

There's something about Merry

What started as unconditional love for her autistic son has turned into a movement. And it was Merry Barua's work for such children that forced the government to include the disorder in the Disability Act

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Back in the 1980s, she set herself an unusual mission. Merry Barua went from one video library to another in New Delhi pasting information on autism over cassettes of Dustin Hoffman's Oscar-winning movie, *The Rainman*, to educate India about the disorder. Autism figured nowhere in the country's lexicon when the former journalist gave birth to her autistic son Neeraj in 1981.

Barua's journey has been marked by sheer maternal conviction — she expanded the bandwidth of normalcy to engage positively with her child. The early years were tough. Institute after institute failed to understand little Neeraj's situation. Merry moved to the US when Neeraj was 11, convinced he wasn't getting the support he required.

A course for parents of autistic kids helped her see the communication disorder in a new light. She worked with Neeraj at home for a year, helping him develop a

sense of the real world. His violent behaviour reduced and the progress led her to share her work with thousands of similarly affected parents.

Barua turned educator-activist. She wrote extensively in newspapers and started a journal called *Autism News*. In 1994, she started Action for Autism to raise awareness

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about the condition, setting up Open Door, a school where she taught her son and one more child. She also launched support groups for parents across various cities. Her mantra was simple: train parents to take care of their child.

In the 15 years since she institutionalised her efforts, her organisation, now expanded into the National Centre for Autism, has become a nodal agency for the

disorder.

It brings together parents, professionals and trainers, while its website maps everything from legal updates to new books on the subject and information on local support groups.

"I set out to create a model that could be replicated. Today, there are at least

50 schools for the autistic in India," she says. Barua's next step will be to explore employment avenues and integrate autistic children into mainstream education. Working towards a teacher-training model that will help teachers understand diversity is a simultaneous project.

Finally, the real challenge: what happens to these children once they are adults and their

parents are no more? "There's not a single home for the autistic. I plan to start a residence that'll serve as a model," she says.

Barua's untiring work forced policy change in 2006, when autism was included in the Disability Act. Her demystifying of the condition has encouraged several schools specifically for autistic children. And her reaching out to parents has made her an effective support system. ■