

AIRBORNE TO CHAIRBORNE

My attempts to move my limbs ended futilely. The pain in the neck was excruciating and intensifying by the second. I was stumped for a moment but quickly recovered to realise the seriousness and significance of my inability to get up.

I do not remember whether I involuntarily screamed, then, in sheer desperation. My mental state on that abominable night of 23 June 83 was a medley of intense frustration, utmost dejection and extreme disappointment. At around 2300 hrs, whilst returning to the Officers Mess after night flying, I drove onto a wooden road barrier - just ahead of the technical area gate inside Air Force Station, Pathankot. The impact wrenched my neck and broke the cervical spine. The injury resulted in total paralysis below the neck with no limb movements whatsoever. After overnight's stay in Military Hospital (MH) Pathankot I was transferred to Army Hospital, Delhi (AHDC). Neck surgery failed to mitigate my predicament. Though I had brief spells of consciousness I do not recollect various incidents and my fight for survival during the fortnight's hospitalisation.

at AHDC On 12 July 88, I was transferred to the Spinal Cord Injury Centre (SCIC) of MH Kirkee. Two weeks after my admission, I gathered my wits and eagerly inquired about the prognosis. The medical officer looked up into the false ceiling and motioned his hands skywards; ~~to~~ perhaps, he wanted me to adjure divine intervention. This charade instantly deflated my hopes but it conveyed the enormity and hopelessness of the incurable nature of the incapacitation. Inconsistencies of life have always bemused me but not even the wildest nightmare presaged that one day I would fall prey to such a quirk of fate. The medicine of faith had in Providence got shattered when I failed to show even an iota of improvement.

The cervical spinal injury (quadriplegia) necessitated me to lead a totally dependent life tethered to the bed and wheelchair. It wasn't just loss of tactile inputs and outputs but absolute dependency on someone else to accomplish mundane ^{necessities} and domestic chores; even swabbing ears and swatting flies. Dystrophy set in within couple of months and took its toll by altering the geometry of torso and limbs. The mirror replicated the image.

of a human skeleton swathed by a layer of wizened skin. Depression to some extent and numerous excumbrances forced me to while away two years in MH Kirkee. Nonetheless, I learned to dissemble and with a smile on the face I managed to hide the pangs of the heart. The Indian Air Force (IAF) realised my uselessness and discharged me from service on 12 Apr 90. That silly accident dealt the coup de grace to my aspirations and career in the IAF. In Aug 90, at the young age of 26, I got admitted to Paraplegic Home, Kirkee, Pune as an inmate to begin the second phase of my life - afresh.

I was born and brought up in a hamlet by name Chirayinskil, 55 kms north of Trivandrum. At the age of 9, I entered Sainik School, Kazhakkootam. A slow learner and an unobtrusive performer by nature, I ~~gradually got my engine of performance well oiled and well maintained to~~ consistently excelled in both academics and sports. Later, I was found worthy enough to be adjudged as the best Air Force cadet of 65th course at NDA, Khadakwasla and as the best in Aerobatics at the passing out parade of 134 pilots course at Air Force

Academy, Secunderabad. In Dec 84, I was commissioned into the IAF as a fighter pilot.

All my attempts to rationalise personal catastrophes have always mystified and at times stupefied me. Anyway, I had to break the self-imposed stupor to adapt to the new challenges posed by the debility. Therefore, in Sep 90, I decided to learn the art of writing by holding a pen in my mouth (because of dysfunctional hands). I began by illegibly scribbling alphabets but was chagrined to find little progress even after 3 weeks' laborious efforts. One day I decided to change tactics and write a proper letter to Sheela George, the person who kept on chivvying to start mouth-writing (earlier, I had paid very little attention to her exhortation). My joy knew no bounds when I decipherably completed few lines which embodied my first mouth-written letter. Initially, I found my hard work to be a pie in the sky but 4 to 5 months' assiduous efforts resulted in achieving a readable style of writing. This modest achievement helped me a great deal by reviving the chain of correspondence and begetting new friends.

In May 91, I was presented as

electrically operated wheelchair with chin controls for manoeuvring (imported from U.K.), thanks to the benevolence of the IAF. Motorised mobility, though only a substitute for natural one, has enlivened my lifestyle.

It was Wg. Cdr. Murlidharan, my former flight commander, who first mooted the use of a computer as a writing tool to assist me to exploit my mental faculty to the hilt. Wg. Cdr R.V. Jog (retd.) and Dr. A. Kulkarni besides teaching programming did the spadework of exploring the possibilities of a PC acquisition, by entreating some PC manufacturers to modify the keyboard to cater for my mouth-operation - sadly, to no avail. Needless to say that their apathy emasculated my resolve and ultimately in Feb 92, we had no choice but to discontinue the scheme.

In the meantime, I toyed with the idea of teaching. For some untenable reasons I kept declining the offers (by bringing one imaginary reason or the other as an ad hoc excuse). Aforesaid setbacks notwithstanding, I am very hopeful of making the second phase of life as meaningful as the one I would have had

from the confine of a cockpit

Believe it or not, every dark cloud has a silver lining. To surmount even seemingly insuperable barriers one has to shun the thought of disability and muster the remnant faculties and canalise one's energies purposefully and whole-heartedly. It isn't just physical ability and intelligence but an insatiable appetite for success and an unstinted will power that would texture the warp and woof of the fabric called human destiny. Greater the difficulty sweeter the victory.

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