

## DISABILITY IS A STATE OF MIND

I was honoured to be identified by Bachi karkaria as a inspirational person with spinal injury from Mumbai and to have this conversation with an international, motivational icon Mark Inglis in Mumbai on 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2011.

I got my disability in a very adventurous way. In Feb 1995 I was in a paragliding camp at Virar near Mumbai and this was to be my last flight. At the stroke of 12 noon I took off from the hill and the wind turned, the thermal in the air increased and I was thrown in the opposite direction on the rocky ground from a height of 30 feet. I crash landed on my back and instantly lost sensation and power in my lower limbs. My camp was away from town and it took the helpful members some time to organize a car and get me to the best orthopaedic doctor on this planet. Dr Riten Pradhan.

I lost the power to move, sense, incontinence of bladder, bowel, no muscle strength waist down. Lots of things! I had Spinal Injury – a permanent disability.

What I gained was much more. Acquaintances and friendships of some genuinely terrific human beings....my doctors, therapists, nurses, attendants, new friends with spinal injury, strangers.....

I could not get up from the bed, stand or walk....even turn while sleeping.

I was operated on my spine and had to gradually get used to a brace, heavy metal calipers, crutches, walkers, catheters, diapers, baby bag & more.

I had to relearn to do everything all over again like a child, coached and trained by my family members, friends and ace therapists. I got my entire rehab at home in Mumbai. 6 hours of physiotherapy each day is necessary for the first two years after injury. I put in that effort. Our home was on the first floor without an elevator, its not easy to move to a new place with our real estate prices, so we learn to adapt and I learnt to climb the stairs. I remember a humourous incident when we were exploring a new way to negotiate steps, Dr Pradhan came up with an excellent idea and my walker was modified in a manner that I was standing at the head of stairs and was asked to hop down the first step. I had no balance, no control it felt like I would fly down....and inadvertently I let out an earth shattering scream...that made, Dr Jacob my Senior Physiotherapist hold my waist tightly and my brother in law was positioned as a wicket keeper at the foot of the steps....as if to catch me if I rolled down. The entire neighborhood came down to check the source of the scream and witnessed this scene. Till date Dr Jacob revels in recounting this as the most embarrassing moment of his life!!

It's a different thing that he also mentions that because of me learning to negotiate steps he also taught this technique to quite a few other patients giving them independence and freedom.

There were quite a few basic things I could not do initially like sit on the floor, pick up an object from the ground, self catheterize, bathing or even dressing by myself. But I could continue working from home on the computer, meet and encourage young students and write.

Spinal injury is a permanent disability leading to paralysis waist or neck down and its an irreversible condition.

**What we *face* in our life is never in our hands,**

**But how we *deal* with it is in our control.**

A friend Navin Gulia has tetraplegia & is neck down paralysed, he has authored a book recently ' In quest of the last victory' and raises a pertinent question

**'If I have to put a million times more efforts at achieving things that other people get easily- how can I be called disabled. *Doubly abled would be more appropriate!***

I endorse it. As an associate dean, research with a reputed management institute. I was invited as a jury to Delhi last year. I woke at **4 am in the morning sat in the flight for 2 hour**, 1 hour of road journey and **carried up a flight of stairs and sat through** 15 case studies for the corporate innovation contest.... managing my bladder, bowel, intake of fluids, and type of food, risk of being carried up the aircraft, board room etc...I hit the pillow at 1 am in the night *sorry* morning.... At the end of the day I would be happy to be acknowledged and applauded for my cerebral capacity and abilities rather than "*oh I still did it because I have a disability.*"

**So who is disabled?**

Someone who has consistently met deadlines and brought out quality publications on time for various groups, who was the first woman to complete her PhD in a topic hitherto untouched !

**Its time that we rethink the definition of disabled.**

**My brother, Dhaval, though younger has wisdom beyond his years. He says those people who do not understand, empathize and be responsive to the needs of the society and its ecosystem are disabled.**

**One does not have to lose an eye or limb to be labeled as disabled.**

I have a friend when she travels on work she is scared to sleep alone in her hotel room.

Many people fear crowds and several don't participate in our Mumbai Marathon, but our Nina Foundation members look forward to it and are the first ones to arrive. Earliest to arrive being our 84 year old member Dharapkaka who stays on the first floor without an elevator & has to be helped down.

Most of us put on spectacles for poor vision but are not called disabled. But some of us who need a wheelchair, walker or artificial limb is called disabled?

Isn't this strange?

**Disability is a state of mind:**

Life is full of possibilities. I may not take up extreme sports but I do intend to do exciting things. I cannot let a single freak accident colour my view about life or take the sense of adventure out of living. After all what are limitations? Its all in the mind. There are countless able bodied men and women out there with all their faculties intact, who will still not do the things they can or want to do because they let fear handicap them.

How different is their situation from mine?

We are all operating from within certain limitations – real or imaginary –

And its upto us to break past these barriers.

ITS ALL IN THE MIND!

I would like to repeat what I said while receiving the NCPEDP Helen Keller award in 2003.

**I quoted Jonathan Livingstone Seagull's discovery**

*'flying is seen as a way of thinking...*

*you have to think of yourself as a creature of total freedom,*

*you have to think you are free from all rules....*

*In your mind,*

*Where it all happens.*

*Now you can fly at the speed of your mind, unlimited....'*

(Dr. Ketna L Mehta is founder Trustee, Nina Foundation & this is her thoughts during the Times Literary Carnival in Mumbai, December 2011)