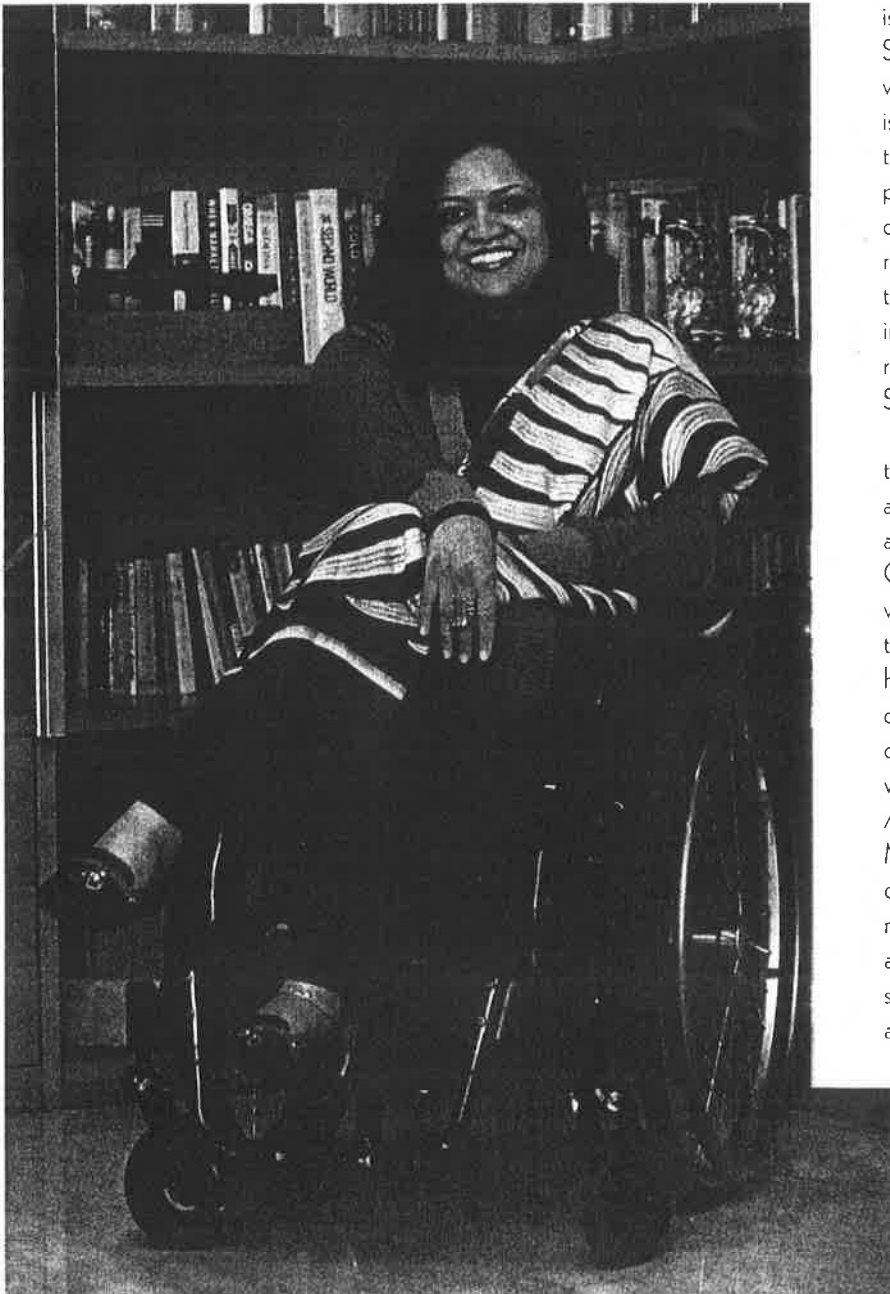


BRAVE HEART

WHEELS OF STEEL

Meeta Mishra meets the dynamic and spirited Sminu Jindal, who multitasks on her wheelchair.



You might be excused if you gape at Sminu Jindal. She is quite used to it. Busy shuffling around in her wheelchair as she goes about her office work, it takes a while to realise that she is paralyzed waist downwards. She makes multitasking on a wheelchair look so simple. "But it is not. And that is why I have been trying to create awareness among people in the government and corporate houses to make their respective infrastructure accessible to all, especially the elderly, women in confinement/ with infants and reduced mobility people," says Sminu, MD, Jindal SAW Ltd.

In spite of being confined to the wheelchair due to an accident at the age of 11, she has not allowed her spirit to be chained. On the contrary, it has added wheels to her determination to take life head on. And she doesn't have just herself in mind. Her organisation 'Svayam' (an initiative of S J Charitable Trust) has been working closely with NDMC, ASI, DTC and the Education Ministry of Delhi to make public conveniences units, historical monuments like the Qutub Minar and Jalianwala Bagh, bus queue shelters and government schools accessible to all those with

BRAVE HEART

reduced mobility. "Government agencies are empathetic towards such demands when told about them, but they don't know how to go about it and that's where our initiative comes in. We help in identifying and drawing out a plan for a project that needs to give attention where it is due."

It is easy to get impressed by her, since Sminu Jindal is an exceptional and exemplary woman of substance who does not shy away from challenges in all walks of life. She has been working incessantly towards providing independence and dignity to people with reduced mobility through 'Svayam'. "I believe that we should make the environment enabled for the disabled," says Sminu.

It might be her driving force, but that's not the only thing that Sminu Jindal is all about. She is the first lady entrant in the country to do her gender proud by breaking the glass ceiling in the steel, oil and gas sector in India. Having been appointed as the Managing Director of Jindal SAW Ltd, a part of the fourth largest industrial house in India, the Jindal Group, Sminu's contribution to the growth of the organization has been phenomenal. "I had decided at the tender age of seven that I would like to join my father's business. My parents used to laugh, thinking it was a passing phase. They'd say that before I knew it, I'd be married off. I was able-bodied at that time."

It was while she was returning to Delhi from her school, Maharani Gayatri Devi Girls' School in Jaipur, that her car met with a terrible accident in which she lost movement of her lower body. "It took me a long time to realise what had happened to me, but my parents stood rock solid in helping me cope with the repercussions of the accident. They never treated me differently from my sisters. My two younger sisters were also very sweet. When we would fight, I would call out to them to come and get thrashed by me and they would come! So it was

a very normal upbringing for me where I was never given any special consideration, be it organizing my cupboard or getting stuff from the kitchen. What is great is that once my parents accepted my condition, they educated themselves about it and found out the best possible treatments that would help me grow up the normal way. They got me a machine that would make me stand up for

a few hours everyday, so that I would be able to grow proportionately. I was at a growing age when the accident happened, and being confined to a wheelchair could have hampered the normal growth of my legs."

And all this does not come out of quivering lips. Sminu is jovial and jests all along. She talks about her condition in the most matter-of-fact way. There is no hesitation or reluctance. She has no problem in accepting her condition, and neither has her husband, Indresh Batra, found it an issue. They met at a friend's party where the two got along over "nonsensical banter". After which one thing led to another and they got married. They have two

sons aged six and three. Incidentally, Sminu had a natural conception, after which she went to the US where experts tracked her pregnancy. "We have a normal family life. Just like my parents, my husband too doesn't give me any special treatment. We fight like every other husband and wife and indulge our children like other parents."

Her message is simple: "What makes a person special is her work, her compassion and not her condition."

Next on her agenda is to sensitize tourism in India - to help people with reduced mobility enjoy the splendour of our country. Way to go, Sminu! ✍

PHOTOGRAPHS: NAVEEN SHARMA



"We have a normal family life. Just like my parents, my husband too doesn't give me any special treatment."

Ms. Sminu Jindal

CAREER

on the right track

Against all odds, Sminu Jindal, managing director of Jindal Saw Ltd, keeps her office machinery well-oiled. The Rs 7,500 crore venture requires the best of her leadership skills and humanitarian values

“WOMEN EMPLOYEES ADD VALUE TO THE WORKPLACE. THEY BRING WITH THEM A CERTAIN MULTI-FACETED APPROACH”

I was seven when I first announced to my industrialist father that I would be a businesswoman, and that I'd sit on this chair. He said he'd have me married off instead. In my family, that's the norm. But at 19, my father helped me start my career from that very office, sitting on that same chair. He gave me a sick unit called Swastik Foils, which was on the verge of being shut down, but I turned it around. He then brought me to Jindal Saw as a director.

I have been serving as the managing director of Jindal Saw for 12 years now. Yet, there are so many lessons to be learnt each day. Being a part of the top management requires special skills. Though leadership calls for proper delegation of work, not everything can be left to others.

There are some basic rules I follow at my workplace. Loopholes should be plugged, work should be streamlined and the employees should be allowed creativity. Your employees are your assets; you may have the latest technology but if you do not have the people to run it, it comes to a naught. I've learnt to value people like we value jewels.



To have systems in place, make a flowchart. Delegate, update and supervise. Take care of basics, so the functioning is smooth. Use human resources in a way that they are indispensable, yet, when they're away, work does not suffer.

I also ask a lot of questions; sometimes my colleagues are tired of my endless 'whys'. While it is a good trait, as a team leader, one should also know when one is being unreasonable and give in.

Women employees add value to the workplace. They bring along with them a certain multi-faceted approach. It's a gift that we women have. We have the ability to plan work meetings, the children's homework and gifts for the sister-in-law all at the same time. And we put a lot of thought into each of these jobs.

To be able to do this effectively,

working women must learn to prioritise. I've understood that the Cs can wait, but the As cannot. It is not easy being a working mom. I have two sons, aged six and four, and a husband who demands equal attention.

Once, I was asked how I ran the company being wheelchair-bound, and a woman. All I said was, "Why not? I don't have to lift pipes; I just have to manage the people who do." I do not think your gender or physical circumstances have anything to do with how you perform. It is just incidental.

I have been on a wheelchair ever since a car accident at age 11. My family was prosperous enough to support me. I had people who took care of my essential needs, enabling me to live the rather challenged life of a paraplegic. However, there are hundreds of

people suffering from similar disabilities who have nothing to fall back on.

When I became a director with Jindal Saw, I founded Swayam, a trust that works to increase accessibility to public spaces for the reduced-mobility populace that includes the elderly, children, women in confinement, people suffering from ailments and the disabled. Swayam conducts studies to assess the accessibility or the lack of it in public places, to advise the government and NGOs on what can be done. It is my dream to see India accessible. Lack of it leaves almost 3 per cent of the population without a means to livelihood, and all it calls for is small effort in planning and implementation. I believe that of the things you do, it is your work that will outlive you. ■