

Engineer by education, researcher by profession and comedienne by DNA, Pooja Vijay shows the world how disabilities and obstacles can be turned into trump cards.

"The truth is I hadn't planned a career in stand-up comedy. It just happened to me," says 28-year-old Pooja, recalling her early days in stand-up comedy a few years ago. She had just returned to Bengaluru after completing a Master's degree in Engineering in Europe. She partook in a handful of open mic nights over the 2-3 years she spent in Bengaluru before she moved to Delhi to pursue a career in the think tank space. Life in a new city offered her an abundance of time to herself and she found herself gravitating towards open mic nights - this is where her career in the laughter business truly took off. Four years on, Pooja Vijay is a fairly well-recognized name in stand-up comedy and she has for the past year committed herself completely to being a stand-up comedienne.

What makes Pooja's story remarkable is the fact that she has a speech impediment. Many of us will recall the incredibly popular Nescafe ad about a stuttering comedian and his journey to the stage and as such it is easy to imagine the challenges that Pooja encountered along her way to becoming a name in stand-up comedy. She says that the trick is to put the audience at ease by acknowledging and mentioning her stutter. "It is crucial to address the fact that I have a stutter in the first few minutes or else the audience tends to become awkward - they are unsure of whether it is rude to laugh at my jokes or

whether they should offer me an 'awh for effort' instead," she says. But this implied that she had to embrace her disability herself in the first place. This, she admits, is a tremendous challenge. "Most people with a stutter are subjected to such scarring childhood experiences that they find it impossible to channel confidence later on in life. School was certainly difficult. I got bullied and mocked. Most people with a stutter will agree when making introductions, for some reason, when you are asked your name or try to

LAUGHS AND LESSONS WITH COMEDIENNE POOJA VIJAY

She is engineered to make others laugh, a stutter notwithstanding

introduce yourself, your stutter tends to become more pronounced - resulting in a series of quips such as 'did you forget your own name' and so on. Fortunately, I had a few really good friends who stood up for me even when other children made fun of me," Pooja reveals.

She says that there is a lesson in this for youngsters. "If you see someone being bullied or treated poorly on account of their speech impediment or indeed, because of any disability, be the voice of reason and stand up for them," she advises school-goers. She finds that sensitisation is important to balance out the image portrayed in movies, where the person who stutters is always ridiculed. To those who stammer, her message is to sweep all embarrassment out of the way. "When you are struggling to say a word or to introduce yourself, mention that you stammer even if it is after someone has made a joke about it. That often turns the tables on the feeling shame," she says.

Even after having 'arrived' on the stand-up comedy scene, life is not without its challenges. "Comedy is a boy's club that has thrived on sexist jokes for decades - women are still making their way into the top ranks. You get trolled terribly online, often abusively, but this too is true for nearly any female public figure," Pooja says.

The reality of the situation is that while her own shows work out perfectly, she does lose out on some categories of work that her counterparts benefit from. "Emcee opportunities and jobs to host



corporate networking evenings often bypass me because they would prefer something or someone more generic," she admits.

Reactions to her stutter have ranged from "she's using it as a crutch; making it more pronounced" from fellow-comics to "I really enjoyed your performance; if only you didn't stutter... I know a really good speech therapist" and "You're such an inspiration and you barely stutter – how can I get rid of my stutter" from audience members.

She is quick to insist that comedians are a mixed bag and that comedy makes for a superb job. "There are some really nice comics out there. I've even had support on-air from comedians on several issues. Being a comedian is very enjoyable. It is also rewarding because you can have people laugh with you and utilise humour to address issues," she says. Pooja does not attempt to conceal or fix her stammer. She has accepted it as who she is and encourages others to do the same. Society has become more accepting to everything from plus sizes to skin-colour and speech impediments could also be accepted – I think that accepting my stutter as a public figure allows me to set the ball rolling.

Pooja uses humour towards the greater good as she talks about her stutter, her experiences as a woman and the stand-up scene in India. She creates awareness and drives sensitisation in a lighter vein, delivers lessons through laughter and inspires by her own example.

Life at the moment is exactly how she would like to have it. "About a year ago when I decided to give up my corporate job and dive whole-heartedly into stand-up comedy, I had the support of my mother and grandmother who invited me to move back home to

Bengaluru so as to focus all my resources on developing my audience and following," she says. "On Sunday, May 6, the first of my series of 'secret stand-up shows' has taken off," she says. This new genre of stand-up comedy shows is aimed at an audience that prefers connecting with the comic over commercialisation; intimate spaces over bars and enjoys stand-up comedy in its purest form.

In fact, Pooja has used her popularity to streamline the industry for the better, from the word go. When she started out in Delhi, she immediately began open mic nights for women comics – a tradition that she continues today as a curator for women-only stand-up comedy shows in Bengaluru. She is also looking to work with an all women troupe in Gujarat. Once again, she has a good amount of free time and is grateful for it. Unlike most millennials, she is not plagued by a need to travel constantly. "I spent my younger years travelling a lot – I've been to over 30 countries – so I do not have the wanderlust that most people subscribe to," she says, admitting that she does have a favourite among the 30, "Lisbon, where I studied my Masters, is definitely my favourite destination."

She thrives on lazy days at home with her mother, grandmother and her cat Sushi. Free time is for 500-piece and 1000-piece puzzles, for adult colouring books and for British comedy shows such as *The Mighty Boosh*; *Fry & Laurie* and *Would I Lie to You*.

Her words of advice on conversing with people who stutter, she offers two rules of thumb: One, allow them to complete their sentences instead of losing focus or attempting to guess the end of the sentence – that can be very frustrating. Second, a stutter comes and goes. It is insensitive to ask someone "why are you not stuttering right now?"

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