BLOGS

In Conversation with Saista Parwin (NLUO), Disability Rights Activist and Lawyer, Speaker at UN COSP16

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In this conversation with CLATalogue, Saista Parwin (NLUO) talks about her journey as a Disability Rights Activist and Lawyer and as a Speaker at the UN COSP 16.

Tell us a bit about yourself.

Hello! I am Saista Parwin. I am from Bhubaneswar and currently, I am a Delhi-based disability rights activist/lawyer. I cleared CLAT in the year 2014 and successfully graduated from National Law University Odisha in the year 2019.

I am a first generation lawyer and motivational speaker from my family. I was born & brought up in Bhubaneswar. As a person with special needs, the journey wasn’t easy and was full of ups and downs. When I joined National Law University, I can definitely say that a new chapter started in my life.

Would you like to discuss some of the challenges you have faced as a specially-abled person and how you have overcome them?

As I said before, being a child with special needs isn’t easy at all. I was merely 14 years old when my journey started when I was busy fighting societal norms and various stereotypes. I was fighting with people to allow me to be in their group, allow me to be part of an all girls sports team.

As a child, I had self-esteem issues as I was always the laughing stock of various people. I was always the kid who never had a career to look forward to since I was disabled. I grew up a loner but when I look back, it was such a blessing in disguise. My days that gave me grief made me a strong-headed individual. I grew to find peace in my own company as nobody wanted to be associated with me.

When people treated me as poorly, I cried a lot but I also learnt to pick my self up and move on each time. I have come out as a much better individual and in all these years I have learned to value life much more than before.

The idea that changed my life is coming out of my comfort zone and speaking up for myself. The fact that I am much more than my disability is all I want to let the world know.

How did you start your journey in the domain of law?

My journey to the domain of law was motivated by the idea that law is a tool to change the society. I definitely call those years spent in law school the “5 GOLDEN YEARS OF MY LIFETIME”.

I joined law school as a teenager from a small town with big dreams, a little potential and a lot of enthusiasm. I met and learned a lot from my batchmates and seniors as all of them came from different cities, states, backgrounds and cultures. Initially, it was quite intimidating for me to see such talented students all around me in all spheres of life.

How were your initial years in law school?

I participated in almost every activity in my college- be it debates, volunteering or becoming the convener or co-convener of various committees. Being a student with low vision, life wasn’t easy initially. My biggest challenge, or fear, was facing a crowd. I fought an unseen battle against this fear for years and conquered it gradually.

Today I speak in front of thousands of people. I feel so happy when people know me for who I am or what I’ve accomplished and not because of my physical appearance.

Please share your experience of speaking at the UN COSP 16. How did it feel to address such a prestigious platform?

To be honest, it felt unreal when I got the invitation to attend the UNCOSP16. I still cannot believe it sometimes. It is truly a blessing from Almighty and I feel so honored and grateful for the recognition. I chaired one session on Youth Accessibility and Leadership and at the other, I was a speaker on 'Women with Disability and Reproductive Rights'.



And also, I am an Executive Member at the Commonwealth Disabled People's Forum. Travelling abroad I realized that it is the system that is a barrier because we are all disabled in one way or the other and what impairs our abilities more is the brute attitude of the people around us.

How do you envision your role in addressing the rights and needs of specially abled individuals?

It is just a beginning of my career. What I feel is that there is there a lot to be done in the field of education and employment for the disabled. I have been actively engaged with NGOs and DPOs from across the state and the country and have brought about several policy changes which have

positively impacted the lives of persons with disabilities in India in general and the state of Odisha in particular.

For development of the disability sector and to help the specially abled people be a part of the the state's development agenda, my focus is on supporting school education, strengthening youth for availing employment opportunities, increasing public awareness on the issue of disability, working towards accessible cities, building capacities and conducting research for enabling advocacy.

What advice would you give to other specially abled individuals who aspire to make a positive impact and advocate for their rights?

My only advice is to educate yourself as much as you can as education is the only tool that can change your life as well as the lives of those around you.

You'll never know your own strength until you are tested by adversity! Speak up, even if nobody listens to you and speak up with passion and honesty until one day they invite you to hear you speak.

My story revolves around hope and determination. There's no shortcut to success. The harder you work the luckier you get. We all have been sent to this world with a purpose. If you still don't know what that purpose is, then remember, a life without a purpose is pointless! Live, laugh, love and share – That's the key to happiness!

This interview is a part of our series #MyStory where we interview law students and legal professionals.

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