

## Super Idol- Sunita Ambatkar

Disability, she asks?

For 41-year-old Sunita Ambatkar, it is a word that exists only in one's mind.

What else can explain a 41-year-old engineer with an orthopaedic disability who works at reputed engineering firm in Pune?

As an operational manager and soon to be Chief Operating Officer at SV Tech Engineering Consultants Pvt Ltd., Pune, she draws a salary of 60,000 and is a happy, single, independent woman.

"You can achieve what you set your mind on, nothing else matters more than that determination", she says.

For a girl who lost sensation in her right leg as a two-year-old, life hasn't been easy. But she is not the one to complain. "My siblings, my parents have always made me believe that I can achieve what I want and that is exactly how I have viewed life", she says.

Born and brought up in Nanded, a small village in Maharashtra, a high fever at the age of two saw her get a wrong injection that left her leg disabled. It is another thing her family never let her feel she was any different. For she went to a regular school in her village and then cleared her engineering exams to get into an engineering college in Latur. "I never felt any different really. Of course, I have been blessed with friends and family who are more than supportive, she says.

Her father, an engineer in the irrigation department never undermined the importance of studies for his children and it was no different for his darling daughter, Sunita. Her mother meanwhile was her emotional anchor and siblings, her best cheerleaders.

An operation six years back helped her improve her walking. "I don't bend as much as I used to" she says matter of factly.

Ask her what she likes doing best and pat comes the reply, "studying". From preparing for bank exams to having cleared engineering and doing a course in a polytechnic, she has done it all.

"Given the way technology is progressing and the ease of doing things, the world is here in front of each one of us and we can do all we want. We are the masters of our minds and destiny", she says.

## Healing Hands

She remembers them distinctly, the colour of sky on a clear day, the fiery red hibiscus flowers in a tin container at home or the green frock her mother had bought on her eight birthday.

At 35, Neetu still asks her mother to choose her clothes. Not only because she loves her but also because her mother can see the colours and she can't.

"Of course I tell her what styles I want. For example on a relaxed day, I could wear a salwar kameez but when I have things to carry in my backpack or I have a hospital's appointment to attend to, I prefer jeans," she says with a smile. A pink lipstick has been put carefully and lovely orange nail paint, sits pretty on her dainty fingernails.

"I love my job. The fact that so many people ask for me, that they wait for their turn to see me feels great. But what I love most is to think that they get rid of their pains and relax", she confesses.

Neetu works as a female therapist at PayU office in Gurgaon, five days a week. The women employees line up to get a quick neck and shoulder massage. On Saturdays she works from 9 to 5 at C K Birla hospital as a medical tactile examiner. I got trained in 'Tactile Breast Examination' (TBE) technique, she says with confidence. Pioneered by Dr Frank Hoffmann, the internationally accepted Discovering Hands concept uses the exceptional sensory skills of visually impaired women for manual breast health screening. This helps with early detection of cancer, she smiles.

But she didn't smile as often till about a decade back, shares Neetu. As a school girl in Hapur in Uttar Pradesh, she was always happy to go to school. But that was only till class five, she shares. Because post that, she began losing her eyesight gradually, because of Optic Atrophy. The doctor advised her not to strain her eyes but Neetu couldn't think of not studying. She always looked for brighter areas in class where she could see better, avoided telling her parents how she was slowly not being able to see their faces clearly. "It was a sinking feeling to think I was slowly losing everything that was comforting and familiar", she says. Post her class 10th exams, Neetu knew she couldn't study any longer as she had lost her eyesight completely by then. For a young girl full of dreams and hopes, it was a cruel blow. "My world was suddenly plunged in darkness. It was a very difficult phase. What made it worse was the fact that I was at home, always" she recalls.

After years of sitting at home trying to keep negativity out, when she finally heard of training centre for blind women like her in Delhi's Hauz Khas, she was determined to join it. From her small protected world, it was a big change but Neetu was beginning to dream again. She also completed her class 12th.

Soon after, she heard of Sarthak Educational Trust which helped her with a job placement at PayU, where she has now been working for three years.

"When I spent endless days at my village, hoping this misery would end, I couldn't even imagine life could be this meaningful. It feels great to be independent. I live in a paying guest accommodation in Guragon and travel to work on my own. I am no different from any other working woman now", she says with confidence.

## Silent Brew Master – She Brews to Conquer!

A cup of tea or coffee sets the course of our day for many of us, but for Rakhi it's more than just a day starter rather it sets the course of her independent life!

If you happen to visit Cafe Coffee Day Outlet at Vaishali, Ghaziabad, to enjoy your preferred cuppa, you may be amazed by this young and exuberant girl. You need not to learn sign language for sure, to get the beverage of your choice. Just pen it down and the silent brew-master will get it done, in a couple of minutes.

This was always a dream for Rakhi, to live her life independently and to lend a supporting hand to her father. But she was also aware that her disability may pose a challenge in realizing her dreams. Born 100% deaf, she completed her schooling from a school for deaf and learnt sign language as part of the curriculum. What could she do thereafter was neither clear to her, nor her parents were aware enough to guide her. She was clueless and disarrayed.

Then, with some divine intervention - as she confidently claims - she got to know about Sarthak Ghaziabad centre, supported by Capgemini, in a job fair. On further inquiry, the team oriented her about the training program, placement prospects, and stories of many individuals with hearing impairment, working successfully. The interaction that lasted hardly few minutes, proved to be life changer for her. She grabbed the opportunity and got herself registered the very next day.

She utilized the three months program very effectively to hone her skills, and to get prepared for employability. During her training schedule an 'Exposure Visit' which was part of the allied activities, to one of the Cafe Coffee Day outlets helped her to decide her job preference and the first hand exposure to work culture and interaction with employees left a very positive impact on her.

Focused preparation for facing interviews in the last 15 days of training, proved to be the cream over the coffee. When she got an opportunity to appear in interviews, beaming with confidence, she cracked the very first one and got selected in Cafe Coffee Day.

Dedicately catering to her customers, Rakhi says Thank You with a shine in her eyes and a wide smile. She really brews to conquer!

## Talking from the heart

He looks at the person he speaks to with great attention. And then answers patiently, smiling a smile that lights up his face. It is only sometimes that he hands over a pen and paper to the person he is speaking to. Only, when he can't lip read a few words. Somen lost his hearing at 18, thanks to a wrong treatment.

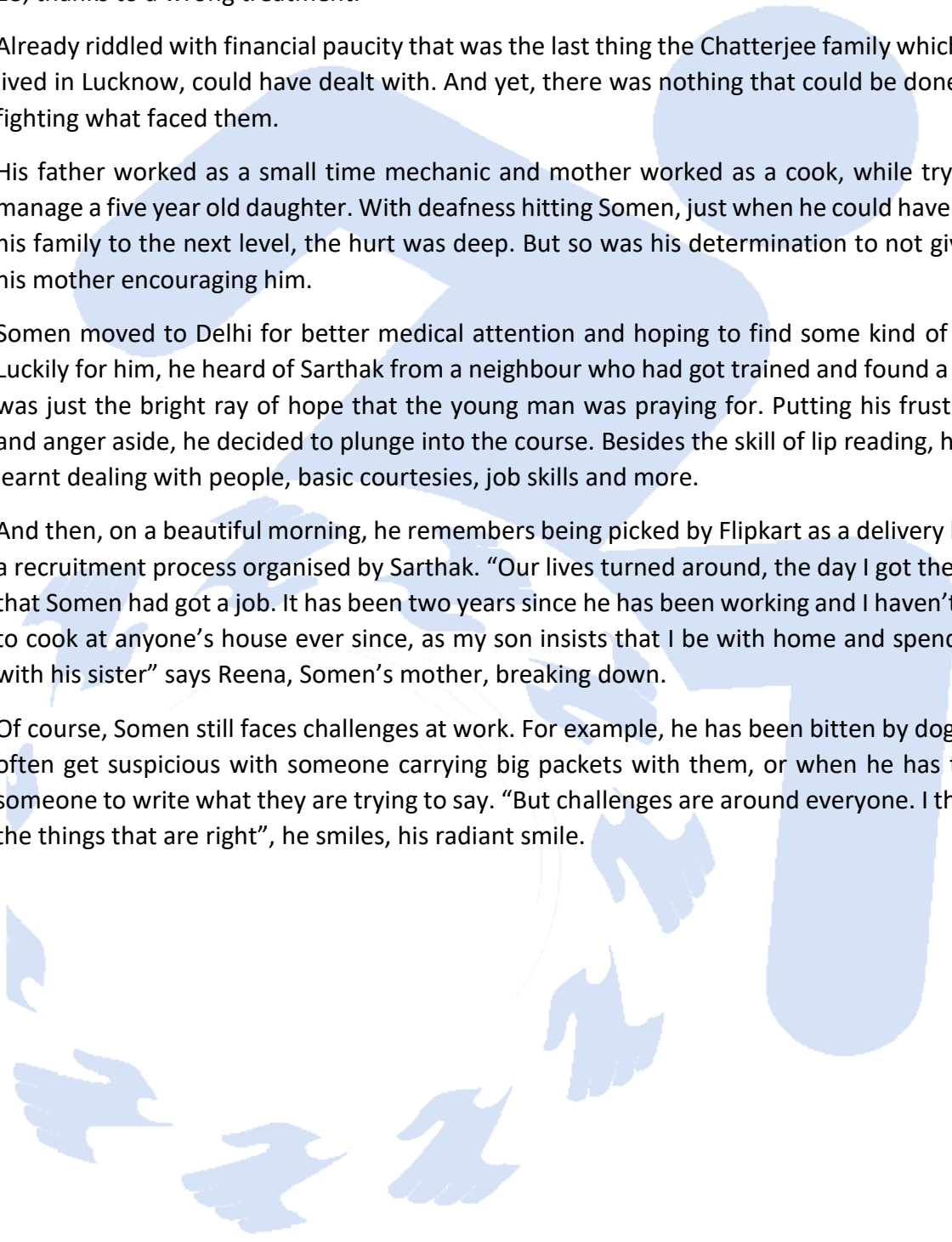
Already riddled with financial paucity that was the last thing the Chatterjee family which then lived in Lucknow, could have dealt with. And yet, there was nothing that could be done than fighting what faced them.

His father worked as a small time mechanic and mother worked as a cook, while trying to manage a five year old daughter. With deafness hitting Somen, just when he could have taken his family to the next level, the hurt was deep. But so was his determination to not give up, his mother encouraging him.

Somen moved to Delhi for better medical attention and hoping to find some kind of work. Luckily for him, he heard of Sarthak from a neighbour who had got trained and found a job. It was just the bright ray of hope that the young man was praying for. Putting his frustration and anger aside, he decided to plunge into the course. Besides the skill of lip reading, he also learnt dealing with people, basic courtesies, job skills and more.

And then, on a beautiful morning, he remembers being picked by Flipkart as a delivery boy in a recruitment process organised by Sarthak. "Our lives turned around, the day I got the news that Somen had got a job. It has been two years since he has been working and I haven't gone to cook at anyone's house ever since, as my son insists that I be with home and spend time with his sister" says Reena, Somen's mother, breaking down.

Of course, Somen still faces challenges at work. For example, he has been bitten by dogs that often get suspicious with someone carrying big packets with them, or when he has to ask someone to write what they are trying to say. "But challenges are around everyone. I think of the things that are right", he smiles, his radiant smile.



## Sarthak Pride- Jyoti

Would her seniors like her work, would she make friends easily, would she be able to speak well? These were the only worries 31 year old Jyoti Singh had when she joined her first job at the 108 emergency call centre in Lucknow.

All the other challenges she had learnt to fight since she was born. A mother of two, Jyoti has not had any sensation on her waist down 20 days after she was born.

But every morning when she wakes up at 3 am to head to her shift from 5 am to 1pm, it is only excitement she feels about heading out to work. Her children aged 14 and 10; help her with small chores like getting her water ready for bath, putting her clothes for the day. While her mother readies her tiffin, her father drops her in a scooter, every day.

“I want to think of what is right in my life”, she smiles.

Married at 18, Jyoti is currently fighting a divorce with her husband of 15 years. The couple lived in a setup; her parents had made for them, a floor above their own. “It didn’t work out for a host of reasons. Nothing is more important than self respect for me. I want to now focus on my children and make them proud of their mother. I have parents and an elder brother who have always encouraged me and of course God who has shown me the right path and been so kind,” she says.

For so much more could have gone wrong, she says.

On a pleasant October night when her mother, Uma Rani Thakur, gave birth to second child, at home, the family was overjoyed. “We already had an elder son and the family was finally complete,” says the mother.

Everything was perfect except a small abscess on the baby’s lower back. Following the tradition of not stepping out of the home for the first five days, the first thing the parents decided to do was take their daughter to a hospital on the sixth day. The naming ceremony was to happen after they returned from the hospital.

“The doctor told them, I had to undergo a surgery and the chances of survival were thin even after that. If I lived, I would lose sensation down the waist, lose eyesight, lose my mind or have my head grow constantly. Thankfully I only lost sensation down the waist”, shares Jyoti.

Jyoti was all of 20 days when she had her first surgery and the Thakur family never knew the milestones most parents did. Instead they dealt with other challenges.

From dealing with a child who had no control on her bladder to a burn accident that further disfigured her foot as a six month old, the parents saw this and more.

But they were sure they did all they could for their little girl. Jyoti in turn was slowly growing into a patient young girl who learnt to find her happiness in small things around her.

Not only did she manage to complete her schooling but also went on to do her BA and then did a course with Sarthak that helped her get a job.

“Till you experience pain you don’t know the value of joy. It has been a challenging journey but with my training at Sarthak that helped me with a job, I finally feel complete and independent.”

## Fire in his belly

Entrepreneur, poet, philanthropist and a sworn feminist, Rishabh Bidola is an enthusiastic 31 year old. That he was struck by Polio when he was all of eight months old is a thing he takes in his stride.

“Life is beautiful. There is so much to be achieve and so much to do. And when one starts thinking of disability as just another thing, that is what it becomes,” he says.

But this attitude didn't come easy, he reveals. “I have seen some very difficult times. When all one has is hope,” he says egging his eyes to hold his pain.

Born in a small village in Mayalgunj district in Sitapur, the family saw several hardships. Abuses came their way, more easily than food. “My father had a small shop and we are three brothers. What made matters worse was that my father had a drinking problem, the brunt of which was born by my mother. I remember walking 3kms to school every day,” he shares.

It was anything but easy, with his polio riddled legs of course but Rishabh preferred to look at the brighter side of life because his mother always told him that disability is only in one's mind. It went on to become his life's mantra. His surname, he says, is actually an extension of his mother's name (Biddo, which she was called lovingly by her mother). Rishab's father's surname was Gupta, one that he and his wife both gave up.

“I wanted to pay a tribute to my mother. It is from her that I learnt, that when you tell yourself you can do what you want, you really can”, he says.

Having developed an early interest in computers he knew he had to come to the city to achieve more. He went on to do his B Tech in IT from a college in Noida and soon enrolled with Sarthak Educational Trust, having heard about it from a friend.

At Sarthak, it seemed his dreams were finally being given a shape. If a three month course got him ready for a job, his attitude landed him with one at a firm in Delhi where he joined as a software programmer.

Two years later, he started a company in his mother's name and today runs a successful IT company in Gurgaon with a dozen employees currently.

He hopes to give jobs to several differently abled like him, soon.

The idea is to pass on the positivity. “Just like I got, from Sarthak”, he signs off.

## Walking the path of hope

A handsome face, a warm smile, Shadab is a thorough professional who has successfully retained his job at IBM's accounting department for the past six years. "I have a lot to achieve", he says.

That he has been riddled with Polio since he was two years old is something he likes to take in his stride. "I don't like to ponder too much on the tough times gone by; instead, I like to focus on what needs to be done. What else is there to life, than keeping one's hopes high and efforts higher?" He asks.

A belief, he lived by even when he went to his non-descript school in a small village in Farukhabad district, using crutches. Every day that he saw his father, a labourer at a sugar mill go to work and his mother struggling to run the family with the little money her husband brought home, Shadab's determination to become self-reliant only became stronger.

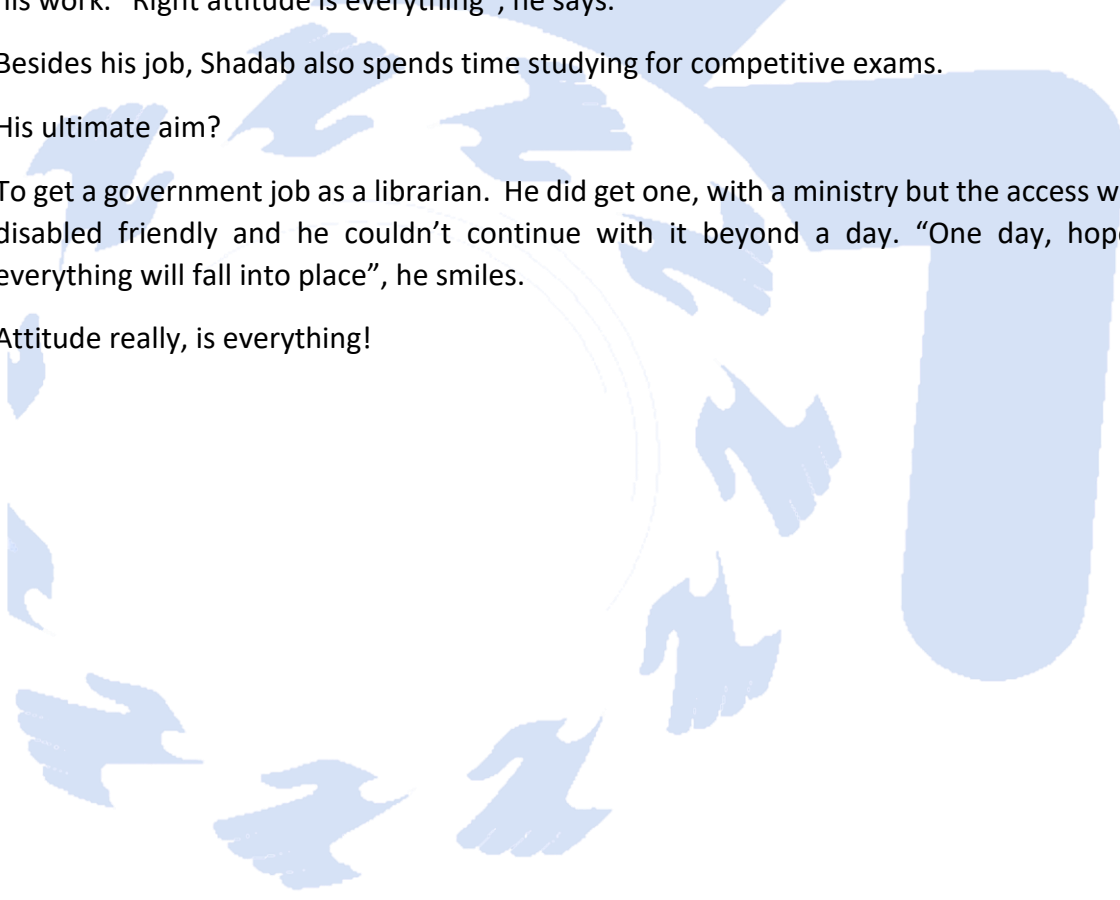
He moved to Delhi to pursue a degree in Library Science from Jamia Milia Islamia University. After his degree, he enrolled with Sarthak for their three-month training programme. Give his dedication and hard work; it was no surprise he got placed with IBM and works as a senior practitioner. A much-appreciated employee, Shadab makes sure he gives his 100 per cent to his work. "Right attitude is everything", he says.

Besides his job, Shadab also spends time studying for competitive exams.

His ultimate aim?

To get a government job as a librarian. He did get one, with a ministry but the access was not disabled friendly and he couldn't continue with it beyond a day. "One day, hopefully, everything will fall into place", he smiles.

Attitude really, is everything!



## To serve with love

His employer's look beyond what most others see in him, a young man who can only lip read since he is hearing disabled. For behind the "disability" is a very sharp mind that Crowne Plaza, Rohini, a five star in Delhi, values and appreciates.

Rohit Jaitly who works in the F&B department is very passionate about his job and loves to give extreme attention to the smallest of detail.

The fact that his work not just helps him support his mother but also makes him independent is his driving force. The fact that I came after years of struggle, then only adds to how much he values it.

Born in a middle class family, the now 37 year old struggled through school because he was born deaf. If that was not a challenge enough, he was only in class five when Rohit lost his father. He had to give up studies and bear the brunt of the tough times.

It was only when his mother heard about Sarthak from an acquaintance that the family saw a glimmer of hope. Those three months of training, shares Rohit, were the turning point in his life. It was like he had got a new lease of life. He felt confident, he felt special.

A job at a five star then, was like an answer to his prayers of being self reliant.

"I am very, very happy", he says with a smile.

