

ABILITIES REDEFINED

Forty Life Stories Of Courage And Accomplishment

By

Mukta Aneja

&

Eyeway Team

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Confederation's
SILVER JUBILEE Celebrations
2005**

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DEDICATED TO THE LOVING MEMORY OF

LAL ADVANI

The Doyen of the Disability Movement in India.

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Foreword

It is tempting to think that blind people of exceptional achievement have been sparsely scattered in time and place; that this is not so is amply illustrated by the biographies recorded in this remarkable book.

For 25 years the All India Confederation of the Blind has been at the forefront of the struggle for the rights of blind people in the sub-continent and far beyond. The right to dignity and self-worth, the right to self-representation, and the right to contribute to society have informed their activism and it is therefore altogether appropriate for the AICB to celebrate its Silver Jubilee by recognizing these outstanding individual contributions to Indian culture and the economy.

Reading these pages, it is as though there has been a special flowering of talent amongst the blind men and women of India, and this in a country which has ever known conditions of harsh challenge and extreme inequality. Even against such odds, many dozens of blind people have performed in extraordinary ways in such varied fields as literature and language, social and medical science, mathematics, computer technology, law, business, music, and classical dance.

The World Blind Union is proud to be associated with a publication so rich in life history. Surely, blind people the world over will be inspired by these examples of personal triumph and creativity.

(William Rowland)
President,
WORLD BLIND UNION

Message

I have gone through with great interest and admiration the material included in this book. It contains real life stories of modern day blind heroes, who have made a niche for themselves in the socio-economic life of India—the great country with rich diversities.

From Homer to Helen Keller, the annals of world history represent the wealth of contributions and fortitude of blind persons through the centuries. In the present times also, there are shining examples world-wide of distinguished blind and partially sighted luminaries--mayors and ministers, professors and medical psychiatrists, adventurers and conquerors of Mount Everest. The book brings out in sharp focus the fact that the blind of India are second to none--not just in the field of work with the blind, but also in a variety of mainstream activities, occupations and professions. The Norwegian Association of the Blind & Partially Sighted (NABP) has through the decades been striving to lend a helping hand to self-help movements in the developing countries, which work ceaselessly towards raising the profiles of their blind brothers and sisters. It is with great happiness and satisfaction that we note that our joint endeavour with these pioneering organizations have paved the way towards opening up new vistas of opportunities for blind persons seeking to attain new heights of excellences. It is these successful blind citizens who prove through their examples in the developing world that blindness is no barrier to successful and independent living.

NABP's association with AICB spans a period of just about one decade. During this short period of time, we have watched with great appreciation the growth of this Confederation, which is now celebrating the Silver Jubilee of its establishment. We wish the Confederation a very happy Silver Jubilee and are confident that it would continue to serve its blind and partially sighted members across the country with increased vigor and vitality in the years to come, too.

I hope and trust that this book being brought out by AICB would serve as a beacon light of hope and success for thousands of other blind men and women still striving to achieve excellence in their respective spheres. I also fervently hope that it would prove a resource of enduring value for all researchers as also community leaders and government officials whose task and responsibility it is to work in close partnership with premier self-help organizations like AICB to secure equality of opportunities and full participation for blind and other persons with disabilities.

My heartiest felicitations to AICB for this much needed initiative in bringing out this invaluable publication.

(Arnt Holte)
Director International Affairs,
NABP-NORWAY.

Acknowledgement

For some time past now, the need for a comprehensive book on the achievements of contemporary blind persons in India, was being felt with great intensity. While there had been some brief and sporadic attempts to produce such success stories, these have proved woefully limited and circumscribed in range and scope. There has also been a tragic shortage of such comprehensive collection in Hindi.

As All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB) braced itself to commemorate the momentous occasion of its Silver Jubilee, many proposals were put forward for the purpose. It was, however, the general consensus that one of the activities AICB should take up during the year is to collect, present and disseminate information about successful blind persons currently engaged in different spheres of work in the country. It was also felt that it would be more relevant and consistent with the present-day philosophy of inclusion and mainstreaming to concentrate on persons achieving eminence primarily in fields other than work for the blind. Thus came into existence the concept and rationale for the present book.

This book is now ready for a wide distribution free of charge. What is of no less significance is the fact that the book is in English and its Hindi translation has also been arranged. It has been brought out in Braille too, in both English and Hindi.

The book contains true life stories of 40 blind men and women who have made a mark for themselves in a wide range of professions and activities--information technology, science, medicine, literature, civil services, banking, management, business and entrepreneurship, astrology, dance, accountancy, law, journalism etc.

As we look back on completion of this stupendous and challenging task, we are deeply touched by the help and support we have received from many quarters in bringing out this publication and it is our very pleasant responsibility to acknowledge the deep debt of gratitude to all of them.

First and foremost, our sincerest thanks are due to all of our successful blind heroes who have responded so heartily to our questionnaires soliciting information on their achievements. Our task would have remained incomplete, the desire of thousands of our readers would have gone unfulfilled, if these shining stars had not taken time off their schedules and provided to us their cooperation in such abundant measure. Space constraints do not permit us to thank each of them by name, here, but we have no doubt that their exemplary achievements chronicled in this book, are a living testimony to our genuine appreciation for their support. A number of our well-wishers having commendable writing abilities, have lent us their invaluable cooperation in bringing out this book.

We are deeply grateful to Mrs. Mukta Aneja for the untiring efforts made by her in examining the material collected based on the struggles and achievements of our subjects and preparing a large number of lively success stories presented in this book. We are most thankful to Dr. Anil Aneja, Secretary, AICB for the valuable insights provided by him during the process of writing this book. We would also like to express our thanks to Reverend Joseph Raj, and Mrs. Lalitha for their precious support and encouragement.

Our sincere gratitude is due to the Eyeway Team, especially, Mr. Rajesh Kumar, Ms. Anjali Sengupta, Mr. Anand Sharma, Mr. Arjun Sengupta, Ms. Anjela S. Nath and Ms. Priya Varadan for their insightful contributions included in the book.

Dr. R.S. Chauhan Dehra Dun has lent us his valuable assistance through his admirable skills of translating into Hindi the stories originally written in English. We cannot but recall Dr. Chauhan's contribution with profound appreciation and gratitude.

We are also immensely grateful to Mr. A. K. Mittal, Founder-Member, AICB, for the time spared by him in coordinating this project and providing to us his valuable advice and guidance towards preparing the book. Mr. George Abraham, CEO, SCORE Foundation, has been a source of great support and strength to us in editing the book and we are deeply grateful to him for his valuable cooperation.

All our concerned volunteers and staff including Ms. Meera Mittal, merit a special word of praise for the contribution made by them by way of text-entry and other computer activities.

No task of such magnitude could be possible without financial help. We must at this juncture, recall with the utmost gratitude the funding provided to us for this Project by several of the prominent international organizations and our other well-wishers. We are, thus, highly obliged for their generous assistance to:

- (a) European Union of the Blind
- (b) Danish Association of the Blind
- (c) Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted
- (d) Mr. Pedro Zurita, former Secretary General of WBU.

We do hope and trust that this book which is the outcome of diligent and selfless joint endeavours of such a galaxy of well-wishers would prove a resource of enduring inspiration and guidance for all our readers--blind and sighted alike.

(J.L. KAUL)
Secretary General,
ALL INDIA CONFEDERATION OF THE BLIND

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Atul Ranjan Sahay

Exploring the Limits of Human Potent

by--Priya Varadan

He created his own opportunities when none were available to him and paved his way to excellence. That's Atul Ranjan Sahay, Head, Business Excellence, JUSCO (a fully owned subsidiary of Tata Steel).

Atul Sahay was born in 1966 in Darbhanga, Bihar. He and his family moved to the North-East while he was a child. Due to detachment of the retina, he lost sight in his left eye at the age of 14 and then his right eye at age 23.

Recollecting his experience at the age of 14, he says, "Whatever I focussed on got blacked out. That's when I realised something was wrong." Even while he was losing his vision, Atul Sahay knew all was not lost in his world. Disappointment lasted only for a very short time and he carried on well enough with vision in one eye for the next nine years.

While doing his postgraduate degree in Economics, he lost vision in his right eye too and became totally blind. Citing his preparedness for the eventuality he says, "I could sense what was coming even before the bandages were removed, given the mood and tone of the doctors."

After he lost his sight, he had very little time for rehabilitation. His involvement with social work during his early days became his source of strength. He reminisces, "I remember reading about Helen Keller, Louis Braille and interacting with disabled people, all that helped me cope well."

As he had not learnt Braille, his immediate concern was about how to complete his postgraduation. The born inventor in him devised means to draw diagrams and graphs by using pins, wires, boards, etc. in order to understand and remember concepts and definitions.

Sahay became the first blind person to obtain a postgraduate degree from the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 1989. It was later, during his stay at National Institute for the Visually Handicapped, Dehra Dun, that he learnt Braille. That year (1990-91) he also won the Best Trainee Award and several other prizes.

After finishing his postgraduation, Sahay found himself at a cross-road. He recognised that in the existing system (non-inclusive and discriminative), his career aspirations would remain unfulfilled. As career options for a visually impaired person were limited in India, he decided to create a suitable opportunity for himself. He sought an audience with the then Joint Managing Director, Dr. J.J. Irani, at Tata Steel; he convinced Dr. Irani to provide him with a suitable opportunity.

He joined Tata Steel as an officer in 1992 and since then his career graph has risen steadily. Today, in 2005, he has been entrusted with the job of assessing Tata Group Companies for Business Excellence. He is the custodian of Tata Business Excellence Model for the organisation.

There is more to his credit. In 2003-04, he was one of 30 employees selected by Tata Steel to study for an Executive Diploma in General Management from XLRI, Jamshedpur. Sahay passed with a noteworthy grade – one of the first known blind persons in the country to do so. As Unit Leader--I.T and Communication, he taught I.T to many of his colleagues who were sighted. He has always had a 'never seek favour' attitude and has valued self-esteem. When he emerged as the best performer in his area of work, many of his colleagues wanted to know if he was subjected to similar tests or was there a special consideration for him!

Stating the initial reactions and attitudes of his colleagues when he first joined the company, he says, "Some thought initially that it was an act of kindness on the part of Tata Steel. Then, slowly but certainly, they accepted me as an equal." In fact, many of his colleagues see him as a threat as many of his seniors have now become his juniors!

If you think academics and career peaks are the only interests of Mr. Sahay, then think again. His adventurous spirit lured him to the Himalayas, and he went on four treks, each of which was 13,000 plus feet above sea level--proving again that he seeks to be at the top, to excel in whatever he does.

Perhaps it is his adventurous spirit that enables him to empower other visually challenged persons. He laid the foundation for the empowerment of persons with visual impairment in Jamshedpur and subsequently developed and consolidated similar activities in other parts of Eastern India.

He has also contributed significantly to sports for the blind, especially cricket and adventure sports. He initiated and institutionalised Annual National Adventure Camp for Visually Challenged persons in Jamshedpur and was intensely involved in organising the World Cup Cricket for the Blind in 1998.

Access to information and communication is key to empowering persons with blindness and visual impairments in India--Mr. Sahay asserts. He strongly believes that computer technology can act as a facilitator. Software such as JAWS for Windows, as he says, "changed my life, and of many others like me in the country". He hopes for a technological revolution that would redefine life for a visually impaired person.

Mr.Sahay reasons that despite all odds, people with disabilities in India (particularly blind people) are doing very well, but "there is no place for complacency."

An eternal positivist, Mr. Sahay has faced every adverse situation with calm: "Life is a challenge and the more you struggle the more you live." His family consists of four-year-old daughter Pragya and wife Seema.

•

B.S. Venkatesh **- A Crusader** by--Mukta Aneja

Overcoming immense hurdles and prejudices, Dr. B.S. Venkatesh has risen in life to demonstrate that, given a chance, blind persons can teach, at the highest levels, subjects which are, usually, considered beyond their reach. He is among a select group of blind persons who have excelled in the field of teaching Economics.

B.S. Venkatesh was born on 1st July 1964 in Bangalore in a middle class family. He had to drop out of school when he was just ten years. The reason? He suddenly lost his eyesight when he was in the 5th standard. Pain, shock, bewilderment made him discontinue his education. The little boy who had initially joined a regular school like other normal children of his age, had no tools to help him cope with the sudden onset of blindness, which occurred due to retinal detachment. After the initial state of helplessness and disbelief, his father took the initiative and guided him towards resuming his education. So, Venkatesh successfully completed his 7th standard examination as an external candidate, securing First Division. He felt motivated to study further

and with encouragement from his father and grandfather, he resumed schooling as a regular student, from 8th standard onwards. After that, there was no looking back. He won the best student award in almost every year, right upto his graduation.

Venkatesh faced many difficulties in his school and college days. Apart from problems of traveling and transportation, he was not able to find timely reading help. Depending upon audio devices was both costly and unwieldy. To procure the required textbooks in Braille was particularly difficult as he attended a regular integrated school, where reading material in Braille was not available. As he moved to senior classes, problems relating to visuals, graphics, diagrams and equations became more and more conspicuous. The sensitive young student was also perturbed by the attitude of certain people when he approached them for help regarding these problems.

But Venkatesh was determined to succeed and not allow such obstacles to get the better of him. He started taking the help of personal assistants for traveling and reading and also received help from friends. He diligently prepared concise notes in Braille, paying special attention to questions not directly based on graphics. His talents began to shine forth as he participated in various extra-curricular activities and won prizes, too. He performed remarkably well in his B.A. and was awarded the National Merit Scholarship to pursue his post-graduation. He successfully completed his M.A. in Economics with specialization in Banking, a subject which very few visually challenged persons had taken upto then.

Prejudices against the blind continue to prevail everywhere in this world. B.S. Venkatesh was not mentally prepared for the long struggle he had to undergo, in order to get a suitable job. He did not receive any response to many of his job-applications. Even Central Schools, which have special reservations for the blind, did not consider his applications. Even when he was called for interviews, he was rejected on account of his so-called disability, though he was well-equipped with the required qualifications. Notwithstanding his professional capability, the authorities mistakenly believed that a blind person could not manage classroom situations. It is a demoralizing experience for anyone to remain jobless for eight years; but Venkatesh drew upon his inner resources of courage and determination and did not give up. At this juncture, the UGC issued fresh guidelines, which made Eligibility Test compulsory for aspiring lecturers. B.S. Venkatesh was one of the few people in Karnataka at that time to have qualified the state level test for lecturership. This criterion made his selection automatic and the Government of Karnataka appointed him in a first-grade college.

Venkatesh has been working in the Department of Collegiate Education under the Government of Karnataka since August 1996. He is now a Senior-Scale Lecturer in Economics. He teaches both graduate and post-graduate students. His long cherished dream of teaching thousands of sighted students has come true. Venkatesh has fond memories of his first posting. He recalls, "Colleagues and superiors were excellent in their co-operation. My initial experience with the students was unforgettable. They received me with much affection and respect."

In 2002, another cherished goal was realized as he received his Ph.D. degree from Bangalore University. His research topic: "Problems and Prospects of Development of Backward Regions—A study of Karnataka State", covered nine important aspects of the State's economy.

Today, Dr. B.S. Venkatesh has come a long way, facing and overcoming the challenges confronting a visually impaired research scholar. He now has the opportunity and responsibility of guiding M.Phil and Ph.D. students of Bangalore University.

Dr. Venkatesh has always kept himself busy in various intellectual pursuits. This is evident from the fact that he has actively participated in many seminars and conferences and also presented several insightful papers in his field. Among some of the papers he has presented are: "Inter-

District Disparities in Road Development in Karnataka State” in a U.G.C. sponsored National Seminar in December, 2000 and “Agricultural Development in Karnataka--An Inter-Regional Analysis” in an Inter-Disciplinary International Conference, held in Bangalore in July 2001.

Dr. Venkatesh has found a good life partner. His wife is well-educated and has just finished her C.A. (Final) exams. They have two children - an eight-year-old daughter and a two-year-old son. Encouraged by his wife, Dr. Venkatesh often participates in family and local community functions.

In recognition of his contribution to society, Dr. B.S. Venkatesh has received several prestigious awards. In 2003, he received the “National Award for Best Employee - Visually Impaired Category”, which was conferred on him by the President of India. He has also received the “Vocational Excellence Award” from the Rotary Club in Bangalore. He has been honoured by the Government of Karnataka and by the prestigious Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bangalore.

Dr. Venkatesh has yet again demonstrated convincingly that blindness need not be considered an obstacle to a career in teaching an ever-widening range of subjects. Appropriately enough, Dr. Venkatesh’s suggestion to the public is: “Society should recognize the special abilities and accomplishments of physically challenged people and should respect their achievements. Society should also allow the P.H. Category to avail legal provisions meant for them and stop obstructing their march to progress”.



Buse Gowda
- Dance Celebrity
by--Mukta Aneja

Buse Gowda has made a name for himself, countering all prejudices and attitudes of rejection. He has distinguished himself in the field of self-employment. More importantly, he has through consistent training and application, demonstrated to the world that, given the right opportunity, blind persons can excel in the purely visual art of dance as well.

Buse Gowda, the fourth of five children in the family, was born in a village called T.Channapura, in Mandya District of Karnataka. Though two of his brothers were visually impaired since birth, he was not. A childhood tragedy in 1979, however, led to his becoming visually impaired.

Then studying in Ist Std., Buse Gowda had gone to a crowded village fair with his siblings. In the jostling and pushing, the little child fell down; he got sandy water into his eyes which caused him severe irritation.

Not much was thought of the incident till six months later, when Gowda’s eyesight started deteriorating. The doctor, his parents consulted advised them to wait for two years as he was too young to be operated on. Someone in the village administered a local medicine, an extract of leaves, into his eyes. One year after that, he lost his vision completely. His parents consulted the doctor once again but were told that it was too late to do anything and that he would have to live with blindness the rest of his life.

His parents were not educated and with no guidance forthcoming from them, he was idle for almost a year. Then, in 1981, his uncle helped him join Divine Light Trust for the Blind (D.L.T.B.), a residential school for blind children near Bangalore. In addition to excelling in his studies, he took part in the school's extracurricular activities--winning acclaim as an all-rounder. In 1984, he was admitted to Vimanapura East Primary School, an integrated primary school in Bangalore.

In 1986, when the D.L.T.B. hostel closed down, he joined Shree Ramana Maharishi Academy for the Blind (S.R.M.A.B.), a residential blind school in Bangalore and continued his education. Buse Gowda had by this time become an acknowledged cricket player, becoming Vice Captain of his team. He also achieved considerable success in chess and athletics. He completed his Xth Std. in 199 with distinction.

His family was unable to support his higher education due to financial constraints. Their initial attitude, in fact, had been hesitant; later, he did receive their full moral support.

He started work as a receptionist and was later promoted to coordinate sales and purchase in the corrugated box manufacturing unit. While working to support himself and his family, he completed his graduation from Mysore University through correspondence in 1997. He remembers the help of the many readers and scribes who converted printed materials to audio cassettes for his benefit with gratitude even today.

Since 1986, Buse Gowda had been learning classical dance (Bharatnatyam) under the guidance of Guru Ashok Kumar. "In teaching his blind students to dance, my Guruji adopted the innovative 'touch and feel' method," Gowda recalls. "Due to his patient, persistent and relentless efforts, I started giving solo performances." The acclaim he won from his audiences and the love and affection of his Guru, encouraged him to take up dancing as his profession. "I am the first person in my category of visually challenged to achieve this. I have given shows across the country and abroad."

It is dance which helps him transcend himself. He has given more than 1,000 stage performances in India, Australia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, the U.K., Singapore, Sri Lanka, Dubai, U.S.A. and Canada. He is the recipient of numerous awards. Prominent among these are: the 'Mayura' Award presented by NASEOH, the National Award given by the Government of India in 2000 for outstanding achievement in the field of creative art work, Kavin Care Ability Eminence Award given by the Ability Foundation (Chennai) in 2003, and the 'Natyakala Koushala' presented by the Kalapremi Arts Academy (U.K.).

Mr. Gowda was selected for a job in Canara Bank, but he was not given the job because "the management felt my cultural activities would interfere with office work".

This rejection was a turning point in his life. It motivated and spurred him on to try his hand at business. He intensely desired to stand on his own feet, and had a burning determination to excel not only in the field of dance but commerce as well.

He dipped into his hard-earned savings from his dance performances and, by the end of 1997, had started a Telephone Booth (P.C.O.) with STD/ISD facility. To augment his income, Mr. Gowda also ventured into the travel agency business with a turnover of Rs.7 lakh. He speaks several languages--English, Hindi, Kannada, and Tamil.

"Despite being visually handicapped, I've achieved a great degree of success thanks to the support of my well wishers. It makes me feel happy to hear people mention me as a role model for youngsters," Mr. Gowda states. He attends social gatherings and family functions as and when time permits him to. His wife is sighted and is a homemaker, and they have a bonny one-and-a-half-year-old son.

“To fight against all odds and an intense desire to do well in life is the secret of my success,” Mr. Gowda declares. In addition to inner strength, one must also have some support from society; “society must spontaneously reach out to striving, struggling, and upcoming young stars.”



Deepak Narendra Motiwalla

- A Brilliant Solicitor

- by--Mukta Aneja

An excelling student, an impressive solicitor and the proud proprietor of a well-known law firm, Deepak Motiwalla has time and again demonstrated through his life that given the drive and the determination, there is no disability which cannot be surmounted.

Born on September 9, 1949, Deepak Motiwalla lost his eye sight early in life. Detachment of retina claimed his left eye at the age of seven and his right eye before he was nine. He went to a Marathi school till the fourth standard. With the onset of blindness, he found it difficult to study further for some time. But timely help came his way in the form of guidance from Dr. Rajendra Vyas of National Association for the Blind. Deepak learnt Braille and started going to an integrated school called New Activity School. In those days there was a shortage of textbooks in Braille and Deepak had to struggle to overcome this problem during his schooling years. He was, however, lucky to have a supportive family. Both his parents and his siblings used to read to him and help him in his studies. His father also employed a teacher who read to him, and Deepak learnt how to take extensive notes in Braille which enabled him to keep pace with his studies.

After securing a First Class in his S.S.C. examination, he joined the famous St. Xavier's College in Mumbai to pursue his B.A. in Economics (Honours). In College, he was better equipped with reading materials than in school. A brilliant student, he received the coveted James Taylor Prize for standing first in the University in Economics.

Since his childhood, he was fascinated by the legal profession. A number of his relatives were solicitors, and deep down, he cherished the dream of becoming a judge or a solicitor one day. With this end in view, he joined the Government Law College in Mumbai to study for his LL.B. He received the Rotary Prize for the Best Student of the Year in 1971. Deepak completed his LL.B. in 1973, having obtained First Class in each of the three years. His habit of taking extensive notes in Braille, his unstinted efforts to reach his goals without letting his disability become a stumbling block -- combined to bring him the desired success.

Having completed his LL.B., Deepak aspired to qualify to be a solicitor. It is mandatory to sign for Articleship (a period of professional training as a solicitor), in order to qualify the solicitor's examination. Despite his brilliant academic record, it was a Herculean task for him to convince solicitors to sign him for Articleship. Deepak got the breakthrough he deserved and needed, when Rajni Patel (the then President of Bombay Congress Committee) recommended his name, and the partner of a leading law firm, Mr. J.P. Thakkar supported his case. Through the good offices of Mr. Thakkar, he was able to join Mulla & Mulla and Craigie Blunt & Caroe for Articleship.

Deepak Motiwalla proved his worth in the field as he stood first in Article Clerks' Examination, which qualified him to practice as a Solicitor. He also received the Tricumdas Dwarkadas Prize for obtaining the highest marks in the subject of Taxation, and the Incorporated Law Society Prize for standing first in this examination. Thereafter, he started working with Mulla & Mulla and Cragie Blunt & Caroe from the year 1975. Encouraged by the positive attitude of Mr. J.P. Thakkar, Deepak was able to bring out the best in him. He measured up to the demands of his job to the satisfaction of his bosses and the firm's clients. His colleagues also extended their co-operation to him, and admired him for his talents. He worked with this company till 1984.

In 1982, Deepak met Nina, a lady Advocate. Soon their friendship blossomed and each discovered in the other an ideal life partner. The two got married in 1983, and two years later, in 1985, the couple were blessed with a son, who is now a budding lawyer.

After a successful career as a Solicitor in a well known Law firm, spanning nine years, Deepak Narendra Motiwalla decided to set up a company of his own together with his wife. It is a dream for many couples to establish an enterprise together. Deepak and Nina pooled in their combined talents and strengths to achieve optimum results in their field of endeavour. Thus, in April 1984, they launched their own law firm by the name of 26Motiwalla & Co. Today, this joint enterprise is doing good business, and is known far and wide for its efficient dealings in legal matters and sound counsels to its clients.

The firm specializes in Maritime Law, Insurance, Customs related matters and general litigation. The firm is doing thriving business with seven employees, and an enviable annual turn over of approximately Rupees Forty Lakhs. As he deals with shipping and insurance matters as a solicitor he receives assignments from abroad too. Deepak Motiwalla's work has also taken him abroad several times. He went to U.K. in 1990 and again in 2001. He has also traveled to Singapore and Hong Kong.

Awards and recognitions have duly come his way. In 1987, he received the AICB Centenary Award from the then Vice-President of India as an outstanding blind person. In 1991, he won Giants Federation of India Prize for outstanding performance in law. The Rotary Club conferred upon him the Vocational Service Award for outstanding achievement and contribution to vocation, in the year 2000.

Years of persistent hard work, a deep commitment to the profession of law and a straightforward practice of the legal profession have given Deepak Motiwalla the standing he has today. He believes that society should provide equal opportunities for the blind in spheres of education and employment, so that their full potential may be tapped and utilized. "Build bridges of opportunity and not buildings of charity" – is his pithy counsel to society.



Dilip Loyolka
- Setting His Sights High
- by--Anjali Sengupta

He manages two businesses in Kolkata, is the author of several well-known books and has been honoured with many awards. He is also India's first visually impaired

chartered accountant. A self-made man, Dilip Loyolka's visual impairment has not made any difference to his life. On the other hand, his life has been a source of unending inspiration to others. By his own example, he teaches them the meaning of confidence and independence, and the value of determination and hard work.

He was born on December 30, 1958 and his eyesight was bad since birth due to retinitis pigmentosa. His continuously fading eyesight meant that he was unable to read the blackboard in school. By Std. VI, he could not see at all - he had to have his question papers read to him. By Std. VIII he needed a scribe to write for him.

"I was very fortunate that my best friends would sit with me in class, especially from Std. VII onwards and make carbon copies of all their notes in class," reminisces Dilip Loyolka. "I would take the copies home and have them read out to me. I was also always provided with a writer."

He remembers that after he finished his Std. XI exams, he told his father that he wanted to become a chartered accountant (C.A.). In fact, his choice of profession was inspired by his father. (His father, uncle, brothers-in-law and many cousins are all C.A.s). "My family was dead set against my joining the course," he says. "They thought I would never be able to complete it because of my blindness." But completed it with flying colours. First he did his graduation in B.Com.; then he finished the C.A. course in about three years, becoming India's first visually impaired chartered accountant in 1983. He then did his Articleship with a chartered accountancy firm. He also passed his LL.B. (Law) exams in 1984.

When he enrolled at the Institute of Accountancy, he remembers that there was no arrangement for a blind student. "Though the Institute agreed to provide me with a writer, they stipulated that he must be from a non-commerce background. It took a fair amount of convincing to let them allow me a writer with a B.Com. background."

He also had a reader to help him with books and texts. He would record lectures on cassettes and memorise them afterwards.

In 1985, his father saw an advertisement in the newspaper, asking for applications for petrol pumps, in the Reserved category. He told his son to apply. Again, there was opposition from family members. Relatives felt that Loyolka's handling cash transactions, that too in lakhs of rupees, would be extremely risky. They also said people would take advantage of his visual impairment. "I explained to them that if I earned Rs. 10 to 15 lakh, and incurred losses of even Rs. 2 or 3 lakh, I would still be making a profit!" And, of course, he said, "we need to trust more in human nature." His logic carried weight, the relatives' opposition subsided and he was allotted a petrol pump.

Called 'Prince Service Station' and situated on Anwar Shah Road, his petrol pump is one of the most profitable in Kolkata. It had a turnover of nearly Rs. 15 crore one year!

He is one of the respected Partners at J. Loyolka and Company, one of Kolkata's reputed chartered accountancy firms.

So how does he manage two businesses? He reveals his daily schedule: "I am at the petrol pump every morning from 8 a.m. to 10.30 a.m. I check up on what has been sold; the earnings are dispatched to the bank. All the sales transactions are entered on a computer, all statutory books are recorded, so it is easy for me to keep track and manage work. Before I leave, I make sure that displays on boards have been updated, indents have been placed and the day's instructions are in order."

Then Mr. Loyolka works in his office from 11 a.m. to about 6 p.m., doing what C.A.s do. His firm handles many well-known corporations as well as individuals. His visual impairment is not an issue with his clients and he has committed and loyal staff members to attend to everyday routine work.

His day is not over yet. He is back at the petrol pump from 7 p.m. to 9.30 p.m.--checking on how the day has been, seeing to the financial aspects, and getting the pump ready for another day.

Mr. Loyolka's hectic schedule does not prevent him from enjoying his creative interests. He had been a regular contributor to journals and had been presenting papers at seminars when the editor of a Hindi newspaper approached him. "The newspaper was called **Chhapte-Chhapte**," he says. "I wrote a column called **Aapke Prashna, Hamare Uttar** (literally, 'Your questions, Our answers'), which was in a question-answer format, on income tax." He had been writing the column for one-and-a-half years when his editor suggested that Mr. Loyolka should be writing books on the subject.

That idea took root, and today he has co-authored four books on Income Tax. 'Practical Guide to V.D.I.S.', published in 1997, is an excellent book on V.D.I.S. rules and regulations. A book in Hindi, called **Kaise Suljhayen Aayker Samasyayen**, received an award from the Central Board of Direct Taxes. Yet another, **How to Handle Income Tax Problems**, is extremely popular; it is into its 13th edition.

The process for bringing out successive, updated editions is quite grueling. Every week, Mr. Loyolka gets journals on taxes. These contain High Court decisions regarding Income Tax from across the country. Some of these may be follow-ups of older cases, some are new cases and some are unusual ones. In addition, he keeps track of other developments in the area: new circulars, Financial Acts, Income Tax amendments. His sound knowledge of the law, an area most C.A.s ignore, gives his work an unbeatable edge.

He has two readers who help him with all the material. Mr. Loyolka keeps adding to his notes in one volume, with the help of the readers. They work very hard every day sifting through the tomes. They put in 4-5 hours of continuous work, especially, from March to June, incorporating changes into the manuscript of important documents like the Finance Bill, as and when these are approved by the Parliament. Once the President of India gives his assent to the Finance Bill, it becomes an Act. Mr. Loyolka and his team then work overtime to bring out the new edition as fast as possible.

Mr. Loyolka's spirit has earned him many acclamations and awards. In 2002, the President of India, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, presented him with the Best Professional Handicapped Person Award. In 2000, the Rotary Club of Kolkata Inner City conferred on him the Paul Harris title for his contribution to the cause of blind welfare. The Indian Oil Corporation too has presented him with awards; notable among them are his being made a Gold Circle Member by the Kolkata Divisional Office and another one for achieving second-highest growth in 2004.

A former Vice President of the West Bengal Branch of the National Association for the Blind, he is now the organisation's General Secretary. He is also the General Secretary of the Welfare Society for the Visually Handicapped.

Happily married to Veena for about 23 years, he has two children. His was an arranged marriage and his wife "prepared herself thoroughly". She says, "It has not been easy, but Dilip is a 'normal' person. He is fiercely independent and handles himself very well."

Garimella Subramaniam
- Venturing on a Path less Trodden
- by--Anjali Sengupta

A classical vocalist or a teacher at a local government college in Andhra Pradesh--these were the two most likely professions that parents, relatives and friends of Garry, as he is called by those close to him, had in mind and were thought best for him. But for 45-year-old Garimella Subramaniam, social stereotypes of what a person with visual impairment must do, or rather not do, were never a constraint.

Today, as the Assistant Editor of **The Hindu**, Chennai, he lives a fast-paced life as a respected and ideologically influential journalist.

“Before I could even reach the stage of choosing my future occupation, other people felt they have to decide for me. In school my teachers kept urging me to become a professional musician. They told my father that it would be the best profession (for me)--I would go far. Fortunately for me, my father was an understanding man. He gave me the space and freedom to chose,” says Garimella Subramaniam.

Garimella comes from a family of agriculturists from coastal Andhra Pradesh, but his parents had the necessary foresight to allow him and his brother--both of whom had hereditary congenital blindness--to venture out and chart their own destiny.

Garimella and his brother were sent to Little Flower Convent for the Deaf and Blind in Chennai. “School was very normal for us as all the children were either deaf or blind and one did not feel different,” he recalls.

About the attitude of his school-teachers, he says, it was no different from what it would have been, had he been in a regular school. “Since I had a keen interest in music my teachers kept urging me to become a professional musician.”

After finishing his schooling, Garimella Subramaniam went to Loyola College in Chennai, from where he graduated in History. “Loyola was an absolutely new experience for me. I was interacting with strangers for the first time. Moreover, coping with studies was difficult in those days with hardly any infrastructure for students with disabilities.”

After Loyola, he joined the prestigious Jawaharlal Nahru University (J.N.U.), Delhi, where he pursued M.A. and M. Phil. in Political Science. J.N.U. was no different from Loyola and he has to take the help of tapes or ask people for help as readers, etc. But J.N.U. changed his perception. His personal sense of isolation was fast fading. “The University thrived on political debate and discussions and lack of vision does not restrict your knowledge of politics or economics.”

After J.N.U., Garimella Subramaniam returned to his home state and took up an assignment as a teacher at a college. But he could not really settle in his job and his inner calling began to nudge him on.

“Soon I realised that my college could not provide me with facilities needed to carry on with my work. Probably even big universities such as J.N.U. could not have given me such technology. Luckily I decided to pursue doctoral studies and left for the United Kingdom to do a Ph.D. in Political Theory from the London School of Economics. After finishing my Doctorate, I got an

offer from *The Hindu*. I decided to take up the offer as I liked writing and thought journalism was the closest to pursuing academic work or intellectual activity.”

On the challenges he faced in getting a job, he says: “As many good jobs are advertised by word-of-mouth publicity, my entry into **The Hindu** was through its London correspondent with whom I had interacted in my student days. **The Hindu** already had someone without vision working at a very senior position.

My own career progress and sense of independence was obviously an important factor. Also, **The Hindu** is long known for its enlightened policies towards employees. So it is a combination of factors.”

He remembers, “A lot of people were sceptical when they got to know that I wanted to come back to India. At the workplace also, although I received lot of support from my colleagues, strangers tended to be a little awkward when meeting me for the first time. In interactions with people with disabilities, the onus is always on the disabled to take the initiative to put things at ease.”

Ask him how his vision impairment affects his work, and he says: “I do things differently from others; using assistive aids such as text-recognition software to surf the Net and write reports, etc. The nature of the job remains the same in every other respect as with other journalists.”

Although Mr. Subramaniam is at ease with his work, he sometimes regrets that he did not stick to his government job of teaching. He laughs, “Things would have been much easier. I would not have to keep myself abreast of latest happenings and read constantly, although my office has provided me with speech-enabled software.”

Mr. Garimella Subramaniam is married to Shubha--a teacher and special educator--and has a daughter. The couple went in for adoption as Mr. Subramaniam’s family has a history of hereditary blindness.

“Although Shubha’s family was okay with our decision to get married, mine were hesitant. Maybe because she was an independent working woman.”

He feels that awareness about the rights of disabled people has improved over the years. “Indian society is moving forward and we see greater awareness on gender rights, human rights, and children rights, etc.”

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Geethavani Shamanna
- **Heralding New Opportunities**
- by--Mukta Aneja

Geetha Shamanna is one of those young and highly talented visually challenged ladies in the country who, through their diligence and application, have effectively exploded the myth of the oft repeated statement that ‘being blind and being a woman is a dual disability.’ She has not only emerged triumphant in her quest for leading a life of dignity and independence, but has also opened up new avenues of work for others similarly challenged--men and women alike.

Geethavani Shamanna was born in Bangalore on June 29, 1973. At the age of three, she lost her eyesight due to Retinitis Pigmentosa. When she was five, her parents placed her in a residential school for the blind near Bangalore--the Divine Light School for the Blind. During the six years of her stay here, she was equipped with some basic skills essential for a visually challenged person such as orientation and mobility, daily living skills and Braille. Today, Geetha looks back at this school with fond and pleasant memories--she concedes that out of all the schools she went to, this school for the blind left a deep imprint upon her. The sense of healthy self-esteem, which the school inculcated in her and the need for self-reliance, which her teachers fostered in their students, went a long way in ensuring success in her future endeavours.

By the time Geetha was eleven, she shifted to a regular integrated school. For some time she found it difficult to get used to the atmosphere, the routine and rhythm of an integrated school environment. Although she had the gift of making friends easily, the teachers were not able to relate to a single student with special needs. Not able to know what was written on the blackboard, she would often need to ask her classmates to read it aloud to her. Also, her Braille slate and stylus could not match the pace of the ordinary pen and paper. But Geetha was not the kind of person to sit back and give in to defeat. She forged ahead with an inner strength, often resorting to the use of a self-devised Braille code to match her sighted classmates' speed in taking notes!

Another problem that she faced during her school days related to her efforts to understand subjects such as Algebra and Geometry. The teachers at the integrated school she went to, did not know how to teach such subjects to a blind student. She grappled with these subjects for two years, until her elder brother came to her rescue. He patiently sat with her and devised ways of explaining complicated mathematical concepts to her.

A highly intelligent student, Geetha went in for higher studies. At the college and university levels, she found it easier to relate to her environment than she could during her school days. But she had to struggle with other difficulties that higher education entails for a visually challenged person, difficulties such as finding good readers on a regular basis to help her cope with the bulk of her course and reference work.

Geetha successfully completed her Master's in Political Science. There were two options before her, two roads to success--to be a teacher or to do something new. Geetha "took the one less traveled by". The most natural thing for her would have been to pursue a career in the teaching field, but she dared to be different. Despite her good educational background, the uncertainty about a suitable and satisfying career choice continued. However, she was determined: "teaching would never be a career option for me." With her strong desire to do something different, she decided to pursue a professional course in Technical Writing, a rather unusual and innovative choice for a blind person in the country.

Armed with a Master's degree, qualifications in Technical Writing, and self-confidence mingled with a bit of trepidation, Geetha embarked on the process of job-hunting. She now debated whether to mention her disability in her resumé in a forthright manner, or to keep silent on this issue, and let the potential employers discover it for themselves at the time of interview. She finally decided to send her resumé to prospective employing firms without mentioning that she was visually challenged. However, she placed subtle hints in her CV such as her familiarity with Jaws and OCR (Optical Character Reader) softwares!

The first company that she applied to for the position of a Technical Writer was a well-known software company in Bangalore. When the time came for fixing the interview date, she informed the company that she needed a computer to take the test as she was a visually challenged person. To her pleasant surprise, a computer was arranged for her test. She was selected and she worked with this company for more than three years.

Geetha Shamanna enjoyed working with this software firm as a Technical Writer. After three and a half years, however, she began to feel stagnated and restless. So she started looking for new opportunities and a placement with better salary. For some time this bold and talented young lady had to struggle. She applied to several companies and after a particularly successful telephonic interview, she managed to impress a potential employer so much that she was offered a job over the phone itself. However to the shock and disappointment of both the parties, when she went to meet the lady boss to complete some formalities before taking up the job, the boss declined to give her the job because of Geetha's visual disability. All the enthusiasm and good impression about the candidate's knowledge and awareness evaporated at the sight of her blindness!

Disappointed but still determined to get more out of life and to develop her career, Geetha decided to venture into the field of translation. After resigning her job, she went to Germany to study German language for a year. Her sincere efforts to gain proficiency in a foreign language yielded fruit. On her return to India, she found a good job as a German Translator in a reputed German software company in Bangalore - SAP Labs India. Although she is now just in her early thirties, she earns an enviable annual salary of around Rupees seven Lakh.

In her quest for identity and self-sufficiency, Geetha Shamanna discovered that in order to compete in the 'normal' world, a blind person needs to have higher levels of skills and knowledge. She also realized that securing a good job depends, to a large extent, on the disabled person's self-assurance and capacity to convince others.

Geetha's story of victory is an inspiring example to all young people with potential and challenges.



Harishkumar P. Kotian

- An IT Manager.

- by--Mukta Aneja

Harishkumar Kotian believes in the triumph of the human spirit over adversity. He claims, as he exemplifies in his own life, that the "human spirit is amazing. It is not bound by the limitations of the body."

Born on August 20, 1960 in Mumbai, Harishkumar was a normal playful child until a fire-cracker accident took away his eyesight at the age of thirteen. Suddenly faced with total lack of vision, Harishkumar grappled with the new 'dark' world around him, trying to adapt and find coherence in it. Today, he has come a long way, not only making a place for himself in this changing world, but also embarking on an area which was hitherto not considered to be the domain of a visually challenged person.

Harishkumar had started his education in a regular school along with other children of his age. But due to his loss of vision, he wrote his S.S.C. examination as a private candidate through his school. He emerged as a good student and went in for higher studies. He secured his Master's

Degree in Political Science from Mumbai University, with International Relations as his area of interest.

Harishkumar Kotian developed a deep interest in Computers. Social prejudices regarding a visually challenged person's ability to deal with Computers blocked his way. He was denied admission at many places when he expressed his desire to learn Computer Programming. In those days, there was virtually no information available at the local level, nor any special programme for a visually challenged person interested in this field. But Harishkumar's passion for technology enabled him to overcome such problems with patience, perseverance and strength of his convictions.

Mr. Kotian armed himself with several challenging qualifications. He obtained a Diploma in Software Designing and Development, Diploma in Business Management and DOEACC O Level. He thus refuted the common belief that there are certain areas which are not meant for visually challenged people.

Mr. Kotian got his first job with the Reserve Bank of India as a Telephone Operator. Starting work as a Computer Programmer was a challenging experience. Initially, his colleagues and superiors at work were very skeptical about his ability to perform. As Harishkumar began to demonstrate his capacity to work, without getting adversely affected by the negative attitude of people around him, their opinion began to change. Soon the cynicism of his colleagues and bosses, gave way to wonder and appreciation. Today, he is recognized as the country's first known blind Programmer, working in the organized sector.

Mr. Kotian has been working in the Department of Information Technology since 1981. Today, he holds the post of a Manager with the RBI. When asked about the secret of his success, he responded, "Sheer hardwork, faith in oneself and excellent interpersonal relations" have brought him where he is today. His work involves software development among other responsibilities. Today, it gives him satisfaction to see more and more blind people turning to computers, but when he started work he knew of no such precedent.

Harish had an arranged marriage. His wife is a wonderful home maker. The couple are blessed with three daughters (including twins). Together with his family, he actively participates in social functions. He has also been involved in the cause of the disabled people. Harishkumar's keen interest in the plight of visually challenged persons gave him the opportunity to hold several responsible positions in various organizations of the blind. For instance, he is the former President of the Blind Graduates' Forum in India.

Harishkumar has also made notable presentations at the national as well as at international levels. His achievements have endowed him with several prestigious awards. He has received the President's Best Employee's Award from the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. He was also conferred the Pilloo Kambatta Award in the Best Employee category by NAB India. The Karnataka Welfare Association of the Blind conferred upon him the Rising Star Millennium award.

Awards and achievements sit lightly on this modest person. Dedicated to his work, Harishkumar continues to inspire many people by his example. In particular, the visually challenged youth are motivated to empower themselves by becoming Computer savvy like him.



Heeru Chandnani
Exploring New Horizons

by--Priya Varadan

“**M**y family and friends never treat me differently, no pity, no excuse, nothing. That is why I am what I am today,” affirms Heeru Chandnani, Human Resource Administration Specialist at I.B.M. She is a perfect example of how strong determination, family support and integrated education can make success an inevitable destination.

Heeru Chandnani, born on April 16, 1978, in Bangalore, is blind since birth due to a nerve not being developed. When she reached school-going age, most schools refused to give her admission because she was visually impaired. But her strong-willed parents persisted in their quest to get her admitted to a ‘normal’ school. At the age of seven, her determination and conviction so impressed her future school principal at Bishop Cottons Girls High School, Bangalore, that she promptly gave her admission. For Heeru Chandnani, integrated education was the best thing that could happen. From then on there was no looking back for her. She excelled in whatever she chose to do, whether it was academics, or co- and extra-curricular activities.

In college, she wanted to study psychology, an unusual choice of subject for a blind person. The college authorities refused; they asked her to think about it and come back a week later. She did, more sure than ever before about her choice of subject. The college authorities gave in. Her good grades in psychology made those who initially were not in favour of her studying the subject now support her in her endeavour. Helping others with their studies and repeating text aloud were some of the methods that she used to cope with her studies. Talking of overcoming problems and attitudes, Heeru Chandnani states matter-of-factly, “Everywhere you go, there are problems. What is important is that how you handle them.”

After completing studies, it was time for her to compete in the job market like any other fresher. Here too, she saw no problems. She was interviewed, “grilled”, as she says, and got her first job as an Organisational Psychologist in 2002. After that she was between jobs for a while as she attended several interviews. Most companies refused to employ her due to her visual impairment. In some, she admits modestly, “I did not do well.”

Then came a chance with I.B.M. in 2004, in her words, “the best” yet. There was a telephonic interview, followed by a face-to-face interview where she was asked to explain how she would do the job. She explained, and got the job. “Human Resources” was her natural choice as “it is about normal people like me”.

As an H.R specialist, her role comes into play post-recruitment--she acts as a link between the new recruit and the management. She is responsible for orienting the new recruit and company (that is, the top management) about each other in terms of H.R policies, remuneration, performance, etc. Does she encounter any problem given her visual impairment while doing her job? She emphatically answers, “None at all.”

For Ms. Chandnani her disability is almost a non-issue. For her, it’s all about being comfortable and making others comfortable about her disability. That explains why she did not feel any attitudinal problems in her workplace or otherwise. Explaining her views in respect of societal attitudes, she says, “It is up to us to tell and help people learn how we work by being nice, patient and understanding. They need some time to learn and, eventually, they do.”

Perhaps very few or no visually impaired women have done what Ms. Chandnani has achieved: a Master’s in Psychology followed by a career in Human Resource Administration. She has carved a niche for herself. And the Neelum Khurshed Kanga Prize 2003, awarded to her by the National Association for the Blind, is testimony to that.

Ms. Chandnani is not about studies and career alone; her life extends well beyond them. With a background in Western classical music, she can sing in Hungarian, Welsh, Japanese, Korean, Italian, English, Latin and French (she also speaks French)! And that is not all: she can also play the piano, participates in choir singing as well. Her passion for music has resulted in many awards being bestowed on her. She has represented India in the Asian Youth Choir, organised by the Government of Niigata as part of the Niigata Asian Cultural Programme in Japan. As she proudly asserts, "I was the first and only Indian to go to Japan, to be a part of the Choir." In fact, she was the only blind person in the Choir.

Apart from Japan, she has travelled to Sri Lanka, Singapore Australia and the United States where she was a part of the Mobility International U.S.A. (M.I.U.S.A.) Teen-Parent Leadership Programme on Disabilities, in 1998.

Commenting on the disability scenario in India, Ms. Chandnani feels that today, people are more aware of visually impaired persons, of what they can and cannot do, and treat them as equals. People are more open to learning, to knowing how persons with disabilities work. She advises blind persons to help themselves and to guide society as to how such persons should be treated.

Revealing the secret of her success, this H.R specialist, Western classical and Choir singer, and pianist declares: "the support of family and friends; support of God; hard work and determination; willingness to try new things; the spirit of exploring; an extrovert nature; passion--for work, for life, for your interests and hobbies; balancing leisure and work; being blessed with extremely supportive parents and sister and friends", are the key to her achievements.

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Jagdish Luthra :
- From a Victim to a Victor
- by--Mukta Aneja

It was a dark lonely world for a little boy. Amidst the din of unfamiliar sounds and unknown crowds, he travelled all alone by bus from Meerut to Dehra Dun. His only companion was a piece of paper bearing his name and address, which his parents had put in his pocket before sending their small blind son alone on a long distance journey to a blind school in Dehra Dun, when he was just ten years of age. But little Jagdish responded to the bleak world around him with resilience--forging ahead, piercing all darkness.

Jagdish Luthra was born on July 15, 1950 in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. Though he was blind since birth and did not receive the much-needed support from his elders at a young age, he did not sit back and bemoan his fate. Instead, through his will-power and positive approach to life, he carved a niche for himself in society. He studied at Andh Mahavidyalaya, Delhi and later at the Model School for the Visually Handicapped, Dehradun. After completing tenth standard from there, he shifted to his hometown, Meerut, and pursued higher studies at Meerut College.

Young Jagdish was ostracized by his family members as well as relatives and neighbours. As a student, many asked him absurd, irrational and irritating questions, because people around him did not believe that a blind boy could study. Fellow students sometimes even hid his Braille slate out of a sense of curiosity and fun! But Jagdish did not allow such things to deflect him

from his chosen path. Rather, with dogged determination and fortitude, he went ahead to prove his worth to a disbelieving and unsympathetic world around him.

He emerged as an all-rounder in college as he participated extensively in debate competitions, seminars, games (he excelled in chess), and was adjudged the best student, the best speaker and the best chess player of the college.

In 1974, Jagdish Luthra completed his Post Graduation from Meerut College. Now the subject of suitable employment came up, and along with it came the extra load of challenges that every blind aspirant has to face. Initially, he wanted to join the Civil Services or the legal profession. But until very recent years, Indian Administrative Service (IAS) was not open to visually impaired persons. Nor was he able to join the Bar. However, his inability to join the profession of his choice only strengthened his resolve to make a mark for himself in society.

Meanwhile, in 1972, Jagdish Luthra launched English speaking school, called Rosemary English School (now known as Rosemary Institute). The school which started with just two students, is reported to have benefited 35000 persons by now.

Today, many people who had studied at Rosemary have become established professionals in their own right--IAS officers, doctors, CAs, army officers, academicians, journalists and industrialists. Rosemary Institute offers a comprehensive range of services. Special coaching classes are arranged for those appearing for competitive exams such as IAS, PCS, Bank Services, SSC, B.Ed., Railways, etc. Mr. Luthra also organises various cultural programmes, debates, seminars, symposiums, quiz contests and sports activities in his Institute. The Institute not only imparts academic knowledge but also grooms the student's overall personality, making him/her self-confident and capable.

The young man who was thoughtlessly written off by society and his parents and siblings, has indeed come a long way. Far from being dependent on others, or being a 'parasite' as others feared, Jagdish Luthra is a worthy citizen of this nation, contributing significantly to society. His annual income is comparable to that of the most highly paid senior officials in the government.

Jagdish Luthra is not content to be self-sufficient and to raise capable people through his Institute. He also reaches out to the underprivileged in society, endeavouring to rehabilitate physically challenged persons. His keen interest in various issues regarding the plight of the physically challenged is also manifested in the lectures he has delivered, particularly those at National Institute for the Visually Handicapped and National Federation of the Blind Women's Wing.

Jagdishji has become a living legend in his hometown. Several national newspapers have carried articles and news items highlighting his achievements. He has appeared on television too, several times. Ankhon Dekhi, Sahara Uttar Pradesh and NDTV have covered his remarkable accomplishments.

Jagdish Luthra found an understanding, caring and supportive life partner in Surjeet. His spouse helps in the overall supervision of the Institute and together the couple lead an active social life. The couple have two children--a son and a daughter who are currently studying.

True worth does not go unnoticed. The multifaceted personality of Shri Luthra has attracted recognition and awards from enviable quarters. Jagdishji has won credentials from Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal, Bhatkhande Vidyapeeth and honorary fellowship from Lucknow Sangeet Samiti. He has also received the prestigious T.P. Jhunjhunwala

Award, which was conferred upon him by the then Prime Minister, Shri Chandra Shekhar and the Millenium Award from the AICB.

Jagdish Luthra is not content with being successful and happy in professional and personal life. He constantly extends his joy, cheer and expertise on a social level too. He is often seen making arrangements for picnics, celebration of festivals, birthdays, anniversaries and other functions. He has also held the post of Chairman of Rotary Club, Meerut. He is a life member of U.P. Darshan Parishad, and a member of Advisory Committee of Young Advertisers' Club.

One wonders what is the secret behind such indefatigable energy and success. When questioned about this he responds that patience, positive attitude towards life, the motivation to give something instead of expecting from others--are the main mantras of his triumph in life.

Rosemary Institute continues to nurture talent, living up to the motto of Swami Vivekananda, "Arise, awake and stop not till the goal is reached." The distinguished founder of this Institute, Jagdish Luthra, continues to inspire countless numbers of people with his belief: "We should motivate others to be optimistic, encourage everybody to work hard with full strength and energy without expecting anything in favour. We should live for our present, forget the past and think of a better tomorrow".

The victim of an uncaring society has indeed emerged as a great victor in life!



Jyotindra V. Mehta:
- In the 'Mainframe'
by--Priya Varadan

“We think you are the best person for this job,” declared his boss as the company (IBM Global Services, India) was acquiring a mainframe project in Bangalore; they wanted Jyotindra V. Mehta to manage it and render necessary advice to the company. He took up the challenge. His work led him to pioneer the IBM 'mainframes' high-end technical competencies (systems administration, systems programming and D.B.2 database administration) in India. He has moved on to other assignments but "I can never get away from the Bangalore mainframes, even from Pune!" says Mehta. He has also authored a research paper on the software migration tools available on IBM mainframes.

Jyotindra Mehta has been with IBM, India, since 1997 and is currently working as Advisory Software Engineer in IBM's Pune office.

Jyotindra Mehta was born on December 6, 1948, in a middle class family in Bhavnagar, Gujarat. A sense of anguish, shock and disbelief took hold of his family, initially, as they discovered that he was blind. Jyotindra Mehta has retinitis pigmentosa and had very limited vision till his early adulthood. With sustained efforts, he overcame the gloom and confusion that threatened to engulf him and won the support of his family and relatives. But he could not enjoy simple pleasures such as going out with friends, dabbling in extra-curricular activities, etc, due to his vision impairment.

In school and then in college, he wanted to study science and maths but he was denied that choice. He settled for the Humanities stream and did his M.A. in Economics. Due to lack of facilities and infrastructure for vision impaired students, he regrets that he could not secure high scores in college. "I learnt Braille and blind-specific skills later in life," he says.

After completing his education, he started looking for job opportunities. He was appreciated for his academic qualifications but that did not translate into opportunities. The local Employment Exchange for Disabled people was of no help; the government institutions he approached rejected his application. Even his family did not see the need and significance for him to secure a job. Analysing the reasons for lack of opportunities then, Jyotindra Mehta reasons, "I believe the experiences I had 30 years ago should be taken in the context of a mammoth problem of educated unemployment at that time."

In 1978, he and his family migrated to the USA. There, he did his Diploma in Computer Programming from Maryland Rehabilitation Centre, Johns Hopkins University, in 1980. He got a job quite easily with help from the rehabilitation placement services with MCI Telecommunication, where he worked for the next 12 years. Initially, his colleagues and superiors were amazed at his skill. But even after putting in 12 long years, he was not given a single promotion. He reasons, "Lack of requisite trust in the abilities of blind employees, insurmountable challenges posed by my inability to drive in the USA which, in turn, prevented me from taking on equal responsibilities and contribute at par with my sighted counterparts--due to all this perhaps I could not transform the amazement (or even the disbelief) of my MCI superiors into a confidence level sufficient to take me to the next level."

Nevertheless, his patience, perseverance and confidence level never took a dent. He continued with his IT studies and did his M.S. (Information Technology) from George Washington University (USA).

In 1997, Mr. Mehta came back to India and has since been working with IBM India, where his pioneering work has been well appreciated. He says, "I believe the difference in employer attitude is due to the flexible work options... as well as the extremely open work culture of IBM Corporation. I have adapted very well in India."

His involvement is not in the field of IT alone. He has also contributed to the voluntary sector. He was instrumental in the launch of a computer training programme for blind users at the National Association for the Blind, Karnataka Branch as its technical advisor. He was also the honorary Vice President of the organisation from 2002 to 2004. Recognising his contribution to the IT and disability sector, he was awarded the NCPEDP--Shell Helen Keller Award in 2004.

He feels that a positive attitude towards the high-tech sector should spread to the rest of the country. "I have observed that once the masses see concrete proof of any concept, it is not all that difficult to transform people's attitude toward people with blindness," Mr. Mehta remarks. "However, our traditional inertia is a huge challenge to overcome." He believes that today, in the 'new' economy, blind people do have better access to higher education and better employment opportunities.

For Mr. Mehta, finding a life partner was a big challenge. He met and married Urvashi, who has orthopaedic disability. He says, "I was pleasantly surprised to learn that she and her family had very good awareness, due to her work experience at a small industry run by a blind gentleman in Mumbai." They have a 20-year-old son.

What is his message to the citizens of the country, particularly its blind citizens? "Simply treat the credentials of everyone, and have expectations from everyone, on an equal footing--regardless of whether they are sighted or not. Also, do not treat persons with disability exactly as

their non-disabled counterparts. Be ready for adaptations, to accommodate the diverse needs and aspirations of disabled people.”



K. Ramakrishna - The Master-Challenger by--Priya Varadan

One can not but be wonder-struck on hearing K. Ramakrishna solve algebraic equations orally (over the phone) in seconds! So much so that even a die-hard mathematics-detractor might start taking a fancy for the subject! How does he do it? One might ask. He simply says, “Think systematically, go step-by-step and you have the solution.” He goes on to add, “Whether it is problem at home or office, I concentrate on removing the factors that initiated the problem and not just the problem alone.” That explains why he is where he is today--General Manager, Corporate Strategy and Planning Department, IDBI Ltd.

K. Ramakrishna was born in Trichy, Tamil Nadu, on January 7, 1950, and was brought up in the city of Mumbai. He was born with congenital cataract. He continued with his life normally since his vision in both eyes was somewhat okay. At the age of 11, however, he developed glaucoma and lost vision in his left eye. Subsequently, he developed retinal detachment in the right eye at the age of 13. His vision started deteriorating further; he stopped attending school and lost five years of academic studies. By the age of 22, he had become totally blind.

Right from childhood, he had a passion for mathematics. In his words “at school, maths was the only subject in which I did well”. It was a passion that proved to be his pillar of strength and, along with his photographic memory, saw him overcome obstacles resulting from his blindness and realise his dreams.

His family had very little awareness about disability matters and so could not offer much support to him, but they certainly never discouraged him either. He recalls, “My family thought my blindness was a matter of destiny.” Their awareness about the disability and its rehabilitation was self-initiated, helped by the advice of friends and a few experts in the disability sector. So, he rejoined school at the age of 18 in Std. VIII. Initially, he had problems finding readers and writers, but with help from volunteers of the National Association for the Blind (NAB), he overcame his problems. Since then, he has had an unceasing excellent academic and professional career.

After completing his Master’s in Economics (with Mathematical Economics and Econometrics as special subjects) from the University of Bombay at the age of 26, he worked in an electronics firm for five years. But the pull of the academic world proved too strong for him; he wanted to realise a dream that had been etched in his mind for a long time. He explains, “Long ago, a friend had wanted me to do an MBA (Master’s of Business Administration) degree. But at that point of time, neither my friend nor I knew what an MBA was. But that dream lingered.”

He applied for a course in Master’s of Management Studies. The selection process included an entrance exam, a personality test and an interview. When he approached the university authorities with a request to provide him with a writer for the entrance exam, the authorities seriously thought “I had gone mad”, says Ramakrishna. Their contention was: How could a blind person think of

making such an attempt? But they could not refuse him from sitting for the entrance exam--and he performed exceedingly well.

He joined the SP Jain Institute of Management and Research, Mumbai, and specialised in Finance. He made use of his excellent communication skills and strength in mathematics, statistics and other quantitative subjects and taught his peers who, in turn, assisted him with his academics. He got a First Division and became probably the first visually impaired person to do an MBA in the country.

During the campus interviews he was offered jobs by several institutions; he chose IDBI Ltd. In his words, "I consciously joined IDBI Ltd. which gave me the initial start and has recognised my ability by posting me to key departments. IDBI's attitude was positive and mutually beneficial."

With infrastructure support in place, he had no problems in carrying out his responsibilities. He was evaluated at par with other employees of the organisation. But he also realised the fact that 'To err is human...' does not hold true for him (and disabled people in general). He would be required to put in much more effort than usual to prove himself. He states "If an error is committed by anyone with disability, that error will be related immediately to his or her handicap, whether or not it is true. So I had to put in double the efforts to ensure that my output is error-free."

Despite an error-free performance, there was curiosity, even scepticism, about how he functioned. At a meeting, someone asked about how to deal with a visually impaired person in the organisation. A fitting reply was given to that by the then Chairman, Late S.S. Nadkarni: "Who is that visually impaired person?" Mr. Nadkarni categorically stated: "In a place of work or, for that matter, in carrying out his responsibilities or participating in any team to achieve results, none of us feel that Mr. Ramakrishna has vision impairment."

The two important pillars of Mr. Ramakrishna's success have been his mathematical ability and use of technology. The latter includes screen reading software, talking devices, OCR and scanning software, electronic diary, etc.

Today, he is the General Manager of the organisation. His job profile includes commercial appraisal of industrial projects, assessing the viability of projects from the standpoints of global competitiveness, marketing strategies, technology, cost structure and much more.

Besides his job, he also finds time for voluntary work. He is associated with the National Association for the Blind (NAB). He is also deeply involved in teaching and cultural activities. Being a performing artist (vocal music--bhajans), he has given many performances.

Whether it's mathematics, music or his profession, Mr. Ramakrishna does everything to perfection. His excellence has fetched him many awards from many organisations, e.g. the All India Confederation of the Blind, National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People, JAYCEE, NAB, Lion's Club, etc. Doordarshan (India's public broadcaster television) has made a two-part programme titled 'Strivers and Achievers' on his life and achievements.

Having travelled abroad and also having been exposed to the disability scene in India, he has an interesting comment to make: "They (developed countries) have the infrastructure, accessibility, social security net, etc., but despite all that I believe not many disabled people are part of the mainstream there."

With regard to India, Mr. Ramakrishna affirms that disabled people should be prepared for new sets of challenges, and that they should be made to think differently about their disability. He stresses the need to have new and innovative training methods coupled with massive awareness campaigns, from school level onwards, to change the scenario. In his inspiring words:

“There is no one in the world who is disabled and, in fact, all of us are differently abled. There is no need to be defensive and submissive about your disability. After all, you are differently abled. Have confidence in yourself. You will be what you want to be. You will get what you deserve: nothing less, nothing more”.

Mr. K. Ramakrishna is, indeed, ‘The master-challenger’ amongst the visually challenged persons in India.



Kanchan Pamnani
- A Born Achiever
- by--Anjali Sengupta

A successful advocate and solicitor, Ms. Kanchan Pamnani has refused to let her vision impairment deter her from doing anything in life that she felt was worth doing.

Born on September 19, 1965, in Mumbai, she had low vision since birth. A series of eye-related problems--congenital cataracts, squint, nystagmus, retina degeneration and, finally, macular degeneration--resulted in Kanchan Pamnani becoming totally blind by the age of 34.

Her parents have been a constant source of emotional, social and intellectual stability. They were very worried when her eye problems were diagnosed--they ran around for information, medical advice and support. Since she is from an upper middle class family, her parents could afford good medical advice. “They enrolled me in a good school and supported me and spent additional time with me, guiding me through school work as well as extra-curricular activities and social skills.”

She attended regular schools, but could not read the blackboard. She had difficulty reading question papers during exams too. There were other issues too, things which all children otherwise take for granted. “I could not read the thermometer during experiments. I had to use bigger scales while working on graphs.”

But she devised ways to get around those problems. “As I could not read the blackboard, I paid strict attention to everything spoken by the teachers. I peeped into my neighbours’ books and even walked up to the blackboard to read it!” Her teachers encouraged her in her studies, and gave her tremendous freedom to grow as an individual. As for experiments, she ignored the thermometer and tried to score marks in other areas!

Other personal systems she used to help in her studies included using the “Memorex method, using my fingers to count points. Of course, I always listened to everything and concentrated on all oral work”.

Besides excelling in studies, she was also the best in general knowledge in her school, Walsingham House School in Mumbai. “I was the President of the Workers of Walsingham, the social work unit of the school.” Kanchan Pamnani represented her school on the Bournvita Quiz

contest on radio. She also took part in debate and elocution competitions while in school and college.

“I represented my college (Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics, Mumbai) in Inter-collegiate quiz competitions, and on the television programme ‘What’s the good word’. I was a member of several committees in college.” Some of the posts she held were: Treasurer of the Public Speaking and Debating Society, Administrative Officer of the Planning Forum and Member of the Managing Committee of the Career Guidance Society.

After her B.Com. degree, she took the LL.B. exams from Government Law College (GLC), Mumbai, and her LL.M. exams from University Department of Law, Bombay University, in 1993. She participated keenly in extra-curricular activities here, too: she was a Member of the GLC’s Moot Court Committee as well as of the Annual Magazine and Library Committee. “I was also the Founder Editor of GLC’s magazine **We the Jury**.”

She has even been the Prime Minister of the country--albeit at a mock parliament session organised by the University of Bombay.

While in college, she joined the Rotaract movement and was elected President of her club. Subsequently, she was the Director of Vocational and International Services at the district level for two years. “I ended my career as District Rotaract Representative (District Governor) with 42 Clubs.” In 1988-89, she received the Best Director Award for her services.

Law has fascinated Ms. Pamnani, and she is always in search of knowledge, of that extra something that would give her work an edge. Her father inspired her greatly when, “as a child, I watched him handling cases. As I grew up, I read Perry Mason and was affected by the injustices around me.” She has done a solicitor’s course from Bombay Incorporated Law Society. In addition, she has also completed a Qualified Lawyers Transfer Test (Solicitor, Supreme Court of England), from The Law Society, England.

She was employed only for a few years. She did her articleship with Dhru & Company, a well-known law firm specialising in corporate law. There, she worked with the senior partner for three years prior to and during her Articles of Clerkship. There were a few sceptics at her workplace, but she overcame their objections. “I explained that though I had low vision, I would work harder than the others and that I didn’t mind doing any kind of work. I had to convince my seniors that although I could not read very well I was intelligent enough to handle the work, deal with clients, appear in court and completely take charge. My low vision did not hamper office work.” Minor problems, such as reading small fonts, arose occasionally “since I could not do it quickly enough”.

From 1991 to 1994, Ms. Pamnani had her own independent practice as an advocate, advising clients on matters relating to litigation, testamentary matters, intellectual property rights and consumer dispute redressal. She did not face any difficulties in getting her first few clients as these were mainly friends who trusted her judgement and her skills and did not care about her eyesight. She was referred by her friends to their friends, relatives and companies to whom they were connected. Word-of-mouth publicity is the best publicity, and work started flowing without a hitch.

In addition to managing her own practice, Ms. Pamnani also studied for more exams (Solicitors, LL.M.). During this time, she also had to undergo four eye surgeries for retina detachment.

She then worked for one year as an Associate with Thakker & Thakker, a firm of Advocates and Solicitors specialising in assisting international clients on areas of law such as

aviation, banking, company law, exchange control, foreign collaboration, and joint ventures.

Her visual impairment has not been a factor in her work. "Some new clients are aware that I am blind before coming to me; some come to know after they meet me. But hardly anyone has had a problem while dealing with me just because I am blind," she remarks. "There have been just two instances in my career where the client has been uncomfortable with my blindness and not continued with me."

"Visually impaired people," she believes, "are a part of society just as anybody else. It is time society accepts that and makes visually impaired people contribute as much as others."

To help her work efficiently, Ms. Pamnani uses JAWS which helps in reading and preparing all her documentation. "I also use CDs and tapes to listen to stories, news and magazines which are available on tape," she shares. "I have a high-end mobile phone which is loaded with software called 'Mobilespeak', with the help of which I can now make calls, SMS and e-mail. I read all my files thoroughly and try to memorise as many facts as possible so that I do not have to read the file again."

She also acknowledges the support that she has received from voluntary readers. "They have also contributed to my success," she says. "I could not have done as much without such support."

She shares a tip with our readers: "I have started labelling hard copy files with Braille labels to quickly identify them. Sometimes, I also use a Dictaphone while taking instructions."

Since 1996, Ms. Pamnani has been at Pamnani & Pamnani, a firm of Advocates and Solicitors. She is today a Partner in the firm. The firm's clients include non-resident Indians investing in India, international law firms, Indian financial institutions, multinational corporations, private and public trusts, dotcoms and high net worth individuals.

Her unquenchable thirst for knowledge led her to complete two courses on the Internet, on Intellectual Property Law, conducted by the World Intellectual Property organisation, Geneva, recently.

Ms. Pamnani is as active socially as she is professionally. She participates whole-heartedly in family functions and events. "I am a member of a voluntary organisation called Praja, which works in the community, with the local municipal authority." She is also the Honorary Secretary of the Blind Graduates Forum of India, and member--National Association for the Blind (India), the Blind Persons Association (Mumbai), the Bombay Bar Association and the Incorporated Law Society.

Ms. Pamnani's contribution to society and nation-building has not gone unacknowledged. The National Association for the Blind honoured her with the Neelam Kanga Award.

She has travelled extensively--around the world to Europe, South-East Asia and the USA and in India from Ladakh to Kanyakumari--both for business and pleasure. She is fluent in several languages: English, Hindi, Sindhi, and Basic French. She holds a "Grade III in Speech and Drama from the Trinity College of Music, London", and has also done courses in public speaking. Her hobbies include reading, swimming, walking, travelling and philately.

The secret of Ms. Pamnani's success is "positive attitude, hard work, willingness to try anything new, perseverance, and learning from everybody."

"Society has also played its part in my development and achievements. Friends, relatives, clients, teachers, parents--so many people have all stood by and have allowed me to bloom".

The attitude towards persons with visual impairment has changed, she feels they are no longer considered a burden on society. But she also feels that “only when this attitude fully develops will there be equality of opportunity in the correct sense.



Kirpal Singh Kasel -Scholar and Litterateur

by--Mukta Aneja

A distinguished septuagenarian, still going strong in the field of literature and social welfare, Prof. Kirpal Singh Kasel is an esteemed writer of more than sixty books. He was born on March 19, 1928 at a village named Kasel in the Amritsar District of Punjab (North India). His father passed away when he was a small child. The only child, he was brought up by his loving mother. A sensitive boy, he was susceptible to a lasting impact formed by the upheavals and turmoil of a pre-independent India, struggling for her freedom. Young Kirpal silently absorbed a myriad of impressions, social, personal, national, and all that he had sensitively imbibed, which went into the making of a great writer.

He was a bright student, and after completing his Master’s degree, he started teaching at the college level in 1951. Not only was he a good and popular teacher, he also emerged as a successful writer in the realm of Punjabi language and literature.

However, fate struck a sudden blow in the year 1964: at the age of 36, he suffered from serious eye-trouble which led to a complete loss of eye-sight. No amount of good medical treatment proved to be of any use. At the CMC Hospital in Ludhiana, Kirpal Singh, afflicted, devastated and bewildered, lay wondering how to come to terms with his sudden disability. He had never been exposed to any active blind person before, had never heard of any way by which he could continue his promising and upcoming academic career, knew of no means or strategies by which he would be able to make his way in this wide world, largely hostile to the disabled, even more so in 1960s when not even a handful of blind persons had proved their skills to society. It was in such moments of utter despondency that he had the good fortune of meeting Dr. E.M. Johnson. Dr. Johnson, who was himself blind, was a noted figure in the disability sector, and under his wise counsel, the newly blind Kirpal, received the much needed sense of direction. Thus, he was soon able to rise above his situation and, move forward victoriously in life.

It is rightly said that in the middle of adversity lies opportunity. Undeterred by his loss of sight, Kirpal Singh continued with his profession of teaching and writing. He worked in the Language Department of Punjab Government for eight years. After that he joined the Education Department at Government Mohindra College, Patiala, where he successfully fulfilled his responsibilities till the time of his retirement.

A prolific writer, Prof. Kasel continued to produce quality work in Punjabi--both creative and critical. After he lost his eye-sight, he wrote and published his famous book **Pushpvan**,

which fetched him the renowned Shiromani Sahitkar Award from the Punjab Government. He was also acclaimed for his book **Ward Number 10**.

A maturity of style and deep insight into his subject matter characterize his writings. Prof. Kasel has written extensively on the history of Punjabi literature, Punjabi literary criticism as well as creative literature. Some of his books have been recommended in the syllabus of several universities throughout the country. His famous book on the history of Punjabi Literature **Punjabi Sahit-Utpati Te Vikas** has run into ten editions. Another of his books: **Punjabi Sahit Da Itihas**, published in two volumes, is considered to be the most authoritative book on the subject.

After his blindness, Prof. Kirpal Singh Kasel has made significant contribution in the field of translation and has translated into Punjabi the works of well-known writers. He is particularly known for his many translations from English to Punjabi of the works of the writer Puran Singh. His books on various aspects of Puran Singh's works have broken new ground re-establishing the genius of Puran Singh as a writer.

Several prestigious honours and awards have been deservedly conferred upon him. Apart from Shiromani Sahitkar Award which he received in 1968, he has received the Sahit Shiromani Award from Punjabi Sahit Samikhya Board in 1983. In 1993, The Punjabi Sahit Sabha conferred upon Prof. Kasel the Balraj Sahni Award. In the same year, he was honoured with the K.S. Dhaliwal Award from Punjabi Sahit Academy.

Overcoming his disability, Kirpal Singh Kasel has been actively involved in well-known Punjabi literary associations, such as Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha, Punjabi Sahit Academy and Punjabi Sahit Samikhya Board. He is currently the Vice-President of Punjabi Sahit Academy and also holds the prestigious Life Fellowship of Punjabi University, Patiala.

Another significant dimension of Kirpal Singh Kasel's personality is reflected in the good work that he has done for institutions for the blind, such as Bhartiya Netrahin Sevak Samaj and National Federation of the Blind. He is a Governing Body Member of Vocational Rehabilitation Training Centre for the Blind, Ludhiana.

The warmth and care of his wife has gone a long way in enhancing decades of Prof. Kasel's eventful life. He has led a happy and harmonious family life. He has four children: all of them are well settled.

Kirpal Singh retired from his college job in 1988, successfully completing 24 years of active and fruitful service after losing his eye-sight. Since then, he has continued to shine in life, writing extensively, ever active in his literary and social welfare pursuits. His attainments in life are an eloquent illustration of the dictum that "life will always be to a large extent what we ourselves make it".



L. Subramani
- A Budding Journalist

by--Arjun Sengupta

It is not always easy to reduce somebody else's pain and struggles to writing which runs the risk of being prosaic. Much of the emotion and struggle is lost in translation. But, then, there are people who carry the human habit of perseverance to such a peak that their accomplishments demand that an effort be made. L.Subramani, born on July 6, 1973, is one such personality.

The year was 1988. A visually impaired youngster was taking an exam. His name was L. Subramani. He was having to write the examination himself, despite his visual impairment. He had recently been diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa, a degenerative disease of the eyes. The humid weather did little good as a trickle of sweat slipped down his temples and formed a rivulet that ended on his chin, as the young boy persevered with the daunting task of writing the exam without a scribe. When he finished, a sense of relief overwhelmed him and as he made his hesitant steps back home he must have asked what every kid asks after taking an exam: 'Would I pass?'

There were many reasons to suggest that he mightn't. His eyesight, as the doctor had predicted, was rapidly deteriorating. He could barely see and his parents were close to heartbreak. Yet, there was something in him that refused to give up, something that bore him through his ordeal and sustained him through the darkest moments of his life.

"Though the doctor believed that blindness could occur later in my life, it happened surprisingly early--just two years after the diagnosis," he remembers. He was doing his higher secondary schooling and as his sight deteriorated, he wondered how he could possibly complete his schooling. As it was too late, Government Education Department rejected his plea to have a scribe and so he had to write his final school exams on his own. Subramani passed that exam with flying colours. "To my disbelief, I secured 64 percent for exams I wrote as a visually impaired student." He has since passed many more. He is now a reporter with the **Deccan Herald**, a premier Newspaper in Bangalore.

Taking a little jog through memory lane and recalling his initial days of the onset of the disability, Subramani observes, "My parents were devastated and thought life was over for me even before it started. Some relatives suggested that I stay at home and pursue my degree through distance education, advice that I readily rejected."

Born in the little town of Salem in Tamil Nadu, Subramani did not have the best of starts as far as his eyesight was concerned. He had myopia when he was five and was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa in 1988. Though he had very little support from his family, Subramani attributes a lot of his success to the help he received from his mother, Mrs.N.Vijayalakshmi, who provided unflinching support to him and encouraged his idea of going to college. She scouted educational institutions for people who would accept her son and help him fulfill his aspirations. She finally found the right nurturing ground in Loyola College, Chennai, where Subramani was admitted in 1991 and where he went on to do his B.A. and M.A.

"During my stay in the college, I made some wonderful friends, some of whom continue to be very close pals even today. My friends used to cycle down to my house and record all the study materials for me. Readers Association for the Blind, an informal N.G.O. comprising educated housewives in Chennai, also chipped in with reading assistance and acted as scribes for me and 30 other visually challenged students of my college."

It was during his college days that Subramani's tryst with journalism began. "I enjoyed interacting with people and found knowing about them interesting. Thanks to my personal interactions with several people early on in my life as a visually impaired person, I was able to learn different ways of tackling my problems."

But what ignited the flare for journalism? The seed of his passion was sown long ago, in the fertile field of sport. “Even before I lost my sight, sports events used to interest me a lot. I particularly loved watching tennis and as I was losing my sight, I saw the Wimbledon finals between Edberg and Becker, and struggled subsequently with an enormous pain in my eyes. And, at the end of the match, I used to write down my observations, with inadequate vocabulary and flawed grammar. Little did I realise that that was what I would end up doing”.

After college, Subramani dithered for a while before joining P.G. Diploma course in Journalism on the advice of some friends. “The course led me to **The New Indian Express**, where I joined as a trainee for three months. I wrote my first article in 1998 and felt thrilled when well-wishers told me that I had a promising career ahead. It also answered my critics at home, who didn’t believe I could ever come anywhere close to that,” he recalls.

And come close he did. He almost got a permanent job at the Paper but luck turned her fickle back on him again. “Employing me full time was a decision the Newspaper management was finding it hard to take, as they weren’t fully convinced that I could do it. Understandably, some higher-level managers raised questions about how independently I could work. So, I had to continue my career on freelance basis,” he says.

However, borne by inexhaustible reserves of perseverance and the support of friends, Mr. Subramani plodded on. He found a place in **Chennai Online**, where he spent his time doing what he enjoyed most--writing about sports. He covered two international tennis events . “I had more exposure and quite liked what I did. Reporting on sports, particularly on Tennis, is quite easy, because you can hear the ball bouncing on both sides of the court and the chair Umpire tells the score. If I may say so, I was probably the first visually challenged sports journalist at that time,” he says.

Sunny days, however, did not last long. The dotcom industry crumpled into a messy heap and his company was forced to join the debris. Mr. Subramani, resilient as ever, moved on as well. He took up a job in a company as a language consultant where he reviewed technical documents translated from Japanese. Within three months, his tongue had added a new language to its repertoire. He could speak Japanese. “The Director of the company once called me and told me to teach English for seven of our Japanese staff. I found it exciting, as, with no common medium of instruction, I had to explain most of the things to them by gestures. Today, my spoken Japanese language level is quite comparable with anyone who can handle the language, though I am yet to master the script.”

In 2003, Mr. Subramani decided to take up the pen once again. “When I decided to get back to mainstream journalism in 2003, I resigned from ‘Sofil’ and kept myself busy contributing for Newspapers in Bangalore as well. This was also the time when I did research work for the memoirs of film actress Padmini,” he says.

Sometime later Mr. Subramani was called for an interview for a position in **Deccan Herald**. “My editor Mr. Shanth Kumar understood my condition. A great feeling of triumph filled my heart, for I was able to convince the editor of a famous daily that I had what it takes to be a journalist. From April 2004, I have been working in **Deccan Herald**, concentrating on editing and writing assignments. I write on several topics, including on disability affairs. Sports, alas, is not an option I have been able to explore so far.”

Mr. Subramani has by now interviewed many celebrities and woven the stories of many famous personalities--from Kamal Hasan to Leander Paes. He has the support of technology--his brother gifted him the speech software, JAWS, after a stint in Japan. Apart from his work, his life now revolves around his wife, Anuradha.

Mr. Subramani’s story is an unending fount of inspiration. Surmounting all odds and obstacles, he has emerged as a ‘winner’ setting up an example for others.

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Madhuri M. Desai **- An Astrologer With A Difference**

by--Mukta Aneja

Madhuri Desai has illustrated the value of self-reliance in life, living amidst a society that continues to be diffident of the capabilities of the disabled. Her steady job at a bank has enabled her to hold her head high and lead a life of dignity. She is popularly known by a host of titles in the astrological field, such as Jyotish Acharya (meaning, one who has mastered astrology) and Jyotish Visharad (that is, astrology scholar).

Madhuri was born on 18th May, 1956 at Surat in Gujrat (Western India), in a middle class family. She was blind by birth. When she was of school going age, her parents took her to a residential school for the blind. However, seeing the plight of the institution, they were reluctant to leave their little daughter in that institution. Later, they received counsel from the National Association for the Blind and, accordingly, they placed her in an integrated education school. Thus, at the age of seven, Madhuri started going to a regular school at Bandra, Mumbai. Often, young Madhuri felt lost, confused and dejected because she could not keep pace with sighted children in their games, or participate in their joy with colours and other extra-curricular activities. She longed to be a part of the 'normal' world.

As a school student, she struggled to overcome the problems faced by a lone visually challenged child in an integrated school. It is most natural for teachers of regular schools to write on the blackboard and expect the students to imbibe learning through that method. Naturally, Madhuri felt left out as she could not be expected to read from the blackboard. Gradually, she overcame this problem with the help of some supportive classmates who dictated to her what the teacher wrote on the board. A resource teacher taught her Braille.

Madhuri was a sensitive child, very quick to feel offended. She had often to seek the help of her friends and siblings. If, sometimes, she was denied help from them, she poignantly felt conscious of her disability. This evoked in her a desire to become self-sufficient one day.

Finding suitable readers and scribes, particularly during the time of examinations, was another problem that she and her parents had to tackle. One particular incident regarding this difficulty has stayed in her mind till today. During a half-yearly school examination, the Question Paper was given in two parts, but her scribe brought only one part. Although Madhuri insisted that clarification be sought in this regard, the scribe emphatically told her that there was no second part. When she stepped out of the examination hall, she discovered that there was a second part that she missed out on which carried 40 marks. She was horrified and again she keenly felt the need to be free from the shackles of her disability. Later, her parents admitted her younger sister to the same school, so that she could be a support to Madhuri, which she became.

College and university life brought their own set of challenges, which she sought to overcome with tenacity and resilience. She was now better equipped to study than in her school days and kept pace regularly with her curriculum through help from readers, volunteers, audio cassettes and Braille notes. Yet, she had to undergo hardship as she traveled alone from her home in Bandra, Mumbai to the University at Churchgate, by bus or train. There were times when she fell into open pits, there were times when she banged her head against some stationary object on the way, there were times

when she was hit by hand-carts. But each time she rose up, refusing to concede defeat. Her strong will to complete her education and ultimately get a stable job, gave her the strength to go on.

During her student days, she participated in elocution competitions, debates and seminars. She received recognition for her performance in such events in the form of prizes--medals, trophies and certificates. After completing her B.A., she went on to pursue her Master's in English Literature. She also equipped herself with several professional degrees such as: Diploma in Journalism, Diploma in Public Relations and Advertising and Diploma in Astro-Palmistry.

Despite her qualifications, it was difficult for Madhuri to get a job commensurate with her capabilities. As it often happens with competent and qualified disabled people, she was called for interviews, but rejected many times because of her disability. After many years of struggle, she got the job of a Telephone Operator in the Central Bank of India, in the year 1987. She continues to work in the same place till date. Her job stability has given her financial independence and enabled her to live a life of dignity.

Madhuri became very interested in the study of Astrology. Motivated by a desire to find reasons behind a person's particular situation or destiny, she delved deep into the field of astrology. It was not easy to obtain admission to the Diploma Course in Astro-Palmistry, but she managed to convince the faculty members of her genuine interest and her capacity to learn.

Madhuri regards astrology as a Vedic occult science through which she believes, one can resolve sufferings of people. Initially, she started offering consultancy in astrology free of charge. Only when her clients started trusting her on account of her suitable remedies to resolve their problems, did she start charging fees. Madhuri believes that one can counter the negative effects of planets on an individual's destiny, with certain precious stones and gems and through other methods. She sometimes performs Gayatri Yagna free of charge. She has written many articles on astrology for magazines such as the popular publication **Star and Style** and so on. She also writes for journals published by Indian Institute of Astrologers and Indian Federation of Astrologers. **Gurjari** a magazine published in USA also receives write-ups from her regularly.

As one who is deeply interested in the matters relating to women's welfare in general, and blind women's rights in particular, Madhuri is a member of various organizations such as: Asmita Club, Nari Shakti Co-operative Bank, National Federation of the Blind and National Association for the Blind.

She has also been the recipient of various awards, honours and titles. In the year 2003, NFB (Maharashtra) conferred upon her an award for outstanding contribution in the field of the blind. In January, 2005, NAB (India) awarded her the prestigious Neelam Kanga Memorial Award.

Her amazing passion for astrology has also brought her awards and impressive titles. In April, 2004, she received a Gold Medal at an International Astrologers' Conference in Jharkhand. In March, 2005, she was invited as the Chief Guest to give a keynote speech on Vastu at Jagannathpuri, Orissa (Eastern India). She is, perhaps the first known blind woman to practise Astrology in India--a most commendable feat, indeed.

Madhuri believes that "God helps those who help themselves". She is indeed an "empowered woman", living a life of self-esteem and economic independence, extending valuable help and guidance to those who seek her advice.



Marita Cardoz **- - Helping Others**

by--Mukta Aneja

Gentle, yet firm; sensitive as well as understanding; brilliant, yet unassuming, Marita Cardoz is able to express the best that is in her, while maintaining faith in God. Seeing her today, it is difficult to believe that her struggles began very early in life.

Born in Mumbai on May 6, 1957, Marita is blind by birth. It was tough for her parents to discover that their sweet little daughter had been robbed of vision due to Congenital Glaucoma, but Marita's parents bravely faced the situation and soon geared up to create a conducive environment for their daughter.

From the beginning, young Marita received good support from her parents by way of financial as well as emotional stability and was enriched by their positive outlook on life. She started going to school at the age of five. Her parents placed her in a regular school for sighted children, so the process of integration began from her childhood. The focus in any regular school is on reading and writing print as the basic mode of education. Marita struggled with her own special needs with the help of her parents. Volunteer readers were arranged to help her cope with the study load. Marita turned out to be a brilliant student. She outshone others, topping her class. She secured the first rank in the entire school, surpassing many intelligent sighted students. In the board examination she got the first rank among blind students in the state of Maharashtra. She became a living example--to society in general, and the student community in particular--of the fact that disability need not hamper one's true merit and potential.

Marita continued to do well in college too, striving hard to excel. After obtaining a first class in B.A. from Bombay University, she went in for her Master's in Social Work. She discovered that she had an aptitude for and genuine interest in the subject she had chosen. She completed her MSW degree from Bombay University with flying colours.

Now came the time for job-hunting. Although she had been a brilliant student throughout and had impressive certificates to prove her worth, many of her job applications were rejected solely because of her disability. However, Marita did not give up hope in the face of so many rejections. Armed with faith in herself and God, bolstered by encouragement from her family, Marita continued to look for the right opportunity and placement.

It is rightly said that perseverance always pays. In June 1986, Marita Cardoz got a suitable job at the Public Health Department, Hospital of Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai. She continues to work here till date as a Medical Social Worker. Marita is motivated in her work by a desire to help others. Her job involves counseling, rehabilitating, guiding and also sometimes arranging financial assistance to hospital patients and relatives. Initially, she met with cynicism from her seniors and colleagues, who were most doubtful about her ability to work. However, the patients and relatives who received her help and saw her performance had no such prejudices against her. Gradually, the attitude of her co-workers and seniors in her office began to change, as they discovered her competence. Marita's sensitivity and warm understanding have always enabled her to relate to people who approach her with their problems. She has a knack of helping them handle their difficulties in a holistic manner.

Whether in her workplace or in society in general, Marita expects no special concessions for her disability. Self-assured and responsible, she interacts well with the people around her. Apart from

devoting herself to her job, she takes out time to be involved in issues and concerns of visually challenged persons. She is a member of National Association for the Blind. She has voiced some of her opinions through her writings.

Marita Cardoz's sincere, intelligent and thoughtful approach in her vocation has brought her due recognition and awards. In 1994, she received The P.D. Khambatta Memorial Award for the Best Blind Employee. She has also been honoured as the Best Employee of the Year by Bhabha Hospital, MCGM.

Marita has found a good life-partner. Her husband works in the private sector, in the field of information technology. The happy couple have a fourteen year old daughter, who is studying in school.

Marita is appreciative of the family support she has been lucky to receive. Her faith in herself is bolstered by her faith in God. Viewing the tenuous relationship between the disabled and society in general she comments, "Rid yourself of the blindness that prevents you from seeing the visually challenged as normal human beings." May she continue to inspire people, particularly women, for many, many years to come.



Mohan Chandrasekaran —The Violin Maestro

by--Mukta Aneja

In the late 1940s, a little boy named Mohan Chandrasekaran, charmed the audience with his first public performance at the age of eleven. The young prodigy's talents began to be noticed from an early age. Nurtured in an ambience of Carnatic music, Mohan Chandrasekaran won the Best Violinist Award from the Music Academy, Chennai when he was barely thirteen years old.

Though born in a family of traditional musicians, personal tragedy struck him early in life. Born on December 11, 1937, he lost his eyesight at the age of two, after he suffered from jaundice. Fate struck a double blow when he lost his father when he was just seven years old. However, M. Chandrasekaran's mother, Charubala Mohan, who was a highly accomplished musician, bravely took the responsibility of looking after her little son's music career as well as general education. At the age of seven, Chandrasekaran started learning how to play violin from his mother. Charubala Mohan was the only 'Guru' to the young boy, and under her skillful tutelage, his musical talents began to blossom. Within a few years, the child artist imbibed the essence of Carnatic music and embarked on a career in music, playing the violin both in solo and accompaniment.

Inspired by his mother's proficiency in playing the violin, M. Chandrasekaran evolved a distinct mode of his own. A remarkable range characterizes his style--soft tranquil melodies giving rise to a gamut of emotional and intellectual strength, combined with a spirit of adventure. He has captured the hearts of countless violin lovers across the globe with his sublime music.

Shri Chandrasekaran has also been a violin accompanist to highly eminent personalities, such as Shri Arijakudi Ramanuja Iyenger, Sri G.N. Balasubramaniam, Shri Mani Iyer, Shri Subramania Pillai,

Shri K.V. Narayanswamy and many others. Leading artists like Shri N. Ramani, Dr. M. Balamurali Krishna also gave melodious recitals with Shri Chandrasekaran as accompanist.

Along with success in public life, also came joy in his personal life. Shri Chandrasekaran married C. Pattammal, in whom he found a wonderful homemaker and good life partner. They have one daughter and three sons, all of whom are well settled now. Their daughter, G. Bharathi, has followed in the footsteps of her father and is today an acclaimed violin artist in her own right.

Shri Chandrasekaran's melodies have been heard by millions of people over All India Radio, where he has featured as a top ranking violin player. He has also been the visiting professor at Government Music College, Palghat. As a member of the Advisory Committee of the Music Academy of Chennai, he has shared his expertise with others.

It is not just in India that music lovers have the delight of listening to this eminent violin-player. Audiences overseas have also had the privilege of listening to him. In 1984, together with his daughter, Smt. G. Bharathi, Shri Chandrasekaran gave benefit performances in aid of Canadian Association of the Blind in Canada. People abroad were enthralled by his music. He held a concert in aid of "Shankaralaya" in U.S.A. In Asia, Chandrasekaran's violin programmes have taken him to countries such as Malaysia, Singapore and Srilanka. In Malaysia, he gave a memorable and melodious recital in aid of Taman Megha Handicapped and Disabled Children's Home and Independent Living Home.

Shri Chandrasekaran's talents are not confined to playing instrumental music only, he is proficient in vocal music and is a good composer too. His mother, Charubala Mohan, who inspired his love for violin, taught him vocal music also. Later on, he acquired training in classical vocal music from well-known singers such as Sri Viswaratha Iyer, Smt. T. Jayammal and others. Today, he captivates listeners with his deep, resonant and melodious voice. Shri Chandrasekaran is known for his singing of religious verses, while playing solo numbers on violin. His endowments have enabled him to participate in Akashvani Sangeet Sammelan since its establishment in 1955. Shri Chandrasekaran has also composed religious songs. One can listen to this talented musician's violin and vocal renderings, solo and accompaniment, on cassettes and records.

Accolades and awards have deservedly come his way. Shri Chandrasekaran is the proud recipient of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Academy Award, which he received from the Government of India in 1986. The State Government of Tamilnadu gave him the honour of "Kalaimamani" in 1982.

The Rotary club conferred honours upon him in the years 1984, 1985 and 1989. The Mysore Shri T. Chowdiah National Award in 1989 and the Ugadi Puraskar Award in 1993 also vouch for his popularity and pre-eminence in Carnatic instrumental and vocal music. Many notable titles have also been conferred upon him.

Shri Chandrasekaran finds deep pleasure in cultivating a good sense of music amongst young people today. He has trained many students and a good number of them have become leading artists today. His daughter G. Bharathi who is a brilliant player of violin and his son Murali, who plays the flute, have rendered continuity to the family's traditional love for music.



Moreshwar J. Dharmadhikari

-A Man With A Scientific Spirit

by--Mukta Aneja

The scientific spirit cannot be curbed by the exigencies of sudden disability. The enquiring mind of the scientist continues with its predilection for searches, observation and organized work throughout life. This fact is nowhere better illustrated than in the life of Moreshwar J. Dharmadhikari, a Scientific Officer, who lost his eye sight at the age of 41.

Moreshwar was born on December 27, 1938 at Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh. He was a brilliant Physics student, and after completing his studies he joined the famous BARC (Bhabha Atomic Research Centre) in Mumbai. Moreshwar became an esteemed Scientific Officer. Since 1961, he was in the Reactor Control Division of BARC. His job involved design, development and commissioning of control systems. In the year 1978, having received the prestigious IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) Fellowship for further studies, he went to Germany for a one-year period.

After a successful period of research and in-depth study, he started having Retinal Haemorrhage. This occurred towards the end of the study period in 1979. With immense shock, he consulted an eye specialist in Germany and then returned to India. He was suffering from degeneration of Retina.

After his return to India, his Retinal Haemorrhage increased. By the middle of 1980 he became totally blind. Imagine the plight of a well established scientist in his early forties, who had devoted the major part of his life to scientific work, only to find himself in a new world of 'total darkness'.

To be a late blind person is a devastating experience for anyone, but more so for a person in the Science field. Suddenly, his established identity is threatened by circumstances, and questioned by people around him. The initial reaction of his colleagues and bosses was that of pity and belief that he would no longer be able to work.

However, in the course of time, Moreshwar Dharmadhikari proved such negative opinion to be incorrect. With unflinching resolve and tenacity, he continued to perform his official work of designing, development and fabrication of control systems. This he achieved by continuing to use his agile mind, and by explaining the required work to his assistants in specific details. He continued to work steadily in this way and ultimately, people in his office were convinced of his capacity to perform well, despite his disability. It is undoubtedly creditable that Mr. Dharmadhikari put in almost nineteen years of good work in his office even after he lost his vision.

The birth of a new discovery often begins with a simple idea. One day as he was sitting in his office, reflecting on how he was used to working smoothly with computer-based control systems before he had completely lost his vision, a simple yet cogent thought came to his mind. He wondered, "What if I can work with computers through Braille?" With this idea, he developed the Braille Interpreter as his restless mind sought to break fresh ground.

The Braille Interpreter is an electronic Braille keyboard, which is interfaced to a computer through micro-processor based board. The matter which is typed in Braille appears as normal English alphabets on the computer screen, and is vocalized. Thus, a blind person, using the Braille interpreter, gets to know what appears on the screen. Moreshwar got a few units of the Braille interpreter made. He then contacted the National Association for the Blind and demonstrated the functioning of this device.

In the year 1997, he received the Best Blind Employee Award for this development. Several newspapers and magazines carried reports of his achievement. He was also interviewed on the 'Door Darshan' Metro channel, in a half-an-hour programme.

This man of mettle has also written papers, enunciating developments. He has written a Report on design and use of the English Braille Interpreter. He has also authored a Report on the Devanagari Braille Interpreter.

M.J. Dharmadhikari has not only been a known innovator, he has had a good settled family life too. His wife holds a Master's degree in two disciplines, namely, in Sociology and vocal music. They have three daughters, all of them Engineers.

Moreswar Dharmadhikari retired from his long-standing service in December, 1998, almost two decades after having lost his vision. In the last five years, he has made four trips to USA, visiting his daughters as well as institutions for the blind. He continues to lead an active life after retirement. He is an active life member of NAB, Mumbai.

Mr. Dharmadhikari is also a member of BARC Retiree Association, and of Marathi Sahitya Sanskriti and Kala Mandir. This man of science is fond of writing poetry too. His poems have serious themes, often tinged with a humourous touch.

Dharmadhikari is motivated by the positive thought that despite limitation imposed on a person due to disability, one is capable of doing creative and constructive work. He acknowledges the good support he has received from his family and colleagues. He cautions persons in a similar predicament against negative thoughts.

Referring to the immense potential inherent in persons with visual disability he states: "Do not underestimate the potential of the visually challenged persons. Encourage and help them to build their self-confidence so that they can do some useful work. By doing so you will find astonishing results."



Nafisa Parvez Buhariwala

- Exploring New Frontiers

- by--Mukta Aneja

Nafisa Parvez Buhariwala is an inspiration to most women, sighted and visually challenged alike. A lady with virtually no eye-sight, she works as a manager in a well-known bank with a wide range of challenging responsibilities.

Born on May 29, 1955 in the State of Gujarat, in an upper middle class family, Nafisa was lucky to have supportive parents and siblings. Their rich academic background exercised a positive influence on young Nafisa during her formative years. Little Nafisa, who suffered from retinitis pigmentosa since birth had very little vision when she joined a regular school at the age of four. She was unable to read from the blackboard which is a primary medium of teaching students in a regular school. Initially, Nafisa felt rather confused amongst normally seeing children, who had no difficulty in reading and writing. But Nafisa not only had a sharp intellect but she was also extremely hard working. With support from teachers, family members and friends, she made herself comfortable in

the school environment. Her intelligence began to shine forth as she made determined efforts to break through barriers caused by her disability.

Whatever little sight she had, deteriorated after school. Undaunted, she continued with her higher studies completing her B.A. in Economics from the prestigious St. Xavier's College in Mumbai. Despite all the cooperation she got from her college, she had a tough time in convincing examination centre heads to permit the use of scribes for appearing in the exams. A scholarship winner, Nafisa ranked 2nd in college, scoring the highest marks in the subject of Logic at the university. Indeed, her keen reasoning ability was to prove an invaluable asset subsequently in her career.

Nafisa wanted to do MBA, but was deterred by various people who felt that given her disability, telephone operating was a more viable option. She had come across NAB(India) in Mumbai, a well-known organization for the blind. NAB helped her to secure a job with the Central Bank of India as a Telephone Operator.

Deep at heart, Nafisa knew that her caliber and capability far exceeded that of a routine telephone operator's job. She was dissatisfied, restless and unhappy. So she decided to pursue further studies in Banking. She appeared for the CAIIB Exams conducted by the Indian Institute of Bankers and decided to take the promotion examination conducted by the Central Bank of India. Banking and finance are normally considered to be the territory of a select group of sighted persons. So, Nafisa had to face many hurdles, before she could emerge a winner in this field. First of all, it was not easy to convince the management to give her permission to appear at the examination with a scribe. Then, the management was doubtful about whether she would be willing to go out of station for a minimum of two years, which was a mandatory requirement for promotion. They were also very sceptical about how she would function as an Assistant Manager, the post to which she was seeking promotion. However, her perseverance and persuasive abilities ultimately prevailed and she took the examination.

Impelled by her talents and self-confidence, she amazed everyone by ranking 28th out of 570 successful candidates! Deeply impressed by her performance, the authorities not only gave her promotion as Assistant Manager in 1987 but also allowed her to continue staying in Mumbai.

Nafisa's job at the Corporate Finance Branch of a leading bank has been a challenging one. Her careful and successful handling of her professional responsibilities set at rest all the misgiving and negative reactions of others--colleagues and superiors alike. Her work gave her tremendous satisfaction and joy, which involved the responsible business of buying and selling foreign currencies on behalf of importers in ready and forward markets as also counseling customers about the movement of currencies.

Nafisa always aimed high and just one promotion would not quench her thirst for upward movement. So, she appeared for another promotion examination in 1998, and became a Manager. Today this corporate dealer not only handles complex finance transactions, she also coordinates with her International Division to arrange foreign currency loans for her clients. In addition, she looks after the submission of R-returns--a fortnightly statement of all the sales and purchases of foreign currencies of her bank--to the Reserve Bank of India.

Despite her hectic schedule, she manages to find time to provide her expertise to the disability sector, particularly towards issues that concern visually challenged women. Her involvement in problems of the blind in general, and blind women in particular, is apparent as she works as the Honorary Secretary for the NAB Committee on the Advancement of the Status of Blind Women. She is also the Treasurer for the NGO Forum on the Status of Blind Women and the past President of the Blind Graduates' Forum of India.

Her accomplishments have not gone unnoticed. Nafisa has been the deserving recipient of several notable awards. She has received the Neelam Kanga Award for her outstanding performance from the NAB Committee on the Advancement of the Status of Blind Women. On 3rd December 1999, the then President of India conferred upon her the prestigious National Award as the Most Efficient Disabled Employee. She has also received felicitations from the Giants International, Byculla and the Lions Club.

A cheerful and strong personality by nature, Nafisa enjoys surfing the net with the aid of a screen reader. Her face lights up as she talks about her favourite hobby--Ham Radio. She has also been the chairperson of Mumbai Amateur Radio Society called MARS.

Nafisa has found a suitable life partner, and is happily married. The couple have two daughters.



P.R. Pichumani **- - A Flourishing Entrepreneur**

- by--Mukta Aneja

In the year 1972, a bright young Mechanical Engineer joined a well-known manufacturing company called Lucas-TVS Ltd in Chennai. This brave young man was waging a dual battle at that time--not only was he ambitiously striving to establish himself in his career, but he was also simultaneously struggling to cope with the onset of his blindness. This dynamic man was P.R. Pichumani.

P.R. Pichumani was born on August 12, 1947. He was endowed with talent which was noticed by people since his childhood. His brilliance began to manifest itself even as a school student. Soon he discovered that his real interests lay in the engineering field. Against the backdrop of a promising career, he was gradually struggling with a debilitating eye problem. While he was a student he began to gradually lose his eyesight due to Retinitis Pigmentosa. However, propelled by ambition, determination and energy, he successfully completed his B.E. in Mechanical Engineering. Undaunted by his fading vision, he joined a famous company. Starting as a graduate trainee, he gained insight into, and acquired invaluable experience of activities involving planning and scheduling of production and manufacturing processes. The knowledge and exposure he thus gained, empowered him with long term benefits.

By 1977, that is about five years after he had joined Lucas-TVS Ltd., Pichumani completely lost his vision. The setback was immense, but his indomitable courage and fortitude were greater than his loss. He approached the management of his firm to consider on a trial basis his placement as one of their vendors. It is said that “the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. Pichumani took that one step in 1977 with a heart full of zeal and hope. He launched “Mayflower Engineering Industries”. He began in a small way, but has come a long distance since then. He started his industrial venture in a small rented shed--with just three machines and three workers. He began to supply auto-electric components to Lucas-TVS on a sub-contract basis. Starting an enterprise with very limited manpower and scarce material resources, is truly an uphill task for any person. So Mr. Pichumani had to draw upon his inner resources, knowledge and poise to bring about amazing success in his business.

The initial years were full of many challenges and obstacles. To begin with, he found a wide gulf between the theoretical knowledge he had acquired from books and the practical application of it in terms of the capacities and functioning of machines. With his own hands, Pichumani used to feel the machinery and its various components in order to understand how these operated. Another problem that he faced was to train unskilled labour and to bring them upto a level where they could produce quality work. A resolute and enterprising person, Pichumani regularly updated himself with the technical know-how of operational procedures and surmounted various difficulties relating to practical work.

All his efforts paid off as Pichumani successfully supplied quality products and began to earn a good reputation for his high standards. The management and staff of Lucas-TVS continued to extend excellent co-operation to him, as they were well satisfied with his output. Pichumani manufactures precision steel components for the automobile sector. Quality control is the hallmark of his trade. Timely delivery and sincere service to his clients are other factors which have contributed to his increasing popularity and acceptance among his clients.

When sincerity is combined with quality and business acumen, expansion of business is inevitable. So, although Pichumani had a humble start, he was spontaneously led to expand his business. He shifted to a larger shed and added more semi-automated machines. This was done in a phased manner, by availing of periodic term loans from National Small Industries Corporation (NSIC). With patience, drive and perseverance, Pichumani was able to report a turnover of Rs.60,00,000 by 1990. This was indeed a far cry from the initial annual turnover of Rs.48,000 only.

Motivated by development and growth in the automobile industry as well as his own progress, Pichumani gave further shape to his ambitions. In 1995, he set up his own factory at the suburb called Vanagram Village. This place is known for its pollution-free environment and greenery. Thus, in a carpet area of 4400 square feet and a ground area of 9200 square feet, he gave concrete shape to another dream by setting up his factory premises. Pichumani sought and received help from Punjab National Bank to fulfill this target. He also received assistance from his family members at this juncture.

Totally undeterred by his loss of vision, always striving to move ahead with indefatigable energy, Pichumani has kept alive a large vision of the future. We recall how he started business with just three workers and three machines. Today he has a work-force of forty people, out of which many are long-standing workers. He has an installed capacity of 80 HP load with forty machines. The current turnover burgeoned to Rs.2, 40, 00,000.

For his outstanding achievements, Pichumani has been praised by NIVH and the Association for the Blind. His contribution to the business world has been recognized not only by people in India, but also by some abroad. "Mayflower Engineering Private Ltd" has been an ISO certified company for last three years. The eminent Deming award winner from Japan, Prof. Washio who visited Pichumani's factory, commended him for his quality systems and housekeeping. In the year 2000, Pichumani received the Best Supplier Award. Mayflower has been supplying manufactured components not only to Lucas-TVS and Pondicherry division, but also to GE Power.

Patience and tenacity, a strong will-power and dedication to work have given Pichumani the standing he has today. He cheerfully faces and overcomes every obstacle that comes his way, regarding hurdles as a 'passing cloud'. He encourages others to believe in the adage: "There's always a light at the end of the tunnel".



Parimala Vishnu Bhat

- - A Multi-Faceted Personality

- by--Mukta Aneja

A social worker by profession, an active participant in adventure sport, an ardent exponent of voice culture, and a keen theatre lover, Parimala V. Bhat excels in her chosen fields of activity.

Born in Mumbai on August 21, 1958 and blind since birth, Parimala was lucky to have loving, supportive and understanding parents. Her father was a News Editor with the leading newspaper, The Indian Express. Her mother, Nama Bhat is known for her commitment to the cause of the disabled. Under the nurturing care of her parents and close relatives, Parimala learnt how to overcome obstacles and allow her personality to bloom.

Like most children of her age, her education started with kindergarten. Despite her disability, her parents opted to send her to a regular school, instead of a school for the blind. Studying under the integrated education system, little Parimala was faced with several hardships. She faced hostility from her sighted classmates. Textbooks in Braille and recorded tapes were far too inadequate to cover the syllabus. It was also difficult to find good readers and writers on a regular basis. But, Parimala continued her education undaunted and completed her schooling with flying colours.

She pursued higher studies and obtained her MSW degree (Master's in Social Work), after putting in her best, and persevering against all odds. However, her trials were not over even after securing this degree. She faced the problem encountered by majority of well-qualified disabled people -- rejection. Many of her job applications went unanswered. After much patience and endurance, she was given a temporary post of a social worker in the Kamala Mehta School for the Blind, Mumbai. She worked here for three years.

True potential and worth do not go unnoticed for a long time. Parimala's merits were recognized by Vijay Merchant, the noted cricketer-philanthropist. He helped her to secure a good job with Air India, the country's international carrier, in 1984. She became Social Service Officer in their medical wing. She continues to work in the same place to date. Her job involves counseling for general family matters as well as family planning, booking hospital beds for staff members, interacting with patients and discussing their cases with the doctors.

This charming lady met and married a sighted man. Unfortunately, the marriage did not work out and the two are now separated. Her two teenage daughters stay with her. Ms. Parimala Bhat, with characteristic courage and fortitude, has not allowed her broken relationship to wreck her present or her future life. She has risen above emotional trauma and continued to take part in social activities as well as be a good parent to her children.

The year 1981 was declared as the International Year for Disabled Persons. Ms. Parimala Bhat represented India at the Leadership Training Programme held in Malaysia that year. This training programme was organized for blind women in South-East Asian countries, and Ms. Bhat presented a report on the status of blind women in India.

She has since been deeply involved in work for the disability sector. As a member of the Executive Council of Blind Persons' Association, Mumbai, she has been actively engaged in organizing Cancer detection and Hepatitis B vaccination camps for blind women. She is also a member of the EC and Clientele Service Committee of National Association for the Blind (India). She is a Founder Member of NAB's committee on the Advancement of the Status of Blind Women. She has also edited their magazine "Vishvadarshan" for more than five years.

Ms. Bhat's deep and genuine interest in improving the plight of the disabled prompted her to set up "Snehankit", a network Helpline. This Helpline brings the visually challenged and volunteers to a common interactive platform. She has played a leading role in focusing public attention on the needs of youth and students, as also arranging for them counseling, workshops, lectures, picnics, voice culture and stage shows. She has taken many young persons to All India Radio, many of whom have passed their audition test to broadcast over the radio.

Ms. Bhat's interests and hobbies are wide ranging. She attended the Adventurers' course in mountaineering for the blind, which was organized by the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute at Darjeeling. In 1994, she climbed the tall and sublime **Kshitidhar** mountain peak, at a height of 17,500 ft, in the Himalayan range. She achieved this feat along with a group called Young Zingaro. She climbed another 14,000 ft at Dzongri. Young Zingaro had trained her for rock climbing as well. Her accomplishments on this account speak volumes of her inner spirit, which refused to be bogged down in the wake of the adverse situation of her disability.

Awards and appreciation have come her way and deservedly so. In 1986, she received the Neelam Kanga Award, given to the most outstanding blind woman by National Association for the Blind. In 1987, she received an award from All India Confederation of the Blind which was conferred on her by the then Vice President of India.

One wonders where Parimala Bhat gets so much of cheerful energy from. Whether it is office work or social work, her love for her family or her interest in theater and mountaineering, she enthusiastically puts in her best, without letting obstacles of any kind to get the better of her. She motivates social workers to follow up their promises with concrete help. She encourages society to accept blind people along with their limitations, to be patient, considerate and appreciative of their ability to contribute to society.



Pranav Lal **-A Promising Management Professional**

by--Rajesh Kumar

Pranav Lal may still be a young man, in his twenties but his achievements already serve as positive examples for visually impaired people across India. Blind from birth due to a condition called retinopathy of prematurity, he says: "I have no eyesight except little light perception."

Pranav was born in Kuwait on January 18, 1979, and received his Bachelor's degree in Commerce at University of Delhi in 1999. Commerce is an unusual choice for vision impaired students because of the extensive use of pictorial representations, limited job opportunities and restricted options for professional growth. Nevertheless he specialised in Business Administration, opening the way into the corporate sector, where professional excellence, a competitive spirit, and positive attitude are important assets. What made it possible?

He says: "My parents have been very supportive and provided an environment where I have been able to cultivate skills such as independent thinking, critical reasoning and dealing with change." Parental support began early, and he was encouraged to learn about and interact with the world around him: "One of the first challenges was mother nature. My parents took me to zoos so that I could learn animal sounds. They bought me rubber animals to help me learn the shapes of various animals. Also, they made me touch plants in a nursery."

Despite that support, Pranav had several obstacles to overcome, particularly in his early years. It was difficult to arrange textbooks, either in Braille or on cassettes, because at that time production facilities were very limited: “The primary problem was getting textbooks in accessible format. There were also issues in taking exams since I had to rely on a writer.”

As he grew older Pranav worked hard to keep up with his studies: “I had to create my own systems in many cases. For instance, for Science, I had to almost duplicate a home lab for Physics and Chemistry. Also, my parents and I adapted a lot of mainstream technology especially in Geometry. For instance, I used magnetic rulers to draw straight lines. The paper was sandwiched between a metal plate and the ruler. The magnet kept the ruler in place on the paper.”

“I used to use Braille initially then switched to a cassette recorder and then to a computer. I had my textbooks digitized. This did not work too well for Math. so I had to use human readers and take extra time from teachers.”

He also began to invest a lot of labour in gaining mastery over access technology, as he landed up in ninth standard: “At the time I started using the computer, there was very little support available so I had to solve adaptive technology issues by trial and error.”

The problems connected with relying on readers in exams changed in business-school since he was allowed to take exams on a laptop: “Also, a significant amount of material was available in electronic format.”

Pranav Lal is clearly dynamic and self-motivated. Perhaps his confidence is due in part to the fact that he has visited several countries and as a child lived in Oman for nine years, where his father was working. He moved with his parents and participated in many activities like attending Digital Accessible Information System (DAISY) Consortium workshops and the Abilympics, a competition of vocational skills. He has visited Switzerland, The Czech Republic, Thailand and the UAE. He speaks Hindi, English, and German.

He always found time for extramural activities. He says: “I participated and won several prizes in debates, declamation, and group discussions, at college and school.” He won a Special Excellence Award for computer programming at the 5th International Abilympics, in Prague, Czech Republic in 2000, clinched a gold medal for computer programming and received an award for exceptional performance at the 6th Regional Abilympics, held in New Delhi in 2001.

As he completed his Master’s in Business Administration at International Management Institute, New Delhi, in 2002, his attention turned to finding a job. He secured an interview with a company called Career Launcher and got a job managing the ERP and Human Resource Information System. He says he entered the corporate world without any prejudice due to his blindness: “I was in B-school and underwent the same placement process as any sighted person.”

At work, Pranav Lal made extensive use of adaptive technology. He says: “I did all my work on a computer using as much mainstream technology as possible. One of my roles involved taking classes and as I was unable to write on the whiteboard, I used a LCD projector connected to my laptop instead.”

He says he never felt out of place at work: “I never made a big issue out of my blindness. I learned fast, read a lot and did my own adaptive technology support.” Appreciating his team-members he adds: “They were very understanding people, who were able to see beyond my being blind.” At the same time, Pranav Lal also did his best to live up to the expectations of his colleagues: “I ensured my output was in a format that they could understand immediately.”

Nowadays, the vision-impaired community relies a great deal on speech technology for personal entertainment and communication as well as in academic and professional life. In his first job he was

one of the earliest pioneers, who blazed the trail, in disseminating the access technology: “I introduced the Apollo synthesizer and was an early adopter of Windows screen access technology. Professionally, I have implemented accessible design and deployed large IT systems globally.”

Eventually he decided it was time for a change. “I wanted to move into consulting. I was looking for an area that would more fully use both my technology and people skills. Plus, I developed an interest in cyber crime. Information security consulting fit the bill.” He moved to the Special Services Group in Mahindra, where he is an Associate Consultant.

Apart from his regular office, Pranav Lal is an executive member of the National Association for the Blind, Delhi, and a member of the Managing Committee of the Volunteers for the Blind. He likes to “contribute positively” saying: “Most of my work involves assessing various proposals that the organisation makes and I also do some technology recommendations. In terms of time, things are flexible and a lot of interaction happens via email. I enjoy the role.”

Despite his busy schedule, Pranav Lal still finds time to relax. He likes to socialise with family and friends, when time allows, and says: “I participate actively in Holi and Diwali.”

Perseverance, diligence, tenacity and optimism can help overcome any disability, problem or difficulty. Pranav Lal is a clear example of this. He says: “The secret of my success lies in research, analysis, and excellence.” He further prompts people to stay open to new experiences and to welcome any opportunity to learn. In his determined no-nonsense style he simply urges people: “Evolve constantly.”



Ravi Kumar Arora

-A Dream Come True

by--Anjali Sengupta

Born with chronic low vision and myopia, Ravi Kumar Arora had a clear image of what he wanted to achieve in life. And one thing he was sure of: he would not let short-sighted bureaucrats cheat him out of what was his due.

Ravi Arora was born on September 24, 1973, in Madhupur, Jharkhand. He attended a regular government school in his hometown, Madhupur, and went to Madhupur College (Bhagalpur University). But he was unable to see the blackboard. “In a small village, government schools are as poor as their students, lacking physical infrastructure as well as trained human resources,” Ravi observes. In school, as in college, he was helped by his friends, and by his mother at home. His parents have always been the guiding force in his life; they have supported and encouraged him. “Whatever I have achieved today is only because of my parents,” he says.

“My vision is 6/60 (Normal Vision is 6/6), and I can read by holding papers or books very close to my eyes,” he says. “The first time someone sees me doing this asks some foolish questions. After sometime they come to know the real me and these things do not matter.”

His independent spirit made him refuse the help of either readers or writers for his exams. He got the same question papers as all the others, and wrote the answers himself.

Ravi Arora was motivated by the desire “to do something really meaningful.” Becoming a Civil Servant is one way of ensuring that you are in a position to be able to take significant steps for the development of your country.

In his words: “I have opted to serve society as a member of the Civil Services. The Civil Service is one of the most influential ways of serving the masses. The government frames the policies, but it’s the bureaucracy which is responsible for implementing them. In the case of the Disability Act also, the policy that the Parliament framed has not been implemented in its true spirit. That’s why I, like thousands of other people, faced problems. As Civil Servants, we have to follow the rules in their true spirit. I will follow this principle in my career.”

Preparing for the Civil Services is hard work--there are many subjects to be studied; global current affairs to be tracked; reasoning skills brushed up, among others. He left no stone unturned in his efforts to realise his dream. After he graduated, Ravi Arora started his career in the Health Ministry, Government of India as an Assistant. “Almost all the files in a Ministry start their journey from the table of an Assistant. It’s a purely desk job.”

However, he did not give up his goal in life--joining Civil services. Every day, returning home from office, he would sit down with his books and preparatory material, working with single-minded devotion for the fulfillment of his cherished dream. It is, indeed truly said that patience and perseverance bring rich rewards. It was his indefatigable zeal and determination that saw him qualify Civil Services written Preliminary and Main exams, and the interview round as well, in 2001. Mr. Arora stood 325th in the Civil Services examination, qualifying for the Indian Postal Service, entirely on merit and not due to any disability quota.

And, this was where he came up against a serious hurdle. He had received the intimation for joining the Foundation Course. The Medical Board then conducted a routine medical examination, and declared him unfit for all Services on account of “substandard vision”.

This was a rude blow. Mr. Arora refused to suffer this injustice silently. He petitioned the Delhi High Court. In a landmark judgment delivered on April 15, 2004, the High Court declared: “The petitioner [that is, Mr. Arora], without any aid, appeared in the written examination and was successful. He was found meritorious by the expert panel in an interview. To deny the benefit of appointment to the post would be a travesty of justice.”

The Court further ruled: “The petitioner is therefore entitled to be appointed as per his merit and seniority based on the rank obtained... for the examination of 2001 and... be so appointed to the Indian Postal Services or an equivalent Service.”

At present, Mr. Arora is on probation in the Indian Postal Service, undergoing field training in Punjab. A government appeal is pending before a Division Bench of the Delhi High Court. “My appointment is conditional and subject to the outcome of the appeal,” he clarifies.

He has settled down well into the normal, daily routine of life as a Probationer. “My main duties are to clear files and inspect offices, and my poor vision is not an obstacle here.”

Mr. Arora was conferred the Helen Keller Award in 2004 for his resolute struggle to see that justice is done to him. His mantra for success: Strive for excellence in whatever you do. “Just concentrate on your work; don’t ever bother about what others say,” Mr. Arora emphasizes. “Try for the best but be prepared for the worst”--words worth emulating from one whose determination has broken down the doors of discrimination in the higher echelons of government service in India.



S. Tarsem **-The Creative Genius**

by--Mukta Aneja

He started writing poetry from the age of ten. He began earning his livelihood from the age of sixteen. Although he started losing his eyesight since the time he was twelve, he was undeterred by the vicissitudes of life. A prolific writer and recipient of a number of awards, he has shown the world how to “determine your goal and go ahead. Let problems come, but face them boldly”.

S. Tarsem was born in December, 1942 in Tapa (which is now in District Sangrur in Punjab). He hailed from a middle class business family. As a small child, neither he nor his family had any inkling of the complete loss of vision that he was to suffer in future. But even before he encountered problems with his eyesight, life was not easy for him. Fate struck a cruel blow when at the age of five, he lost his father. S. Tarsem was brought up by his loving mother and supported by his elder brother, Harbans Lal, who struggled hard to support a family of eight on a meagre salary.

Tarsem started going to a regular school at the age of seven and with his brother’s help studied there till the 7th Standard. Financial hardships increased and so he had to stop going to school. Subsequently, through dint of hard work, he acquired the rest of his education privately (except for B.Ed.). To the shock and horror of Tarsem and his family, his eyesight started deteriorating when he was twelve. He later discovered that he was suffering from Retinitis Pigmentosa and night blindness.

Even as a teenager, his resolute spirit came to the fore. Battling with a degenerating eyesight on the one hand, and severe financial pressures on the other, he started teaching at a private school from the age of sixteen. He spent most of the day teaching and giving tuitions and thus he found very little time for his own studies, which he continued to pursue privately. It is indeed creditable that he stood first in his Matriculation Examination in Tapa and surrounding areas. He also pursued and completed Punjabi Honours securing IIIrd position in the Punjab University.

From an early age S. Tarsem had progressive leanings. He fought for the rights of the common masses, the working class, and for the cause of the blind as well. He has been a renowned champion of the protection of the rights of the intellectuals. As a result of such reformist social views he had to enter into many confrontations with the police as well as faced warrants and arrests. But he always stood by his convictions.

By the age of thirty, Mr. Tarsem lost whatever little vision he had earlier and became totally blind. His disability did not prevent him from writing innumerable books, pursuing higher studies and excelling in the teaching profession. He secured the second position in his Master’s in Punjabi and Hindi. He went on to further do a third M.A. and this time in Urdu in which he stood first in the entire Punjabi University, Patiala. With a zeal for learning and imparting knowledge, he went on to complete his Ph.D. in Punjabi.

Dr. Tarsem is known for his literary genius. He has written as many as twenty-four books, which include collections of short stories, poems, and ‘ghazals’ i.e., lyrical poetry. He has also written biographical and autobiographical essays, as well as research papers on modern Punjabi literature. He has a distinct style of writing. Themes of peace and communal harmony, love and unity, social injustice and class struggle--permeate his writings. Some of his well-known works are: *Ajj De Masihe*, a collection of short stories, published in 1978. His autobiography titled *Kachchi Mitti*

Pakka Rang was published in 1989. His collection of Ghazals, *Dhai Akhar* was published in 1999. The year 2004 saw the publication of his Hindi short stories under the title *Rishte*.

Dr. Tarsem's significant position in the realm of Punjabi literature can be gauged from the fact that research scholars of three north Indian universities have explored in depth his literary contribution, as part of their M.Phil. degree. Also, two research scholars are currently pursuing their Ph.D. in the field of Dr. Tarsem's poetry and fiction.

Uptil 1981, he worked as a school teacher. He then found placement as a Lecturer in a Government College in Punjab. He has been popular and successful both as a school and college teacher. Throughout his life, he has remained active on the Punjabi literary scene. Apart from being a prolific writer, he has also edited a number of Punjabi books.

It is not only as a creative writer, progressive leader and teacher that S. Tarsem has carved a niche for himself. He has had a good domestic life too. In 1966, he married Sudarshan Devi and they were blessed with two sons. Tragedy struck Dr. Tarsem just a few years before his retirement. In 1998 his wife passed away at the age of 48. His two sons are well-settled now. In December, 2002, Dr. Tarsem retired from his College as a Senior Lecturer in the pay scale of Reader.

Dr. Tarsem's ceaseless endeavours have fetched him many rewards. For his outstanding contribution to Indian literature and social welfare, he has received as many as 35 awards. Notable among these are--Punjabi Sahit Smikhya Board, Jalandhar Award (1982), Punjabi Sahit Trust, Dhudike Award on Literary Criticism (1990), Giani Gurmukh Singh Musafar Poetry Award for his book *Dhai Akhar* conferred by Language Department, Punjab Government, in 1999. He has also received The Shiromani Punjabi Sahitkar Award from the Punjab Government in the year 2000 and the Vidya Vachaspati Award by Hindi Sahitya Sammelan (Allahabad) in the year 2002. In the year 1995, he bagged the prestigious Social Welfare Department Award from Punjab Government. He has also been the recipient of the AICB Millennium Award in the year 2000.

His continued interest in, and deep impact on Punjabi literature is manifested by the fact that from July, 1983 to February, 2004, he has been the Vice-President, General Secretary and President of Kendri Punjabi Lekhak Sabha, which is the largest international association of over 2000 Punjabi writers. Even today, this active involvement remains unabated. At present, he is the General Secretary of Punjab Sahit Kala Parishad, a position he has held since January, 1994. He is also the Editor of **Nazria**, a leading Punjabi literary magazine.

Sustained hard work on his part, honesty and a desire to contribute positively to society have combined to bring him the measure of success that Dr. Tarsem enjoys today. As he wisely observes, "if you laugh, people will laugh with you. If you weep, nobody will weep with you."

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Sadhan Gupta **- Six Decades of Eminence**

by--Mukta Aneja

A renowned Barrister-at-law as also a well-known politician, Sadhan Gupta's name has been synonymous with success for over six decades. His life is an impressive illustration of the extent to which a person with disability can accomplish and also contribute to society, given the right opportunities.

Sadhan Gupta was born on November 7, 1917 at Dhaka, (now in Bangladesh). An attack of smallpox at the tender age of sixteen months, took away his eyesight. Little Sadhan was fortunate to have caring and supportive parents. His parents left no stone unturned to endeavour to restore his eyesight, taking him to various countries in Europe for the purpose in 1931, in addition to all the efforts made in India. However, all these endeavours proved futile. Yet, his parents always took keen interest in his education having enrolled him in Calcutta Blind School at the age of nine. His loving mother even learnt Braille, so that she could supervise his studies at home. Young Sadhan faced the challenges of his visual disability boldly and emerged as a brilliant student. He stood 10th in Calcutta University in the Intermediate Arts Examination in 1936. He went on to pursue his Bachelor's Degree (with Honours) in Economics from the famous Presidency College in Calcutta. Sadhan excelled in extra-curricular activities. An outstanding debater, he participated in Inter-University debates and won several trophies. He also participated in the students' movement and was the President of Bengal Provincial Students' Federation between 1941-44. Thus, two of his special traits began to shine forth--his oratory skills and leadership qualities. Both these endowments were to prove indispensable in his future professional and political career.

Sadhan Gupta chose to follow the profession of his forefathers. His father, the late J.C. Gupta, was a leading member of the Calcutta Bar. Sadhan's grandfather and grandfather's uncle were also lawyers in their own times. Sharing the same keen interest in law, Sadhan Gupta joined the University College of Law, Calcutta (after having completed his Master's Degree in Economics with a first class in 1940). He passed the Bachelor of Law examination in First Class. Sadhan Gupta started practicing law at the Calcutta High Court in September 1942. He went abroad (to England, France and Switzerland) during 1946-47 to complete his Bar examination. In 1947 he was called to the Bar from the Middle Temple in London. The help that he received from his father was indeed invaluable. However, Sadhan Gupta's own individual talents began to shine forth, and he soon made a mark of his own in the legal arena.

Shortly after he started practice, Sadhan Gupta appeared with his father in a political case pertaining to the detention of political leaders under the Defence of India Act. Now was the time for him to prove his inner worth. It is indeed a challenging experience for an illustrious man's young son to prove his mettle, but Sadhan Gupta rose up to the task. J.C. Gupta arranged for his son to argue a particular point and Sadhan did so with so much aplomb that the judges really appreciated his merit. In the same case he received the opportunity to argue in the Federal Court (as it was then known), for which his performance was noticed and commended by the Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. In a letter of congratulation, sent to his father on the occasion of Sadhan Gupta's wedding, Gandhiji wrote:

Dear Gupta

When I saw in the papers months ago a reference to a blind lawyer brilliantly arguing his case before the Federal Court, I never knew that you had the honour to own that lawyer as your son. May his marriage be a blessing to him and his future wife. I congratulate her on her choice.

Yours sincerely,

M.K. Gandhi

Sadhan Gupta tied the nuptial knot in 1944. He found an ideal partner in Manjari, who has not only shared his professional triumphs and personal joys and sorrows, but also belongs to the same field. Manjari is also a senior advocate of the Calcutta High Court. The couple were blessed with four daughters and a son, all of whom are well settled now.

Today, Sadhan Gupta is the senior most lawyer practicing in Calcutta High Court, and is also a Senior Advocate of the Supreme Court. In 1978 he became the Additional Advocate General of West Bengal, and in 1986-87 he had the honour of holding the post of the Advocate General. The fact that

Sadhan Gupta was the first blind person to hold such a post in the country speaks volumes for his brilliance and zeal.

Mr. Gupta was not content with his ascendancy in the legal field. Like his father (who was an eminent Congress leader of Bengal and a long-standing member of the legislative Assembly), Sadhan Gupta also evinced keen interest in politics. Long years of continued success in the political arena has gone hand-in-hand with success in the legal field. He has been a member of the Communist Party for over six decades. In 1953, he had the distinction of being the first blind member of the Lok Sabha (House of the People of the Indian parliament) as a member of the communist Party. He was re-elected in 1957. In 1969, he was elected to the West Bengal legislative Assembly as a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

Mr. Gupta's dynamic personality and his wide ranging achievements are amply demonstrative of his capacity to meaningfully contribute to society.



Sanjay Dang

- An Out-of-the-Box Success

by--Anjela S. Nath

From zero to Rs. 40 crore in 10 years straight. This is the thrilling and fast-track journey of Sanjay Dang--a leading entrepreneur in Delhi's tourism industry. The 38-year-old bachelor has made dreams for innumerable clients come true by selling to them beautiful and exciting travel destinations. Going by his growing business, his clients do not seem to notice or care about the fact that this highly successful travel entrepreneur has vision impairment.

For Mr. Dang, the travel business has been his only calling ever since he finished schooling. He decided against a three-year graduation and instead did a diploma in Business Management. He was not deterred by the degenerative vision disorder he had since he was a two-year-old child. Born on January 2, 1967, in Lucknow, he was diagnosed with congenital myopia. With successive retinal surgeries failing to yield any success, he lost his vision by the time he turned 25.

The choice of this field to make a living and reach personal and professional landmarks was unconventional for a person with vision impairment. But, Mr. Dang is not the kind of person who gives up. He turned all the challenges, that his dwindling vision confronted him with, into new opportunities.

His father was an army officer. And a transferable job meant that as a young boy, Mr. Dang got to travel to new places, meet new people and learn new customs. These experiences accentuated his appreciation of cultural dimensions of life and later found an outlet in his choice of profession.

As one window of knowledge closed with diminishing eyesight, Mr. Dang began experimenting with a new one. "While in school, I had very little difficulty in reading but when my vision deteriorated, I started spending a lot of time listening to international radio broadcasts to keep pace

with developments and improve my knowledge about world affairs. Also, usage of low vision aides did help,” he says.

He recalls his school days as being fun. He studied in a mainstream school. “Despite my limited vision, childhood for me was absolutely normal and conventional. Along with my younger siblings--a brother and a sister--I had my schooling at the Army Public School, New Delhi and, later on, Kendriya Vidyalayas at Barielly and Dehra Dun,” says Mr. Dang.

At school, since sports was off limits for him, he turned his attention towards cultural and extracurricular activities. He won awards in various cultural events, such as dramatics, and also contributed regularly to the monthly school magazine. He was very active in inter-house activities too, such as being in-charge of the House news bulletin board.

“The world of travel and tourism attracted me and I always had a keen interest in the cultural aspects of various regions in India and abroad,” he adds.

After he finished his diploma course, he worked for sometime with the General Sales Agent of Pan Am. When his parents shifted to Noida (near Delhi), he started a small travel agency with a staff of two runner boys and an assistant. He advertised in a modest way in a weekly tabloid then distributed in South Delhi, called Neighbourhood Star. Customers started trickling in. The quality of his work spoke for itself and the trickle soon turned into a steady stream. Mr. Dang then advertised in Noida Bazaar, and enlarged his office in Noida. In the early 1990s, when the computerised reservation system started, he realised that he should have an office in Delhi too--it would be central and convenient for the business, and most airline offices too were there.

Today there are 30-35 people working for him. His parents helped him out with money for the initial investment in the business. “The support I have received from my parents and family--my brother and sister--has been phenomenal,” he says gratefully. His brother now heads the Delhi office; his sister works in the Hyderabad office.

Within a decade of setting up of his travel agency, Le Travelworld, he has won acclaim and awards by major international airlines like Singapore Airlines, Thai Airways, Malaysian Airlines, KLM, Kuwait Airways, British Airways, etc.

“My company, in a short period, has achieved a leadership status in the region, essentially because of a focussed outlook and high-spirited motivation that one is able to generate in one’s team. Also remember, business is ethics,” said Mr. Dang with an apparent sense of pride.

But were there moments of doubt, when his peers or family members became concerned about his vision impairment?

“It is human nature. A lot of parents and families become over-concerned because of the vision impairment of their children. However, if they try to identify areas or faculties in which their children show talent and inculcate confidence in them as well as create an environment where these talents can be nurtured, there is no reason why they cannot perform better than others,” he says in a generic advice to parents of disabled children.

Ask him about the struggle he may have had to go through in treading this unconventional path for a person with vision impairment and he says: “Like any other entrepreneur the initial years I had various challenges--capital, infrastructure and credibility. Due to hassles in commuting, after my family moved to our own house, I had to quit working. This was probably my opportunity to set up my own enterprise.”

Mr. Dang believes he has been able to excel in his work “because of the high spirited motivation that one is able to generate in one’s team, also one is able to do out-of-the-box thinking as one is not reading through pre-chartered or book defined options.”

He has evolved skills that are routine for a person with vision impairment, but are a real surprise to his colleagues. “It is a fact that you will have enhanced memory retention and recall, as other faculties become stronger when your visual functions are not normal. A lot of friends and colleagues tend to ask me for instant information like phone numbers, addresses etc., which I am able to recall instantly. And, in general, one has better voice recognition capability than most others,” he says.

In addition, he has people designated for various tasks. A personal secretary helps with correspondence, reads out e-mail, etc. Another person takes down letters. For his day-to-day functioning, he relies on various gadgets which have a “speak out mode”, as he says. For instance, a voice recorder. Earlier he used one which could record up to eight minutes of audio; he would record instructions, client names or other important data on it. Now he uses a Sony I.C.D., a digital recorder which records up to 15 hours of audio, for his work.

“It is prudent to keep checking at frequent intervals,” he advises, “if these products have come out with newer improved versions as technology is ever changing.”

He travels infrequently and that too on business-related ventures. Otherwise he is so busy with work that he does not have much free time for personal travel.

Mr. Dang is upbeat about the future for people with vision impairment and says: “Mere academic learning is not sufficient and in today’s world where new avenues of Opportunities are springing up everyday you need to spot your niche and excel in it.”

He loves listening to the radio, especially to music. Mr. Dang has subscribed to World Space Radio to indulge his passionate hobby.



Satish Amarnath
- Breaking Fresh Ground
by--Anjali Sengupta

September 5, 1998, was concluding as a normal work-day. Dr. Satish Amarnath, working in the Microbiology Department of Manipal Hospital, Bangalore, was on his way home. However, one vicious act, perpetrated by an unseen hand, changed his life forever that day. Somebody threw concentrated sulphuric acid on his face, blinding him irreversibly.

“As I lay in my hospital bed wondering what to do, absolutely frightened about the blackness surrounding me, I thought I was finished,” he recalls candidly. He was a Microbiologist; sight, he thought, was an absolute necessity for his work. “I could not even think of taking a step; I was scared to even hold out my hand. I was devastated and felt my life was over,” he reminisces.

As Dr. Amarnath lay battling with his demons in his hospital bed, his family came to see him. He remembers that they were too devastated to even talk, though they did try to make small talk. “My hand touched my daughter’s face accidentally; she was around 10 at that time. There were tears in her eyes. At that, something in me died. My fears, my doubts suddenly were cleared. I steeled myself

that I needed to do what I could to wipe out the tears from my family's eyes. I did not want that person (who threw acid on me) to succeed and destroy my life and my family's happiness."

Thus, at the age of 43, Dr. Amarnath found that he would have to redefine his dreams and styles of functioning. That he did so with remarkable fortitude is a tribute to his never-say-die spirit and steely determination.

Manipal Hospital, where Dr. Amarnath had been working since 1996, also came to his support. In addition to defraying his medical expenses, it allowed him to continue in his job. His colleagues rallied around him, egging him on to whatever he felt like doing. They acquired information and practiced how to work with a blind person. He received all necessary support to function in his workplace. In fact, the software which allowed him to type was provided by the hospital.

"I have been helped by colleagues and friends to explore my world and know its limitations. I have discovered what I could and could not do. For instance, I can definitely not see any image of a slide under a microscope but given the findings and the clinical picture of symptoms I can make a diagnosis. My previous experience also helps tremendously."

Dr. Amarnath comes from a middle class family. His father was a manager in a private transport organisation and his mother was a housewife. His parents supported his education and encouraged him to graduate in medicine. He completed his medical education before he lost his sight.

He considers himself lucky that the management of Manipal Hospital understood his particular situation. Initially, he was not sure of himself and what he could do. But the hospital's management supported him in coming back to work at the same post that he was holding before the incident. In fact, they facilitated his job by providing him good assistants. This allowed him to explore his possibilities.

"The hospital has enriched my training by sponsoring me. They deputed me for I.S.O. and N.A.B.L. training as an Internal Quality Auditor. I could thus take on additional responsibilities in the organisation for both these functions."

Then, a colleague suggested that Dr. Amarnath take up counseling. He did meet with a recently diagnosed cancer patient. "I did help her, and this gave me the confidence to begin this work. I now counsel patients with HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis and other infectious diseases."

How do his patients react to the fact that he cannot see? "Many of my patients do not look at my blindness. They are happy to receive the help I provide them. I get information from the Internet and give it to them in a clear, understandable form, which allows them to take informed decisions."

Life has not been all smooth sailing for him. He has had his share of skeptics. "I guess there will always be persons who consider themselves better because they are sighted. But, I guess, to see, a person need not only have sight but also inner ethos and feeling." His actions, however, have proven that nothing is impossible once you set your mind to it.

Dr. Amarnath leads an active professional life holding many important positions, normally considered out of reach for the blind. He was the Vice President and, subsequently, the President of the Indian Association of Medical Microbiologists, Karnataka Chapter. He led the Association for two years, leading scientific deliberations as well as organising seminars and guest lectures after he became blind. He is currently Advisor in Microbiology; Quality Management Representative for I.S.O. 9001 (2000); Chairman, Hospital Infection Control Committee; and, Coordinator for Distance Education in Allied Health Sciences.

Dr. Amarnath knows many languages. He is familiar with Tulu, English, Hindi, Kannada, Tamil and Telugu.

Today, he participates actively in family and local community functions. Dr. Amarnath travels frequently, alone, to deliver scientific talks, in the city and outside. He never misses a social gathering arranged by the hospital; regular family outings include going to the movies. His wife, who is sighted, is a doctor and a Pathologist, working in the Defence Research and Development Organisation. His 17-year-old daughter is an aspiring doctor; his 12-year-old son is in the VIIIth Std.

Dr. Amarnath had been contributing regularly to scientific journals of national and international repute and his visual disability has not dampened his scholarship and spirit of enquiry. Even after the onset of blindness he has contributed six papers and articles to leading scientific journals. In addition, he also writes for newspapers and science magazines.

“The message I would like to give all blind persons is: Explore your limitations. There are ways and means to do and perform all tasks, and sight is not needed for a lot of things, though it is important,” Dr. Amarnath says. “It is time we learnt to perceive the world outside through the eyes of friends. Let me assure you, it is still lovely out there. Dew drops fall just as softly as before, and I am sure myriad colours will splash out when I disturb a leaf. A cobweb, which you might accidentally destroy and feel bad about, still feels like gossamer. I am sure I, and all of us, need to experience the world out there and to also learn from others.”



Shirish Deshpande **- A Legal Luminary**

by--Mukta Aneja

It was a time of festivities and joy. A spirit of celebrations was in the air as the festival of Diwali was in full swing in November, 1964. Despite warnings and wise words of caution, it was a time when most children throw caution to the wind and play with firecrackers. Shirish, a mischievous little boy was no exception. With a firecracker called ‘Lakshmi bomb’ in his hand, he ran to the courtyard. Placing it in the centre, he ignited it. In the past, nine-year old Shirish had observed his friends covering the ‘bomb’ with a metal container, so as to experience the thrill of listening to a resounding noise. Shirish tried to do the same--he too covered the ‘Lakshmi bomb’ with a tin. He waited for a while for the expected result, but the firecracker remained quiet and still. On removing the tin he discovered that the wick had extinguished. He relit the firecracker and covered it again. There was total silence again as the firecracker neither caught fire nor made any noise. This was really too much for an excited little boy’s patience. Again, Shirish went to remove the tin. This turned out to be the most irredeemable moment of his life. It was at this very moment that the firecracker exploded and devastated the happy-go-lucky child’s life.

Shirish was in agony as everything turned black before him. In searing pain he screamed for help. His mother came rushing out and together his parents took him to the doctor. The price of the firecracker turned out to be too heavy to pay. Shirish was tormented with pain, had blurred vision in one eye and total loss of vision in the other. Overnight his world changed completely.

Shirish stopped going to school and started studying under a private tutor. During the years that followed his loss of sight, his mother was a pillar of strength to him. She read out to him stories as well as textbooks and often played cricket with him. She also completed her B.A. so that she could be equipped to teach her son well. Young Shirish drew all the sustenance he needed from her dear mother in order to cope with his new world. He thus learnt to deal with many frustrating moments and overcome the challenges that came his way with the onset of his disability.

Shirish learnt Braille and devoted himself to his studies. He appeared for one examination after another, emerging successful each time. His father, an IRS officer, who holds a Master's Degree in Law, encouraged him to pursue further studies in Law. After completing his LL.B., he obtained his Master's Degree in Law. Shirish manifested his caliber by scoring the highest marks in the University in LL.M. programme. Deeply impressed by his performance he was invited by a noted Law Faculty member to teach. Shirish Deshpande took a decisive step towards professional success as he started teaching at the Post Graduate Teaching Department of Law, Nagpur University, in 1982.

In a few years time Shirish Deshpande became well-settled in his career, as his talents and accumulated knowledge began to shine forth. The year 1987 will always remain a memorable one in his life. That year he was invited as a guest speaker to deliver a lecture at a well-known college in Nagpur. Unknown to him, an intelligent and dynamic lady was sitting in the audience keenly listening to his lecture. Shaila, a Botany Lecturer in that college was armed with a Ph.D. degree, but disarmed by the strong impression made by Shirish. The two of them met and fell in love.

The following year, Shirish received a visiting research fellowship from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which took him to Oxford, U.K. By that time he was engaged to Shaila. At Oxford, Shirish spent a fruitful year learning a lot from his supervisor Prof. P.P. Craig and also interacting with his new friends. On his return to India in 1989, Shirish and Shaila got married. Shaila's parents had high regard for his academic and educational achievements. The couple was blessed with a baby boy whom they named Tejas. Parenthood has been one of the most joyful experiences of Shirish's life. He considers Tejas to be "the most precious gift bestowed" on him by God.

With his wife's encouragement, Shirish pursued higher studies in Law and obtained a Ph.D. In the social sector too, he began to shoulder responsibilities and win recognition. He became the President of National Federation of the Blind and Executive member of National Association for the Blind. He also received the Blind Welfare State award in 1989. Increasingly, he became involved with the issues concerning the disabled persons as well as the under-privileged. Besides becoming the founder member of a residential blind school and library, he grew interested in human rights issues.

Dr. Deshpande has kept pace with the latest developments in his chosen field by often attending conferences and publishing papers. He has recently joined as Professor of Law at National Academy of Legal Studies and Research University, Hyderabad. Today, he is able to look back and reflect upon his life with a sense of pride, triumph and contentment. He is a man at peace with himself and the world around him, meaningfully contributing to society. He asserts, "My loss of vision has never been a deterrent to my sense of humour and positive approach towards life".



Shiv Jatan Thakur

- Combating Discrimination

by--Mukta Aneja

Shiv Jatan Thakur's life-story is ample vindication of the fact that visual disability need not be a barrier to achieving high positions in life. He has established himself as a shining crusader against all unjust and discriminatory practices against deserving persons with vision impairment. Coming from a humble family background, he has risen to one of the highest constitutional bodies in the country.

Born in June 1953 in the Nalanda district of Bihar, young Shiv lost his eyesight at the age of eight, after an attack of meningitis. His father was a simple Railway employee (Class IV). Though the financial condition of the family was not good, his parents' attitude towards him was supportive. Encouraging him to study, his father did his best to meet all the expenses of his education. Shiv started attending a residential school for the blind from the age of eight. He demonstrated a steely determination to succeed and overcome all odds from a very young age.

As a student, Shiv Thakur excelled in studies. After his schooling, he completed his Bachelor's Degree in English Honours. Not only was he a good student, he was a keen reader and a brilliant speaker as well. He emerged as a national orator at the university level. He also evinced leadership qualities as a student in Bihar. As a result, he was elected as the Secretary of Patna University Students' Union. Shiv Thakur completed his Master's Degree in English securing first position. His shining record as a student enabled him to get a job as a lecturer within six months of his completion of M.A.!

With his perseverance and bold spirit, he continued his onward journey on the road to success. He completed his B.Ed. as well as Ph.D. Since 1981, he has been teaching at the Department of English, at Patna University, Bihar. Today he is held in high esteem as a professor at the university.

In March 1991, Dr. Shiv Jatan Thakur was appointed as a member of the Bihar Public Service Commission--it was a unique distinction for a visually challenged person to hold the post of a constitutional functionary. His administrative performance made a great impact in the political as well as social spheres. So much so, that in a resolution dated 22nd October 1991, his name was recommended for the Padmashree Award--one of the widely acclaimed civilian awards from the Government of India. However, the grant of these awards was stayed by the judiciary for three years.

Unfortunately, as is often the case with a talented person achieving recognition in public, Dr. Shiv Jatan Thakur, too, was confronted with opposition from several quarters, particularly from the then Chief Minister of Bihar. Dr. Thakur would not quietly submit to the dictates and whims of the government and politicians. So, the outcome was inevitable. Citing his disability as a ground for denial, a writ petition was filed against Dr. Thakur in the Patna High Court. The writ challenged the validity of his appointment as a member of the public Service Commission, invoking Article 317 of the Constitution, giving "reason of infirmity of mind or body" as the base for disqualifying him.

Dr. Thakur is not the kind of person who would take such discrimination and negative attitude lying down. He rose to the occasion and personally contested the case in the Patna High Court and won the case! This was not the end of the battle for him, however. The judgement was challenged in the Supreme Court. The State Government of Bihar continued to press for the removal of Dr. Shiv Thakur, on the grounds of his disability. In the Supreme Court, Dr. Thakur impressed everyone by arguing his own case, amply substantiating his arguments with apt quotations from constitutional provisions. The Supreme Court expressed appreciation for his calibre, saying: "We have seen the respondent no. 6 in this court who argued his case in person. It took some moments before we realized that he was totally blind. As a matter of fact, we found him a highly competent person who has impressed us much".

Dr. Thakur won the case! He also went on to act as the Chairperson, State Public Service Commission, for a short while.

Dr. Shiv Thakur's all-round success not only brought him recognition in public, but also happiness in his personal life. Highly impressed by his strong personality and professional accomplishments, one of his students proposed to him and they got married shortly thereafter. His wife is a teacher in a senior secondary school. The happy couple have two children.

Dr. Thakur has remained active in his field through various means. Not only has he been a good teacher and researcher, he has also expressed his talents through writing. He has written a book titled

‘Mind and Heart of Helen Keller’. He has also written several research articles in national journals. He is the Associate Editor of Cyber Literature. His deep interest in literature and linguistics is enhanced through his involvement with several national and international organizations. Dr. Thakur is a life member of American Studies Research Centre, Indian Association for American Studies, and International Society for Linguistics. He has also been abroad.

His achievements have won him recognition in the form of awards. In 1992, the National Award as the Best Disabled Employee was conferred on him by the President of India. He has also been acclaimed as the Man of Distinction by the American Biographical Institute, USA and the Man of the Year, International Biographical Institute, London. He has received commendation for his meritorious work from Human Welfare Society.

He believes that the secret behind his triumphs lies in his perseverance, confidence and tenacity to struggle against odds. His life story is an inspiration to all who need to overcome challenging situations. Although his life he has demonstrated commendable strength of will-power, resilience, pertinacity and courage.



Shivaji Laxman Chavhan

- Following His True Calling

by--Priya Varadan

Shivaji Laxman Chavhan was born on July 12, 1951, in Sangli, Maharashtra. At the age of four, he lost his eyesight following a cataract operation. His parents were illiterate but financially well settled because of their fruit mart business. They tried many options to restore his eyesight but that was not to be. Till the age of 10, he stayed at home as his parents refused to send him to school mainly due to fear relating to his blindness and lack of awareness. A caring and concerned neighbour finally managed to change their attitude and put their fears at rest; Chavhan’s parents allowed him to attend a blind school.

However, his parents feared letting him travel alone to school and instead escorted him wherever he went. It took about three years for them to realise that their son was indeed independent enough to travel alone. He was a very mischievous boy—he was thrown out of school thrice but taken back each time on the request of his mother. “That’s all the problem I had and that’s how it was dealt with,” he says lightly. His sharp memory, concentration and good grasp over Braille got him good grades in exams in school and college. He also did a Telephone Operator course and a vocational rehabilitation course along with his studies.

After his father’s death, he did not want to depend on his siblings for life; he, instead wanted to earn his own living. But jobs were not easy to come by. So, he decided to make his own modest beginning towards self-sufficiency. He sold lottery tickets, set up a fruit mart, then a barber shop, then a tailoring shop, etc. But none yielded him any profit and he had to close them down.

Meanwhile he met Smita, whom he wanted to marry. The road to marriage was not a smooth one. His family had reservations since his spouse to-be was also blind. His family wanted him to marry a sighted girl. Despite opposition and reservations, he went ahead and married Smita. It is a decision that both families are proud of today.

In December 1979 came the moment he had been waiting for. He was called for an interview at the Indian Overseas Bank (I.O.B.), for the post of telephone operator. He cleared the interview and joined the Calba Devi branch of I.O.B., Mumbai.

But his true calling was business. He felt that all he had to do was to give it another try--success was just around the corner. In 1987, he opened his own travel agency, Smit India Travels in Mumbai. This gave him what had been eluding him till then in his earlier ventures--profits and prosperity.

His initial years in the business saw him face many problems. As he had his bank job, he could give time to his business only after office hours. His business partner (in the early years) tried to take over the business and there were clients who cheated him. There were many who doubted his ability due to his visual impairment and he operated only as a booking agent for a long time.

But Mr. Chavhan did not lose hope; he just kept striving harder and harder. In fact, he continued investing in human relationships as he believed that was the key to success, in business or in life. He says philosophically, "It's all about trust and faith in business and they (the cheaters) committed breach of trust. I believe it has nothing to do with my blindness."

Success knocked at his door in the form of Khurana Travels in April 1992. Mr. Khurana (of Khurana Travels) did a thorough study of Mr. Chavhan's business and was impressed with his public relation skills, staff management and handling of accounts and decided to do business with him. Mr. Chavhan's disability did not prove an impediment to their business ties.

Business expanded as he ventured into tour operation (plying luxury coaches, buses, etc.). Thus began a long innings of faith, trust and enduring business relations. Since then, there has been no stopping him--business turnover, profits and clients steadily increased. In 1995, he resigned from his job in I.O.B.

Today, his annual turnover is approximately Rs. 30-40 lakh. He has six permanent staff working for him and a few temporary employees depending on the volume of business at a given point of time. His son also assists him in business now.

Mr. Chavhan, however, does not forget his debt of gratitude, and expresses his feelings with these words: "It is all because of Mr. Khurana's faith in me that I am in this position, today."

Throwing light on his business expertise that impresses his clients, he says "It's all in my head. My powers of concentration help me deal with my clients, keep tabs on accounts, decide whom to hire, etc." Questions and cross-questions are some of his tactics to keep a check on his staff and clients. And, he has the final say in business matters.

Mr. Chavhan is not insensitive to the plight of persons with disabilities in the country. Commenting on the disability scenario, here, he says, "I feel the private sector is more supportive; government policies for persons with blindness and visual impairment exist only on paper. They should reach out and support our endeavours."

Though he mostly remains preoccupied with his business, he likes to spend the little spare time that he has, interacting with his family--wife and three children. He also loves to write poetry.

Shivaji Laxman Chavhan has succeeded in bringing out the best within him, overcoming all odds and never giving up hope. He had always aspired to have a business of his own and he has succeeded in abundant measure in his cherished calling!



Shri Ram Bhadracharyaji

- A Religious Head With A Vision

by--Mukta Aneja

On the Eastern side of the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh, there is a small, quiet town, called Chitrakoot. It has been famous through the centuries as a major pilgrimage centre for the Hindus; through the last over a decade, it has acquired special name for itself as the abode of a Jagat Guru (teacher of the world) as he has come to be titled. The Jagat Guru is characterised as much by his erudition and scholarship as the fact that he is deprived of physical eye-sight.

However, let us begin the story from the beginning. The Jagat Guru Ram Bhadracharya was born on 14th January, 1950 at Sandi, a village near Jaunpur in Uttar Pradesh. His parents named him Giridharlal and he was initiated as Ram Bhadracharya 28 years later. At his birth, he had normal sight, but a few weeks after his birth when he was nearly two months old, he developed some inflammation in the eyes. However, most primitive methods were used to cure this. Instead of being taken to a medical doctor, he was taken to a nearby village woman who used to put some concoction in the eyes to cure such illnesses. When she prepared this hot concoction and put it in the child's eyes, blood came out and people rejoiced in the illusion that the disease was cured. Nobody could then imagine the child's agony and the fact that with the blood from the eyes the sight was lost forever.

As his father used to be in Bombay (now Mumbai) most of the time, Ram Bhadracharya grew up under the affectionate care and strong religious beliefs of his grandfather who encouraged the child's predilections towards Hindu thought and Hindu religious works. As a child, Giridharlal had exceptional memory. Before he was five years old, he had memorized the whole of Srimad Bhagvad Geeta (a sacred Hindu religious book running into 18 chapters) and before the age of eight he had learnt by heart the whole of the epic called Ram Charit Manas.

However, an incident which took place when Giridharlal was eleven years of age, left a poignant imprint in his memory. He wanted to join the family in a wedding procession but he was stopped. Such deep rooted was the prejudice against visual disability that it was thought that his presence on the auspicious occasion of marriage could be the harbinger of ill luck. Years later, the same blind child grew up to be an acclaimed religious teacher not only in India but also overseas, one whose presence is much sought-after on auspicious occasions.

Though he had acquired knowledge rare for the children of his age, unlike his other brothers and sisters, the child Giridharlal had not attained any formal education due to his blindness. His family wanted him to become a Katha Vachak (a Hindu priest who earns his living by narrating religious stories). But Giridharlal wished to take up studies and wished to do nothing else at this stage. Seeing his determination, his father went to Varanasi to explore possibilities for his education. It was initially thought that he may be sent to a special school for the blind, but his mother refused saying that blind children were not treated well there. So, he was sent to a Sanskrit school called Gaurishankar Mahavidyalaya situated near his village.

Giridharlal started his education in this institution in 1966 and spent five years studying Sanskrit and other subjects. He deeply impressed his teachers and peers with his determination, hard work, skills and, above all with his exceptional powers to memorize everything just by hearing it once. It

was because of his unusual powers of memory and retention that he never took the help of Braille or any other technology. He topped his class every year, and in 1971 was enrolled in Varanasi Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya known as Sampooranand Sanskrit Vishvavidyalaya (Varanasi Sanskrit University).

Here, too, his unusual intellectual acumen, his phenomenal powers of memory and his gentle and friendly demeanour impressed everyone. He became very dear to both his teachers and peers.

Though Giridhar had come from a humble background of a rural area, yet he was soon able to adjust to the routine of the University and obtained degrees of Shastri (two years) and Acharya (three years) with flying colours, breaking all previous academic records of that University. He won Gold Medals in the Shastri and Acharya examinations. Further, though he had enrolled for an Acharya in Vyakarana (grammar), his examiners were so impressed with his scholarship that he was declared as the Acharya of all subjects taught in that University. He also received the UGC Research Fellowship during these studies.

But Sampooranand University was not just an academic institution for Giridharlal. At this University, Giridharlal came in contact with learned scholars, participated in religious discourses and debates and excelled in these, winning many prizes at various levels and establishing an unchallenged claim of his genius as a Vedic and Sanskrit scholar.

He possessed a not too common skill of instantly composing Shlokas (four or eight-line Sanskrit verses). A significant number of Sanskrit scholars witnessed this skill when he came to New Delhi in 1973 to take part in various Sanskrit national competitions. He won five of the eight gold medals. Impressed with his achievements, the then Prime Minister of India, offered to send Giridharlal for eye treatment to USA, but he politely declined the generous offer.

After getting his Acharya degree Giridharlal enrolled himself for a Ph.D. and also started earning some money by Kathas (religious discourses for common people). However, during his studies for Acharya and Ph.D. degrees he faced extreme financial hardships.

Soon his popularity as a scholar and as a Katha Vachak spread all around. In 1978, he was invited for an important nine-day Katha in Chitrakoot and till today this place Chitrakoot remains the centre of his life and work.

1978 was an important year in Giridharlal's life in many respects. Not only did he come to Chitrakoot for the important Katha, he also went to Gujarat where he met once again his elder sister, Geeta Devi, who promised to join him in his quest and mission. She has stood by him since then and even today plays an important role for him. Above all, the year 1978 was important for him because it was in this year that the person so far known as Giridharlal made a conscious choice to be a Sadhu (a religious recluse) and was formally initiated in the Ramanand sect of Hinduism. Henceforth, he came to be known as Ram Bhadradas and later as Ram Bhadracharya.

Prior to this initiation, however, he had enrolled for a Ph.D. which he completed in October, 1981. Within the same month he received a letter seeking to appoint him as the Head of Vyakarana (grammar) Department of the very University where he had studied and completed his Ph.D. He was offered this prestigious appointment even without applying for it bearing testimony to his comprehensive learning and qualifications. But destiny and his inner call had chosen another way of life for him. After giving a brief thought to it and after consulting his sister Geeta Devi, he decided not to take up this appointment because by now he was convinced that he was ordained to serve religion, society and literature.

In keeping with this sense of mission he finally left home in 1983 and along with his sister virtually became a wanderer. Ram Bhadradas went through serious hardships during the next three years. He had no place to live in, and as his sister was performing a three years' Anushtan (a religious fast and ritual) he did not have her company. He had difficulties in paying the salary of his escort, who even misbehaved with him and ridiculed his visual disability. But Ram Bhadradas was not to be deterred or strayed from his chosen path. In the meantime, many people started following him as his disciples. Finally, with the help of his sister who had now rejoined him, and with assistance from some disciples and religious minded persons he set up his own Ashram (a dwelling place for Hindu saints) called Tulsi Peeth (the seat of Tulsi) in Chitrakoot in 1987.

Last eighteen years have brought for him recognition and laurels one after the other. In 1988, his sect recognized him as the Ramanandacharya of Tulsi Peeth. Now he decided to dedicate himself to literature as well and wrote an epic in Hindi titled **Arundhati** and another epic in Sanskrit titled **Shri Bhargava Raghaveeyam**. Both have won wide literary and academic acclaim. In 1997, he was awarded a D.Lit. degree by the Sampurnanand Sanskrit University. Before this, in 1995, the congregation of Hindu saints at Ayodhya (a famous Hindu religious place known to be the birthplace of Lord Rama) reconfirmed his position as the unchallenged Ramanandacharya of Tulsi Peeth as Ram Bhadracharya.

He was now inspired to write a Bhashya (exhaustive commentary) on Prasthan Traya. Such a commentary is a mandatory requirement if one wishes to be considered for the title of Jagat Guru (the teacher of the world) awarded by the highest congregation of Hindu saints. This commentary was released by the then Prime Minister of India, on 6th April, 1998 and on 10th April, 1998, Ram Bhadracharya was awarded the title of Dharma Chakri and was recognized as the Jagat Guru by the World Religious Parliament: a rare achievement for anyone, and an achievement hitherto unknown in the case of a blind person.

His work and talent have also taken him abroad several times. Ram Bhadracharya was asked to lead the Indian delegation in the 9th World Conference on Ramayana held in Indonesia in 1992. He has also visited Singapore, Mauritius and England where he delivered several discourses on Hindu religion.

Despite his esteemed position as 'Jagat Guru', he has not abdicated his social and literary commitments and responsibilities. On the social front, he is involved in many ventures and charitable trusts. Notable among these is one in Gujarat where he runs a hundred-bed hospital.

Realizing the sad plight of many poor disabled persons, Ram Bhadracharya started a special school for the blind in Chitrakoot in 1996. He also organizes many camps for the disabled where assistance as well as equipments are provided free of cost. In the year 2001, he set up the first model University for the Disabled which is now known as Jagat Guru Ram Bhadracharya Viklang Vishvavidyalaya. This is the first university for the disabled of its kind in the world where education is provided free of cost and a barrier-free environment and modern technological devices are available. The University has been recognized both by the State Government and the University Grants Commission.

Through his own example Jagat Guru Ram Bhadracharya has proved to one and all that physical disability as well as obstacles caused by economic conditions and social prejudices are powerless provided the individual has the will, unflinching determination and a conviction in his mission.

Siddharth Sharma

- In Pursuit of Excellence

by--Anand Sharma

Siddharth Sharma was born in New Delhi, on May 4, 1966. He had his graduation from a reputed college in Delhi and was comfortably settled in a garment export firm and was also doing a course at the National Institute of Fashion Technology.

On a cold, foggy December night in 1990, Siddharth and his friend were returning home on his motorbike, when he crashed into a police barrier which resulted in instant loss of vision due to damaged optic nerves. No effort was spared in consulting leading ophthalmologists all over the world and finally, Siddharth was operated upon twice by a team of Russian doctors from the Feodorov Institute, Moscow, which was the leading research institute in the world at that time for eye microsurgery. Unfortunately, the operations were not successful and Siddharth accepted he would lead a life of 'darkness' with complete loss of vision in both eyes.

In 1992, Siddharth went to the National Institute for the Visually Handicapped (NIVH) in Dehra Dun, to master the basic skills of Braille, mobility and home management. During this period, he had a short stint at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling and successfully led a team of visually impaired youth on the first expedition to Dzongri Peak at 14 thousand feet in the Sikkim Himalayas. This was a moment of triumph for Siddharth as it was a great personal accomplishment and a confidence booster.

In early 1993, at the behest of Mr. Vivek Bhushan, a friend and proprietor of the export house, Fascination India, where he had worked before the accident, Siddharth resumed work with them. After 15 months, he realised that an ambitious career in garment manufacturing and fashion was not a viable proposition for a visually impaired person.

He then made a bold decision to resign and explore new avenues. A short while later he teamed up with a jewellery designer. Together they began marketing contemporary fashion jewellery domestically as also exporting it overseas. Although this was an exciting business venture, Siddharth realised that he would be always dependent on inputs from the sighted.

It was at this time that the First World Cup Cricket for the Blind was being organised and Siddharth joined the organising committee to look after the public relations aspect of the tournament. He successfully helped in organising press conferences both with the national and foreign media.

Impressed with Siddharth's professional abilities, a public relations agency, Connexions, a Dalmia group subsidiary, invited him to join them. Siddharth settled into his new career with ease and took on responsibilities of both corporate communications and business development. Over a span of a few months, Siddharth was given independent charge of the entire operations of the agency and, assisted by an able team, he spearheaded its growth.

Confident with having gained experience in dealing with a broad spectrum of clients, Siddharth decided to spread his wings and move to greater challenges. He explored the possibilities of advancing his career with some leading multinational public relations agencies with which he had a

series of interviews. He admits that although there was keen interest shown in his professional abilities, there was also a hint of scepticism.

At this juncture, he made yet another bold decision and rekindled the entrepreneurial flame that was dormant yet not extinguished, within him. He teamed up with his friend Sajal Ghosh, the owner of a successful advertising agency called Foundations Advertising and floated a partnership firm called Foundations PR. In this venture, he was assisted by his friend and colleague from Connexions, Shaaz Hassan, who is still an integral part of the team.

With its modest beginnings in 2002 with one computer and a skeleton staff, today Foundations PR is a public relations agency of repute. With Siddharth at the helm, aided by a team of PR consultants and executives, the agency has a national network of associates spread across most state capitals. Foundations PR has the distinction of working with market leaders across various industries, publicising and promoting brands.

Siddharth maintains that his positive attitude definitely has a rub-off effect on others and all through his career his colleagues have given him immense support and encouragement.

Siddharth has been successful in charting new territories as one of Asia's very few visually impaired self-employed public relations professionals. He advises new aspirants to this field to try to pursue post-graduate courses in public relations and advertising. He believes this, coupled with an extensive course in computer education, would enable blind people to be independent and productive.

Siddharth has always maintained strong ties with the Association of Cricket for the Blind in India (ACBI) and continues to be a member of its governing council.

Siddharth has never felt his visual impairment to be an impediment to his being part of the mainstream society. He has always laid stress on good grooming, communication skills and personality development. He considers these to be important aspects for the visually challenged since he strongly believes that the image projected plays a key role in success. He also has a flair for fashion and keeps up with current trends. He was always an active sports person and today he pursues body building to maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Siddharth currently does not hold any post in organisations within the local community. He does admit, though, that he is interested in politics and is considering joining a secular party sometime in the future.

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Sobhagya Goyal

- Persevering Against Odds

by--Mukta Aneja

Dr. Sobhagya Goyal's career represents a shining and inspiring example of conquest over social prejudices and barriers and the emergence of a truly empowered lady with a vision-impairment.

Sobhagya hails from an educated middle class family. She was born in Ajmer, Rajasthan (Central India) on October 25, 1955. At the young age of seven, she became totally blind, due to detachment of retina. She had to contend not only with the personal trauma that inevitably accompanies the onset of disability, but also with the misconceptions and ignorance that is generally prevalent towards a blind girl-child. However, she was lucky to find support, affection and help from within her family.

Sobhagya started her education at a special school for the blind girls in New Delhi, Rashtriya Virjanand Andh Kanya Vidyalaya. She displayed her intellectual prowess from very early on, often standing first in her class. She studied in this school up to the Higher Secondary stage. Her elder sister, an advocate, encouraged her to pursue higher studies. So, after her schooling, she returned to Rajasthan and continued her education there. She completed B.A. (Honours) and went on to do her B.Ed. and LL.B. With her characteristic zeal for higher learning and strong desire for self-reliance, she successfully completed her Master's degree, followed by M.Phil. and Ph.D. She made a mark for herself by taking various examinations on English/Hindi typewriters. She demonstrated a remarkable capacity for hard work, coupled with a determined drive to surmount various obstacles and gender-bias that visual disability entails for women.

As is often the case, despite the fact that Dr. Sobhagya Goyal was a gold medalist at both the college and university levels, when it came to the question of finding a job, most people doubted her capacity to work. Undaunted by the lack of trust and skepticism of a harsh and doubting society, she made resolute efforts to be at par with others and pursue a mainstream career. Her perseverance paid off, and in the year 1981, she was appointed by the Directorate of College Education, Government of Rajasthan, as a Lecturer in the Department of History. The following year, her merit was reconfirmed through her selection by the Public Service Commission for a similar post.

In 1981, Dr. Sobhagya Goyal was greatly encouraged to know from All India Confederation of the Blind that she was among the first few blind lady lecturers to teach at the college level in the region. The boost she received from this organization deepened her self-esteem and enhanced her capacity to work hard. Currently, she is the Head of the History Department at the Government Post Graduate College, Ajmer. Apart from her teaching commitments, she has today as many as seven scholars pursuing their research towards M.Phil./Ph.D. degrees under her able guidance. She has emerged as a popular and successful teacher during the course of twenty-five years of her teaching career. All these years, she has striven to bring out the best in her students who have often rewarded her by performing creditably in their respective examinations.

Dr. Goyal's keen interest in her subject has led her to write as many as three books and thirty-two research papers. Her books have been included in the curriculum of universities in Rajasthan and are very popular among students. Her articles on various issues pertaining to her field of specialization have been published in many regional and national newspapers. She has also had the privilege of presenting her research papers both at national and international levels.

Dr. Sobhagya Goyal's capacity for contributing to society has come to be recognized even outside the teaching field. She was appointed a member in the Co-ordination Committees set up by the Rajasthan Government under the Persons With Disabilities Act--1995 and the National Trust Act of 1999.

Dr. Goyal's varied talents have been recognized time and again by different institutions, organizations as well as the Government. During the early stages of her career, in 1982, she received an award from the Government of Rajasthan. The National Association for the Blind (India) has honoured her with various awards as many as three times-- in 1985, 2001 and 2003. The Government of India conferred upon her the Best Disabled Employee's Award in 1994. In 1996, the World Youth Organization recognized her various contributions through an award. M.D.S. University, Rajasthan, gave public recognition to her attainments in the year 1995 and 2002. It was in 2002 that the prestigious award of All India Confederation of the Blind, that of being an outstanding blind woman was conferred on Dr. Sobhagya Goyal.

This empowered lady is of the opinion that a synthesis of concentration, dedication and hard work hold the key to overcoming obstacles. She believes that a burning desire not to be left behind in the competitive world of today, should motivate a visually challenged person and make him/her

perform at par with the sighted individuals. She has been a forthright spokesperson for the rights of the disabled persons and has worked ceaselessly towards the implementation of the Persons With Disabilities Act--1995.

Dr. Sobhagya Goyal continues to be an inspiration to thousands of women, both blind and sighted, across the nation. She has demonstrated through her unstinting efforts that the concept of empowerment of visually challenged women need not be confined to mere arm-chair discussions and rhetoric, but could easily be translated into a tangible reality through appropriate education and strength of will power.



Surender Singh Sangwan

- An Illustrious Academician

by--Mukta Aneja

In the early 1970s, when a meritorious student from Haryana expressed his desire to pursue his Master's degree in English, everyone thought he was being foolhardy. This is not surprising because prejudices against disabled people were more pronounced in those days, and the student in question was visually challenged. Society felt that the only avenues open to the blind were those of caning and music! But Surender was not the kind of person to be governed by the dictates of society. He forged ahead and followed his own convictions. Not only did he rise to become an esteemed Professor, but he also went on to hold responsible positions in the University.

Surender Singh Sangwan was born on 3rd October, 1952 in a village known as Nilothi in the Rohtak District of Haryana (North India). He lost his eyesight at the age of seven due to retinal detachment. Initially, his family was traumatised and filled with grief, but gradually they geared up to prepare the child for a life of dignity. Little Surender had discontinued his schooling in his native village for four years after losing his eyesight. He resumed his studies when he was eleven years old, joining the residential Government School for the Blind, Panipat, Haryana. His father was the headmaster of a government school, and he found at home a conducive atmosphere for his studies and his overall growth. Childhood years are the most formative ones of a person's life, and the positive vibes that this intelligent child received from his entire family in his early years went a long way towards fostering his self-esteem and career. Even today, he recalls the faith his grandfather reposed in his capabilities when he was very young.

In those days, schools for the blind encouraged the students to focus on music and crafts only. Surender silently rebelled against these stereotypes. This strong reaction implanted in his mind a desire to excel in other fields and to be at par with the best in normal society. He studied at the Panipat blind school up to standard VIII. Thereafter, he joined a government high school in a village. His innate intelligence, combined with hard work, enabled him to outshine other students. As a result, he found himself on the Merit List in Matriculation, much to the joy of his well-wishers and others.

When he went to seek admission to a college in Hissar for further studies, he found that the Principal of the College was reluctant to admit him, because he felt that a visually challenged student would place extra burden and responsibilities on the College. It was only after Surender succeeded in convincing the Principal that he would himself be responsible for his own safety, mobility, as well

as for his studies that the Principal agreed to give him admission. Soon, however, the teachers and head of the institution began to revise their opinion as they started recognizing this student's brilliance and capabilities. He graduated with flying colours, and was once again on the Merit List of Punjab University.

Much against the reservations and misgivings of other people, Surender Sangwan went on to complete his M.A. in English, and topped the University. He had battled against many social prejudices to come thus far in life, but the worst was yet to come. Despite the fact that he stood First in the University, virtually no one was willing to consider him capable of teaching English to College and University students! It was a real challenge to get an opportunity to demonstrate his ability to teach these students. After a lot of struggle, he was appointed to teach on part-time basis at the University's evening college at Rohtak, Haryana in the year 1975. Here too, he was subjected to close scrutiny before he gained acceptance. It was only after his work was gauged in the classroom for sixteen days continuously by the Principal and the Head of the English Department that his joining report was ultimately accepted.

Sangwan's dynamic performance as a Lecturer, the warm response of his students followed by their excellent results, soon had a positive impact on the management and staff of the institution. By 1977, he obtained a much-deserved permanent appointment through open selection. His deep interest in the subject as well as his desire to strive for something higher motivated him to join M.Phil. at M.D. University. In 1978, he was selected as a Lecturer in that University's Teaching Department.

With his penchant for learning and imparting knowledge, Surender Singh Sangwan rose steadily in his career. In 1986, he submitted his Ph.D. thesis on Hemingway's Fiction to Kurukshetra University. This thesis was subsequently published in book form by Lakeside Publishers under the title Hemingway's Fiction.

In 1994, he became Professor of English and thereby realized his childhood dreams. Thus, Dr. Sangwan was able to live up to the famous dictum, "The future belongs to those who believe in their dreams".

In the year 1996, he was honoured by the Kurukshetra University for his outstanding contribution to the teaching field. He has also written a number of research articles. A recent book edited by Prof. Sangwan titled 'The Sounds of Stillness' is under publication by the Oxford University Press, India.

His commitments at the University as a Professor have included not just teaching work, but administrative duties as well. Several positions of responsibility have been well-discharged by him. For instance, he was the Dean, Faculty of Humanities during 1995-98; twice he proved to be an efficient Head of the Department, first from 1996-99 and again from 2002-till date. He has also been the Chairperson, Board of Studies; a member of the Academic Council and also, a member of the University Court. As Nominee of the Vice-Chancellor and expert on various selection committees, he has played a key role in the selection of many Lecturers, Readers, Professors and Principals.

Prof. Sangwan has also guided the research work of many scholars both at the M.Phil. and the Ph.D. levels.

At the personal level, Prof. Sangwan has had a meaningful and happy family life. He met Ranjana in 1977 and the two got married in 1979. His wife Dr. Ranjana Sangwan holds a Ph.D. in Education and is currently working as a Senior Lecturer, College of Education, Rohtak, Haryana. Their two children have followed the footsteps of the parents in their desire for higher learning. The 23-year-old son is studying at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. Their 18-year old daughter is doing her M.B.B.S.

Having lived a meaningful life, Dr. Sangwan observes that “For a blind person, whatever his field of work may be, it is not only his knowledge and efficiency that is important; his personal conduct also plays a very important role in determining the attitude of society towards him”. It is his hope that society will start taking a positive approach towards the disabled people, focusing on what a person with disability can do, instead of thinking what he/she cannot do.



Sushama Agrawal -A Shining Star in the Mathematics Firmament

by--Mukta Aneja

For many sighted youngsters, the stereotypical attitude towards Mathematics has been that it is a complex and droning subject, which is too hard to master. But for Sushama Agrawal, a bright and daring visually challenged lady, Mathematics was the field she chose to excel in.

Born in February 1960, Sushama started going to a regular school at the age of six. Like other girls of her age, she looked forward to a normal, happy school life. However, to the terrible shock and horror for Sushama and her family, she started losing her eyesight. At the age of nine, she was diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa, a degenerative eye problem, ultimately leading to blindness.

Initially, Sushama was able to read books, but could not decipher anything written on the black board. By the time she joined college, she could not read books either.

Young Sushama was increasingly heading towards a ‘dark’ world. However, she was not the type of student who would give in easily. To equip herself for her studies, she began to take help from her sighted friends and later on, her dear mother started reading out for her.

Prodded on by a desire to prove to herself and to society that loss of eyesight does not entail a compromise in choice of career, Sushama went on to pursue and excel in one of the most challenging subjects--Mathematics.

She secured a first class in B.Sc. as well as in M.Sc. She also qualified in the tough UGC-CSIR Junior Research Fellowship Exam. With single minded dedication, she went on traversing the challenging path towards her career goal. She received Fellowship from the National Board for Higher Mathematics for doing her Ph.D. Her keen intellect coupled with her redoubtable courage and untiring efforts bore rich dividends, when she completed her Ph.D. in Mathematics from Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai. It was indeed a proud moment for Sushama and her well-wishers when she received her Ph.D. in 1996. She is the first visually challenged person in India to receive a Doctorate in a Science subject. In recognition of this distinction, she received a letter of appreciation from the then Prime Minister of India, Shri Deve Gowda.

Despite such high achievements, Sushama’s struggles were, by no means over. To convince prospective employers about her capabilities, was no easy task. Although she had already proved her merit through her Ph.D. and post-Doctoral research work, her applications for teaching jobs were not considered favourably by many educational institutions. Sushama was disheartened by such setbacks, but she did not give up. She contributed valuable papers in national as well as international journals

of her field, as well as presented papers at international conferences. Among her papers published before she got a stable job were “Intrinsic Proof for Real Analogue of Fuglede Putnam Rosenblun Theorem” (1994) and “Some Applications of a Spectral Theorem for a Normal Operator on a Real Hilbert Space” (1994 and 1998).

In November 2000, she was finally selected for a job that she so thoroughly deserved. She was appointed as a lecturer at the Ramanujam Institute for Advanced Study in Mathematics, University of Madras. The fact that she has been teaching students at the Master’s and M.Phil. level, as well as guiding Ph.D. students is a commendable demonstration of her rare mental agility and tenacity. Today, she has secured a congenial environment at work for herself, earning the respect and support of her students and colleagues alike.

Sushama Agrawal has found joy not only in her professional sphere but in her personal life as well. Her husband also belongs to the same professional world--he is a Professor in the Department of Mathematics at the renowned Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai. The couple have a daughter, who is now in college.

Dr. Sushama Agrawal has continuously striven to maintain a hectic profile, often attending symposiums and seminars, where she has been presenting papers, participating in short term courses, traveling abroad, delivering guest lectures at various institutes in Tamil Nadu and also organizing a national level conference at her Institute. Her contribution to her field of specialization was recognized at the international level, when she visited the Department of Mathematics of Technion, Israel Institute of Technology, in Haifa, where she attended the International Conference on Fixed Point Theory and its Applications, in the summer of 2001. Dr. Agrawal also went to the United States of America in 2002, and presented at Washington and Lee University, Lexington, a paper jointly written by her and Prof. S.H.Kulkarni of IIT, Chennai. The complex subject of her presentation, “Spectral Isometries of Real Commutative Banach Algebras”, reflected her deep love for and command over her chosen field. Dr. Agrawal also visited some other Universities in the U.S., such as the University of Iowa, Kansas State University and Emporia State University, sharing her views with well known Professors of these Universities.

In cognizance of her notable contributions, Dr. Sushama Agrawal has received awards from voluntary organizations, including one from All India Confederation of the Blind. She considers herself a normal person, and this, she asserts, is the key to her success. She feels that society should not discriminate between a so-called disabled and a normal person, and ought to treat everyone as normal.



Sushil Bhutani **- A Successful Businessman**

by--Mukta Aneja

Sushil Bhutani’s journey through life represents yet another shining example of conquest over disability. He has fully vindicated to the world around, the truth of the oft-quoted saying of Helen Keller: “while people said it could not be done, it was done.” Bhutani has excelled in business and entrepreneurship--areas not generally associated with blindness in the country.

Born in Gurgaon, Haryana on 20th August, 1950, he started going to a regular school at the age of five. To the shock of the young school boy and his family, Sushil lost vision in one eye when he was 15 due to retinal detachment. The family was shattered. In those days there was no “crisis management unit” to help out. Sushil was in the 7th standard at that time. The doctors warned him of the impending loss of sight in the other eye.

Sushil had to give up his studies and joined his father’s business at the age of 16. His father was a distributor with Hindustan Lever Limited. When other young boys of his age were busy studying or playing, Sushil was preoccupied, learning skills of the business world from his father. Sushil Bhutani developed sharp business acumen from a young age. Tragedy struck the family, when his father passed away in 1971. The few years he had spent learning marketing strategies and honing tools of the trade, did not go in vain--rather, they were to prove to be his long-term assets.

Sushil continued in business along with his elder brother. The following year, the two brothers decided to expand their business by adding more consumer products. They entered into Pharmaceutical trade as distributors for Rajasthan. Sushil’s dedication and drive in his chosen field of endeavour was immense. The nature of his enterprises demanded extensive traveling. He was required to cover almost three-fourth of the state of Rajasthan, and he did so with fortitude and cheerful energy.

In 1972, Sushil met a wonderful girl, whom he married the following year. His wife proved to be an ideal life partner, understanding and affectionate. A few years later, in 1977, what he dreaded most came true, he completely lost vision in both eyes. In his mid-twenties, he found himself in a totally ‘dark’ world. The vicissitudes of the business world posed a severe challenge for him. Sushil Bhutani had to fight a dual battle--he grappled with his complete loss of sight and contended with market forces as well. But, he was determined not to give up and continued in business as before.

He was propelled by his desire to be self-reliant, live a life of dignity and fulfill his responsibilities and commitments towards his family. Carrying out daily business activities, working out calculations and figures and remembering phone numbers had to be dealt with in a different way. He started using the talking calculator for business accounts and recording contact numbers on tape.

In 1983, Mr. Bhutani established a new company called “Real Services,” working as Clearing and Forwarding Agent in Rajasthan, for a well-known Bombay-based firm, Elder Pharmaceuticals, which is known for its heavy turnover. Sushil Bhutani looked after the new company while simultaneously pursuing his old business. The business continued to grow as Sushil worked with indefatigable energy, along with his brother. At the personal level, too, he found happiness. Sushil and his wife were blessed with two daughters and a son.

Life continued smoothly enough till 1994. He was part of a joint family and had joint business until then. However, he received a severe jolt when the joint family split, and his brother separated from him. A separation in a joint family is a heartbreaking event, and Sushil had no choice but to bear the trauma caused by it.

Once again, Sushil Bhutani summoned up courage and began life afresh. After the break-up, Sushil took independent charge of the C. & F. Pharmaceutical business. With his will power and initiative, he has made a successful living out of it. Today, Sushil runs a good business from his office in Jodhpur. He has an efficient staff and infrastructure--seven employees, computers and other office equipment. The Company has an annual turnover of Rs. 7 crore. His son has also joined him in business.

Sushil is also a computer savvy person, very fond of new technology. He is well-versed in the use of softwares which are required in his business.

Sushil Bhutani's account of struggles and achievements is a source of unswerving encouragement to others, as a man with a strong will-power, who always strives to move ahead in life, without allowing negative situations to get the better of him. With quiet self-assurance, he asserts: "Positive approach towards life makes nothing impossible. Overcome all hurdles, and **Never, Never Give Up.**"

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Usha Nagarajan **- A Beacon of Light for Others**

by--Mukta Aneja

A visually challenged lady working successfully as a Medical Officer! sounds almost unbelievable, but it is true. Dr. Usha Nagarajan, who fought against all odds with fortitude and strong will - power, is a source of inspiration to many.

Usha Nagarajan (who was born in Kolkatta in August 1963) lost her vision at the age of 24 after completing her M.B.B.S. from Kolkatta National Medical College. The shock that she received was immense, because she was faced with the prospect of giving up a promising career in the Medical field for which she had struggled so hard. But Usha believes that "if one door closes, another opens"--and this positive attitude in the midst of bleak circumstances helped her to achieve her cherished goal.

Usha had completed her Internship from Kolkatta National Medical Hospital. But she had to discontinue further studies due to complete loss of vision (which had occurred as a result of diabetes) in 1987. It is extremely difficult to cope with sudden loss of sight when one is used to a normal way of functioning in a normal environment for many years. Equipped with no past experience, but with a determined drive, Usha began to prepare herself mentally, physically and practically for a long battle ahead. In January 1990, she took special training in Orientation and Mobility and tried to absorb new methods of coping with her crises from YMCA College for Handicapped, Nandanam, Chennai.

Usha Nagarajan did not want all the years of assiduous training as a medical student to go waste. Rather she wanted to dedicate herself to a life of concrete usefulness. So she did not allow any obstacle--big or small to come in the way of her choice of profession. She stood undaunted in the face of opposition and threat of failure. Her courageous spirit brought her success. In February 1990 she was appointed as a Medical Officer at the Swedish Mission Hospital, Tirupputtur, in South India. Her duties included attending to patients in Health Camps; delivering lectures to students of diploma in nursing at the School of Nursing SM Hospital; and also health teaching at the Blind School in the same campus. Dr. Usha worked at the Swedish Mission Hospital till early 1991, where she performed her duties with creditable accomplishment.

In February 1991, Dr. Usha Nagarajan was appointed as a Medical Officer at Grace Kennett Foundation, Madurai, where she continues to work today. Her responsibilities include Lecturing students of Nursing courses in subjects that are normally considered to be the territory of 'sighted persons only', such as Anatomy and Physiology, Medical and Surgical Nursing, Obstetrics and Gynaecology. Long years of continuing work at the same place are an eloquent testimony of her competence. Dr. Usha is known for her qualities of counseling and motivating people, and also for her affirmative outlook of life.

It is not just her professional field that has brought her contentment and joy. She has found meaning in her personal life also. She observes that in a prejudiced male-dominated society, it is not

easy for a visually challenged lady to find a good match. But she adds, "I am lucky to have an understanding sighted husband". Her husband is a DGM in Parle Agro. The happy couple have a nine year old son, who is now studying in the fourth standard. In her free time Dr. Usha enjoys listening to music, cooking and hearing audio tapes regarding positive attitudes to life.

Dr. Usha is involved with various organizations--both at the local and national levels. She is a member of the Advisory Committee of the Talking Library at Madurai. She is also a member of established national organizations of the visually challenged, such as National Association for the Blind, All India Confederation of the Blind, IAB and NIVH. She has often shared her views as a resource person in seminars, workshops and other programmes conducted by these organizations.

Dr. Usha Nagarajan also extends the benefit of her opinion during various community related activities. She has given Nutritional Advice and counseling to AIDS Awareness Programmes conducted by FPAI Madurai. Her Health-related speech was broadcast over A.I.R.

A tireless dedication to share her expertise and knowledge underlies Dr. Usha's public activities. Her commendable contribution to society has been recognized in the form of various awards conferred upon her over the years. Way back in 1993 she received the Excellent Young Individual Award for the TC Club, Madurai. The state Government of Tamil Nadu gave her the Best Handicapped Employee award in 2001. The All India Confederation of the Blind awarded her a gold Medal in 2002. The Vocational Excellence Award by Madurai Rotary came her way in 2003. In Dec. 2004 the prestigious National Award for Outstanding Disabled Employee was conferred upon her by the President of India. This year, that is in January 2005, Dr. Usha received the Best Achiever award of Neelam Kanga from the National Association for the Blind Mumbai. We hope that this list will continue to expand, as Dr. Usha Nagarajan continues to be a blessing to those around her.

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Ved Prakash Varma

Blazing Trails of Excellence

by--Mukta Aneja

A brilliant student, an accomplished teacher, a prolific writer and a social scientist of repute--Dr.Ved Prakash Varma demonstrates yet again that 'where there is a will, there is a way'. His life-story is a veritable saga of courage, determination and perseverance in the face of seemingly insuperable obstacles.

Born on October 9, 1934 in Bahawalpur (now in Pakistan), Ved Prakash Varma was about 10 months old when he lost his sight due to trachoma. He came from a simple family background. His father was an Assistant Station Master in Karachi Division.

The child Ved Prakash's visual disability did not overwhelm his parents. They had a positive attitude to the child and his disability, neither rejecting him, nor overprotecting him, as Ved Prakashji recalled later. No wonder, then, that this attitude of parental acceptance had a profound and positive influence on the personality development of the young child.

One of the first things his parents concentrated upon was to locate suitable avenues of educational development for him. He received his initial training in independent living skills through

his loving parents. At the age of 10 he was admitted to a residential school, **Institution for the Blind**, Amritsar. School life opened out to him a vast array of challenges as well as many learning opportunities. There were problems of inadequate textbooks in Braille, shortage of assistive devices and lack of proper training in mobility and communication skills. It was, here that the young student had his first lessons in diligence, application and innovativeness to overcome these difficulties.

His flair for reading became noticeable during these early school days. He made it a point to study each and every book available in Braille in the school library, which, despite shortage of texts, had a wealth of other reading material transcribed by hand into Braille. It was at this school that the child set his future goal and decided to become a college/university teacher. He received inspiration in this respect from his favourite teacher at the school, Mr. Somnath Kapoor, who motivated him to continue his determined efforts for higher studies after leaving school. After completing his elementary education from the school in Amritsar, he returned home, since the institution had no further provisions for secondary education. Undeterred, Ved Prakash Varma continued his studies at home and completed matriculation as a private student, securing creditable results, showing potential for his future educational accomplishments.

In the meantime India had gained independence and the country partitioned. The family moved to Agra, U.P., where Ved Prakash took up his college education as a regular student. He showed his brilliance at college and completed his Masters' degree in Philosophy at Agra College, Agra in 1960 securing 1st Division and 1st Position in the whole of Agra University. It may be relevant to mention here that Agra University, those days, used to be among the largest universities in the country in terms of the number of affiliated colleges and geographical area covered. Securing top position in that university, despite visual disability, was an achievement of immense proportions. Thus, Ved Prakash Varma vindicated in his young days that visual disability was no barrier to attaining excellence in life.

Then began the almost inevitable struggle for securing his life's ambition of becoming a teacher at college. This young talented scholar saw an advertisement for the post of a lecturer in a college. He confidently applied, reasonably sure of his chances of getting this job. However, he was not even called for an interview. The reason: simply because he was blind and this fact was mentioned in his college testimonials. A blind person can top the university but surely he cannot teach: must have been the view of the selectors. He then managed to get the post of temporary lecturers in Philosophy at two different colleges in Agra during the next three years. However, these were just temporary jobs so, Ved Prakash Varma now decided to further enrich his academic career by pursuing his studies for a Ph.D. degree.

In 1963, he joined the Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi as a UGC Junior Research Fellow. He was awarded the coveted Ph.D. degree in 1968 from Delhi University.

The constant support of his family as well as his years of continual hard work, tenacity of purpose and his strong determination finally bore fruit, when in 1968 he was appointed to the prestigious position of a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi.

Dr. Varma drew upon the vast wealth of his knowledge and scholarship and successfully taught thousands of university students. Though he experienced initial bottlenecks in his career-development due to misconceptions regarding his blindness, he continued his work with unstinted devotion, staying abreast of evolving philosophical thought and writings, constantly perusing books, magazines and journals by engaging paid readers. His merit was ultimately recognized and he got the much deserved promotion as a Reader in the Department. From then on, there was no looking back.

Dr. Varma was promoted in his turn as a Professor and also held the distinction of being the Head of the Department for about 19 months. Dr. Varma recalls that he was more inclined towards continuing his academic work but, the then Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University insisted that he must take his turn to be the Head, not just because he fully deserved it, but also to demonstrate to the

academic world that blindness need not be viewed as a stumbling block to attaining senior appointments. Dr. Varma, thus, was, perhaps one of the very few blind Heads of Departments in any university in the country and the first in the field of Philosophy.

Dr. Varma also has the rare distinction of being granted the coveted position of a Research Scientist by the UGC for a period of 2 years. This is, indeed, a rare honour which is envied and respected by most sighted academicians. Dr. Varma retired from the university in 1999 after making a distinct niche for himself among philosophical thinkers and teachers in the country.

He also worked as a Professor Emeritus, another honour which is as prestigious as it is rare for a visually handicapped academic.

He is currently working on a UGC project on "*Contemporary Relevance of Aristotle's Ethical Philosophy*".

Not only has Dr. Varma excelled in his vocation, he has also had a happy family life. In January, 1968, he married Krishna Kumari, who, through her constant care and support made his life "happy, purposeful and worth living". The couple was blessed with a son. Initially, Krishna Kumari's parents were vehemently opposed to this marriage. Although her parents and relatives reconciled themselves to the marriage after a few years, unfortunately, her family members did not give due regard to this successful man.

Dr. Varma has to his credit 11 books and more than 60 research papers and articles. The fact that many of his books have been reprinted several times bears testimony to his erudition and scholarship and the popularity of these works. Some of his well-known books are: *Neetishastra Ke Mool Siddhant* (basic principles of ethics) (first published in 1977), *David Hume Ka Darshan* (basic philosophy of David Hume) (1978), *Mahatma Gandhi Ka Naitik Darshan* (moral philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi) (first published in 1979), *Louis Braille--Vyaktitva Aur Krititva* (Louis Braille- life and achievements) (1981), and *Dharma Darshan Ki Mool Samasyaen* (basic problems of religious thought) (first published in 1991 and reprinted several times).

Dr. Varma's talents have been widely honoured. Recognition has come his way from several quarters. He has been honoured with prestigious awards from various academic institutions. These include: Uttar Pradesh Hindi Sansthan and Akhil Bhartiya Darshan Parishad. He received the award for the Best Handicapped Employee from the President of India in 1980 and the AICB Centenary Award in 1987. A special moment of pride and happiness came Dr. Varma's way when in 2005, he was conferred "Shankar Puraskar" by K.K. Birla Foundation for outstanding work published in Hindi during the last ten years on Indian Philosophy, Culture and Art.

If achievements such as the ones mentioned above were a source of serenity and joy for Prof. Varma, there have been some deeply sad and tragic moments in his life as well. One harsh blow of fate struck him in the year 2001 when long years of understanding, cooperation and togetherness came to a painful end as his beloved wife Krishna Kumari passed away after a prolonged illness.

Courageous as he has always been, Dr. Varma rose above his bereavement and has continued to live a meaningful life.

The life-story of a person attaining such excellence is in itself an example and embodies a strong message both for visually impaired and for the society at large. His brief but revealing message to the world is: "Society should treat blind persons as normal individuals who have the same needs, desires, ambitions, weaknesses and limitations as any other member of the society. None of us is perfect."

The dynamic example of Dr. Varma's struggles and successes will continue to inspire one and all for a long time to come.

Vikram Dalmia

-Turning Losses into Profits

by--Priya Varadan

He has the knack of converting setbacks into gains, failure into success. How else does one describe Vikram Dalmia?

In 1994, his father's plastic goods company was incurring heavy losses; he had to repay a loan of over Rs.2 million. The company, in fact, was at the brink of closure. Vikram Dalmia took over the company at this juncture. Within a few months of his taking over, the company started earning profits; his father could repay his loans. By 2001, the turnover increased from Rs.2 million to Rs. 10 million. In 2002, Mr. Dalmia bought over a loss-making unit, Plastechnics (an ancillary of Philips India Ltd, which manufactures plastic covers for street lights and tube lights) with loans from the market and, over a period of time, made it a profitable unit. It is functioning successfully today.

All this from a man whose father thought his son was a lost case since he had no eyesight. In his words: "My struggle and impediments in life came more from the family than the outside world."

Born on April 24, 1969, Vikram Dalmia started experiencing night blindness at the age of 12 and was subsequently diagnosed with Retinitis Pigmentosa (a progressive deterioration of eyesight leading to blindness). After getting over the initial shock, the family sought every kind of medical help to avert the eventual loss of vision -- including sending him to Cuba in 1991 for the most up-to-date treatments. But like many families in India, he and his family too had no real knowledge about the disability and its rehabilitation and were, in fact, "unaware and pretty nonchalant".

Schooling was not much of a problem since he lost his sight after his Std. X exams. In college he says, "I never really told them (college authorities, professors) and they never knew about my disability." Then how did he get through college? Recounting his college days, he says, "I would depend on my memory and friends. I never even knew I could have a writer during exams." That meant writing exams all by himself while his friend read out the questions to him!

After graduation in 1991, his father asked him to join his business, convinced that his son would only while away his time or, at best, follow his orders without question. But Vikram Dalmia could not accept this attitude and refused. On the contrary, he believed that if he were to have complete authority and decision-making powers in company affairs, he could run the business in a much more efficient and profitable manner. Finally, that moment came in 1994, when the company was facing imminent closure. His father relented and gave Dalmia junior the opportunity to run the company. The rest, as they say, is history.

His success mantra is simple: know your job, do your job well and show your presence; be a bit dashing. But his business success wasn't a smooth ride--there were quite a few hiccups. Initially, Philips India (his main buyers) did have its share of skeptics. But when he showed them that he meant business in terms of his performance, they were satisfied. More skeptics resurfaced at a quality training meet Philips India was organising for its subsidiary companies. This meet was to have all the

top managers from Philips. His seniors at Philips India wanted Vikram Dalmia's father to accompany him for the meet. They worried about how a visually impaired person would interact at such a platform. He defied them all, went all by himself and stole the show at the meet.

Be it his father's company or his own, unlike his predecessors, his approach to running the company is refreshingly new and conducive and that is the reason why his subordinates are always willing to assist him. In addition, he has his talking diary, computer for making notes and keeping accounts and a laptop, etc.

Success has won Mr. Dalmia awards that include one for Outstanding Achievement in his sphere of work by Rotary Club of Bujbuj, in association with B.P.C.L., in 1997. Besides, several Rotary and Lion Clubs have felicitated him.

Other than business, he is also the Honorary Joint Secretary of National Association for the Blind, West Bengal Branch, and he has played cricket (for the blind) for the state of West Bengal at the zonal and national championship levels.

Interestingly, Mr. Dalmia got to hear about the progress made in the disability sector in India through a fellow Indian only during his trip to Cuba where he had gone for his eye treatment. Back home, he learnt more about the sector, which led to more interaction with, and understanding of other visually impaired people and disability per se.

Making a comparison between India and abroad, Mr. Dalmia says roads and transport are accessible, disabled people are aware of their rights and are comparatively more independent abroad.

In India, "I feel that technology, and especially its availability at cheaper prices these days, has played a significant role in changing the quality of life. However, the process of spreading awareness needs to be carried on with more intensity and vigour."

Mr. Dalmia is happily married and has a five-year-old son. His message to people is, "Do not write off people due to disability." And for people who want to be successful like him, "stay positive and focussed".

