

# Changing Attitudes, Building Camaraderie

**A Kolkata-based NGO works to remove biases towards individuals with disabilities and strives for attitudinal changes**

“Disability is not a disease; it can happen to anyone, anytime,” says Ritika Sahni, the well-known singer and founder trustee of Trinayani, operating out of Mumbai.

Ms Sahni, who holds a B Ed degree in education for the hearing impaired from Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped (Mumbai), started Trinayani in 2006 with the objective of changing the mindset of people towards those with disability. In her role as a special educationist as well as an entertainer of repute, Ms Sahni realised that awareness about disabilities among non-disabled people was almost non-existent. Yet, the main decisions in the lives of the disabled are taken by non-disabled persons; hence, it is important to educate them, change their stereotypical perceptions, erase fears and eliminate unfounded prejudice. Trinayani, which stands for the ‘third eye’ (of Lord Shiva in Hindu mythology), was born as an advocacy-driven, cross disability organisation which aims to create awareness about disabilities and issues related to them among all stakeholders of society.

Trinayani works at sensitisation through ‘LOOK AT ME’ workshops for students. These aim to create acceptance, camaraderie and build bonds of friendship with differently-abled students through information and busting of myths. One such initiative was to hold sign language workshops for non-disabled students

across several schools in Mumbai to let them experience and understand the world of deaf people. One of its strengths is the ability of its founder to leverage her connections with leading personalities in the entertainment industry to boost awareness for its cause in schools, large corporates, chambers of commerce, media houses and social groups.

Trinayani also works through films and radio programmes.



Indranil Goswami, chairman of Trinayani and a noted filmmaker and scriptwriter based in Mumbai, has directed several films that deal with disability, again with the objective of creating awareness. “Hey! What Is Your Impression about Persons with Disability?” is one such film, directed by Ms Sahni. It featured Jeeja Ghosh who was infamously prevented from boarding an aircraft by a top private

airline due to her disability.

Trinayani’s flagship programme is Ms Sahni’s 15-minute radio show called “Mud Mud Ke Na Dekh” in Hindi on All India Radio. This interview-based programme covers the extraordinary work and achievements of a wide cross-section of people with different kinds of disabilities and how they have surmounted incredible challenges very effectively. In doing so, it hopes to provide role models for people with disabilities. For instance, interviews have covered issues like living with Spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, visual impairment, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and psychological effects of disability on caregivers, being the child of deaf adults or travelling in India in a wheelchair. The programme is aired on Community Radio Stations, across

the country like Radio Solan, radio station of IIT Kanpur.

“Count Me In” was an important advocacy campaign which led to disability being noted in Census 2011. Hoardings were put up in the metros like Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata as well cities like Guwahati, Asansol and Patna.

Trinayani believes that standing for one’s rights comes only from self-dependence which is realised through employment. So, since 2009, it has been working at securing meaningful employment for persons with disabilities. One area in which it has found great success is training blind persons to be Foot Reflexology Massage therapists. Such trained therapists have been welcomed by a number of well-known Foot Spas and beauty salons. They also visit corporate offices and malls to provide therapy.

The website of the NGO features awareness films and literature, which can be downloaded. All donations to Trinayani are tax-exempt under Section 80G of Income Tax Act. ■

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