

When the Disabled Stand on Their Own Feet, On Own Steam

(M P Anil Kumar, Former Fighter Pilot at Paraplegic Rehabilitation Centre, Pune)

(Posted online rediff.com: Tuesday, November 08, 2005 at 0214 hours IST)

As was the wont, I called on my old teacher N Balakrishnan Nair during a visit to my alma mater (Sainik School, Kazhakootam, Kerala) in the mid-80s. He told me in the course of our chat that the school had benevolently admitted 25 needy students from Bihar that year.

I scanned our alumni website days ago to ascertain where these students, some from the boondocks of Bihar, had stationed themselves in life. Officers in the Army, Navy & Customs, journalist, doctor, engineers, research scholar, lecturer, executives—all doing well and shinning up the totem-pole. I could not but wonder where these schoolmates would have been had they not obtained quality education? Flotsam and jetsam perhaps.

Roughly a century ago, Shri Narayana Guru, sage and social reformer, had an uncomplicated solution to nudge the oppressed masses of Kerala to unfetter themselves from their social and economic subjugation—education. Unlike the self-styled modern messiahs, Guru never exhorted violence or grabbing as means to amelioration. He foresaw education as the stairway to salvation. It reaped rich dividends

The above illustrations epitomise the capacity of education to catalyse the upward mobility of the straitened strata of the society. At the risk of luring opprobrious epithets, I would aver that the time has come to defenestrate the reservation policy based on castes. It has failed to meet its exalted objectives. Its beneficiaries are the ones with political leverage and the well-heeled SCs, STs and OBCs, not the necessitous ones.

Instead the government should focus on their education, books, meals and groundwork for competitive exams; building top-notch schools to

provide first-rate education to impecunious students; sponsoring the higher education of the bright among the indigent lot. Unimpeded access to quality education will aid them to make the grade through open competition, instill self-esteem and self-assurance among them, breed role models to emulate, and prod their social and economic elevation.

I know my impassioned pitch for skirting the beaten track will fall on deaf ears as no government will have the gumption to groom them that way. It cannot beget instant results and tangible fruition will take decades; hence it will be a political hot potato. Nostrums like reservation, and more reservation, are sly remedies to con the electorate. I boldly believe that empowerment through education is the sure-footed path to pull off the durable uplift of the downtrodden masses. Education is the one-way highway to empowerment. There is no short cut.

I was a fighter pilot in the IAF till a mishap 17 years ago snapped my cervical spinal cord, rendered me a quadriplegic and condemned me to a wholly dependent life. From my vantage point aboard a wheelchair, the world markedly looks a different place, nay a different planet. Disabled persons—variously seen as wastrels, counterfeit coins, eyesores and laughing-stocks—are indisputably at the nadir of the food-chain. Though there are excellent exceptions, lip-service and pity are what we get in abundance. Our Parliament passed the Persons with Disabilities Act in December 1995 after much goading. Equal opportunities and non-discrimination, its cornerstones, have been flung to the winds. Why not? The disabled community is not a mouth-watering, exploitable votebank.

“Disabled persons will never be true citizens until they are defined by their contributions, not

When the Disabled Stand on Their Own Feet, On Own Steam

(M P Anil Kumar, Former Fighter Pilot at Paraplegic Rehabilitation Centre, Pune)

(Posted online rediff.com: Tuesday, November 08, 2005 at 0214 hours IST)

needs,” bemoaned Sam Sullivan, a Canadian alderman and a quadriplegic. Our society has chosen to be a moral one in which no one should be in need. In a welfare state, a need of one confers a right to the resources of the rest.

‘Needs Assessment’ is the bedrock of our social support system. The classic mechanism of the welfare state is to identify large numbers of similar needs and to assign means to agencies devoted to solving or mitigating them. Alas, people are earmarked by their needs, not by their talents and assets. Think of friendships: They are always based on assets and contributions; no one develops friendships based on what’s wrong with the other person.

In sum, we need to ripen our skills and talents; we need to make our communities aware that everyone, regardless of disability, has vital contributions to make. Communities prosper when all their citizens contribute.

Rehabilitation, that catchall mantra chanted by the government, means more than just equipping with crutches, prostheses, wheelchairs, etc. Livelihood is the crux, not handouts. Governmental props, regrettably, enslave the recipients, stunt their talents and abet corruption. Besides, the sundry arms of the jumbo bureaucracy customarily work against one another to nix well-meant welfare programmes.

Yet, the imperative of the state joining forces with the society to enable a delivery system needs no emphasis, but we need a novel paradigm to expedite the deliverance of disabled people from the yoke of destitution. Ergo, I believe that a slick public-private tie-up is the avenue to redemption, as demonstrated by the polio eradication drive launched jointly by the government and Rotary. Apart from access to transport and buildings, the

disabled people want to be made employable and find employment opportunities where they live.

Since unemployment is a curse worse than impairment, a two-pronged initiative to boost employability and employment cannot wait. The education model (with accent on vocational training) I broached above is the key to making the disabled persons employable. Since the 3-per cent job quota pledged in the 1995 Act has not swollen employment, a robust blueprint to fuel employment needs to be devised. Everything being equal, an employer will always favour a non-disabled candidate. As the private sector will not do it pro bono, why not ape the German policy of stipulating incentives? Like, higher the number/ratio of disabled workers, higher the tax incentives for the employers. The disabled community will be empowered when the support apparatus will facilitate them to stand on their own feet, under their own steam.

Lastly, India will be empowered when the state of affairs is conducive for her citizens, especially the underprivileged lot, to realise their full potential and live with dignity.