

Rising like a phoenix

“When you call a disabled person inspirational for merely doing normal day to day things like going to the book fair or a show, I believe you reinforce the idea that society’s expectations for disabled people are so low that we don’t expect them to do anything constructive. When you sympathise with me, you treat me like a second-class citizen just because I have a disability. Hello! Please don’t be overwhelmed by my disability. I am so much more than my wheelchair. See me. See the person. You’ll be surprised at your own discovery.” Dr. Sruti Mohapatra

Sitting in her wheelchair, fighting for the rights and dignity of disabled persons, 58-year-old Dr. Sruti Mohapatra has emerged as the perfect role model for all of India’s persons with disabilities.

A road accident fractured her spinal cord at a time when young Sruti had just qualified for the Indian Civil Services. She lost everything in just that fraction of a second. A fighter through and through, she leapt back to life like a phoenix and is today an activist by passion and mission.

Sruti is a gold medalist and university topper, three-time national debating champion, state basketball player, and the first in South Asia to complete her PhD from her wheelchair. Following her first book ‘Echoes’, a collection of poetry, she has also authored two other books - ‘Disability Etiquette’ and ‘Laws for the Disabled’.

A TEDx speaker, Sruti has won several awards for her exemplary life and work and is the member of several committees and governing bodies, including serving as the Vice President, Indian Red Cross Society, Odisha Branch; Member, Syndicate, Rama Devi Women’s University, Odisha; and Vice-President, Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF).

In 2001, Sruti founded Swabhiman, a disability information and resource centre and cross disability organisation advocating for rights for persons with disabilities. With Swabhiman, her vision to create an equal society has grown in leaps and bounds. Swabhiman's main program areas are legislation and policy, inclusive education and employment, active citizenship and accessible cities. The tools used are advocacy, information dissemination, research, training, capacity building and networking.

Her innovations are many. She conceptualized *Anjali*, a project for inclusive and joyful learning using dance, music, art, magic, puppetry, clowning, theatre and more. *Anjali* has grown to become the only international children’s festival of the country. Commencing in 2001 with only 77 participants, today it has reached over 47,000 children (both disabled and non-disabled) across India and in eight countries overseas. *Anjali* bridges gaps between children with disability and those without, between rural and urban children, between privileged and the less privileged. *Sandhan* is a college-based program. The network sensitises the younger generation to overcome societal biases that are responsible for creating divisions among people. OSdN – Odisha State disAbility Network was founded in 2003, with the notion that on their own, no one can change very much, but together, disabled people can have a stronger voice. OSdN is a conglomeration of about 155 NGOs and over 550 individuals with disabilities from across the state. Notable achievements of OSdN are that 70% disabled people in identified districts in the state went to polling booths in the last general elections, despite the hurdles. Sruti visualised and initiated a new concept of “Single Window Approach” for Disability Certification and essential entitlements all under one roof. In its new avatar, it is Odisha government’s “Bhima Bhoi Scheme” which is regularly conducted in Odisha’s 314 Blocks ever year. OSdN facilitated the 1st political convention in 2004 for inclusion of disability issues in respective party manifestos. It got the

appointment of an independent Disability Commissioner – 2010 done by aggressive advocacy, designation of Minister as “Minister - Disability,” formation of the “Disability Directorate” and establishment of a separate department for disability i.e., SSEPD 2014-15. The network conducted a successful “Census Campaign” in 2011 leading to Odisha having higher disability percentage (2.9%) as compared to national average of (2.21%). The new rights-based law RPD Act 2016 was drafted, advocated for and finally lobbied with law makers to make it a reality. PRERANA - *Prerana Samman* recipients are children with disabilities who, despite many challenges, were determined to succeed. Students are showcased and awarded with *Prerana Samman* certificates, a monthly scholarship and win prizes. The program *Swabalamban* offers interest free loans to beneficiaries to start their self-employment journey. The assisted beneficiaries can take up different activities in primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors according to their own choice. *Sashakt* is a multi-level, multi-stakeholder multi-partner campaign with NGOs, governments, media, philanthropic organisations, students, parents and others to build awareness on laws, inclusion and disability rights. Using traditional Odisha art and folk dances, it reached over five lakh people across the state in 2018 in all 30 districts. *Saksham* is an innovative approach to ensure quality education to children and youth with disabilities from urban poor areas. It aims to ensure that they complete their high school education while cultivating a hobby that would have a possibility of evolving into a professional activity. To school dropouts reluctant to return to school, it will provide a skill and help get a job or be self-employed.

That’s Dr. Sruti Mohapatra for you... Need we say more?