

people



**GIVING WINGS
TO DREAMS**



**THE STAGE
BECKONS, ONCE
AGAIN!**



**A LIFE FULL OF
EXPLORATIONS**



GIVING WINGS TO DREAMS

Dr. Jitender Aggarwal (45), Founder and CEO of Sarthak, is transforming India's landscape for 'people with disabilities' (PwDs). Krishan Kalra spoke with him at length to learn about the Good Samaritan's life and what drove him to this crucial area for inclusivity of the country's 30 million or more PwDs.

Days merged into nights and the phone wouldn't stop ringing. With two dental clinics to manage in West Delhi between him and his wife, and a three-year-old to come back to, life was as perfect as it could be. "At least that is what I thought," Dr. Jitender Aggarwal says with a smile. But the best was yet to come his way, as he puts it. In 2004, while he was examining a patient's mouth, it seemed blurry. He adjusted the light

overhead, but it didn't help much. Must be the exhaustion of the extended hours, he decided, and began the next day just like another. Till he noticed his vision still seemed cloudy.

The ophthalmologist confirmed that 'macular degeneration of retina, which was to slowly but surely result in vision loss' had set in his eyes. "I did not know what hit me. The day passed in a haze," he recalls. How would their lives pan out? What about his work? How

would he look in a beard, if he couldn't shave? How would he drive to his clinic? These and a million other questions crowded his mind. Perhaps the diagnosis today was just a bad dream? May be he would wake up the next morning and everything would be just fine. Sadly, it wasn't so. He was angry, utterly dejected, irritable, sometimes all of this and much more.

Born in a small Haryana town, in a family of shopkeepers, he had worked

“Disability is in our mind and not in our body! Scientist Stephen Hawking and India’s IAS topper Ira Singhal are shining examples of those who have not only overcome physical limitations by their will and determination but have set an example for millions more that nothing is impossible once you set your heart and mind to a cause.”



hard, attended a dental college in Karnataka, set up a successful practice, married another dentist, opened a second clinic and the couple had become sort of celebrities back home. And, now this! The next two years were the toughest of his life. From being a recluse to shouting sprees to becoming suicidal, he went through it all. “It was like I was in the middle of a storm with something new hitting me each time. It is not easy to see something so precious slipping away. I felt utterly helpless,” he says honestly.

Looking back, he can’t thank god enough for making him go through this phase of life. “If I hadn’t lost my vision, I would still be examining people’s mouths and seeing the filth,” he chuckles. “Surely, God had a plan for me,” he adds.

What he does now, he says, is so much more important. And you get a better sense of it when you see it for yourself in the eyes of Reena Chatterjee whose son works as a delivery boy at Flipkart. He can’t hear but can lip read with perfection. Or in the bright orange nail paint of a visually impaired girl who works as a therapist in a posh office at Gurugram. “It is brilliant to help the ladies relax while I help them with a shoulder and neck massage. It gets tiring to work on computers for them, all day,” she smiles.

Then there is a handsome young man who is riddled by polio but his sharp mind helped him get a job as an accountant at IBM. These and are just some of the many who have been trained at Sarthak, that has helped over 18,000 people with dis-

abilities not just get trained but also find jobs – some with five-star hotels, others with MNCs or at leading retail groups. All of this, says Dr. Aggarwal, happened because he lost his eyesight. “Today I am so thankful that it happened because if it didn’t, how could I help so many people lead a life of dignity? I was living in my own cocoon and now here is this new world where every little thing that I am able to do for someone means so much more,” he says.

But how did the transformation from the frustrated young doctor grappling with a sudden physical challenge into a patient middle-aged social entrepreneur happen? “After I was done feeling angry and frustrated, seeing my wife run her clinic while managing our son, I knew I could not sit

and mope. So I decided to think of some work I could do. I heard about medical transcription and found it was something I could do, thanks to my background as a doctor. Of course there were frustrations along the way but by then I began to realise that I had a situation to face and it was up to me to handle the same or sit and feel angry. Working around it, seemed more logical and a little less frustrating.”

“My college mate Dr. Dinesh Jain – now a trustee of Sarthak – was a great source of strength through the long ordeal during which I tried my hand at many things – teaching at AIIMS, dental equipment business, medical transcription, et al. One day, a thought dawned on me. Weren’t there many others like me grappling with disabilities? I had some kind of financial backup, several others didn’t. Couldn’t I help a few others pick up what I was doing? People gave them charity, some even trained them but no one empowered them by finding sustainable jobs,” he adds.

That thought was the

birth of Sarthak Educational Trust. After he trained a few visually impaired who were taught medical transcription and they found work, Dr. Aggarwal felt the happiness he hadn’t in years. Soon he decided to turn part of his wife’s clinic into a training centre. This was in 2008. Today, Sarthak has a modest office in Delhi, 20 other training centres all over India, has placed 18,000 ‘divyangs’ so far and trained 16,000. A three-month course helps individuals with various disabilities pick up life skills and be market-ready.

Of course it was not an easy journey but Dr. Aggarwal thrives on these challenges. “When you know you are empowering someone to become self-supportive and lead a life of dignity, there is no better feeling,” he says. Along the way, many individuals helped him; Ranjan Chopra generously gave hired office space, Sandeep Bhargava got him a grant from Nokia, Tech Mahindra sponsored the first Skill Development Centre, ITC’s Niranjani Khatri and MDI’s Neelu Bhullar constantly gave great advice and the

latter also introduced him to management Guru Dr. Mrityunjay Athreya who has been mentoring Sarthak since 2010. Later, NSDC, Capgemini, The Hans Foundation, Credit Suisse and many others came forward with handsome grants for more and more centres.

What also drives him is the change in attitudes he has seen over time. “We have placed a number of youngsters at five-star hotels, besides a number of leading MNCS, restaurants and retail spaces – not because these organisations are doing charity but because they actually feel that these boys and girls have skill-sets that they need and that they are so much more dedicated to their jobs. This dedication stems from the faith that these companies have shown in their capabilities and given them a chance to be financially independent. It is a mutually satisfying association,” he says. An active cricketer and movie buff at one time, Dr. Aggarwal now uses his spare time – if at all there is any – visiting temples wherever he travels.