.

This little story highlights how the positive attitudes of my mother and mine seeped into an outsider with-

out any resistance. This outsider comes into contact with many people of the so-called (Non-Accepting Society). He proudly relates the story of my capabilities, in spite of my disability, to them, which in turn arouses curiosity amongst his interested listeners. This then leads to the first stage in attitudinal change towards disability. ***The world looks at you exactly the way you look at yourself, the world treats you just as you treat yourself.***

Reaping rich harvests

This is the only life you have got to live. Don't let disability refrain you from living it to its fullest potential. The strength and determination is hidden within you, find it, and use it to work on your abilities. ***The sky is the limit, it is up to you to reach for the stars.*** How long can you sit around mopping and waiting for something to happen? ***Its time we wake up and make things happen.*** Stretch-out your hand, take the first step, you may fall, continue the effort with unshaken determination and you are bound to succeed. There are great people in the Non-Disabled Society, who are ready to walk with you. All you need to do is to demonstrate your own willingness to strive for success as well as ability to contribute.

We, in the disability group, must understand the fact that able or disabled, we are all human beings. Why then we the disabled, always demand love, affection, understanding etc. only for ourselves? Why do we conveniently forget that the people in the non-disabled society have similar needs? How about, for a change give, to that society, love, affection and understanding? I don't think disability destroys the power of sharing these beautiful feelings with others. You will be amazed to find that how quickly and automatically you will become the lifeline of the mainstream.

Before I conclude, I would like to share a few observations. Many a sighted-husband picks up and drops their sighted-wives from work, and here my husband allows me confidentially to take myself to work and back. This does not mean he is not concerned, this only further reflects the successful transfer of the positive attitude and approach which was initiated almost 35 years ago by my parents.

So friends, after all, it is not the most difficult task on the face of the earth, to catch the bull by its horns and slide into the mainstream.

Where there is a will, there is a way.

Remember the age-old saying: ***Smile and the world smiles with you cry and you will cry alone.***

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