

EDUCATING VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN INDIA

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Abstract - Education is the most important tool for social, economic and political transformation. Education acts as an integrative force in society, imparting values that foster social cohesion and national identity. In our country, today also, there are many children and youth with visual impairment or Blindness, who are deprived of education due to lack of resources and funds which creates a hurdle in the path of our progress. The subject of blindness and education has included evolving approaches and public perceptions of how best to address the special needs of blind students. Educators and parents of students with visual impairments have pioneered special education and inclusive program options, for over many years. National Association for the Blind NAB (India) is one of the pioneer institutions of India, providing school and college going blind children support services in the form of scholarships, free distribution of Braille Kit and other assistive devices, volunteer reading services and so on. A Braille kit contains basic educational devices needed by blind students for learning braille, arithmetic, geometry, etc. Also brailers are distributed to institutions as well as to blind students pursuing higher education. NAB is doing good work in this area. In fact many of the prevailing practices in the fields of other disabilities have their origins in the ideas generated by NAB (India), in the sphere of education of the visually impaired. This study aims to analyse the role of NAB in fostering Blind education in India.

Key Words: Visual Impairment, Braille, Blindness, National Association for the Blind (NAB).

INTRODUCTION

India is among the countries with the largest number of people suffering from blindness or visual impairment. One out of every three people suffering from it lives in India. Blindness hampers all aspects of a person's life especially education which is undoubtedly the backbone of a country's growth and development. For a country which is striving hard for a developed nation status, it is certainly a cause for concern. The major causes of blindness in India are malnutrition, trachoma & cataract among others. Malnutrition results in deficiency of Vitamin A which in turn is the leading cause of childhood blindness. Cataract accounts for a significant percentage of the cases of blindness in India and in other countries as well. It is a clouding that causes opacity in the eye lenses. It usually occurs with advancing age. Apart from these, unavailability of eye care at an affordable price is also responsible for the increasing cases of blindness in India.

NSSO defined visual disability as loss or lack of ability to execute tasks requiring adequate visual acuity. For the survey, visually disabled included;

(a) those who did not have any light perception – both eyes taken together, and

(b) those who had light perception but could not correctly count fingers of hand (with spectacles/contact lenses if he/she used spectacles/contact lenses) from a distance of 3 metres (or 10 feet) in good day light with both eyes open. Night blindness was not considered as visual disability.

KEY WORDS

- **Visual impairment:** Visual impairment is when a person has sight loss that cannot be fully corrected using glasses or contact lenses.
- **Braille:** A form of written language for blind people, in which characters are represented by patterns of raised dots that are felt with the.
- **National Association for the Blind (NAB):** Is an association fostering Empowered and well-informed visually challenged population of our country, thus enabling them to lead a life of dignity and productivity.
- **Blindness:** It is the state or condition of being unable to see because of injury, disease, or a congenital condition.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dr. Nidhi Singal, in her research paper, “**Education of children with disabilities in India**”, (2009), found that, the government currently fails to acknowledge that issues addressing the education of children with disabilities reflect broader challenges in an education system which is grappling with issues of quality, drop-out/ push-out factors for *all* children. Thus many of the issues discussed with respect to Children With Disability (CWD) are more acute manifestations of broader challenges.

Jo Walker in his paper “**Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities (2010)**” opines that, billions of people in Asian Countries who live with a disability face a multitude of barriers to participating equally in society. In particular, their right to education is often not realised, which in turn hinders their access to other rights and creates enormous obstacles to reaching their potential and effectively participating in their communities.

Kamala. R in her paper “**Specific Learning Disabilities in India: Rights, Issues and Challenges**”, (May 2014), states that, many specific learning disability students in the main stream education have been remaining unidentified; they are often termed as ‘lazy, dull and inattentive. The problems of these students remain unnoticed by the teachers due to lack of awareness about learning disability. There is a dearth of standardized tools available in different languages to identify the specific learning disabilities. So the government should join hands together with different academic community members to develop standardized tools in all languages in India to identify specific learning disability, develop sensitization programme about the rights and provisions available to the persons with specific learning disability, and should release funds to achieve the goal.

OBJECTIVES

- To study the role of National Association for the Blind (NAB) in fostering Blind education in India.
- To analyse the History of Blind Education in India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary data. Relevant data are availed from various sources of information such as Research Papers, Books, and websites etc.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- The study is undertaken by the use of secondary data collected by other sources which may have some deficiencies.
- Due to the limitation of length of the paper, the researcher was unable to develop a detail insight into the topic.

HISTORY OF THE BLIND EDUCATION IN INDIA

Organized Efforts for the Education of the Blind was taken in Pre- and Post-Independent India The missionaries arrived in Asia and other parts of the world before the turn of the 19th Century, to offer education and rehabilitation services to blind people. In India, Miss Annie Sharp, a Christian missionary from England, founded the first school for the blind in Amritsar in 1887. There were just four schools for the blind at the turn of the Century. But the efforts in this direction by the voluntary organizations and the Christian missionaries continued. By 1944, when the report on blindness in India was submitted, there were 32 schools in undivided India. Most of these schools were being managed by private agencies, with grants from some state governments. Significant landmarks in the history of education of the visually handicapped in India have been:

- State level decision to establish a Braille press to produce books in Braille in 1923.
- Setting up of a Committee in 1941 by the then Govt. of India to develop a uniform Braille code for Indian languages.
- Submission of the Report on Blindness in India (1944) which is the basis of most of the services for the blind today.
- Setting up of a Cell in the Ministry of Education in 1946 to promote education, training and rehabilitation of the blind.
- Development and acceptance of “Bharthi Braille”, a common Braille code for Indian languages finalized in November 1950, replacing the earlier codes in the light of certain recommendations made by UNESCO.
- Setting up of the first Braille press at Dehradun in 1951.
- Establishment of National Association for the Blind in 1952 marking the beginning of concerted voluntary action in the field.
- Setting up of first Vocational Training Centre for the Adult Blind Women in 1957 at Dehradun.
- Establishment of the first School for the Blind by the Central Govt. in January 1959 at Rajpur, Dehradun (now located in the campus of NIVH, Dehradun).
- Institution of the first Light Engineering course in 1961 at Dehradun.
- Establishment of the first National Library for the Blind by the Central Government in 1962.
- Govt. of India brought all its activities for the education, training and rehabilitation of the blind under one umbrella for better coordination in 1967 called National Centre for the Blind, Dehradun.
- A review of the Government initiative in 1973-75 to gauge the impact of its schemes for the welfare of the blind led to the decision to set up one apex level Institute in each disability area by the then Ministry of Social Welfare (presently the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment).
- Establishment of the National Institute for the Visually Handicapped (NIVH) on 2nd July 1979.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND (NAB) - DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

National Association for the Blind (NAB) has been established by Government of India. In the beginning, the first special school for the blind in India was set up at Amritsar in 1887. During the subsequent six decades several special schools came up in different parts of the country. As a result, there were about 50 such schools at the time of attaining independence. Blind children for the most part stayed in these institutions and received education along with some elementary trades that later led them to some kind of vocational rehabilitation. However, not much was achieved through this system of education, in so far as their socio-economic rehabilitation was concerned. There were other concerns too like isolation from mainstream, standard of education and expensive nature of the system. In 1958, Mrs. Rehmat Sultan Fazelbhoj, a trained teacher of the blind and a member of the Executive Council of NAB (India) was successful in admitting three blind boys in New Activity School in Mumbai, of which Mrs. Dolat Dungaji was the Principal. Such efforts, however, remained isolated to a few cases in the 60s and 70s. Thereafter, what started as an experiment in Mumbai gained rapid grounds in a decade's time, and in the years that followed became a movement that spread in the other parts of the country.

In the intervening period, NAB (India) provided school and college going blind children support services in the form of scholarships, free distribution of Braille Script and other assistive devices, volunteer reading services and so on. Realising that a blind child too like any other child, deserves education, NAB (India), set up its Education Committee 1961, which efficiently handled the general problems related to education of the blind and contributed a great deal to introduction of the Integrated Education (IE) system. This vital activity received impetus when NAB (India) appointed Mr. M. K. Choudhary as its first education officer in 1980, and subsequently established a full-fledged department, the NAB Department of Education, to handle this task.

ACTIVITIES OF NAB**[1] Integrated Education (IE)**

Partnering with local voluntary organizations, especially in the rural areas, the Department has so far initiated education of more than 5,000 visually challenged children through “Itinerant Teacher Model” of IE, wherein blind children reside with their families and attend the nearest regular schools. They receive the services of a special educator called itinerant teacher, who attends to the following tasks:

1. Teaching plus curriculum that is Braille, use of special arithmetic and geometric devices, orientation & mobility, activities of daily living and so on.
2. Preparing/procuring instructional materials like Braille/large print text-books, tactile maps, diagrams etc.

3. Family counseling.
4. Serving as a link between the child and the school authorities and providing guidance on classroom management, remedial teaching for subjects like math and science, peer tutoring and evaluation.
5. Community Resource Mobilization – arranging for readers, scribes, transcribers, private tutors, etc.

The Department presently supports 90 IE units, catering to 1,000 visually challenged children all over the country, with a budgetary outlay of about Rs.80 lakh. The cost of education of one blind child is Rs.8,000 per year.

[2] **Free distribution of Braille Kits**

Every blind child irrespective of whether he/she is studying in special school or IE program must have access to a braille kit. A Braille kit contains basic educational devices needed by blind students for learning braille, arithmetic, geometry, etc. The cost of a Braille kit is Rs.1,000. The Department distributes about 500 braille kits every year to schools for the blind and IE implementing agencies in India, with an expenditure of about Rs.5,00,000. So far, over 15,000 braille kits have been distributed.

[3] **Free distribution of Braille**

Depending on availability of earmarked donations, braille are distributed to institutions as well as to blind students pursuing higher education. The cost of a braille is Rs.35,000. So far, hundreds of braille have been given away.

[4] **Home-based program for Multi-Disabled Visually Impaired (MDVI) children**

The additional disabilities MDVI children possess along with visual impairment are mental retardation, hearing impairment, autism, hyper activity, cerebral palsy etc. Itinerant teachers train these children in developmental areas like motor skills, communication, sensory skills, concept formation, activities of daily living, orientation and mobility, functional academics, pre-vocational skills, social skills, community-based instructions etc. Parent's meetings, picnics, outings, social gatherings, festival celebration, camps etc., are a regular feature in this program.

[5] **Human Resource Development Programs**

Primarily aimed at community participation in IE Programs, the Department conducts short-term training programs for parents, volunteers and itinerant and regular teachers, throughout India. Integrated Camps are also organized at various locations to provide blind and sighted children the opportunity to come together and learn from each other. Similarly, special skills enrichment camps for visually challenged children are organized during vacations, to give them rigorous and intensive training in plus curriculum. The yearly expense on conducting these programs at various locations is around Rs.5 lakh.

[6] **Training Centre for Teachers of the Visually Handicapped (TCTVH)**

Started in 2000, TCTVH offers two-year Diploma in Special Education (Visual Impairment), recognized by the Rehabilitation Council of India. The eligibility Criteria is Std.XII passed. Twenty-five candidates are admitted in each batch. Needy trainees are provided lodging and boarding facilities at a reasonable cost. We are proud to say, almost all the candidates who have so far passed out from TCTVH are either employed in Special Schools or Integrated/Inclusive Education Programs in the State of Maharashtra. TCTVH received a Certificate of Excellence from RCI in 2005.

[7] **Consultative Services**

Professional staff of the Department participates in various seminars, workshops, training programs etc., in consultative capacity. Many of them serve on important committees of the Government of India and other vital policy-making bodies.

[8] **Sale of Aids and Equipment**

The Department stocks basic assistive devices used by the visually challenged in education, mobility, recreation etc. These items purchased from various manufacturers are made available to individuals and organizations, at cost. Devices worth Rs.40-50 lakh are sold each year.

CONCLUSION

Today it is the need of hour that a policy of inclusion needs to be implemented in all schools and throughout Indian education system. Children with visual and hearing impairment are still studying in special schools must be eventually be enrolled in mainstream middle or high schools. Fortunately, NAB is doing a remarkable work in this area. There isn't a single aspect concerning education of the blind that NAB (India) hasn't touched. In fact, many of the prevailing practices in the fields of other disabilities have their origins in the ideas generated by NAB (India), in the sphere of education of the visually impaired. Their mission is to ensure that every blind or low vision child has access to formal education in an appropriate environment and is provided all the support services necessary for academic excellence and all round development.

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