

# On a mission with a vision

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[Divyanshu Ganatra \(right\) and his travel buddy during a tandem cycling pilot run to Khardung La, last August. Special Arrangement](#)

## Divyanshu Ganatra wants to make a world where able-bodied people start seeing people with disability as equals

On a bustling corner of a narrow street in the heart of old Pune, I meet Divyanshu Ganatra. He had offered to send me his location via map coordinates on my smartphone, but to his great amusement I had confessed to not owning one, and passed on my beat-up Samsung to the Pune local I was with so that Ganatra could tell him where to send me. Now, in our hired car, it turns out our driver doesn't know Pune much better than I do; and no, he doesn't have a smartphone either. Ganatra's half-smile, which never leaves his face, turns into a grin, and he whips out his phone and swipes at a blank screen; the phone's virtual assistant chipmunks at him (he has the audio speeded up) and he tells us where to go. When we reach his home in Pashan, up a verdant slope, with peacocks calling just outside the colony's compound, with, he says, a hill view in daylight, we break into laughter, mine a tad more rueful than his guffaw. You see, I had just been driven across Pune with turn-by-turn directions from a blind man. "You can choose not to be tied to a smartphone," he tells me. "For me, it means I can find my way around anywhere." Ganatra was diagnosed with glaucoma around the age of 16, and began losing his sight despite aggressive treatment. He was in denial at first, he says. "You do simulations. You close your eyes, try and figure out what it would be like to be blind. But you always have the choice to open your eyes. When you have that choice, the full extent of it never really hits you. When I was told—in no uncertain terms—that I was going to go blind, I thought, 'I can see perfectly well, no way I'm going blind!' That's not going to happen to me. You see, even with 50% sight, it is still so much that you can fool the world and you can fool yourself. You can get around, even ride a bike. You usually lose peripheral vision first—you can still see straight ahead, you start compensating—so you don't realise the impact of 50% vision loss. I realised the full extent of my blindness on the day I went completely blind. Which happened pretty much overnight, when I was 19." **Look outside the window** Then, he says, he left college. Not because of losing his sight, but because he had concluded that college was not educating him. He had started working at 18, selling washing machines in a store. "I was pretty good at it." Next, he sold electronic consumer goods. He had begun learning computers while working, and around the time he was 20, he switched to an IT job. This was pre-web, and from working on things like setting up email inboxes and Internet fax addresses for companies, he made the transition to web technologies. After that, he worked on evaluating accessible technology, then in its infancy. He also got interested in the workings of the human brain and started college again—"doing college while you work is very, very easy; it doesn't take much"—and then decided that was what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. So, he quit his job and enrolled for a Master's. That was in 2004. He then worked in HR, before setting up his own company, a learning and development organisation called Yellow Brick Road. In all this, one early love got left behind. "I was always interested in what happened outside the window: trees, mountains, lakes, rivers, all of that. I was 16 when I travelled solo all over the country with just a backpack and a map." When he turned blind, this was taken away from him. "Suddenly, there was nobody to take me up a mountain. They said, 'How can you climb a mountain, how can you cycle, how can you swim, how can you do any of this', when this was what I always wanted to do. But there were so many things I had to learn again—right from how to put toothpaste on my toothbrush—that I had no energy left." But slowly, as he found financial independence first, then moved out of his parents' home to live alone, he began to gain ground. "Fortunately, I found people who were willing to do this with me and saw me as an equal. We did crazy stuff together." He got known, got written about: the blind guy who paraglides! who climbs mountains! "Then, I realised that people are going to write me off as an exception. That's not really why I did it. When you do that, it does not change the way you look at blind people." With contact comes empathy "The biggest challenge for me in these 18 years"—he is now 38 and has spent half his life without sight—"has not been my disability. All along, it has been attitudinal barriers. Where are these attitudes coming from? They stem from a simple fact: nobody knows a person with disability. If there is no contact, how will there be empathy?" Add to that a simple insight, a life lesson: "You discover so much about each other through play. Especially adventure sport, where you have to team up, and a level of camaraderie and bonding gets established. I decided that was the tool I was going to use." In 2014, Ganatra set up the Adventures Beyond Barriers Foundation (ABBF), with his sister and he as directors (it now also has two full-time employees). ABBF is a non-profit and promotes adventure sports for persons with disability (across disabilities) together with able-bodied people. It has five verticals currently: mountaineering, trekking, camping; tandem cycling; marathons; scuba diving in confined water and open water; and paragliding. It also trains instructors. Adventure sport is just a tool, Ganatra says, to get the able-bodied and people with disabilities to play together, and through that, learn about each other. "There are benefits for the disabled community: we get to do stuff the world has said is impossible for us; to get a new identity beyond our disability. It helps our self-esteem and we make new friends." But as important, and core to ABBF's mission, is getting able-bodied people to acquaint themselves with persons with disability. He tells me about a party with people ABBF has worked with over a long time. From complete strangers a few months ago, they had become a raucous gang of buddies. "Last night, they said, 'you, you're the ass\*\*\*\*, the madman.' They see me as person, who has his flaws, his good side, who can be a good person and an ass\*\*\*\*. And that is being treated

as equal." **Postscript** By the time you read this, ABBF will be in the middle of a 500-km ride—nothing major, just from Manali to Khardung La, the highest motorable road in the world—to be completed in less than two weeks. The participants are on tandem cycles, each with one able-bodied cyclist and a person with disability. Oh yes, they plan to complete the ride in under two weeks. "This is one of the best cycling routes in the world," Gantra says. He knows it first hand: "We did this last August as a pilot, to see whether it's doable. It is. And we committed to take many more the next time around. Here we are now, less than a year later, taking 30 cyclists—blind and amputee and able-bodied, included—on the same route." A really tough ride, this. So all of them must be trained, experienced endurance athletes? "Everybody but me is going for the first time and doing an endurance cycling event of this nature for the first time." He lets out a long and happy cackle. "That's why they call me mad."

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