

Attitudes

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**I MAY BE DIFFERENT  
BUT AREN'T WE ALL?**

Malini Chib-Alur



# REFERENCE



## ***I MAY BE DIFFERENT BUT AREN'T WE ALL***

*Malini Chib-Alur*

*I am not sure why I have been asked to speak - as I don't think I have achieved anything great but have simply lead a normal life, just like all of you! Let me tell you a bit about my life so far with some slides and film clips.*

*I graduated from St.Xaviers College, Bombay. I majored in History with six papers. Despite my speech problem I managed to remember the tongue-twister names of Ancient India and managed to get my B.A. Degree! It was tough, but more than the degree it was tough educating the officials about my ability to do the B.A. The Vice-Chancellor of Bombay University asked why we wanted to do the B.A. exam when it was such a useless exam, anyway! She may have spoken the truth there but we wanted to be a part of life outside, even if it was useless! Finally we "got through" to all the officials and we were allowed to do the B.A. with extra time for the exams. For us the B.A. Exam was six hours*

*for each of the papers....mind boggling, strenuous and exhausting.*

*Are you really qualified for a job after a degree in History or Ancient Indian Culture?*

*No, you are not.*

*Was it worth it? I say to myself.*

*Yes, The fun of interacting with students who were normal and those heated arguments over what we thought were earth-shaking topics in the canteen which, to us, was the nerve centre of the college. We spent more hours in the canteen than in the library.*

*Yes, a hundred times it was worth it.*

*It was one of the most enriching experiences in my life. I tell students who are in two minds about doing the exam, "without education you cannot get a job and certainly any education is better than none!" However, after all that, I learnt the hard way that the degree system does not prepare students for the job market.*

*I think one of the main aims of the Government should be to work towards creating an educational system that is more vocationally geared. Even so-called normal people face problems getting a job but then society does identify with them as people more than it does with disabled people*

*So I started exploring.*

*I wanted to do something that had a vocational orientation. Having been in England before, I investigated the possibility of studying there again. I applied to the Oxford Polytechnic. I was dreadfully scared about the interview but somehow I managed to convey to the Director that I am not mentally handicapped!*

*I was admitted. I was delighted to be accepted in competition with other fellow students.*

*I found the atmosphere most exhilarating and exciting. People reacted to me for who I was -a student, and not for what I was.*

*Oxford Polytechnic offered post-graduate and doctoral programmes as also professional programmes that a technical institute does. The subjects included Computing, Publishing, Film-making, the Visual Arts,*

*Catering, Architecture and so on. I chose Publishing.*

*Why publishing?*

*I had always been interested in writing and publishing offered a practical outlet for my writing interests. Oxford Polytechnic also had the reputation for offering the best programme in publishing in England*

*I also anticipated that with a qualification from there I should be able to land a job in a publishing house. The course taught us all aspects of publishing:*

- *Editorial*
- *Design and layout*
- *Copyright*
- *Publishing with the computer*
- *The financial aspects*
- *Production*
- *The different ways of producing a book:*
  - *The traditional method.*
  - *Desk-top Publishing and the different software packages*
  - *Linotype*
- *Marketing outlets - Wholesalers & Retailers*

*I found that I could move about with ease on my wheelchair. The College authorities suggested that I may have an attendant to open doors and lifts. I refused. I did not want an attendant next to me all the time. My Xaviers' experience stood me in good stead. I was used to moving around on my own. I preferred to move around myself, getting minimum help from passers-by. The British were very polite people. There wasn't ever a moment when I was before a door and somebody did not open it for me! My wheelchair was seen all over town, queueing up in the supermarkets, bookshops, the bank etc.*

*Here are some slides for you. People were not bothered whether I was on wheels or whether I walked differently. They did not stop and gape at me as if I were someone from outer space. Being on wheels, I am especially sensitive about this. They stopped when I asked for help. The British are not fond of staring. Here it's a national obsession! I felt like a normal person coping with the frenetic, overworked student's kind of existence.*

*I was lost in a crowd and felt free.*

*I think disabled people must go to normal colleges because in a special school one tends to be pampered, cloistered and to live a kind of ivory-tower existence. In Oxford, I learnt that I was not the only one with problems. Even normal people had problems, although they were different to mine - but they were problems. Like my friend, Helen, who is divorced and has three children to support or my friend, Jehangir, who is gay and wants it to be in the open but realises that society still finds it difficult to accept. Or my friend, Peter, who is a haemophiliac. For him, the slightest bump can mean internal bleeding which is extremely painful and his condition is such that he has an inability to move on his own.*

*Or my friend, Laura, who has dyslexia which is an "invisible disability". She finds it extremely hard to do a desk job and so she dreaded going to work.*

*Seeing and listening to their problems sensitised me to being able to feel for other people and their immense problems. As for those who were disabled, they had tremendous difficulties -far more than I.*

*I learnt to reach out and help others. I found that they needed me and I could comfort them. This gave me a*



*tremendous lift. I was a person for myself. My spirit was recognised beyond my body.*

*As far as access goes, a person on a wheelchair can feel degraded if he / she has to be constantly helped up stairs into public buildings.*

*When I think of how inaccessible the public buildings are, here in India, my mind goes back to two of my friends whom I had met at Oxford. I wonder how they would manage in India. Both of them made a deep impact on me.*

*One was Sam who cannot sit up because her spine is damaged. She has a special bed on wheels in which she is pushed around. Sam is highly intelligent. Her I.Q. is 150+. Certainly way above the majority in her class. Sam writes beautiful poetry. She was interviewed by Balliol College at Oxford University and was admitted on the basis of her qualifications but she had to refuse because of access problems and joined the Poly instead.*

*My heart went out to her because nobody would even consider giving her a job, just because she is horizontal and not vertical. She was certainly far too intelligent to*



*lie down on the job!*

*My other friend was Mark. Mark is an engineer. At 24, he was hit by a truck which paralysed him waist downwards and confined him to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. When Mark drives his car, people would not know that he has a disability.*

*Mark is married. He goes everywhere on his own, because most places have wheelchair access. He is able to shop, do a number of other daily chores which a so-called normal human being would take for granted, pay his telephone bills and even go to the tax man.*

*Although his company took care of him financially, they kept plaguing him incessantly whenever he made trivial blunders in his work. The only way he could prove he was still as intelligent was to have one more diploma which he was doing through the Poly, so that he could have an edge on the rest of his colleagues.*

*When I met him, he was going through a great deal of psychological trauma. I find that all disabled people go through this - but many handle it acceptingly with a smile and think of life as a challenge, while others may be bitter and think that the world owes them a living.*

*To move on to the subject of community attitudes. Take a look at my graduation ceremony at Oxford Poly.*

*In comparison, I have been recently felicitated by Junior hamber of Commerce as 'One of the most outstanding young business women of Bombay' -I think there must be a terrific dearth of good people! As soon as we entered the building, a well-known auditorium, there were at least fifty stairs that confronted us. If I could not have walked with support, I would have felt very humiliated if I had had to be carried up. Wouldn't you?*

*I'd like to present a thought for you to ponder:*

- \* We may be on a wheelchair*
- \* We may have a speech impediment*
- \* We may not be able to see or hear*
- \* We may walk differently*
- \* We may not be Venus or Eros*

*- but then how many are!*

*So what? That does not mean we are disabled. What do you think about people differently able - different from the norm. Still, we are people in our own right.*

*Should we be content with sweets doled out whenever people want to do some charity or feel good or visit centres of service for the disabled.*

*Why do we feel like second class citizens?  
We do not exist to satisfy them.*

*Firstly, if you are in a wheelchair access is appalling. Most buildings have stairs. If you are lucky they will have lifts. But then the lifts may be either too small or they will not stop on certain floors and certainly will not take you down! In my last year at Xaviers, my classes were held on the first floor. As it happens, the lift could not stop on the first floor, so I had to get out of my electric chair where I felt most secure and be walked up one flight of stairs and to the classroom. When I talked to the management about it, they said that they had done enough for me by arranging all my classes in one room and they could do anything about it.*

*Access to all public building must become statutory, not left to the goodwill of people. We are a part of society and have to be treated as equal citizens, not second class, but equal.*

*People's attitudes upset me the most.*

*More so when people working with disability talk about disabled people in front of them.*

*I can tolerate the taximan saying 'Poor thing. Have you tried the All India Institute or homeopathy? A doctor can cure her?' or a fakir at such and such place!*

*But I simply can't understand why educated people talk in a patronising way and look down on us as if we cannot think.*

*I end with a couple of slides:*

***Be Different and  
employ the Differently  
Able***

*Don't leave me  
stranded*

*Don't stare I'm human  
too.*

*Don't give me charity -  
give me a job*

*Nobody's PeRrfect*

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