

Handicapped? Who?

It's not just the six-pack band that excels at adventure sports. In a unique experiment, an inclusive rock-climbing camp that comprised of 'normal', blind and deaf-dumb children was a real eye-opener, as the so-called handicapped children bagged all the prizes, leaving everyone wondering who was really disabled. ■ by Annam Suresh

Two weeks after Radha was born, her mother simply threw her into a dustbin. Years later, she was transferred from the government-run orphanage to a school for the blind near Kolkata, to be brought up among other girls who, like her, were visually impaired. To be equipped to look after herself and earn her living. The idea was to make her self-reliant and ensure that she did not end up being a social parasite. No one asked her about her dreams.

But Radha had one — to climb a hill, scale heights, over hard rocks, soft grass, cross gurgling rivers. Of course, she told herself, all this would just remain a dream. There was little chance of her realising any of these fantasies. Neither would 12-year-old Munnamunni who had also come with Radha from the Liluah home. Nor Sandhya or Chumki, whose families, bogged down with the immediate problem of finding the next square meal and unable to cope with the physical, social, moral and financial pressures of looking after these completely blind children, had jumped at the opportunity of sending them away to the school for the blind.

Nor would Binu, who with one seeing eye proudly declares that she can read normal books, not just Braille, and had she continued at a regular school, would have been in Class X instead of Class VI. But her doctor, alarmed at her rapidly deteri-



Fastest climber, hearing impaired Mithun, teaching youngest camper 8-year-old Shubhangini the right way to handle a puppy.

orating vision in the one good eye, had asked her to shift to a school for the blind, learn Braille to relieve the strain to the good eyes and save it from complete blindness.

An invitation from the Uttarpara Adventure Club and the local municipality to join a five-day rock climbing camp in the Mathaburu hills near Purulia district of West Bengal changed everything. The girls jumped enthusiastically at the opportunity when convinced that trained instructors would guide them every step of the way. And a doctor and fully equipped ambulance would be handy if any emergency arise.

"Don't refer to them all as visually-challenged or hearing-impaired even though these are the new politi-

cally correct terms, because these words give the impression that they still have some vision or hearing left, and hence one doesn't quite get an idea of how immense the hurdles they have overcome are. To dream so lofty never having seen a colour or a landscape ever is no mean feat or fantasy," the doctor insisted.

The bunch of 'normal' teenagers who had signed up for the same camp for a bit of healthy fun looked forward to the trip and to probably making friends with other teenagers like them. Till they reported for camp the first day and saw half a dozen blind girls and an equal number of hearing-impaired boys (all but one completely deaf) and a youngster with only one arm.

They were sceptical of the whole

affair. According to the father of one of the teenagers, "It looked like a publicity gimmick. I wondered how these blind girls, the bunch of deaf boys and the lone boy with just one arm was going to do anything. In fact, the able-bodied, I felt, would probably be slowed down and exploited to look after the needs of the all the disabled children. I almost considered withdrawing my child since I felt the training would be oversimplified to suit this motley crowd where there were different groups of variously handicapped children who would need to be handled differently."

Record breakers

Six days later, he had to eat his words. When the final competition of climbing up and down a 1250-metre high rocky hill was completed. The first three places went to Mithun Ray, Sapan Sikdar and Meghnath Sahu. Munnamunni and Radha topped the Burma rope bridge and rappelling tests. The Best Camper Award went to Munnamunni.

Mithun, Sapan and Meghnath are all deaf and Munnamunni and Radha blind. Not one of the 'normal' children figured among the prize-winners!

Never having seen a rock or hill in her life, unable to see any of the equipment that she had to use, Munnamunnii still managed to pass every single test with flying colours. There were no special privileges for the disabled. On the contrary, they had to put in much harder work, which they did cheerfully. Never has the term 'differently abled' been more apt as when this camp revealed the various hidden skills from the least expected.

For example the trainees from the 'general' category could use all four limbs for a firm grip. But the blind



Bina tackling with ease the tough Burma bridge, while an admiring audience of fellow campers and instructors gapes in wonder.

girls had to use their fingers and toes to first grope for foot and hand holds, then guide their feet to the appropriate crevice, shift their hand, all the while mentally estimating the distances between the hands and feet, ensuring that they are not too far or too close.

Thus while most trainees had three

While most trainees had three points of support (three of their four limbs at any given time were used for gripping), the blind girls had sometimes just one, sometimes two, given the additional task of groping and testing out each point for a suitable hold, often one hand and one foot doing this simultaneously, deciding on the kind of grip to use.

points of support (three of their four limbs at any given time were used for gripping), the blind girls had sometimes just one, sometimes two, given the additional task of groping and testing out each point for a suitable hold, often one hand and one foot doing this simultaneously, deciding on the kind of grip to use, estimating the distance and then, if needed, using a hand to guide their foot to it.

Despite the additional effort involved, they were among the swiftest on the rocks. "Almost as if they had always been climbing rocks" marvelled instructor Tushar.

Instead of being handicapped by a physical disability, these children had learnt to actually turn these very handicaps into advantages. As Mithun explained: "Since I could not hear, I had to pay very careful attention during the classes to grasp every detail of the explanations as it could spell the difference between triumph and a nasty fall. And thanks to our hearing disability, no noise could distract us during lessons"

Munnamunni adds, "Since I could not see how high I was, I had no fear of how badly I could fall. I could not see any of the grips and knots I was being taught. But I retained every word the instructors taught and when they demonstrated to me guiding my fingers to describe various grips, the different kinds of cracks and the corresponding holds, and also let us feel each of the equipment I felt they were treating us with so much importance — something we had learnt never to expect. Not only that, whether it was the Burma rope bridge, which some of the 'general' category trainees admitted was quite daunting, or rappelling, or tackling the most treacherous rocks to negoti-

ate, we were never discouraged. They always told us it was easy, and congratulated us every time we completed the exercise."

One-armed Ashis' announcement that he was going rock-climbing was met with disbelief. But he was not to be discouraged so easily. He completed the 2500-metre competition in 46 minutes - just six minutes longer than the previous year's winner. And much faster than the majority of the "general" trainees. Incidentally the first three winners had all broken the club's previous record for the same climb.

For Meghnath Sahu this was his second camp. The first time around he had come unwillingly, virtually forced to join by his parents and the psychiatrist who was treating him for various behavioral disorders. Meghnath was not only deaf and mentally retarded, he displayed socially disruptive behavior. Given to uncontrollable bouts of rage, he would often attack whoever he perceived as the cause of his imagined provocation, and during such phases, it was virtually impossible to restrain him.

Proved helpful

His parents took him to a psychiatrist who after several sessions of counselling felt such a camp would probably have a therapeutic effect on him. Meghnath's parents and the organisers were a little wary of the possibly disastrous consequences of the experiment and the damage it could cause not only to Meghnath, but the other trainees as well as the reputation of the organisers.

Dr Sujit Ghosh not only pleaded Meghnath's case, but actually accompanied him to the camp, in case anything went wrong. However, by the end of the camp, Meghnath was a changed adolescent. He not only began to control his anger, but opened up as a rather friendly person, lending a helping hand to his camp mates. He had become more communicative, less self-centered and begun to take



Best all-round camper, the visually challenged Munnamunni, listening as Instructor Arun explains a grip.

interest in football which he was going to pursue after going back.

At this camp - his third - he was seen translating the instructor's lessons to his deaf-mute brethren and was a source of great encouragement to them - partly why the first three places in the 2500-metre climb were bagged by the boys of his tent, while those from the general category lagged behind.

The blind girls and the deaf-mute boys were housed with their respective escorts for convenience. In addition, other beginners were also housed with them to help nurture a mutually enriching bond and enable informal interaction which was one of the aims of the camp. But as far as the training was concerned, there were no special concessions for the handicapped.

"Initially I was wary" confessed one trainee. "I felt apart from simply running errands or acting as guide-dog, I would have little to contribute, and nothing to gain. How wrong I was" The interaction among the variously abled was so expressive, that they managed to not only help one another but the disabled managed to even entertain the general campers.

"The deaf-mute boys came up with the most hilarious jokes, all in sign language, which we had no difficulty following. In fact, they had us in splits miming the various campers and instructors, all done in good humour".

The general campers had a lot to learn from those who seemed less fortunate. For example, the blind were the most orderly and tidy since there was no time to fumble. They had to remember where they put things. When the lights went out, which was very often, they were the first to help with a torch.

Immensely successful

According to Dr Sujit Ghosh, who accompanied Meghnath every year, one thing that was impressed on the trainees was that they were all alike and yet different in that each had something to teach, and could find something to learn. "Everyone is handicapped - some visually, some are deaf and Ashis has just one arm. But these are the obvious. The majority of the 'general' candidates too were handicapped when they first came - by mental blindness, insensitivity, lack of observation and the general attitude of condescension, if not insensitivity, that is so commonly what the physically disabled encounter."

But by the time they left, they were like gold tempered by fire - the latent humaneness had surfaced and begun to express itself almost instinctively. The inhibitions had simply burnt themselves out as the children began to reach out to one another as individuals rather than as to a blind person, a deaf boy or a normal child."

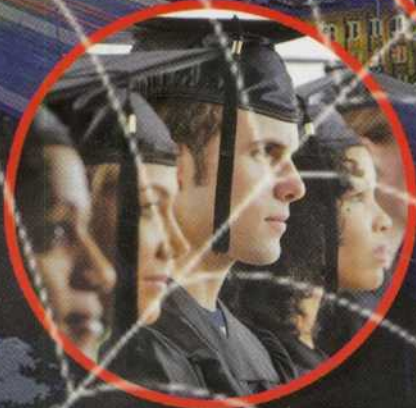
And if the so-called handicapped benefitted from the experience, the not-so-obviously handicapped learnt some valuable lessons too. In the final analysis, it was a display of balanced give and take. And if that was anywhere on the agenda of the training, the camp had certainly been an immense success." Touché. ■

**NRIS
RETURNING
TO INDIA:
A PENDING DECISION**

MAY 2012 • ₹ 25

FOR GO-AHEAD MEN

Alive



● **PORNOGRAPHY IN INDIA: A GRIPPING PHENOMENON** ● **CONGRESS IN KERALA: SUCCUMBS TO PRESSURE GROUPS** ● **WATER THREAT FROM CHINA: INDIA'S IMMOBILISED STAND**