

Too Many Barriers

Right to live freely and with dignity should be available to all

Ketna L Mehta | Dec 3, 2013,TOI, pg 14

This is seriously a funny nation, India. There is discrimination even in the game of chess, as the white piece is moved first.

A person is not disabled by choice. It happens. Congenital since birth, progressive degeneration is a medical condition or due to an accident. The disabled with immense support from family and doctors learn to cope with the new reality and fit in a society which is not compatible both attitudinally and infrastructurally.

I have a spine injury and a permanent disability due to an accident for the past 19 years. More than 1.5 million people in India and 2.28 persons per hour suffer from this devastating, life-altering spine injury due to accidents. There is no cure, only life-long rehabilitation can allow us to have a threshold quality of life. I learnt to adjust using callipers and walker and wheelchair and diapers and catheters, by negotiating stairs and pitiful glances and many other forms of discrimination.

At no point could i go to a store and ask, "could you please give a couple of kilos of dignity?" in exchange for some money. No one can buy dignity or self-respect or expect it to be doled out to us. My take is that as soon as we ask, expect or demand, we become smaller, lower, inferior and weaker. This would be undignified! To say the least.

We, the people with disability, have to earn and command dignity. We earn respect for what we do and achieve and how we achieve it. Also for our character as human beings first and foremost.

The Constitution and law of the land is very benevolent and states 'dignity for all citizens' and yet senior citizens suffer when their children abandon them, wives suffer due to domestic violence, women are molested and raped, and children abused and humiliated and sometimes forced into labour at a young age. And people with disability don't exist; they are invisible. Our very existence is not acknowledged because we look, walk or talk differently. Of course, we have laws for the disabled, but sadly with no teeth, no voice, no heart, no justice and no equality (disabled laws!).

My dignity comes with my identity. For the person that i am. For the happiness my presence creates. For the awareness to the rest of the world as to how fortunate and ungrateful they are for what they do possess.

Our collective dignity lies in rising above all this and concentrating on our growth and development, providing and educating ourselves. There are obstacles and discrimination in getting a decent education, but there are struggles everywhere and for everything.

We earn dignity when despite several obstacles we get educated, sometimes even earning a PhD (when less than 2% of our entire population has this prestigious qualification). We earn dignity when we secure a job and provide to the workplace, contributing diligently and bringing in divergent thinking. We earn dignity when we sincerely pay our taxes to the government (which fails to provide us any special facilities). We earn our dignity when we, despite our daily personal struggles, care and provide for our family and community - lovingly.

Finally, we earn supreme dignity when we inspire 'others' to push their limits and not succumb to pressures and stress. When 'others' learn from us to keep smiling and work hard to conduct routine activities joyfully.

We know what it takes to not only overcome physical infrastructural barriers but also attitudes and mindsets. To survive in India we need to possess more strength, spirit and energy and we collectively can bring about positive change, where the able and disabled can live with dignity and celebrate diversity together.

The writer is a management professional and founder trustee of Nina foundation, an NGO for rehabilitation of friends with spine injury. Today is international Day of the Disabled.