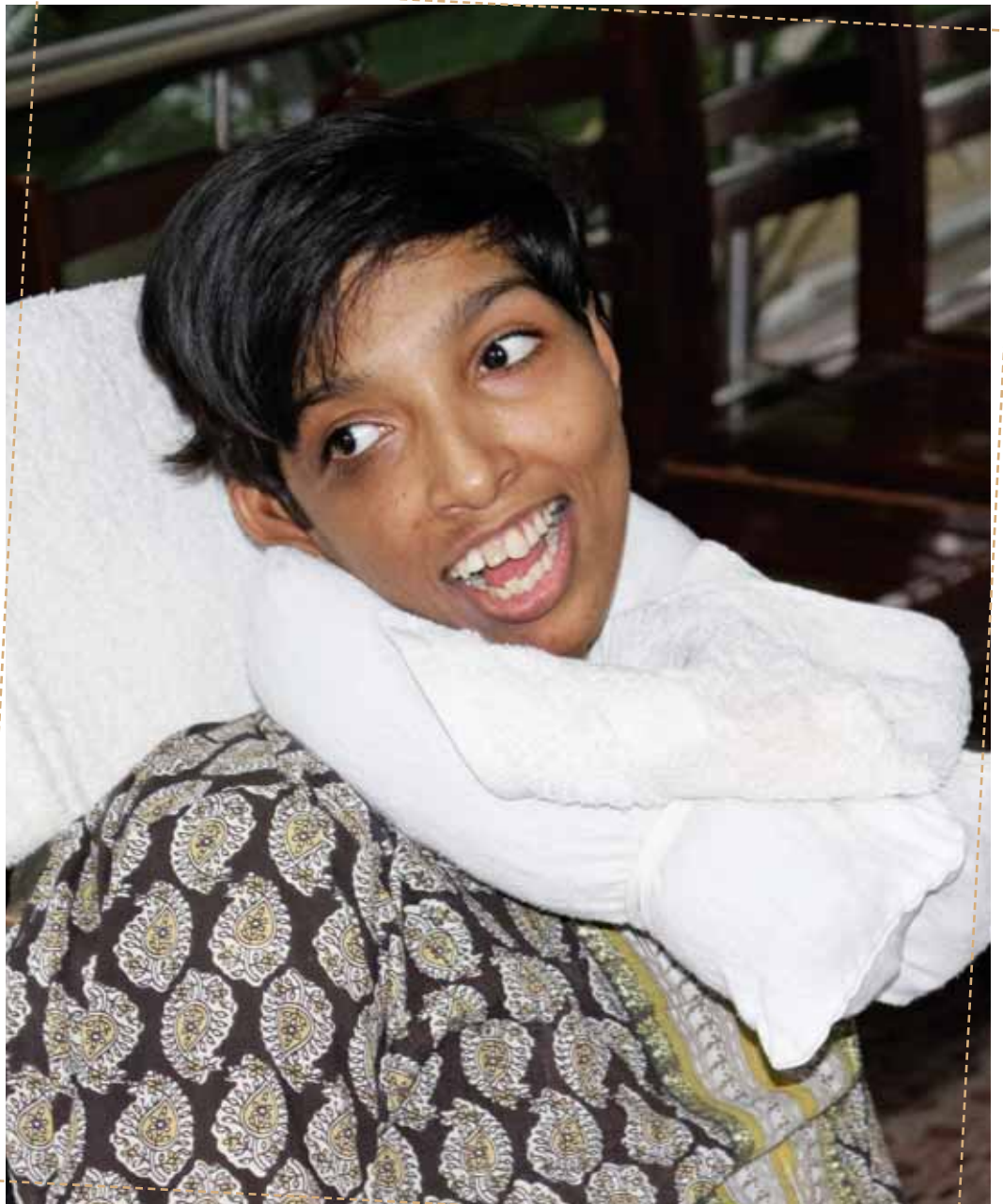


THE POWER OF

Entrepreneur and activist Bhavna Botta communicates through an 'alphabet board', but that hasn't stopped her from being stubborn about her aspirations



SILENT COMMUNICATION

JAMES ROY

Bhavna Botta procured a bank loan in 2011 and started her own textile boutique, *Saahaagika*. By 2014, she repaid the bank and her parents who had helped her with the initial investment. Unfortunately, due to the Chennai floods of 2015, her venture literally ran into troubled waters. This sounds like just another topsy-turvy journey of an entrepreneur, but what makes Botta's story different is that she wasn't born like most of us, she was born with Athetoid Cerebral Palsy.

Athetoid Cerebral Palsy is a condition in which parts of the brain that are in-charge of the body's motor functions (i.e. movements such as sitting, grabbing, walking and catching) are damaged. So while people such as Bhavna are intellectually and emotionally at par with others, she would have trouble doing routines such as speaking or walking and would appear 'different' than us.

Botta's aspirations and spirit, however, do not have anything to do with her physical disability, in fact, they are only stronger, thanks to it. Botta is now editor-in-chief at *Connect Special*, a digital newsletter that demystifies disability and seeks inclusion. "Publishing day is when I cut my nails. Cut...bite, they're the same in terms of what they accomplish," she says.

Connect Special is her one-year-old baby which she plans to put to work. By monetizing the nascent newsletter, she hopes to restart *Saahaagika*. Meanwhile, she has also become the Vice President of the International Society for Alternative and Augmentative Communication (ISAAC), India chapter.

Bhavna says, "I used many modes of communication. It was only at the age of 13 that I was introduced to the alphabet board. Communicating with my school friends was time consuming and difficult but it allowed us to have many secrets. It also provided precious moments of fun. The power of silent communication!"

Bhavna's current mode of communication is the same one she used to give her college examinations; an eye-pointing alphabet board. The board follows eye-movements and spells out words and sentences. She used that to become a Commerce Graduate from Ethiraj College for Women, Chennai.

Athetoid Cerebral Palsy (ACP) means that Bhavna cannot walk but it doesn't mean she will not be 'on the move'. She cannot 'talk' like we do but manages to communicate clearly and impactfully. She can't write but her ideas have come alive. Over the years, Bhavna has learned to live with ACP and grow despite it.

The 'acceptance' unfortunately, hasn't come from some who she has interacted with. "Getting a loan for my business was a big challenge. They said, 'Since you can't sign, you need to have a joint account with a parent or guardian. I was being questioned more on my condition than about my business plan. After visiting the bank almost every day for a month with my mother, I was finally allowed to open a current account," she rants.

The frustration only crept up when people refused to understand and were quick to disregard. With time,

she has developed an appropriate response. "I just smile away," she says, realizing that the only way to change attitudes is to spread awareness.

"Activism is my passion. I want people with disabilities to get their rights. They need to be included in society. The ramp should be right next to the step of the main entrance and not behind or at the side of the building." The editor-in-chief of *Connect Special* is clear about the issues she feels strongly about.

Bhavna admits she is stubborn, short-tempered and difficult to please. These are not qualities parents necessarily enjoy dealing with in their child, but they have kept her going. So while travelling tires her, her stubbornness has taken her places. "My best trip so far has been to the US. I hope to go on another trip this year," she says.

Amidst busy days of creating awareness about 'Alternative and Augmentative Communication', fighting for rights of people with disabilities, collecting books for poor children and providing employment by re-commencing *Saahaagika*, Bhavna is supported by her parents.

"From my rehabilitation ever since I was 6 months old, to realizing my dreams of entrepreneurship, my parents and my sister have only pushed me forward. I hope I can do the same for others."

The THIS-ABILITY article series is an attempt to create a positive, humane and empowered discourse around the lives of people living with disabilities. An initiative of the NGO, TRINAYANI, founded by Ritika Sahni, the aim is to alter perspectives and change attitudes of the masses with our premise being that we are all different, yet similar. www.trinayani.org