

BEYOND

the
horizons



Blind People Need Equality, Not Random Acts of Senseless Kindness!

How rightly it has been said that there are none as blind as those who refuse to see! Blessed with healthy bodies possessed of five senses, the majority of us go through life completely handicapped in the matter of feeling for and understanding the needs of the underprivileged and visually impaired.

In July 2005, RRF decided to financially adopt 16 visually impaired children in Delhi taking its family of visually impaired children to 33

■ Feature story by Robin Raina

All these children come from underprivileged families and thus receive a scholarship of \$ 24 per month each (Rs. 1000) from RRF towards funding their graduation studies, hostel fees and food needs. Recently I was in India on one of customary trips to meet our children and had the pleasure of spending a few days with these children. The time spent with them made me realize that most of us who seem to have a so called 20/20 vision are probably blinder than any of these children. We can see and yet not see!

Anoop (picture on the right) was born into a poor family in Delhi with excellent eyesight. His father was a car number plate painter who worked 14 hour days



to feed his family of five. The family could barely meet its daily needs but yet his family had the gift of happiness of living in a closely knit family. And then the unthinkable happened. Almost three years back at the age of fourteen; Anoop was walking on the pavement of one of the Karol Bagh roads in Delhi, when a person accidentally drove a tractor into him. Anoop's head was badly hit against the wall and both his optic nerves were crushed in the accident. Suddenly from one moment to another the life of this 14-year old had changed from a fun loving independent minded teenager to a visually impaired person who needed help now to walk from one room to another.

Anoop soon discovered that his friends did not identify with him anymore. He was now on his own to pick up the pieces of his life and make something out of it. But for his father, Anoop was left with no real friends anymore. Supported by his poor but resolute father, Anoop joined the government and donor supported school for the Blind in Delhi and started to learn Braille the language for the visually impaired. At the tender age of 14, he had to start his life afresh, learn basics once again and discover new visually impaired friends who he could identify with. By 2004, he passed out of 12th standard with 70% marks and secured admission in the prestigious Kirorimal College at Delhi. Here was a kid, who managed to defy all odds and still kept his head high; that now needed help to fund his graduation studies and his dream to be become a Civil services officer At that time, RRF stepped in to simply help him in his resolve to fulfill his ambitions, by funding his monthly education, hostel and food needs.

When I met Anoop recently, I could see the strength of this young man who probably had seen more in the last three years than most of us see in a lifetime. Yet I could not help notice the fondness and tenderness in his voice, every time he spoke about his father who had become his best friend. It was Anoop's birthday when I met him, and he was anxiously waiting for his father to bring in the sweets to distribute to his new

friends!

It soon dawned on me that Anoop cherished his father's blessings a lot more than most of us 20/20 vision folks, who take our entire lifetime to discover the warmth, blessings and friendship of our parents.

Lokesh was born blind at birth itself. He soon discovered that he was in the company of two other blind sisters and a blind mother. It was now upon his father, a tailor to serve this family as also support their right to self-respect. His father worked 18 hour days to try and support his family and somehow managed to secure Lokesh's admission into a blind school supported by the private donors. By 2005, Lokesh had passed out of 12th standard with a first division and had secured admission in Sri Venkataswara College to do his graduation but now needed financial support to realize his father and his dream of pursuing higher studies and possibly becoming a teacher. That is where RRF stepped in to be facilitator to help him realize his dreams by funding his studies, hostel fees and food needs.

As I interact with these visually impaired children across the country, I cannot help but notice that I rarely meet visually impaired female students in any of the blind schools. Why is that? It soon dawns on me that the discrimination against the girl child is even more pronounced amongst the handicapped and it is driven mainly by the facilities for the visually impaired being almost designed with only the male child in mind. I could not for example discover any girl hostels in these visually impaired schools and on persistent questioning was told that it is done to avoid cases of sexual molestation in hostels. So, that is what the world has come to today - that the girl child has to suffer since we cannot control the urges of some insane folks.

Blindness myths and facts:

Let us examine the facts now. One out of every three blind people in the world lives in India - an estimated 13 million blind people live in India. One in five

RRF adopted kids



Indians is school-age children. And one in ten of these 200 million children have special needs. It is estimated that there are more than 2 million blind children in India. Only 5% of them receive any education.

The central government as well as the state governments have taken steps to reduce, and if possible, eradicate blindness from the country. But the battle is still raging, and there is no end in sight. Schools for the blind are run in most Indian states, but some states, unfortunately, do not have such schools. People above the age of 65 constitute more than half of the blind population in the developed nations, but in India childhood and congenital blindness is unfortunately very high. A little over 25 percent of the total population of the blind people in the whole world seems to be found in India.

How do we define blindness? There are degrees of blindness. Some are totally insensitive to light. Some can recognize their environment, whether they are in a bright light or in dark. Some may feel or recognize light but cannot say the direction or the source from which the light comes. Some can recognize people by their bearing or gait. Some have blurred vision that may not be useful at all for day-to-day needs. Blindness is measured in terms of a person's ability to perceive the details of persons and objects around him. When a person is able to read the letters in an eye chart that is placed 20 feet away from him he is considered to have a 20/20 vision. If a person can read the letters that are ten times lower in acuity (20/200) he is considered to be legally blind. Another factor that is considered is the field of vision. A person may be able to see straight ahead but not sideways. In this case, he is said to be having problem with the peripheral vision. Peripheral vision is equally important for normal transactions. A person may not be able to see the moving light and may have a blind spot in his vision field. A normal visual field is 180 degrees from side to side. If a person has less than 20 degrees of vision he is considered to be legally blind. Note also that the two eyes may differ in their acuity as well as

their vision field.

The blind people may be categorized into two important groups: congenitally blind and adventitiously blind. When children are born blind, they are treated as congenitally blind. When someone loses sight for various reasons later on they are called adventitiously blind. The language of the congenitally blind is somewhat different from the language of the adventitiously blind persons. The differences are found in the mental imagery, attitudes towards blindness, and cognitive abilities.

Vitamin A deficiency, occurrence of trachoma (eye infection in common language), and microfilaria introduced into the bloodstream through the bites of infected black flies, etc. are the major causes of adventitious blindness in India.

There is a general belief that the blind people develop a greater or super sensitivity to the environment through hearing and touch because they do not have sight. There is no higher endowment in the blind people through their hearing and touch. They make subtle distinctions because of their focused attention to these factors. Another skill often noticed in the blind people is their ability to detect objects several meters away. This obstacle sense can be easily developed in the sighted people also with adequate practice.

The blind people use various cues such as auditory cues, draft of air, warm sunlight, interruption of warm sunlight by a shadow, smell, and vocal cues to detect the objects and to study the environment. The sighted people also use these cues.

A blind person does not experience color, but he can use the words that refer to colors. Objects may be described using vision as well as touch, speech, and hearing. Touch and vision come to play an important role in the sighted person's cognitive domains and experience. Some have argued that touch is the primary sense through which the experience of space and spatial arrangement of objects in the space is

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learned. Others have argued that vision is the primary mode for this.

There are objects such as mountains that a blind person cannot touch and feel. Clouds, sun, and moon are other examples of this category. The blind person has problems with experiencing the far away objects. Since these objects cannot be touched, the blind person has to process this information with the help of people around him as he is exposed to words relating to these items. Thus, touch, as a sensory modality, is not applied to many things he comes across in his language.

Reading by listening and reading by touch are the most popular methods of reading for the blind people. But these are slower than the reading by viewing adopted by the sighted people. One of the problems that an Indian language teacher faces is the lack of tangible materials such as talking books or materials for reading by listening.

Auditory reading (reading by listening) is not much different from reading by viewing. Blind persons are not at a disadvantage on this score. But there are no special arrangements offered in schools for helping the blind children to read by listening. Since the Indian

school system, by and large, does not welcome and integrate the blind children in its mainstream, opportunities for fruitful interaction between the sighted and blind children are lost.

Blindness and deafness may be found together in many blind people. When this combination takes place in a person, his language is also severely affected. If a person is only blind, he or she has her language more or less intact. On the other hand, those in whom both blindness and deafness are found, verbal linguistic communication becomes a problem.

The famous Dr. Kenneth Jernigan who was himself blind, in a landmark speech in 1970 said: "We the blind people of today have carried out a revolution, and have won our independence. We have won it by finding our own voice, finding our own direction, and finding our own doctrine. That doctrine may be simply stated: it is that the blind are normal people who can not see. It is that blindness is not a dying, but a challenge to make a new life. It is also that there are none as blind as those who will not see this simple truth. The blind people of today, in a word, were not born yesterday. We who are blind do not accept the tragic prophecies of a dire fate. We have a rendezvous with a different destiny. The destiny we go to meet is that of integration and equality of high achievement and full participation of free movement and unrestricted opportunity in a friendly land which is already beginning to accept us for what we are. "

Let me rest my case by requesting all our readers to support the education of the blind. Each of you can help by adopting a blind child's education needs by simply paying \$20 per month. Please contact RRF'S Blind Aid Project Coordinator Sanjay Supehia at ssupehia@rainafoundation.com to help.

RRF adopted kids





The Courtesy Rules of Blindness

When you meet a blind person, don't be ill at ease. It will help both of us if you remember these simple points of courtesy:

- ◆ I'm an ordinary person, just blind. You don't need to raise your voice or address me as if I were a child. Don't ask my spouse what I want--"Cream in the coffee?"--ask me.
- ◆ I may use a long white cane or a guide dog to walk independently; or I may ask to take your arm. Let me decide, and please don't grab my arm; let me take yours. I'll keep a half-step behind to anticipate curbs and steps.
- ◆ I want to know who's in the room with me. Speak when you enter. Introduce me to the others including children, and tell me if there's a cat or dog.
- ◆ The door to a room or cabinet or to a car that is left partially open is a hazard to me.
- ◆ At dinner I will not have trouble with ordinary table skills.
- ◆ Don't avoid words like "see." I use them too. I'm always glad to see you.
- ◆ I don't want pity, but don't talk about the "wonderful compensations" of blindness. My sense of smell, taste, touch or hearing did not improve when I became blind, I rely on them more and, therefore, may get more information through those senses than you do--that's all.
- ◆ If I'm your houseguest, show me the bathroom, closet, dresser, window--the light switch too. I like to know whether the lights are on or off.
- ◆ I'll discuss blindness with you if you're curious, but it's an old story to me. I have as many other interests as you do.
- ◆ Don't think of me as just a blind person. I'm just a person who happens to be blind.
- ◆ You don't need to remember some "politically correct" term, "visually impaired", "sight challenged" etc. Keep it simple and honest, just say blind.

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