



Sminu Jindal, 36, hopes one day India will rank among the most disabled-friendly destinations in the world. "It is my dream to see India as an accessible country and the world free of barriers."

SHE'S GOT THE ABILITY

Sminu Jindal, MD of Jindal SAW Ltd., is helping change India's public spaces to make them more accessible to the physically-challenged **BY SHASHI SUNNY**

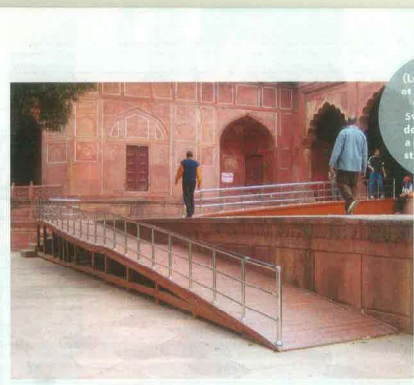
Sminu Jindal never got to visit a temple all by herself until she made a trip to the U.S. years ago. Wheelchair-bound since she was 11, the businesswoman marvelled at the easy accessibility the building provided to the disabled and was struck by the contrast back home. "I remember when I visited Tirupathi, my husband had to carry me inside," she says.

But if Sminu has her way, India should hopefully become a more dis-

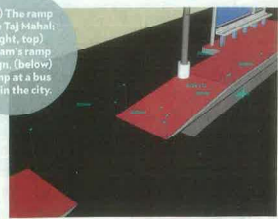
abled-friendly country in the future. She is the force behind Svyam, an initiative by the Sminu Jindal Charitable Trust, that focuses on increasing accessibility in public places to the handicapped, elderly and other challenged individuals. The organisation's current project involves working with the New Delhi government to make the city disabled-friendly by the upcoming Commonwealth Games in October. "Our project will cover bus

stops, public conveniences, train stations, airports, archaeological monuments and even schools and malls," says Sminu, 36.

As a paraplegic, she understands the value of independence. "Where is the dignity for people who are differently abled when they cannot do the simplest things on their own?" she asks. "I am of the opinion that if you cannot give a person dignity, there is no point in giving donations and



(Left) The ramp at the Taj Mahal. (Right, top) Svyam's ramp design. (below) A ramp at a bus stop in the city.



“Why should a person in a wheelchair not be able to visit and enjoy our heritage sites?” —SMINU JINDAL

doing charity." Sminu's can be viewed as a smoother existence than many others in her position. Born into the well-known Jindal family (her grandfather is O.P. Jindal, founder of Jindal industries), her needs were taken care of. "I lost [the use of] my limbs in an accident. But because I was from the Jindal family, which was prosperous, I had people to look after me."

Today, Sminu is a managing director of Jindal SAW Ltd., a Rs. 7500-crore venture that specialises in arc-welded pipes used to transport oil and gas. The fate of those less fortunate than her always plagued her. "Hundreds of people suffer from the same disability and don't have the support system. I felt like I had to help them."

Svyam began in 2007 as a portal when Sminu realised there was no real platform to seek information and advice on issues concerning the disabled. But gradually, she found that there was more active work to be done on the ground. Now Svyam functions in an advisory capacity, providing technical expertise and know-how free of cost to anyone who needs it.

"We don't want to get involved in the actual implementation because that involves financial dealings, which we want to avoid. Anyone can take our advice and implement it themselves," says Sminu. "Simple solutions like installing low-cost ramps, handrails, installing lifts and wider doors will make it possible for a wheelchair-bound person to live a better life."

Svyam's services are also being sought after by the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), the education ministry and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Along with the latter's help, Svyam has already succeeded in making the Qutub Minar a disabled-friendly World Heritage Site and is trying to do the same with other tourist spots. "Why should a person in a wheelchair not be able to visit and enjoy our heritage sites? Even I visited the Red Fort only after we made sure there were conveniences for people like me. When I am asked to attend a function, my first question to those involved is, 'Will there be a ramp for me at the event?'"

Disability has evidently not been

an impediment for Sminu in leading a fulfilling life. She married Indresh Batra, also a managing director at Jindal SAW Ltd., and is a mother to two sons, Anav, 7 and Arjun, 4. Besides being an active businesswoman, she's also an artist (she loves to paint) and was felicitated with the FICCI Women Achievers Award in 2009. On April 16, she was also chosen as the FLO Icon for 2009-2010.

But for the physically-challenged across the country, dreams still remain unrealised due to lack of accessibility and financial independence. "How can you have one without the other?" she wonders, adding, "To go and work somewhere that place has to be accessible to you. Society has to be sensitised to make this possible for the disabled in this country." ●

A PEOPLE HERO is one who is elevated from ordinary to extraordinary by actions which are both noble and inspirational. Know a hero? Email suggestions to letters@peoplemagindia.com