

WITH A FOREWORD BY
HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA



The
Invisible
Majority

INDIA'S ABLED DISABLED

C.K. MEENA
V.R. FEROSE

‘This book provides a clear and accessible overview of disability and inclusion. While it focuses on India, its message is global in every way. With a sense of cautious optimism for the future, it explores how attitudes have shifted over the years and the challenges that still lie before all of us to create a truly inclusive society.’ – **Christian Klein, CEO, SAP**

‘Each sentence in this generous book expresses the Inclusivity of the Heart – the largest inclusivity of all.’ – **Gary Zukav, author of *The Seat of the Soul and Universal Human***

‘An absorbing, transforming and inspiring read from start to finish. Every chapter is infused with stories from people, movements, and organizations. Anecdotal and illustrative, it is thoroughly grounded in research and offers ideas for an inclusive future. A much-needed book, a timely book, a book we cannot be without.’ – **Pradeep Sebastian, author**

‘It is richly comprehensive. I also like the “tell it like it is” tone of the writing. Both the format and the content lend themselves to a general reader audience as well as people who are themselves dealing with disabilities and their caregivers.’ – **Rajni Bakshi, author and Gandhi scholar**

‘The book reads so wonderfully, like an engaging travelogue with so many stories of the “travel” that persons with disabilities and their families have to (perforce) undertake.’ – **Shekhar Seshadri, psychiatrist and professor, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences**

‘This book is an eye-opening narrative of an often-overlooked part of our lives and society. It allows us to enter the lives of the disabled and instils in us a deep respect for those who have forged their experiences into weapons of empowerment.’ – **Malvika Iyer, disability activist**

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whenever I could'. It was a demanding course with 36 subjects, and the 108 students selected knew they could be ordered to exit at any moment if they didn't perform.

As if the course wasn't taxing enough, Lokesh simultaneously did a few certificate courses at the Netaji Subhas National Institute of Sports in Patiala (NSNIS). He would go to Patiala on Friday night, attend classes on Saturday and Sunday, and be back for his Monday morning class in Delhi. During that time, one of his friends started a fencing club in Gurgaon, where he got a job as coach. After 5 p.m. when college ended, he would go to the club on his bike and it would be 1 a.m. when he returned home.

Lokesh says that the two clichéd career options that sports graduates seldom think beyond are coach and physical training instructor. After he teamed up with Aditya, he found that they had a common purpose: adapting sports to inclusive education. 'Umoya gives me a chance to implement my learning and knowledge in a new life that I am searching for,' he explains.

Dancing Into Inclusion

Adults often need education more than children do, and mind you, we're not referring to what is commonly defined as 'adult education'. To be able to understand the differences between another human being and oneself, and to be able to connect to them is an ability lacking in many grown-ups. Through the example of sports we have seen how physical contact can forge human connections. The body can be used as a tool for inclusion in many ways, dance being one.

Avantika Bahl hasn't realized that 24 November 2018, the day her silent performance *Say, What?* premieres at Shoonya in Bengaluru, is Charles-Michel de l'Épée 306th birth anniversary. The eighteenth century Catholic priest from France is known as the Father of the Deaf because he laid the groundwork for French

Sign Language (LSF) – the official Sign Language, that is, for the Deaf had been signing long before that.

When Google acknowledges l'Épée on the day, Avantika's friends start messaging her and that's when she realizes how appropriately timed the event is. The collaboration between the 33-year-old dancer from Mumbai, Avantika, and well-known deaf dancer Vishal Sarvaiya is a first for India. Till now, there have only been performances where the deaf have taught the moves to the deaf, or the hearing asked the deaf to imitate them. Avantika, on the other hand, has learnt ISL to communicate with Vishal so that a genuine collaboration would emerge by which they could jointly conceive and create *Say, What?*

Avantika has been dancing since her schooldays. Not the traditional dance forms, though. She laughingly recalls her only brush with classical dance. When she was seven, her mother had engaged a tutor to come home and teach her and her older sister Kathak. One day her sister told their mother, 'Ma, he's teaching us how to dance to *Choli Ke Peeche*.'³⁰ That was the end of their Kathak lessons; their mother fired the teacher the next day.

Avantika used to take part in dance programmes in school and college. She went pro in her late teens after she learnt jazz, salsa and ballet at Ashley Lobo's Danceworks, and joined the company. She was with them for six years, doing individual training in the morning, teaching in the afternoon and dancing with the repertory in the evening.

In 2011, she married her college sweetheart. A dancer? She shakes her head emphatically and responds, 'I wouldn't make that mistake!' When they moved to London for his job, she joined the London Contemporary Dance School. They returned to India in 2013 and moved to Mumbai, where they still live. In 2013, she

³⁰ A suggestive dance number from the Bollywood film *Khalnayak*. The refrain 'Choli ke peeche kya hai' in the song literally means 'What's behind your blouse?'

staged her first production which she choreographed with four dancers. Called *Wonkot*, it was based on the fable of the six blind men and the elephant – the themes being knowledge, ignorance and perspective.

In 2014, she was part of the Gati Residency Programme in Delhi, where she created a solo work called *110048, M81*. This had been her address (Delhi pin code and house number) for the first 25 years of her life, the place she called home. The piece explored the question: 'What does home stand for?' In 2015, when she was selected for Attakkalari's FACETS International Choreography Residency Programme, she created her next solo named *Here*, which explored the meaning of the different spaces within the home. She also did several site-specific pieces after that. Her *Look Left, Turn Right* premiered at Serendipity festival in Goa in December 2018.

But 2015 was a turning point. She hit a road block. Her creativity evaporated; she found she couldn't teach or perform. One fine day she said to herself, 'I'm going to learn Sign language.' There was no apparent trigger for her decision; nobody in her circle was deaf. But buried in the dim past of her childhood was the memory of a book, a notebook in which she had written: 'I want to learn Braille. I want to learn Sign language.' Maybe some trace of that statement lingered in her when, at age 19, as part of her training at Danceworks she had to produce a Dream Book and on the first page she had stuck printouts of Braille. 'Destiny?' she now wonders aloud.

When she told a filmmaker friend of her desire to learn ISL, he joined her in signing up for classes. He dropped out after two weeks, but she stayed on.

After the course she asked her teacher if he knew any Deaf dancer, and he put her on to Vishal. Vishal Sarvaiya became a star among the Deaf community after he had studied under the famous choreographer Shiamak Davar and appeared on TV in the reality

show 'Dance Premier League'. Avantika met him in 2016 with a proposal to join forces, and he 'was very interested in bringing together Sign and movement'.

She spent five hours a day working with Vishal and her Sign vocabulary improved vastly. At first, he found it tough because he was not used to looking within himself for more profound meanings and concepts, but gradually they evolved a shared language. 'It was important for me to create equitable ground, create a shared common experience between the deaf and hearing,' she tells us. The performance would privilege neither group. 'The social currency of sound is very high,' she says, pointing out that it is a rare experience for the hearing to watch, sit still and focus in complete silence.

At the premiere of *Say, What?* Vishal's reputation has preceded him and the Deaf, who comprise half the audience, line up after the show for selfies and autographs. Before the show, they stand in the foyer in tight groups of four or five, signing animatedly, while the average persons watch them from the sidelines with perhaps a mixture of admiration and envy. In the hall, deaf persons have to be reminded to switch off their mobile phones for the sake of the hearing. The performance is totally silent.

Communication is the theme, but ISL is not the medium – it is just an entry point into a language of gestures and movements that the two dancers have mutually discovered and developed. Each part of one body 'speaks' to the corresponding part of the other. The 'dialogue' is top-down, starting with the face and the head, with the focus shifting in stages to the chest, the legs, the feet and toes. The deaf, who are used to only using their hands to sign, are most entranced by the two pairs of feet that appear to frolic and tease each other.

In the initial sequence, the dancers move in similar patterns but rely on a few different gestures that set them apart. After many repetitions of the patterns, you notice that the differences are being

ironed out and the gestures begin to resemble each other more and more until there is a smooth flow of perfect harmony.

During the discussion that follows, an elderly man raises his hand and shouts out his question: 'What is the story behind it?' A deaf man conveys: 'Neither the hearing nor the deaf understood it fully.' Avantika replies with a broad smile, 'That's the purpose.' A new language has been forged between the deaf and the hearing, and the interpretation is left to the audience.

Avantika says she intends to learn Braille next. 'I want to work with the idea of inclusion from now on,' she said, 'but inclusion for me isn't just about disability.' It is about different class groups as well, and those who cannot afford to access a ticketed space. She wants to create work that will be performed at traffic intersections 'where the richest and the poorest will share it for a moment as an intervention in their daily life'.

Physical connections do have the ability to spark emotional links that give birth to empathy and compassion. A world that includes everyone, regardless of class, creed, gender or disability, is the future we all look forward to.