

Connect Special

Editor's Desk

Dear friends,

Thank you for the positive reviews regarding the new format.

"It is not about being the best, it is about being better than you were yesterday."

This edition brings to you some thought provoking reads and hope you enjoy it.

Happy Reading!!

Regards,

Bhavna Botta

info.connectspecial.com



For sharing log on to-
info.connectspecial.com
for subscribing , suggestions and
contributing news -
botta.bhavna@gmail.com

Special points of interest:

- * Change agent
- * Pedagogical debate
- * Glimpses of a Travel Diary

We are on the Web

info.connectspecial.com

A Change Agent !!

Tell us about yourself

I am Prashanth Kamath ,a person with cerebral Palsy and at present working as a Content Writer in a CSR Project called "I Got Garbage" in Mindtree Ltd.

You said that your life is an unforgettable journey so far, can you share...

I had sustained brain damage at birth , to keep it short - my infancy / early childhood was my darkest hour. Thankfully, I was fortunate enough not to have spent most of that time in hospital (probably because all the Doctors had just given up on me - and decided it'd be better to keep me at home - till I died). I'm also lucky that I don't remember anything much from that time.

All through this time, my parents (especially my dad) never lost faith in me. In his free time, my dad would attempt to teach me alphabets, numbers and other stuff. He would also tell me stories and sing songs. It was very difficult - because there was no way to tell for sure whether I was listening to whatever he was saying or not.

When I was about 6 years old, my father got transferred to Bangalore. Here my parents took me to a couple of schools. For the most part - there were only some physiotherapy sessions - nothing more. Then, after about two years - my parents heard about this new school that had started just a couple of weeks back. This school was the Spastics Society of India (now the Spastics Society of Karnataka)and the teachers, whom we called aunties were ABSOLUTELY PHENOMENAL .This would prove to be a big break in my life...

I'd like to remember and recall a few names - Sunitha Aunty, Paul Aunty, Barker Aunty, Padma Aunty, Uma Aunty, Rabi Uncle, Sumithra Aunty, Dolly Aunty, Priya Aunty Geetha Aunty and Prema Aunty - just to name a few. I consider myself really lucky to be

able get love, knowledge, support, warmth and understanding from all these wonderful people. Slowly, as the days, months and years went by - we(me and my friends) learnt how to sit, how to crawl, how to eat, how to dress up, how to talk, how to walk and how to learn. We were being slowly transformed into Human Beings.



On every single day - we faced new challenges. But with the kind of support we got from our teachers - no challenge was too big. I was among the first batch of students to get formal academic education. I was admitted directly to the 4th standard. From then on - I never looked back. 7th standard was probably the best time that I can recollect from my school days. We couldn't be given Homework - because none of us could write. And there would be nobody at home who could write for us. And for our 7th standard - we had a Public Board Exam (back then).

Ours was the first batch of students (with Cerebral Palsy) to appear for the Std X board exams. For a brief period - there was some uncertainty as to whether we could appear for the exams or not. We were finally allowed to appear for the exams - along with Blind students. I managed to score around 68% in my Std X board exams. I was happy.

Then my father managed to get transferred to Mumbai - where I'd get a chance to complete my graduation .I had completed my graduation (B.Com.) in the year 2000.

A Change Agent !!

Wow, tell us about your career

I got my first job - a good 7 years after that. Before Joining Mindtree - well, I was looking for a job. I was sitting at home. But I was not sitting at home doing nothing. I was earning (Much more than what I do at present - I wanted to work for a Company - where I could meet new people and interact with them. I had sent out my resume to almost every IT Company I knew at that time.

One day - I was asked to come for an Interview at Mindtree. I was very apprehensive / tense. But then, I had nothing to lose. There's a certain fearlessness that comes from being in such a position. While others have a constant fear of losing their job (for some reason) - I don't !

Anyway, the Interview went well, and after about another three months - I joined Mindtree. The first couple of months were tough. There was no fixed transportation facilities. We had to rely on Auto-rickshaws - which were very costly and highly unpredictable. In fact, for the first month or so - my mother accompanied me to office.

My First few weeks at work were rather cool - full of learning for the most part. But quickly I realized that it was difficult for me to handle large volumes of work. And that remains true even to this day.

Fantastic -It's been more than a decade now ,can you tell us the secret behind this

12 years is quite a long time. I joined Mindtree on 9th Aug 2007. Just to put things into perspective - there was a time when I myself had doubts about whether I could work in an office environment for more than ten hours. And even if I could - I believed that I couldn't last for more than 10 days. Yet, somehow, somehow - I've remained intact for this long.....

I was initially part of the Genie Team (which was lim-

ited only to the people function back then). I have fond memories of my colleagues from those days.

Then, After about two years - I had a chance to work on a literary project under Mr. Subroto Bagchi (one of the Co-founders of Mindtree). Result - I became the Proof Reader for Subroto's book 'The Professional'.

In the beginning, I had a limited friends circle in Mindtree. But I wanted to reach out, to be counted, I wanted my voice to be heard. So I started this practice of writing 'Thank You' emails. Typically, when I completed one year in Mindtree - I'd be sending out such an email to all the Top Bosses in Mindtree. It so happened that one such email that I had sent out - caught the attention of Mr. Subroto Bagchi.

Is that a turning point in your career

Yes ,I guess, one day - both myself and my mother were called in for a meeting with Mr. Bagchi. Somewhere deep inside - my mother was a bit apprehensive. But in reality, that meeting turned out to be much more positive and exhilarating than we could ever imagine. Mr. Bagchi was simple, down to earth and straightforward. He had quite a few words of appreciation for me. We hadn't even met before. So this



With Honorable Governor

A Change Agent !!

appreciation came as a bit of a shock to both myself and my mother.

Mr. Bagchi was quick to point out that I had a good grip over the English Language. He said, many Engineers in Mindtree (and other Companies) - can't even write one or two sentences in English without committing mistakes. My mother added that I was not well read - because I had physical / practical difficulties in reading. Mr. Bagchi was really surprised and taken aback. How could a person who hasn't read a single book in his life - manage to write so well? - he wondered...

Then he told us that he was planning to work on his third book (The Professional). Then he offered me the opportunity to be his Proof Reader / Research Assistant for this project. I was elated and I accepted the offer right away. A thought just crossed my mind - How could the Chairman of a Company choose me to be his Research Assistant? Even now - I find it difficult to answer that question.

Work on this Literary Project was really great. Most of the interactions between Mr. Bagchi and myself would happen over email. I had to maintain a version controlled repository of all the articles / chapters - that he would be sending me almost every 2 - 3 days. I had to read them, make corrections and send it back .A seasoned writer that Mr. Bagchi was - I had very little work in terms of actually making corrections. Rather, this was more of a learning exercise, a refreshingly different kind of exposure to new Ideas / new Philosophies and new styles of working. The Version Control part of the job was a bit tricky at times - but very soon I came to grips with it. And I'd like to believe that I did a reasonably good job in this project. So much so - that Mr. Bagchi has written a couple of paragraphs about me in the Acknowledgment section of the

book. Oh, Just for the record - 'The Professional' is most arguably the First book that I have read Completely in my life - and I have the privilege of reading this book - before anyone else in the world.

I still consider this to be one of the high points of my career in Mindtree!!

What about 'I Got Garbage' project

In April 2013, work started on a new project called 'I Got Garbage' - a project led by Mr. Prashant Mehra. This project (and its leader) - was unlike anything I had ever seen before. I was extremely lucky to be given a place in this team - right from the beginning. The first few months of work on this project was ABSOLUTELY INCREDIBLE! I can never forget that period in my life!

I continue to work in Team IGG ever since. Today we have a Stellar Team of around 75 to 80 people working here. I've had the opportunity to work in a number of different roles over the past few years. Everything about this project is at a Stratospheric Level. If you extend your hands a little bit - you can touch the vacuum of Space! Undoubtedly, this is one of the best projects anywhere in the country - and I am really proud to be a part of it...



At Hackathon

A Change Agent !!

What about you as a person with so many years of working in a corporate sector -have you changed

I'm pretty much the same person - that I was when I had first joined Mindtree. To be very frank - I've not changed much over the years. Probably, I'm the only person in the company - whose disability has some serious limitations on the work that they (I) do. Just to elaborate a bit on my limitations - I type just with my little finger (on my right hand) - which is painfully slow and frustrating, I need help in having my lunch or even a drink, and of course, I move around in a powered wheelchair.

I think Credit should go to Mindtree - for being so inclusive and disabled friendly. I don't think I could have survived for so long - in any other company.

Every person experiences a wow movement at work ,do you have one to share

Somewhere in early 2011, there was this corporate level Demo organized by Ostrich Mobility - a powered wheelchair maker based in Bangalore. Naturally, I was asked to be part of this Demo - along with 3 or 4 other people. The demo was good. After the demo - we all went back to work. I don't know what the others did after that - but I distinctly remember what I did. I wrote an email addressed to the Top Management of Mindtree. I explained about our situation of getting stuck to the work table and seeking help of others to manoeuvre our wheelchairs while attending meetings and requested them to consider purchasing Powered Wheelchairs for all physically challenged employees in Mindtree. I stated - This is something that could change our lives forever...

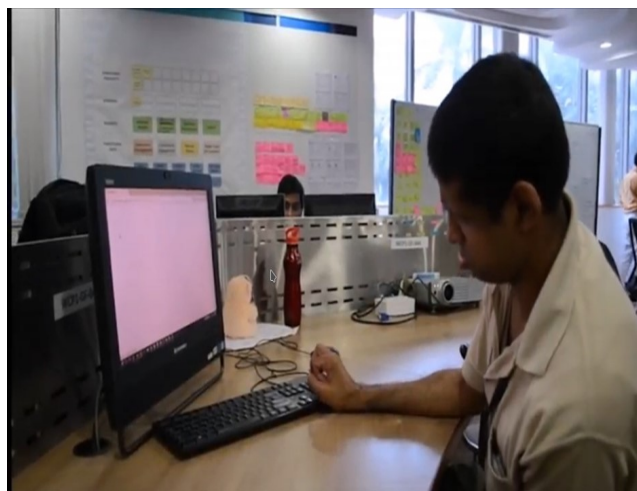
Ashok Soota (the then Chairman of Mindtree) - took this intent to its logical conclusion. My

powered wheelchair was one of the first chairs to be purchased by Mindtree (and I still use the same powered chair). Today, there are well over 8 such powered wheelchairs being used in Mindtree - and every new employee (with a physical disability) who joins Mindtree - gets a powered wheelchair right from day one. *I believe that this has been my greatest contribution to Mindtree so far.*

Do you have some observations about the inclusive work culture

In many other Companies, Physically challenged employees are kept separate from the others. They have their own dedicated floor / work areas (where tools / assistive aids are provided to them). But in Mindtree, there is no such separation. As a result, the entire company has become more disabled friendly / inclusive. I think this is a Model - which other companies can follow.

The equality and equity stems from sensitivity, empathy, understanding. The support and help that we get from Mindtree's Security / Support Staff - is just Unprecedented / unparalleled. I'd like to take a moment to Acknowledge and Thank each and every one of them. I owe my existence in Mindtree - to their efforts and love.



At Work

A Change Agent !!

So you are a change agent

If there is one thing that I'd like to be remembered for in Mindtree - it's for being a 'Change Agent'. A change agent is just an Instrument of Change. It should take nothing to its head. The credit for the Music being played - actually goes to the Player of this instrument - credit goes to Mindtree...

The Change Agent theme - just got to a whole new level - in my current role. At present I work as a Content Writer for a project called 'University of Commons' (UoC) - one of the many interesting pro-

jects under IGG. In this project - we try to envision an Idealistic Society of the Future. And then we'll try to bring that Idealistic Society to life - using a combination of volunteering, other programs, events etc. All these endeavours are designed to create Change Agents - who will then change Society for the better.....

In Short - I think I have a much longer path to tread. I hope I get to be with Mindtree for a much longer time.

A Pedagogical debate

In a country with over 28 national languages, Jhoti Prajapati did not speak at all. Her family, who lived in an Indian village in Maharashtra, was worried. When the child turned 3, her mother Rima took her to a doctor and got an explanation for the silence: Jhoti was born deaf.

The diagnosis spurred Rima into action. For two years, she says, she worked diligently to acquire the disability certificate needed for Jhoti's admission to a school for the deaf. There are only 388 such schools in India, and none near her village. So at age 5, Jhoti moved with her mother to Mumbai.

That was more than a decade ago. Flash forward to now. Jhoti is 16 and can communicate easily through sign language — which she does with her younger sister, Aarti, age 10, who was also born deaf and attends school with her.

They're the lucky ones.

It's a struggle for many deaf children to access appropriate education in India, a country where deafness — and disability generally — has been underreported and underserved.

The 2011 Indian census cites roughly 1.3 million people with "hearing impairment." Contrast that to numbers from India's National Association of the Deaf, which estimates that 18 million people —

roughly 1 percent of the Indian population — are deaf. (Even that would be surprisingly low, considering that 3.5 percent of Americans and 5 percent of the world's population experience hearing loss.)

Part of this discrepancy is due to differences in survey methods or definitions of hearing impairment. But it also reflects a pattern. The latest census reported that 2.21 percent of the Indian population is disabled, compared to the global average for that year estimated at 15 percent. Underreporting is common partially because families are unwilling to disclose disabilities due to social stigma. And some census takers fail to understand and properly report cases of disability.



Rima Prajapati with daughters (from left) Jhoti, Aarti and Sangeeta. Jhoti and Aarti were both born deaf.

A Pedagogical Debate

This invisibility has serious consequences, particularly in terms of government services and accessibility. It's also slowed the spread of Indian Sign Language (ISL).

Bias Against Sign Language

"India has been an oral country," says Madan Vasishtha, a deaf writer and scholar who grew up in a village in northern India. "Only recently we have started to get some leverage for ISL." The pedagogical debate over oral education (teaching deaf people to read lips and speak, and discouraging — or even banning — the use of sign language) first raged in the U.S. during the late 19th century. Championed by inventor Alexander Graham Bell, oral education prevailed as the primary deaf teaching method until the 1960s, when American Sign Language (ASL) gained wider acceptance in the classroom.

India now faces this same debate decades later, as the majority of deaf schools use, or at least claim to use, an oral approach. "Schools that are oral actually use ISL, but they do not admit it," Vasishtha says. "The teachers learn some signs from students and use them."

Why the enduring supremacy of oral education, even when schools are "secretly" teaching in sign language?

The National Institute of Speech and Hearing Disabilities (NISHD), which recognizes the controversy over oral education, argues in its position statement that there's an inconsistency in signs and lack of evidence demonstrating efficacy of a bilingual approach.

'Speak, Speak, Speak!'

But deaf people suspect the key factor is the intense cultural distaste for disability.

Because sign language is the visible marker of deafness, it's been similarly shunned. Varsha Gathoo, director of the Department of Education at NISHD, notes the "sign language is the stigma, more than the deafness."

Sign languages, like spoken languages, are unique to their country of origin. That means ASL is different from British Sign Language. And so is ISL,

which has formed gradually from a blend of local dialects.

In the years since, ISL has continued to develop through increased interaction among India's deaf population. "When people from different regions meet and communicate, the language becomes more standardized," Vasishtha who did a linguistic analysis of signs in four urban centers across India in 1977, says. "It is a natural process." But it's only now gaining government support. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment took a big step in 2017 with the release of the first ISL dictionary. It's just in Hindi and English, however, which still excludes speakers of different Indian tongues — like Rima, who says she uses lip movement when speaking to her daughters, explaining that "they kind of understand."

The situation is particularly tough in rural areas, where deaf people can be isolated. Such factors motivated Rima's move with Jhoti and her younger daughters to Shivaji Nagar, a Mumbai slum, where they share a two-room flat with Rima's brother and his family. Rima left her son and husband to tend to their homestead because she wanted her daughters to have "more opportunities in education and health care."

And most importantly, they have more opportunities to communicate. Each week, Jhoti and Aarti join 12 of their classmates at a deaf dance class sponsored by Apnalaya, a local NGO. Dancers from an elite troupe teach them elaborate bhangra dance routines to prepare for a public performance in South Mumbai. During rehearsal, most students do not wear hearing aids. The Bollywood tunes boom loudly over the stereo, and the students practice with bare feet to feel the music's vibrations. They use ISL and practice the choreography before and long after the class has ended.

Jhoti, like other deaf people in India, is constantly encouraged to learn how to function in the world of the hearing. But for this hour, she can be immersed in her own language.

Originally published at-
<https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/mom-fights-get-education-her-deaf-daughters>

Glimpses of a Travel Diary -An Adrenalin Thrilling

By Prashant

When we decided to go on our long awaited Europe tour, a colleague in Veena's office whispered to another in the ear, "What will this blind girl gain by going on this expensive tour when she is blind?"

It is true, most people wonder why we, a visually impaired couple, travel so much and how do we enjoy the numerous countries we have visited.

The answer lies in the statement of one of the most famous personalities of the 20th Century, Helen Keller.

"The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched - they must be felt with the heart" - Helen Keller.

We cannot see but definitely we can observe, we can hear, we can smell, we can taste and most importantly we can feel. We could feel the fresh air, pure water and free traffic.

We love meeting new people, knowing more about new cultures and tasting new food. I also keenly observe the difference in the transport infrastructure, services for tourists and try to read about the history, climate and economy of the countries we visit.



Prashant and Veena on Glacier 3000 in Switzerland.



Prashant and Veena .

One of the most memorable moments of this trip was the visit to the Glacier 3000 (an excursion paradise) in Switzerland. We really enjoyed the Chair lift and the snow bus on the glacier. We felt the snow under our feet and, yet, because of the sunshine, we did not feel that cold. We went on the roller coaster as well, although not many thought we would dare to do it. I actually got back the thrill of driving a car, something I used to do before my visual impairment. I really enjoyed running our sledge on the track at full speed and controlling the breaks at the turns.

Going close to the Roman Coliseum, touching and going up on the Eiffel Tower, boating in Venice brought back memories of our childhood when we had first read about these famous monuments. Now, being at those places gives a sense of achievement, a sense of satisfaction, a confirmation that all is well.

We were also pleased to see the accessibility provisions on the European streets for people with disabilities like broad walkways, tactile paths, talking traffic signals etc. The civic sense among the drivers there is something we need to bring home, cars stop to give way to pedestrians. We heard vehicle horn only once in 15 days, such a change from the maddening Delhi traffic.

Veena in particular liked her ***visit to the perfume***

Glimpses of a Travel Diary -An adrenalin thrilling

shops in Paris. She is fond of perfumes, and relished the opportunity to smell so many of the world famous fragrances. She also got the rare opportunity to meet Micky Mouse in Disneyland in Paris. The Mickey Mouse made her touch and feel his eyes, nose, the big ears!

We also got to do more activities, something we enjoy a lot. The boating on river Rhine and waterfalls of the Rhine, cruise in Amsterdam and train rides in Jungfrau in particular will remain etched in memory.

Another curious and pleasant discovery was the presence of India and Indians everywhere in Europe. Even small villages now have Indian restaurants and during the summers, they say Indian tourists out number tourists from the rest of the world.

We are close to end of our 15 days Western Europe tour. The arrangements made by Enable Travel of Cox & Kings have been excellent. Mr. Cyrus has been assisting us in hotel check-ins, breakfast, lunch, dinner and also escorting us to all the points of interests. He is doing his best and remains available round the clock for us.

Most of the hotels were disabled friendly and we were given larger rooms with disabled friendly features. The food has not been an issue since we have been getting good Indian dishes all throughout. We also got to taste a bit of the local food in Italy and have got lot of assistance in our shopping. With all the logistics and comforts taken care off, we have been able to enjoy the dozens of places we have visited already. Looks like it will become one of our most memorable tours.

(Prashant lost 75% of his vision at age 20 due to fungal infection, whereas Veena is totally blind by birth. He works as a Consultant - Training & Tech-

nical Support for The DAISY Consortium and she works as a HR Manager with NTPC Ltd. the power generation Public Sector Company. Both have received many honours in their area of work, including the National Awards for 'Best Employee' and 'Best Role Model' category. Prashant has also won the Gold & Silver medals in Abilympics, which is an international competition in occupational skills for persons with disabilities. Their travel arrangement was organized by Enable Travel, the accessible holiday initiative of Cox & Kings.)

Originally published at-

<https://www.patientsengage.com/personal-voices/why-would-blind-person-travel-abroad>



Prashant and Veena with Micky Mouse in Disneyland in Paris

<https://www.patientsengage.com/personal-voices/why-would-blind-person-travel-abroad>