

# WAKE UP, SCHOOLS

**HURDLE RACE** Getting an education is the toughest challenge for young people with physical disabilities. A few have, however, overcome odds

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**A**parupa Chatterjee, 20, did not step out of her home in Durgapur, West Bengal, since an accident on June 5, 2009, paralysed her from waist down. "I was forced to drop out of college and study at home," said Chatterjee, who was a student of English literature at Durgapur Women's College.

The spunky woman did not give up. Undergoing rehabilitation at New Delhi's Indian Spinal Injuries Centre, which helps people like her to be independent, she is happier today: "I can now dance in my wheelchair."

Learning to be independent is a start. What people like her need most is access to a very basic right to fend for themselves: the right to education.

Rajiv Virat, 30, was thrown out of school after he became wheelchair-bound in Class 11. "I was among the toppers in school, but the principal said his school didn't have the infrastructure to accommodate a wheelchair," said Rajiv, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a disease of the nervous system that also affects the spinal cord, in 1996. "The principal also said he wouldn't know what to do with me if I fell ill at school," he said.

Virat did homeschooling and enrolled for a Bachelors degree in Commerce through correspondence at Delhi University. "Despite filling the form under

the severely disabled category, I was allotted a room on the second floor in an examination centre in other end of the city," he recalled.

The final humiliation was the invigilator insisting Virat leave his wheelchair and write the exam at his desk. "It was uncomfortable, but I did it, but when I faced a similar problem the next year, I opted out. Had the educational institutions been a little more sensitive, I would have had a master's degree," he said bitterly.

Like him, Mihir Shah, 14, and his brother, Karan, 13, are trapped by the system. While their

parents, Sunil, 37, and Pratima, 35, have



SUSHIL KUMAR/HT PHOTOS

**RAJIV VIRAT, 30**

Homeschooled because he was thrown out of school by his principal who 'didn't know what to do with him if he fell ill', Virat teaches wheelchair users to enhance their mobility. Battling multiple sclerosis for more than 13 years, he even had to drop out of college

**APARUPA CHATTERJEE, 20**

In 2009, a road accident left her with a damaged spinal cord. She graduated from Durgapur Women's College in West Bengal this year. Chatterjee wants to stay in Delhi and become a newsreader

RAJENDRA SAWANKAR

**NUMBER CRUNCH**

**60 million** disabled people in India

**95%** disabled has no access to education, healthcare and employment

**15 lakh** are disabled due to injury to the spinal cord

**10,000** spinal injury cases are reported every year, mostly due to road accidents - 82% are men between 16 and 30 years



The Shahs don't want to send him to his brother's special school, JBCN Pan Academy in Lower Parel, because Mihir has no learning disabilities or behavioural disorders. "We could not find a school in Mumbai with ramps or an elevator," said Pratima. Both suffer from a genetic disorder called spinal muscular atrophy that causes

ly-challenged students when an average of 2,000 get out of School. Why are disabled students dropping out?" said Seema Parihar, a former professor at Delhi University, who was in-charge of the equal opportunity cell.

Those who find support are confined to their wheelchair. Fifteen-year-old Sidharth Aggarwal, a Class 7 student

**MIHIR (14) & KARAN SHAH (13)**

Suffer from spinal muscular atrophy since birth. Even as their parents have ensured that their sons have enough space to whiz around in their wheelchairs in their Mumbai flat, they lose their independence outside

in our schools and now we have a spe-