

# No ordinary school



It could be a scene from a play school in your neighbourhood. Kids, aged between 3 and 6, run through a makeshift tunnel in a classroom,

with a couple of teachers egging them on. A little later, one of the kids is taken aside by a teacher and is taught nursery rhymes. The same process is gone through in the case of other kids.

Open Door is no ordinary school; it is meant for autistic children. Started by Merry Barua, the school forms a part of the activities of Action for Autism, a network of autistic children and their parents across India. Even though autism is one of the five common disabilities, there is still an aura of mystery about what causes it. "It is basically a learning disability and some of the common characteristics of autistic people are lack of communication and imagination, repetitive

behaviour and sensory defensiveness," explains Barua, whose son is also autistic.

It is the lack of knowledge about autism and the inability to diagnose it at an early stage that makes the task of dealing with it all the more complex. Barua's effort is aimed at spreading awareness and benefit concerts. This year the concert featured bands like Indian Ocean and Just Us. Action for Autism also premiered a documentary on autism.

The initiatives taken by Action for Autism are laudable. Misconceptions abound in spite of the fact that one of every 500 children is autistic. Since the physical growth is normal, most children with autism seem absolutely normal even when they are six or seven years old, but the problems start later. "Speech is delayed in most cases and there is an impairment in social communication. So, usually, parents

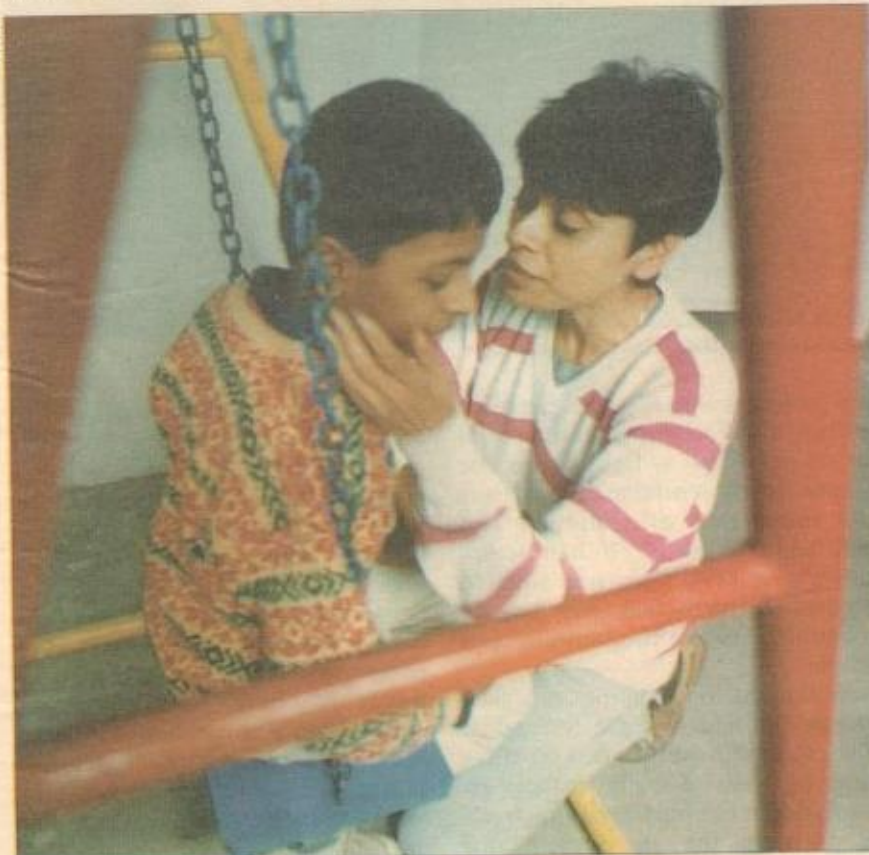
think their kids are slow learners and start pressurising them or are told that they are not bringing up their children properly," she adds.

Barua adds that the common perception that autism is a mental retardation is wrong. Unlike mental retardation where there is an overall low level of development, autistic children have uneven development. Barua's son, for instance, has an excellent memory but finds it difficult to communicate with others and hates being touched.

Barua had started a counselling and leisure club in 1990, when she operated out of her residence. She worked with her son and, having done extensive research on autism and its causes, she began working with other children as well. In 1994, she started the school, which was an extension of the home programme. "It is like lab school as well as an intervention centre for the families, who come here once a week. We discuss strategies for working with the children and also train the parents or siblings," she says. There are five trained teachers and the focus of the school, she adds, is to enhance communication, self-help skills, reading and cognitive skills. "We take them out to other schools and public places so that they can learn to communicate with one another," she adds. Barua has also included regular topics like current affairs, maths and science and the older students are also taught office skills.

While there are 11 full-time students, Barua trains about 50 children in a month at her home and in the school. The organisation, Action for Autism, serves families across the country and conducts workshops once a year. In addition to this, Barua is also trying to spread awareness in neighbouring countries like Nepal. She regularly sends mailers to psychiatrists in an effort to do away with some misconceptions about autism.

Autism is considered a disability worldwide, but not so in India. That perhaps is the reason why funds have not been forthcoming from the corporate sector. Once that support becomes available it would perhaps be possible for autistic children to face the world like other kids.



Merry Barua's Action for Autism prepares kids to face the world