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Any kind of mental deformity continues to be a subject of extreme social disgrace and trauma in India. When a child is diagnosed with such disorders, the parents are at first staggered, shocked, numbed, and thus spend a considerable period in this bewilderment. Then comes the gradual acceptance of facts as they stand. This brings forth a fiercely combative approach, making parents extremely defensive, and anxious to protect their children from harassment. More often than not, the child's education takes a backseat in this web of perplexity and despair. The tag of 'abnormality' that the child is labelled with, sadly, even in the subconscious minds of parents, ruthlessly strikes out the route to an educated life that he/she otherwise would have led. For all our claims on the celebration of linguistic and cultural diversities, the differently-abled

among us still continue to be called 'disabled', to be looked upon with disdainful pity and worse still, mockery (all jokes).

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AUTISM DE-OSTRACISED

You can make a difference in the lives of children by opting for a career in teaching the differently-abled, says PRITHA CHATTERJEE

Famous historical people have been speculated to have been autistic by journalists, academics and

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among us still continue to be called the 'disabled', to be looked upon with disdain, pity and worse still, made the butt of all jokes. You can make a difference in the lives of such children by opting for a career in teaching the differently-abled. But, first the facts...

Think mental disability and there's a string of visuals that come to mind. Amir Khan's worthy attempt in *Tare Zameen Par*, Russell Crowe's Oscar winning act in *A Beautiful Mind*. Rani Mukherjee's deaf, dumb and blind role in *Black* would probably hover in, though it is nowhere in the purview of a mental disorder. Dig a bit deeper into memory, and you will probably come up with hazy images of Ajay Devgan helping a limping child with severe speech impairment. This is the aggravatingly cumulative picture that these films have registered in the minds of the average viewer. How many of us remember that Amir Khan's unfortunate student in *TZP* suffered from dyslexia, and that Rus-

sell Crowe brought to life, the woes of the schizophrenic Nobel laureate John Nash? All attempts at bringing such anomalies to public awareness have failed to imbibe the minor intricacies of these disorders in people's minds. With the result that the populace is largely ignorant about the existence of disorders like the asperger syndrome, autism, and the downs syndrome and more importantly, how each demands a different treatment and approach. This article attempts to bring to light one such disorder — autism.

Autism — the Facts

According to Merry Baruah, Chairperson, Action for Autism, "In lay terms, it is a neurological disorder that affects the way the child reacts to people and the environment, bonds socially, learns a language or communicates needs. The key point is that it is not a short term illness, but a disorder." The characteristics are generally apparent by age three.

Autism is known as a 'spectral disorder,' because the severity of its symptoms range from a mild learning and social disability to a severe impairment, with multiple problems and highly unusual behaviour. According to WHO reports, typically about 20 in a population of 10,000 people will be autistic or have autistic symptoms; 80 per cent of those affected by autism are boys. Over 20 lakh people are living with autism in India.

"Over the last five years, the number of diagnosed cases has increased by almost 35 per cent," estimates Baruah. According to her, the increase in awareness has catalysed the increase in the number of reported cases. "Action for Autism (AFA) did a two-year project with paediatricians between 1998 and 2000, following which the diagnosis shot up markedly. We are in the middle of a follow-up to this project which has already generated a huge increase in the number of diagnoses," she adds. In addition, she credits this to the increasing media coverage and the gradual opening of more and more diagnostic centres across the country. "We can safely say that doctors and clinicians are getting far more adept at recognising autism." She calls the diagnosis a subjective process, depending upon the doctor's perception of autism. "The wider the range of cases the clinician has seen, running from the very mild to the very severe, the more adept he or she is, in detecting its prevalence," Baruah adds.

Current research indicates that anything that can produce structural or functional damage to the central nervous system can also produce the condition of

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autism. Certain viruses and known genetic conditions are also associated with autism. Despite being the third most common developmental disorder, it is one of the most misunderstood medical illnesses. It was

only in the 1980s that the world began to identify symptoms specific to the disability. Being a developmental disorder, autistic individuals have difficulty in performing acts which come naturally to others. "Basic behavioural actions like the way we stand, neck movements, motor skills, and the understanding of special areas like social skills, speech and communication are different in autistic people. Hence the basic criterion for diagnosis is the observation of behaviour," explains Baruah.

Learning disability

According to Mythily Chari, Founder and Director, Indian Institute for Intervention Services, (IRIS), "Autism if defined by an educator can be termed as a learning disability. Children with autism are visual rather than auditory learners. Autistic children have to learn like a script, those skills that are innate in us," she adds. Most of the children react adversely to high decibel sounds and general noise, learn well one-to-one, and are more comfortable with adults than their peers. Levels of stress and anxiety are heightened when changes from the ordinary happen.

Some other notable characteristics are as follows. The child might have difficulty in relating to others, resist to change, exhibit stereotyped behaviour (motor), and show other obsessive, compulsive tendencies. The child may also show the inability to express pain or hurt. However, language is mostly self-taught, with a good visual spatial memory.

Disabling the disability

Autism is a disorder wherein the person's understanding of the social and communication processes is different from that of the non-autistic world. The basic purpose of education, according to Baruah, is to give adaptive skills to these people to enable them to cope with the non-autistic world. Just like hearing skills are especially refined in blind people, autistic persons also develop



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mechanisms to compensate for their differential sense of understanding. One such mechanism is their excellent rote memory. "These children display an excellent ability to learn by rote and this is essentially what is required in elementary education. So, often parents put their children into mainstream schools in the early years and they do well. The problems start coming in when they approach Class IV to V," says Chari.

Some autistic children do not even develop speech, while others may develop speech but still have difficulty using language to communicate. Often, there is an unusual speech pattern, such as echoing whatever is said to them, repeating a word over and over, reversing "you" and "I" when asking for something, and speaking only to express needs,

rather than emotions. "What these children require is essentially, learning by experience," sums up Baruah.

The prognosis

Children with autism do have the potential to build up their skills and they can be helped if they receive early, well-focused intervention. Depending on the child's individual skill profile and the appropriateness and intensity of intervention he or she receives, children with autism can lead relatively independent lives. According to Baruah, "Our children have been integrated into mainstream schools and colleges. Some of them have even received training and are now working with us."

In India, a concrete beginning towards education for the autistic was made in 1991, when Merry Barua formed Action for Autism in Delhi, the first exclu-



It's a different challenge, say Nikki & DJ

According to WHO, typically about 20 in a population of 10,000 people will be autistic. 90 per cent of them boys

Three institutions in India offer government-approved diploma courses for training teachers on how to deal with autistic children



six centre for children with autism. Earlier, the children were put in schools for the mentally retarded though the two disabilities need different treatments.

The 1990s was a decade of change both in mindsets and policy framework. The Rehabilitation Council of India Act (1992), the Persons with Disability Act (1995) and National Trust Act for persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, and Multiple Disabilities (1995) came with a mandate for early intervention programmes, training of schoolteachers and professionals in Rehabilitation and Special Education.

If a career in teaching autistic children is your calling, you need to be patient, sensitive and caring. A background in psychology would give you an edge over others in the field.

At present, there are three institutions in India offering government-certified diploma courses for the training of teachers for autistic children. Action for Autism, started with the National Trust in India, however, remains the only Indian organisation providing specialised training. "Though we prefer people with a background in psychology, we do take in graduates from other fields as well," Baruah. In addition AFA also conducts intensive three month workshops, on a regular basis, for training parents and teachers.

