

A Story from Sri Lanka

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I was born in the year 1966, in a rural Sri Lankan District, where knowledge and information on vaccination was very rare. The District of Moneragala is remotely tucked away in the



Southeastern side of the island nation. To this day, it is identified as one of the poorest regions in the country. I had contracted the virus within two years of my birth and, it took my parents and family another 4 to 5 years to understand what really went wrong.

My childhood memories are of long stays in hospitals, days spent at the homes of indigenous medicine men, of casts and strong ayurvedic brews. There were men who assured my parents that I could be 'cured' and made me their object of experiments by making me drink cauldrons full of formidable proportions and covering me with layers of herbal plaster. Then there were the numerous pujas, rituals and religious ceremonies, which were desperate attempts of bringing back mobility.

I am identified as one of the worst cases of polio by my physicians, with impairments in the left leg and right arm, and with scoliosis and deformities in the rib cage.

It must have been very difficult for my parents to understand what happened to me and come to terms with it. Here in Sri Lanka we see the disabled as sinners of previous lives, the bad karma affecting them and punishing them in this life. This does not apply solely to the individual with the disability, but to his or her entire family. I am sure many family and friends would not have hesitated in mentioning this to my parents. People still do, for that matter. They tell me that I am paying off my bad karma.

I was four years late in entering school, and even though late, I think the decision to send me to school was one of the most brave and remarkable moves by my parents. The majority of children living with disabilities are still excluded from school. My life is what it is today thanks to a great institution called Royal College, Colombo in Sri Lanka.

There I learned, made friends, played, got punished, fought and experienced inclusion in its fullest. After those eight years, I entered the world of university education, made new friends, learned new things and moved ahead. At Sri Lanka Law College, I had friends who carried me, including the wheelchair, three floors up to attend lectures.

Today, I am a politician, and that did not happen by chance. My father became a Member of Parliament in 1977, and at one point in his career, when I was a 20 years old, he let me be a part of his work. I became an essential part of his campaign and enjoyed doing it. Ultimately when he passed away at the prime of his career in 1997, it was only natural that I carry his legacy forward.

I got nominated, contested and won the Provincial Council Election in 2004. My electorate was the District of Moneragala, in Uva Province as was my father's. It did not stop there; I was given a ministerial portfolio adding one more too many of my firsts as a person with a disability in Sri Lanka.

I am surprised that the people of my District never thought of my disability as a disqualification. I am surprised that my co-leaders recognized me despite my disability. I don't think anyone knew that we were making a bold statement of inclusion in this rural Sri Lankan district. I am currently contesting for my fourth term as a provincial councilor, and will hopefully remain one of the few elected politicians with a disability in the world.

Yet, I must admit that we have failed as a country to create broader inclusion. We do have a number of war veterans with disabilities who were nominated and got elected to Provincial Councils on the basis of their heroism. But the majority of our roads and pavements, schools, universities, public and private buildings, places of worship, theatres and playgrounds still remain inaccessible. We do talk about inclusive education, but we have not successfully been able to divert ourselves from 'special' education.

We still look at persons with disabilities with sympathy and as objects of charity. We, as a country, are far away from equality for the disabled.

In my capacity as a provincial politician, I have ventured on creating a model inclusive environment in my district. We call it a 'Disable and Age Friendly City' and are implementing it at the Wellawaya Division of Moneragala District.

Our plans are broad; we have a humongous task to accomplish. It starts from creating environmental accessibility to wide ranging awareness programmes. The World Health Organization has joined us in providing the necessary technical support. The Uva Provincial Council and the Ministries of Health and Social Services, too, are partners of the work that is being done. Access has been completed to enter all public buildings in a selected Division of the District; the rest of the work is lagging as the challenge is to find funds.

I think of all the people living with disabilities in my country who are challenged by the environment they live in. They have not had the support or the resources I have had throughout my life.

Things ought to change and change soon. ■