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DELHIDELIGHT
SMINU JINDAL, 41
**Changemaker & a
businesswoman**

Woman with access code

SMINU JINDAL is an achiever who dons many hats — businesswoman, wife, mother and the face of the cause of making India accessible from a wheelchair. She shares her experiences with PRAKRITI ROY



Meeting Sminu Jindal in person is a revelation, if not anything else. She is a woman who shows that it is possible to be a successful businesswoman in a wheelchair while also advocating the rights of people with reduced mobility, like herself, to have access to public places. Sminu spent her initial years of schooling in cities like Hisar, Kolkata and Jaipur. It was on her way back home to Delhi from the boarding school in Jaipur that the 11-year-old met with a car accident and has since been confined to a wheelchair. But being confined has not deterred her growth as a person, a business woman or a changemaker, as she likes to call herself. Incidentally, Sminu means someone who smiles a lot.

“Since Class V, I’ve been studying in Delhi. After my accident, I went to Presentation Convent School. That was the only school that accepted me as it was run by nuns and the only school with an elevator,” she tells you. Belonging to the reputed Jindal industrial family, Sminu definitely had the best of doctors treating her but the pain was still difficult to take for an 11-year-old. What urged her to move ahead was her parents’ love and the discipline with which she grew up. They did not let me wallow in self-pity. They inspired me to go out there in spite of my disability. Being from an industrial background helped in pressurising the school to accept me, but the everyday battles were my own. The emotional turmoil and trauma is the same for anyone, rich or poor,” says Sminu.

When Sminu went to study at Sri Ram College of Commerce (SRCC), the college was not accessible for someone on a wheelchair. She took it upon herself to rectify this by making her college accessible for people with reduced mobility, a cause she has been pioneering for the last 15 years on a very large scale. “When I passed out from SRCC, I requested the principal to allow us to make ramps as well as donate an elevator for the college. That was my gift to my Alma Mater,” she says.

Sminu went on to get a management degree from Fore School of Management, Delhi, and subsequently took over a company that was on the verge of a shutdown and turned it around. She hasn’t looked back since. Now she is the MD of the Jindal SAW company.

Taking up the MD’s position in a steel company, an industry dominated by men, Sminu definitely managed to break the glass ceiling. Add to that her inspiring work in the social sector for the elderly and those with reduced mobility and she becomes a woman of substance. However, she shuns the term social worker, choosing, instead, to call herself a changemaker.

“My heart was always in making things accessible. Allow a person to do what is inside of them. But enable a person to lead their life with dignity instead of handing out charity. Don’t give them arms for a day, give them life for a lifetime,” Sminu says and believes in.

She has become associated with a number of Government campaigns. Her organisation Svayam, initially founded as a one-stop information portal for persons with disabilities, is also a part of her efforts towards this cause. Most significantly, Svayam tied up with the Archeological Survey of India to make monuments like Qutub Minar, Red Fort and Fatehpur Sikri more accessible by building ramps for wheelchairs. Her organisation also participates in audits and appraisals of public infrastructure to assess the level of accessibility, in line with the Government’s Accessible India Campaign.

Recently, Svayam donated retrofitted cars to certain Government establishments in a bid to increase access as well as awareness for those with reduced mobility in the Government. Apart from the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment, Svayam has also been working closely with various Government agencies like the NDMC, ITDC, DTC, ASI and corporates like ITC Hotels, and working hand in hand with the Ministry of Tourism in their endeavour to promote inclusive tourism.

“It is difficult to balance a career and this passion. But if you love something, you make time for it. That’s what I do too,” Sminu tells you. She also reveals that working with the Government is not easy as there is no co-ordination between Ministries. “I wish I had a magic wand and made everything accessible! But I would like people to know that accessibility is not a disability issue but something that concerns everyone,” she says.

Her work has been recognised by many. She has received the Femina Favourite Face for a Cause Award. But she says: “When I see an elderly person on a wheelchair buying vegetables in the local market, I know that I must be doing something right. There is nothing bigger and better than that.”