

Mohammed Iqbal at his village in Ladakh.



## Iqbal Makes a Difference

His limbs may be useless but a cool head powers this unlikely activist for the disabled

BY ASHOK MAHADEVAN

**H**is upper body enclosed in a bright blue parka, Mohammed Iqbal lies on his stomach on the sofa, head and shoulders up, withered limbs limp. His strong face looks relaxed, but actually Iqbal is seething. He and 30 other disabled people have an appointment with Leh-Ladakh's Deputy Commissioner (DC), and they've been kept waiting for more

than six hours. Iqbal wants to prod the bureaucracy into following the law that says that three percent of government jobs are reserved for the disabled. When the government recently asked for applications and a large number of disabled responded, not one was called for an interview. Iqbal's limbs may not be capable of doing much, but there's nothing wrong with his head. Now, despite

his anger, he's working out how best to get through to the DC.

When Mohammed Iqbal was born 43 years ago, it seemed inconceivable that this baby with misshapen, feeble limbs due to a rare congenital disorder that contracts the joints and weakens the muscles, would one day become one of Ladakh's leading social activists. A forbiddingly high desert bordering Tibet and snow-bound half the year, Ladakh is India's second largest district.

Many Ladakhis, like most Indians, consider disability a stigma. But Iqbal's family and neighbours were different. His family carried him everywhere, and children included him in their games. He was the umpire at cricket matches, and he could play chess and other games using his mouth and tongue. Iqbal's parents also tried sending him to the village school. But he threw tantrums. Nobody had the heart to scold him, so he was allowed to stay home—much to his later regret. His father and grandfather taught him to read and write basic Urdu.

As a child, Iqbal never thought of himself as handicapped. It was only when he was around 20 and his siblings and friends started getting married and taking up jobs that the implications of his physical condition hit home. "I became very depressed," he recalls. For two years, Iqbal lay in bed, sick with despair. Then the *moulvi* of his mosque began visiting and encouraged the boy to pray five times a day, like all

true Muslims should. He also taught Iqbal Arabic so that he could read the Koran. "When I prayed or read the Koran," Iqbal recalls, "I was uplifted. Gradually my mental strength returned."

But then, Iqbal's father developed a heart problem that stopped him from augmenting his meagre pension, and his elder brother married a woman his parents didn't approve of and moved away. As the second son, Iqbal—then in his late 20s—became responsible for the family. His energy and intelligence no longer crippled by depression, he got down to work. The family owned some land in the bazaar that was being used as a garbage dump. Iqbal had the land cleared, built shops on it and rented them out. He started a brick kiln. He hired workers to break up rocks and sold the stones to contractors.

By the late 1990s, Iqbal had become reasonably well off. He found good spouses for his younger brother and sister and celebrated both their marriages. Still, Iqbal's horizons were largely limited to his village. Then, in 2001, he met Vidhya Ramasubban, a social worker who'd recently come to Ladakh—and his world changed completely. By this time, disabled people in several major Indian cities had begun organizing and even successfully lobbied for a law to address their problems. But none of these changes had yet touched remote Ladakh—and this was what Vidhya had been asked to rectify.

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At a meeting in a village where parents had come with their disabled offspring, Vidhya noticed an elderly woman. "I have a grown-up son who's severely disabled," the old lady told Vidhya, crying. "But he's too heavy for me to carry him here." Intrigued, Vidhya and her colleague Kunzang Dolma, a young Ladakhi woman who was interested in helping the disabled, decided to go to Iqbal's house.

Iqbal was a shy man, and it took a while before he started talking freely

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to the two women. But it soon became clear that he was special: unlike some disabled people, Iqbal was not consumed by self-pity or anger.

"Most disabled people meekly accept discrimination," he said quietly. "We silently make ourselves even more helpless. We need to band together and demand our rights."

Vidhya, whose goal was to create a movement that would be headed and run by people with disabilities from Ladakh, sensed in Iqbal a potential leader. She took him to meetings with other disabled people, politicians, bureaucrats, and village leaders all over Leh district. Gradually, he conquered his shyness and

became an effective speaker. And although he knew no English and was not very fluent in Hindi, he left the security of Ladakh and travelled to India's bustling metropolitan cities to learn more about the disability movement. "Actually, he was much shrewder than me," Vidhya says. "He read people better; he has a much cooler head."

With Vidhya's encouragement, Iqbal, Kunzang and others formed an informal committee and started working on a number of issues. Education was especially close to Iqbal's heart. "My greatest disability is not my body," he says. "It's my lack of education." Iqbal believed that children with disabilities should study alongside other kids.

But steep hillsides, unpaved roads or the lack of bridges across streams made it impossible for many such children to get to their local school.

Another major problem was that Leh district, with its limited education budget, had only two teachers trained to deal with the special problems of the hundreds of children with differing disabilities. The obvious solution was a hostel where children could live, get special coaching, and attend a neighbourhood school. It was decided to locate a hostel in a Ladakhi village called Chuchot Yokma. And in March 2004, the hostel opened, with 13 children—

eight disabled, and five from poor families—in rented premises.

The children did well. Indeed, at the end of the first year, the child with the highest marks in the six schools in the area was a disabled girl who had never been to school before, but did so well because of the intensive coaching she received at the hostel. Today, the hostel has 26 children and its own premises. Iqbal and Kunzang now form the core of a formally registered disabled rights organization called People's Action Group for Inclusion and Rights (PAGIR). "Iqbal—along with Kunzang—is formidable," admits Tsewang Rigzin, former executive councillor for education in Leh district.

**Change rarely comes** easily, though. Back in the DC's office, Iqbal has to figure out how to force the district's top bureaucrat to keep his appointment. Then an idea strikes him. "The DC must meet us," he starts

yelling. In seconds the room resounds with angry cries as his colleagues join him. Shortly after, the delegation is ushered into the DC's office. The DC promises the delegation—most of whom have applied for jobs—that disabled applicants will also be interviewed.

"When?" Iqbal asks. "We'll let you know tomorrow," the education officer replies. "No," Iqbal insists. "Now." A date is set, and 14 disabled people—a little more than the three percent quota—get jobs. That was a few years ago, and since then, with some prodding, the government has observed the law. The organization is perennially cash-strapped but this doesn't worry Iqbal. "When needed, money will come," he maintains. "What's important is the work. And there's a lot of that still to be done."



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### MILKY MESSAGES

**A selection of notes** supposedly left for British milkmen:

"I've just had a baby. Please leave another one."

"Please close the gate behind you—the birds keep getting in and picking the tops off the bottles."

"Sorry about yesterday's note. I didn't mean one egg and a dozen pints, but the other way round."

"My daughter says she wants a milkshake. Do you do it before you deliver or do I have to shake the bottle?"

"When you leave the milk please put the coal on the boiler, let the dog out and put newspaper inside the screen door. PS. Don't leave any milk. No milk."

From the Internet