An Activist whose Dream is to Educate Every Differently-abled Child in India

by Anushree Madhavan

Coimbatore: A car accident left her a quadriplegic, but Sruti Mohapatra was not one to lose hope, though looked down upon and rejected for jobs; she took it upon herself to change people's attitude towards those with disabilities. The social activist was in the city to interact with the students of Isha Home School.

Bhubaneshwar-based Sruti was among the activists who advocated a law for people with disabilities and it was due to their efforts that India enacted necessary legislation. The change since then has been positive. "State governments are now forced to adopt policies that benefit the differently-abled. Governments are providing aid and our visibility has increased. Earlier, we were under one government department; now all departments think of us," she said.

Though there is change, Sruti is still not happy with the way differently abled children are being treated. "I always say that if teachers, doctors, lawyers and civil servants change their attitude, we can change the mindset of the public," she said.

While Sruti supports special schools for children with serious physical and mental disabilities, she is for children with mild disabilities attending regular schools.

"When children grow together, they will learn how to take care of each other," she said while sharing her experiences.

Sruti quoted what an American teacher had told her. In one class with a hearing-impaired child, all the children went through an activity in which they were isolated for a whole day. This made them understand the pain of being left out. In a school in UK, she found a headmistress preparing herself to teach a blind child who was to join the school. When teachers think differently, social attitudes also change," she explained.

In the recent Mann ki Baat programme, Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke about Sugamya Bharat Abhiyaan (Accessible India Campaign), where people were asked to pick 50-100 places in big cities. But says Sruti,

"As citizens, we must have access to all places. This is being ambitious indeed. My question is, who is going to audit the spaces and find the requirements? The Odisha government has asked me to be on the auditing panel for our state. What about the others? A group of auditors should be identified first and they must go through a formal training. But before this, I hope that public transport in all cities opt for low-floor buses."

During her interaction with the students, Sruti asked them to believe in themselves, fix a goal and work towards realising it. She shared her dream as well: "My dream is to educate every disabled child in India."