

EXPRESS Newsline

Around the world in his wheelchair

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IMAGINE what it would feel like if you had a tonne of weight around your wrists and your ankles. Imagine if you felt thirsty and you couldn't get yourself a drink of water. Imagine if you felt like hugging somebody but you couldn't."

This was how Scott Jenson, a 29-year old American who was paralysed from waist down 14 years ago, described what it is to be like to be in his shoes.

He said that his words were not to derive sympathy but rather, to make others empathise with the circumstances of the disabled. Scott Jenson and his wife Pratiksha have taken on a worldwide tour to promote travel for the disabled, research in complementary or alternative medicine and basically to remove the 'emotional paralysis' which he thinks affects all of us.

The couple is on a tour — Devotion to Motion — of 25 countries over a period of 14 months. Mission statement: Research international accessibility for those with physical and mental challenges. Countries under scrutiny are as varied as the United Kingdom, France, Spain, India, Israel, South Africa, Peru and Russia.

India is more like home turf for the couple, they say, as Pratiksha was born in Gujarat. Apart from



Scott Jenson and Pratiksha in New Delhi on their Devotion to Motion tour. Newsline photo by NAVEEN JORA

being Scott's 'angel' and 'best friend', as he refers to her, Pratiksha is also a physiotherapist, and involves children in their programme.

Confident of himself, Scott is at ease talking about his disability and answering any questions. "Sometimes the disabled feel like prisoners trapped in their own bodies as they were not given a choice. People who do not understand what it is like, are trapped in their minds", he says.

Explaining why he came here, he says, "One would like to travel to rediscover one's true essence. When people in America hear about India, they say 'Ah! The Taj!' but immediately the question of accessibility comes into their minds. What about the trains, the hotels, etc, etc? Questions which I took for granted the first 15 years of my life."

This motivated him to share information about travelling and that is how the trip came through.

He is aware of more than 10 per cent of the population being physically challenged which robs them of their franchise. "I am going to write to Sonia Gandhi about this, as it is a chunk of votes," he says.

Pratiksha being more familiar with the Indian way of life points out the difference in which the Indian society and the Americans perceive the disabled. "While in

India, the family steps in and looks after them, the Americans are forced to adjust to their situation and get back to their daily lives. This is good in that they are trained to maximise their independence," she said.

The couple plans to remove the mental block that exists among the population when it comes to communicating with those in wheelchairs.

"A child may ask a perfectly normal question about why one is unable to walk, but they are immediately stopped by the adults. This leads to a mental block later on in life which refuses to see the personality in the wheelchair," says Pratiksha. So they have launched a website which communicates with children, and answers all their queries.

From their interaction with people and places in these countries, they plan to do a documentary, research papers and some books. So how does India measure up when it comes to being a 'disabled-friendly' zone?

Scott is very diplomatic when he focuses more on the geniality of people rather than the infrastructure. "Although it has been very frustrating but India is comparable. Unfortunately everything boils down to money," he says, and quickly adds: "I see progress in terms of response. I find people in India very accommodating."



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