Photo: K. K. Laskar

Preeti Brown: shaping up confidence

Inner Vision

This is the story of lissome Preeti Brown. A nascent interest in shaping up her own body has made her hold aerobic classes. She also has an avid interest in teaching handicapped, especially blind students in themselves. And oh yes, she has practically no vision at all. SUSHMITA GHOSH reports.

HIS MUMMY CAN SEE WITH any part of her body, thinks Mark Brown. His elder sister Fiona, infinitely wiser by two years, hotly counters, "You are very stupid — Mummy cannot possibly see with her legs." Mummy, in fact, has almost no vision at all, and perhaps her children's speculation about her omniscience despite what they can sense as being an 'unusual' condition, speaks more about the nature of Preeti Brown's achievement than anything else ever can.

Though there is a lot else. At 30, Preeti is a successful aerobics instructor and spokeswoman for a generally unaddressed issue which has to be faced and overcome by the blind. Walking tall and lissome at five feet seven inches, packaged in a lean, athletic frame of 53 kgs, Jane Fonda would most definitely take a bow. But then Preeti's affair with aerobics is buttressed by an insight that has helped her lead a more satsifying life: she feels that one of the central problems of the blind is navigation, which makes them cling to the floor, drag their feet and walk with a shuffling gait —a lack of 'body confidence', which undermines their total personality. She has found that even the most brilliant of visually handicapped scholars is in serious confidence-shaping trouble when he has to move. This is what she has beaten with the help of aerobics, with such remarkable success that the handicap takes time to register — two weeks in the case of her husband, after he first met his wife-to-be, who also happened to be his neighbour.

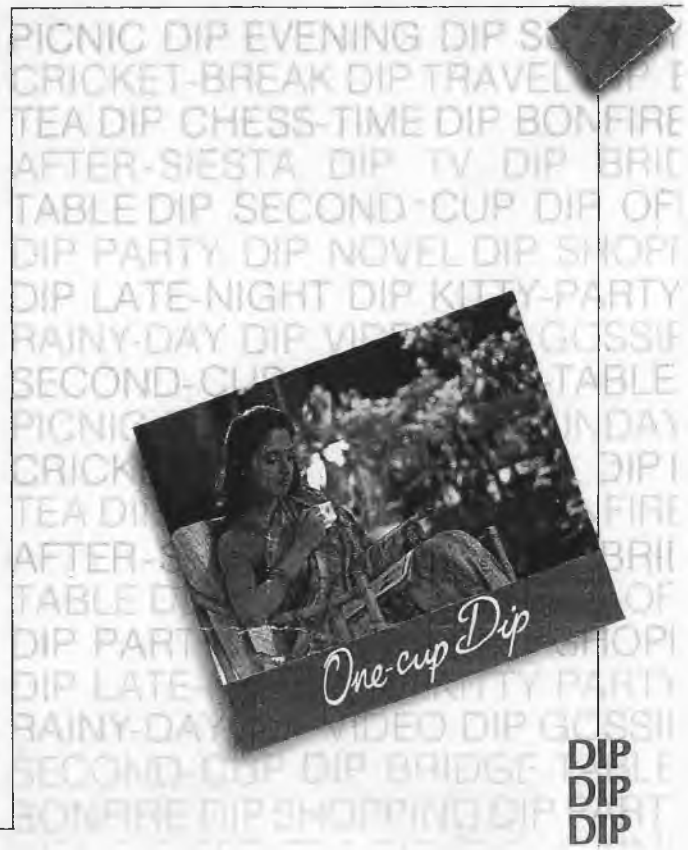
As in the case of all such treks to fulfillment, the road had a large measure of bumps, which repeatedly knocked at the door of resolve. The handicap dates back to when Preeti was 21 days old and received a small pox vaccine to which she was drastically allergic. The rash subsided, but by then the optic nerve had been paralysed and her vision began to deteriorate — and the uphill struggle began, with the help of extremely supportive parents. As the latter were opposed to blind schools which they considered to be demoralising and ill-equipped, Preeti was enrolled into Loretto Convent, Delhi, at age eleven. She however, discontinued after three years. As the integration process had not worked out as happily as it could have, it was impossible to gain admission into any other school at that age. As a blind school was not considered, Preeti began to devote her learning skills to the sitar. After practising 8 to 10 hours a day, she achieved a high degree of proficiency, but began to lose interest when she realised that she did not have the inner talent required for true fulfillment, however much she tried to compensate with effort.

At 17, she spent a year with relatives in Calcutta and learnt swimming along with the other social skills which those with sight usually take for granted. Her parents were subsequently posted to Goa, where they spent four years which saw Preeti picking up household skills and reading as much as she could with a magnifying glass especially prepared for her. Shortly after her return to Delhi, a new phase opened up in Preeti's life, which included the excitement of marriage and children. In between her babies, Preeti passed the Class X examination from the Indira Gandhi Open University. She was preoccupied with motherhood and its trappings until her children began to walk and began going to school. Helplessness and depression descended as the lack of academic and physical prerequisites stood in the way of her adopting a career to vent the creative energy she had. She thought consistently about avenues — until an obvious one suggested itself.

Overweight since birth—"My maximum has even climbed to 75 kg.", she says—she was an avid watcher of the Stay Fit programme on Doordarshan, through her mother's eyes of course. She began to see in aerobics the promise of not only a slimmer self but a career and a way of lending marrow to her confidence. As soon as her resolve strengthened itself, she called on Veena Merchant, who had put the television programme together and is a respected name in the field of aerobics. Unfortunately, the only slot which was vacant was that of an instructors training programme—not the best option for Preeti. But a one-and-a-half hour talk with Merchant caused the latter to give in to Preeti's resolve and the classes began.

"I was 63 kg when I began and my stamina level was so low that I fainted right after the warm-up" says Preeti, while pinpointing the need for organising physical fitness programmes for the visually handicapped.

After guiding Preeti on the basics (with the help of touch instruction, picked up easily... because of Preeti's familiarity with exercise jargon a-la-Doordarshan), Merchant left for the United States, leaving the programme in the hands of a new instructor, Charlie. And it was Charlie's sensitivity which played a major role in equipping Preeti with the toughness she needed to face life on her own. "Without the rest of the class realising tht he was doing it for my sake, Charlie repeated the same exercise routine for a month, helping me to do away entirely with my fear of faltering," recounts Preeti with gratitude, who now realises that his was not a routine adhered to in the field of aerobics.

In December 1987, four months after she had begun classes, Charlie planned to go on leave and a new instructor had to be found to fill his shoes. Preeti suggested that she be given a shot at it for the next 40 days, and to her surprise, was given the green signal. On the first day that she began g classes to those who till t before had been her fello dents, the expected dyna the delicate situation sho via comments and critici garding Preeti's moveme again. Charlie intervened tutive wisdom; he called the students to run throu routine in front of the cla their inevitable fumbling in the most decisive man

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