

No limits

Ability Unlimited Foundation (AUF) was established in 1988 by **Syed Saluddin Pasha**, an exponent of Classical Indian Dance that merges Yoga, Theatre and Choreography to create masterpieces with disabled people. This revolutionary work on wheelchairs and crutches with Indian dance styles is the first of its kind in the world

Sunil Kothari (SK): Reams have been written about AUF. You have been much decorated and honoured for your work. I have seen the shows and we have all been full of admiration for you and the enthusiasm of the disabled artists. What led you to

venture into this area of work for disabled people?

Syed Saluddin Pasha (SP): I was born in a small village, Anekal, near Bangalore in South India in a family of spiritual healers and doctors. When I was 14, I was asked to 'baby sit' for

disabled children. To entertain them, I began to plan games through dance. The parents of those disabled children were pleased and I thought I have some talent to engage these children in a meaningful manner. It started from those initial steps. I became acutely



Ability Unlimited Foundation performing Sufi Dance on wheelchairs

Once the disabled child shows potential of talent, parents go out of their way to support them and see that they progress.



Above left: Bhagawad Gita on wheels, a complete Sanskrit production. The wheelchairs transform into a chariot. Above right: Wheelchair Sufi dancers move 200kms per hour

conscious of how in the same family one child disabled and other non-disabled were being treated. My sympathies for disabled people turned into creative endeavour. Parents started trusting me. And from then on, presenting brief shows in the village brought me some fame.

SK: I understand it culminated into your first professional presentation, 'Ramayana on Wheels' with 200 disabled children in Bangalore in 1988.

SP: That is a long story. But let me tell you about my struggles. I was constantly 'knocking doors' to find answers, devising various ways to teach disabled people from the age of 8 to 18. Patience, patience, patience,

silence, cajoling them and never giving up, for the group was mixed, some physically disabled, some hearing impaired, but I never gave up. I practiced tying my feet on wheelchairs and learnt how to dance, choreograph, and motivate disabled people. I had studied Bharatanatyam and Kathak forms. It came in very handy.

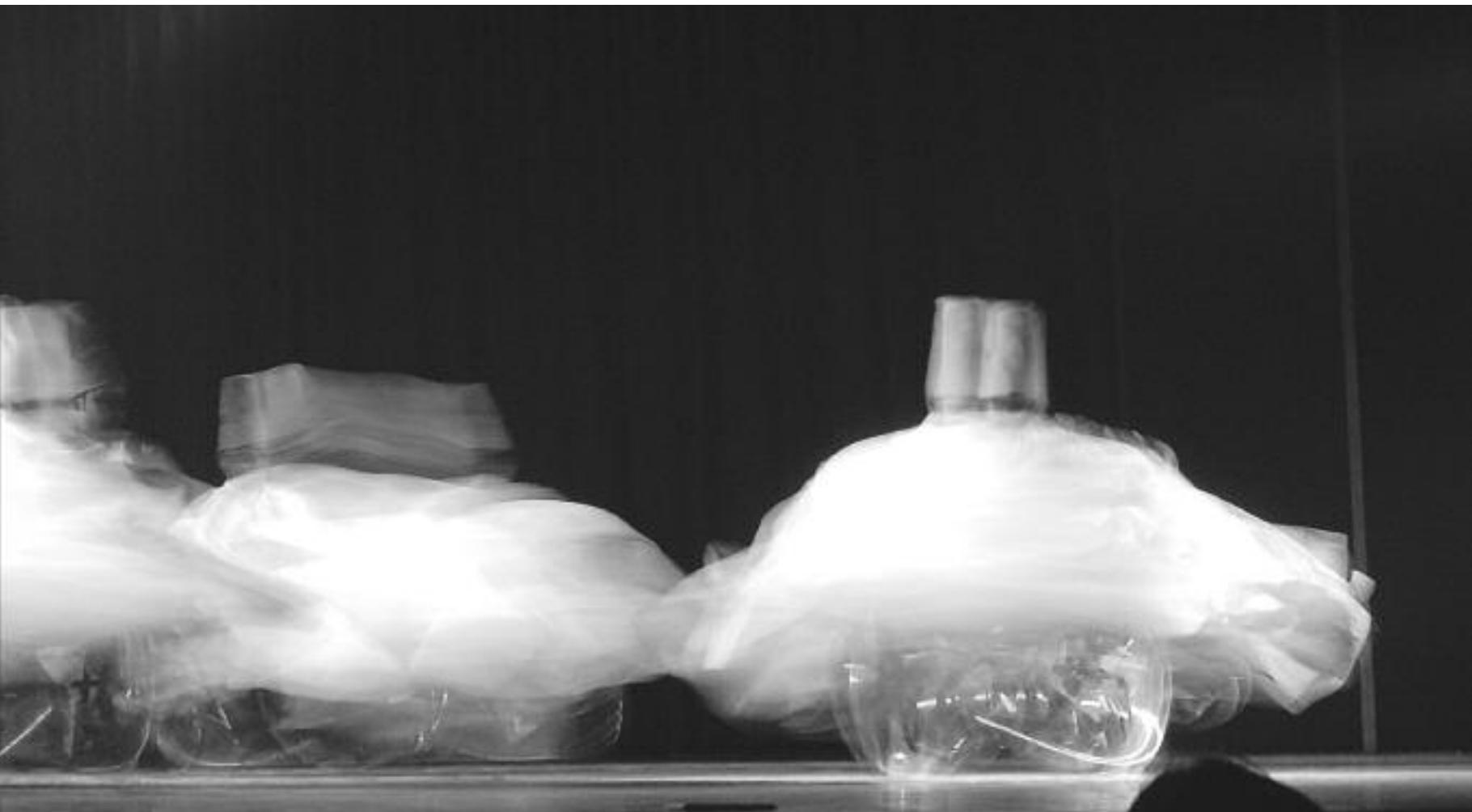
SK: Did you have non-disabled children with disabled ones also? That would place your company in the category of 'integrated' company. When did you combine them and why?

SP: In classical Indian dance you know we have 'jugalbandis', where two parties vie with each other in a spirit of competition. I choreographed such

numbers in Bharatanatyam and Kathak and when disabled dancers won over competing with non-disabled dancers, our enthusiasm knew no bounds.

SK: You established AUF before the Social Justice Act was passed in 1995. I understand you studied abroad in Finland, Scandinavia, London and elsewhere about how to work with disabled people. When you look at the conditions prevailing in those countries in the West, what strikes you most about conditions we have in India?

SP: You know that there are 70 million disabled people in our country (more than the population of the UK), who cannot step out of their homes >



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because of an inaccessible physical infrastructure and transport system. I became acutely conscious of the lack of facilities in India. Though the Act has been passed, we do not have social security, dedicated housing, electric wheelchairs, health insurance, health care, which make things worse and our problems increase. But one thing which goes in our favour is that we still have in India extended families, where parents take care of disabled children along with non-disabled. And that emotional bonding is fantastic. Once the disabled child shows potential of talent, parents go out of their way to support them and see that they progress.

The dignity, self-confidence, self-respect which are inculcated in disabled persons are amazing. Through dance I have succeeded in engaging communities in India irrespective of religion, creed, caste, race and though the struggle has been

continuous for the past 30 years, I would like you to note that the Corporate Social Responsibility has come to our aid. Our shows for corporations, companies have created tremendous awareness about disabled people. It is not out of mercy or pity that they want to support disabled people. They have seen the potential and how dance has helped.

In our Foundation training is given in painting, music, dance, editing of films. We have an in house production unit for filming our shows, and this has developed our artists a lot. Self-sufficiency, earnings, supporting families through dance has created a sense of equality with non-disabled people. A number of non-governmental organisations have joined hands with us and I say with all humility that audiences everywhere have appreciated our work and our shows. I have choreographed shows with mythological stories from The

Ramayana and The Mahabharata, have explored forms like Yakshagana, Purulia Chhau with masks, martial arts and combat, and lately Sufi themes have become popular. As a lighting designer and costume maker I have dovetailed all my talents to make presentations interesting. One of the dancers from our company has won the Guinness book record for 63 non-stop spins of a wheelchair in one minute! This shows that given an opportunity the disabled dancers are second to none.

SK: Your company is a role model to other groups. In that sense you have generated awareness among all communities.

SP: On the contrary, we aim at breaking vicious circles through a holistic and dynamic programme to recognise, nurture and enable the hidden potential within differently-abled people. We are committed to changing the apathy, negativity and fear that surround education, employment and the arts. Through specially designed professional dance theatre performances and innovative methodology we try to give a message of equality, dignity, equal opportunities and full participation by disabled people so that they can be on the same platforms as non-disabled people. And yet I am conscious that awareness is limited to metropolitan centres and a lot needs to be done in the villages. The Hans Foundation has supported us to do a National Awareness Campaign Programme in educational establishments. So far we have performed for one million school children and created tremendous awareness about the inclusivity of disabled people in education and society. I also see my role as a 'cultural activist' and wish to change the attitudes of those who claim to support cultural expression.



Above left and right: Guru Syed Pasha with his wheelchair and mask. Right: National Awareness Campaign in schools

Facing page: Guru Syed Pasha and dancers with wheelchairs and crutches



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