

One evening as my friend Ankisha and I sat on my bed, I told her about a blind school in Rohini that I had visited some days ago. Her only encounter with the visually disabled was when in college two girls had come up to her to ask where a certain room was. She led them down the corridor, but even before she could announce that they had reached their destination, one of the girls said: "Yes, right. That's the place." One can imagine the puzzled look on her face, to what appeared to her a minor miracle. Probably, most ordinary people would have been as stunned. That evening Ankisha looked at me and wondered, "How could they have known that that was the room they were searching for? I mean they are blind. How can they know?" Her questions do not seem too erroneous when one considers that indeed many people know what 'blindness' is and some have even seen a blind person somewhere, but very few actually know about the hidden aspects of their world.

When I visited the All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB) for the first time, I was no better. I entered a spacious room equipped with typing machines. I happened to drop in at a typing exercise and was amazed by what I heard and saw:

"The Railway Minister has again come before the House with his Appropriation Bill. Taking advantage of the occasion, I would like to put forward some points about the performance..."—Ganesh's fingers rushed along the keys of the stenography machine at high speed, while Sandeep Garg continued

Blest in Many More Ways Enabling the Visually Disabled

○ Kristina Bellach

dictating the text. Ganesh does 80 words per minute—not bad for a shorthand typist, except for one thing that sets him apart from other typists—Ganesh is blind. He lost his eyesight two and a half years ago in an accident. No treatment could help him regain his eyesight, so he had to take charge of his life despite his impairment. The basis of his new life for him was to learn Braille, the script

of the blind. Therefore, he had to move from his village in Maharashtra to Mumbai.

Braille consists of a six dot system, which can be transcribed either via computer, according to the six dots, by the use of only six keys on the keyboard, or by hand with a special pin. By combing these six dots in varying orders, the Latin-based alphabet, numbers, punctuation, and symbols can be produced. For example, two dots at the upper left would mean a 'b,' while two dots at the lower left would be a colon. Through these combinations of small dots, the same words in English, Hindi, or any language appear on the page. The only difference between a page in Braille and a printed page is that the former is larger, for the dot system demands more space than print-letters. And most importantly, Braille is to be 'read' with the fingers, not the eyes. After Ganesh had accomplished this step, he was ready to move further. "Then some blind friends of mine told me about this special training in Delhi and so I came here," Ganesh reports.

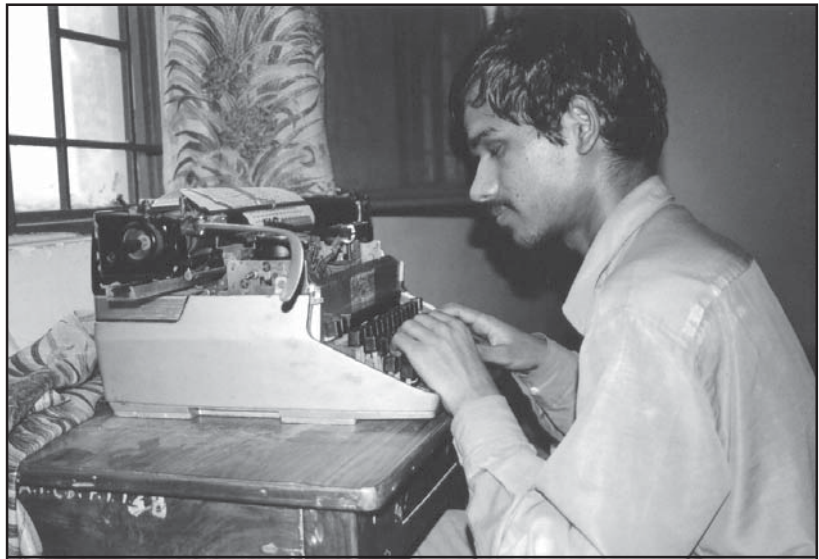
Sandeep Garg, the instructor of typing and stenography, as well as of the mobility classes at the AICB,



Learning Braille, the script of the visually disabled

is very proud of his students. He says, "It is amazing. They usually take three to four months to learn the keyboard by heart. After one year, when this vocational training course ends, they are almost perfect. In typing, the average number of words per minute is around 40, in stenography, even more. All I do is to check their mistakes and teach them what is correct." As Sandeep dictates, he does not even have to tell where in the text to put the commas. Ganesh puts them in by mere intuition. Finally, he takes the small roll of paper out of the machine, moves his fingers slowly over the tiny dots on its surface, and reads them out: "The Railway Minister has again come before the House with his appropriation bill. Taking advantage of the occasion, I would like to put forward some points about the performance..." The last step of his task will be the transcription of the steno Braille script on the typewriter. Now, at the end of the course, Ganesh is seeking employment and hopes to pass the stenography test at Jawaharlal Nehru University in order to get a job there. It seems as if he has a good chance of succeeding. Some other students who are also completing the course have already secured jobs during the training period and are ready to take up employment.

The AICB also takes care to place their educated students in various kinds of jobs. J.L. Kaul, Secretary General and Founder of the AICB, ensures that "the maximum number of these students get jobs." He says, "In fact, in our placement files there are not enough candidates to fill the available slots. Just recently, 18 people got jobs, all in PSU's or some kind of government department, in the special quota for handicapped people. More than 200 students have got best performance awards. Nobody can compete with us. Our training gives rise to good skills in



A visually disabled person must learn the keyboard by heart

various areas including computers. Our female students have also got jobs."

However, most people have deep-seated reservations about hiring blind people, especially for higher posts. For example, there is not one blind person in civil services. There was the case of a person who passed the exam, including the interview, but due to his blindness was not allowed to join the services. There was also a case in the High Court which delivered a verdict allowing people to sit for the examination; but the visually disabled are still not allowed

to join, even if they pass. People are still prejudiced. The AICB continues to find jobs for their students as teachers, stenographers, factory workers, telephone operators, and other forms of employment.

To enhance their chances in the labour market, there are regular vocational training courses for the blind at the AICB's computer lab. After they have learnt the typewriter keys by heart, the next step of using a computer is not an insurmountable obstacle anymore. With the help of a special software called JAWS, all Microsoft programmes can be used

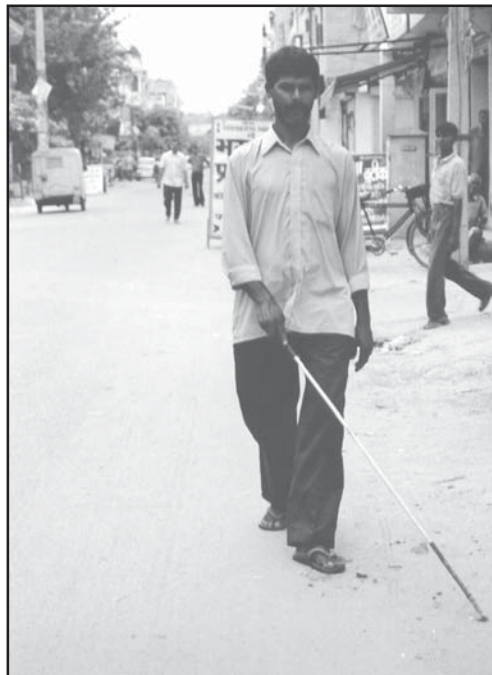
J. L. Kaul, the founder and Secretary General of the AICB, lost his eyesight due to small pox at the age of five. He went to a special school in Amritsar for his basic education, then proceeded to the D.A.V. College, but being visually disabled was not easily accepted. He remarks, "Out of 511 students, I was the only blind one. But there was nothing that was especially done for me. The college had a policy of having special classes for students who did very well. Thus, the special coaching I got was not on account of my blindness but on account of my brightness." He studied English, Sanskrit, and Philosophy in the Braille system and became a teacher in a blind school in Delhi. In 1969, he met Vijay Kumar Malhotra, the then Chief Executive officer of Delhi, who was impressed by his typing skills and offered him a clerical job. When the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) split, he decided to form an umbrella organization to coordinate grassroot organizations for advocacy and for running programmes for people who need it. And thus the AICB was born.

Anjum Taj joined the AICB as its regional coordinator for South India for the Women's Empowerment Project. She was born in Bangalore into an orthodox Muslim family. She did her matriculation from the Sriramana Maharishi Academy for the Blind. Then she did her B.A. in Journalism and was the principal of the Surdas Residential School for the Blind. Later she joined the AICB. Anjum loves to write poetry, short stories, and novels.

by the blind. They also learn how to work with the Internet and how to scan books. A sighted person, merely wearing blindfolds, would probably not be able to operate this way, but 35-year-old Neeraj, who has been blind for two years now, learnt all these skills during a six-month training course. "A. S." - says the loudspeaker as Neeraj presses the appropriate keys and then "space," as Neeraj presses the space key. The voice is transmitted to the loudspeaker via JAWS. This software is not only usable in Microsoft but in all computer programmes. Since Neeraj lost his eyesight, he has had to learn how to manage his life depending almost only on his auditory sense. Prior to his loss of vision, he had a business which is now being looked after by his brother. Now that Neeraj is acquiring skills like reading Braille, typing (in English and Hindi) and operating a computer, he feels he can go back to Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh) to take over his business again.

For the rehabilitation of people who have turned blind later in life, there is a separate programme that addresses their special needs. One reason for this is that there is greater depression amongst the newly blind. "We had clinical psychologists

associated with the programme, but they did not prove to be of much help. I think the best way to rehabilitate these people is to keep them here. When they meet other blind people and see how they are coping, they find new ways to get out of the depression," Kaul explains, citing the case of a civil engineer who had turned blind at the age of 39 after he had a brain tumor. "He had to be forcefully brought here. But when he met the people here and saw them moving, singing, talking, and eating, he got better. It takes at least one and a half weeks to get past the initial stage of complete depression and start moving towards rehabilitation." Another person who had overcome these severe difficulties of the first few weeks of blindness is a doctor from Nagaland, who became blind after an accident. After an initial period at the AICB, he started wondering, "How will I practise my profession after this?" Kaul says, "We took him to a clinic to work with Dr. Chowdhry, a blind doctor. Now he is working as a doctor in Nagaland.



Blindness does not inhibit their mobility

There is also Dr. Salma Maqbool in Pakistan, who is also blind. We encourage them with stories of aged *hakims* who can recognize illnesses and prescribe remedies just through feeling somebody's pulse. It is all a matter of practice and experience."

The most essential part of the rehabilitation programme is restoring the person's lost faith and belief. When someone loses their sight, people make the situation worse by feeling sorry for them. This leads to a negative self-image in the blind. The AICB rebuilds confidence so that the blind, who have initially come with the support of other people, can ultimately manage their lives on their own. The obstacles that an average newly blind person has to overcome depend mainly on their own attitude and the attitude of their social environments. Usually, these attitudes are not entirely positive. For example, if a housewife suddenly loses her eyesight, everyone around will start doubting whether she will be able to do the necessary housework. These prejudices of their

own family and friends will lower their self-esteem so much that they will start to regard themselves as useless—which is not true. The only change these people have gone through is that they have lost their eyesight. In every other respect they are the same as before. "These people know a number of things," Kaul emphasises, "but what they do not know is how to do these things without using their eyes, by their other senses. For example, when a woman has cooked rice for 10 years, she knows how to do it. She does not have to learn cooking as such, but cooking by different means."

Kaul is very clear about what he wants. "What we want to teach here is that learning from each other is very important, and so is counselling and practising what

we learn.” When these main pillars are firmly built up, then a visually disabled person can go back to their former life to take up again the profession they were engaged in. To enable blind people from other parts of the country, especially the rural areas, to enrol in the AICB’s training courses, accommodation is provided in the hostel attached to the Institute. Right now, altogether, the AICB has 75 students. The hostel can take up to 50 inhabitants and at present accommodates 37 girls who are college students and 10 girls who are taking stenography classes at the AICB. The girls accommodated in the hostel also learn skills like cooking, sewing, knitting, and ironing.

Puja, who is 20 years old and comes from Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh), carefully stirs one *puri* frying in oil. As its golden-brown colour indicates that it is done, she takes it out with a spoon. Puja is blind. How can she know that the *puri* is done when she cannot see its colour? The secret is revealed shortly: “You can ‘hear’ that it is done. You do not need to see it. I can hear the noise the *puri* produces while it is frying. It is the same with all vegetables. As soon as the noise stops, I know it is done.” Another small miracle, at least for the onlookers who can see. For them there is no noticeable change in the noise when vegetables are cooked. This skill is acquired thus. At the AICB institute the girls use a timer while cooking, so that they get an idea of how to ‘feel’ the time different vegetables take to be done. During their training period they are trained to ‘feel’ this way, so when they arrive at their homes cooking is not an obstacle anymore. When they are not sure about their estimation, they can just take a piece of vegetable out of the pot and feel with their fingers if it is done.

Usually, you see Puja roaming arm in arm with her friend Ranjana who became blind at the age of three,



Cooking is more a matter of hearing than seeing

following a severe headache and high fever. Her parents took the responsibility of sending her to a Braille school in Delhi. Now at the AICB she is taking household skills classes and has learned how to knit without needing to use her eyes. Her latest project is a pair of baby socks. While she holds the upper rim of a sock in one hand, she counts the remaining stitches on the needle with the thumb and index of the other. The light pink woollen thread moves on as the crafting progresses. Ranjana thinks it is not needlework but cooking which is her favourite: “Cooking is the best. It is important for a blind girl. You learn how to feed yourself independently without the help of your mother, sisters, or in-laws.”

Ranjana picks up new skills quite quickly. In 35 days, she has learned what takes others three to six months to learn. During their training period, students also learn karate. “They can give you a really painful kick,” warns Kamlesh Virmani, their teacher. Ranjana also reports how once, when she had to deliver a small performance, she had broken two bricks within a frame with her hands. She smiles proudly at her

achievements. Puja also agrees that karate is a lot of fun. But besides the joy, there is another aspect to it for her. “It is so good as a method of self-defence. I feel much more secure now that I have learnt karate.” Not that anything serious has ever happened to her, she notes, but “just in case; you never know what may happen. If some boys in the bus harass me, karate will help me a lot.”

Many of these courses are not gender-specific. Learning the skills of mobility, how to read Braille and iron clothes is compulsory for all

Sukhpreet is a student at AICB. She loves music and is training in classical music, besides other forms of music. Originally from Srigangadharnagar, Rajasthan, she is also doing her B.A in Arts from Chowdhury Ballu Ram Godhara College. She was later transferred to an integrated school. She recalls, “At this new school there were no Braille books available. I could not study alone. I could only listen to what people were saying.” She dreams of a career in music, but she enjoys the computer training and karate lessons at the AICB.

students, female or male. Other courses like needlework are voluntary for males, but experience has shown that boys also have a certain interest in these so-called female tasks. One boy who has learnt how to iron his clothes without any help is Sonu. This 15-year-old boy says he had never ironed anything before in his life. "Initially, I felt it was very difficult but as soon as I learnt some small tricks, it became easier. And now I know how to do it." The small tricks Sonu mentioned are indeed quite easy. All said, it is not more than ordinary ironing, except that a blind person pays more attention to the regulator. The steps the regulator takes to reach a certain temperature are counted until the required level of heat is reached. Then Sonu uses his fingers to feel



The trick is to feel and watch the regulator

how hot the cloth has become by his ironing. If he feels he needs to reduce the heat, he turns the regulator one step back. Sonu became blind five years ago and since then has never had a chance to continue his education. "But I would like to go to school again and study up to class X or XII." When he finishes his training at AICB, he hopes he can go back to his home in Patna (Bihar) to attend a blind school there.

All in all, the AICB has not only extraordinary students, but also an outstanding management. The AICB is a self-help organisation not just for the blind, but also of the blind. There is only one non-blind person in the Central Executive Council of the AICB. Kaul says, "We know our problems best. We can think of the best solutions to deal with our difficulties. It is not coincidental that this person is sighted; he does the accounts work. All the office bearers,

the ABU, the WBU, and the President are blind."

One might ask how they as blind people cope with the responsibility of running a whole institution. Kaul explains his tasks and the working strategy regarding problems related

Fareeda is originally from Kabul (Afghanistan) but lives in Peshawar (Pakistan) where she works at the office of the Afghan Association of the Blind. She has been with them for more than three years and was in AICB for training. Only 19 years old, she is the chairperson of the Women's Committee of the Afghan Association of the Blind in Peshawar. She is simultaneously enrolled as a student of Journalism and English at the Afghani College and hopes she will soon be able to work as a journalist .

to his blindness: "I look after all the programmes and supervise them through reports and physical verification. This includes administration and staff work. There are around 100 staff members here, and it is my job to attend to their problems and provide whatever they need. I also work with the Asian Blind Union, which is the World Blind Union's regional unit. I handle their seminars, conferences, and advocacy groups." He has his staff to help him where his inability to see comes in the way of his work. But he has to take precautions in financial matters, like signing checks and checking accounts because he cannot see what is written. There are different staff members who he trusts, and has each and every document read and cross-checked by more than

one staff member. "But other than that I face no extra difficulties as a blind person in coping with my duties," he states.

In an administrative job, such as Kaul's, the main work consists of policy framing and implementation. He notes: "Policy framing comes from the brain, and although there can be problems in implementation, such as maintaining cleanliness in the building, the staff helps us. Our other capabilities are not curbed by our visual handicap. Other senses and other strengths can be used such as hearing and smell. The lack of sight cannot be fully compensated, but we can overcome the limitations to a large extent by allowing other faculties to become sharper." Another initial problem the blind face is how to figure out distances. "You can 'hear' the distance," says Kaul. "This sense develops rapidly when you are blind. Many blind people

think they have some sixth sense. I think it is only that the four remaining senses get enhanced. Something we did not need before.” This explains the stunning moment Ankisha experienced when she led the two blind girls to the room in the college. Ordinary people do not need these senses as urgently and are therefore amazed by these skills. Kaul says he can even tell who is standing in front of him by just touching that person’s arm.

To improve the blind children’s chances in the labour market, the AICB has a special educational programme that divides schooling into two units. During the first unit, the pupils attend a blind school until class VIII. Later on, they are sent to an integrated school. There is a reason behind this division. Kaul points out the difference between this project and integrated learning. “Unfortunately, people have not tried to understand the problems of integrated schooling for the blind. The integrated schooling movement is dominated by the concerns for the orthopedically handicapped students. They face only one problem—that of mobility. Once you get them to the school and into the classroom, they can learn as well as others. But blind students face many more problems. The teachers in integrated schools do not know Braille. The students face problems while studying mathematics and geometry since they cannot see numbers and shapes. They also cannot use labs designed for sighted people. During playtime they are left out. This gives rise to inferiority complex amongst visually disabled students.” Sukhpreet, an AICB student originally from Sriganadharnagar (Rajasthan), initially attended a school for the blind



Dexterity of feeling, weaving

and then was transferred to an integrated school. She hated the change. She recalls, “At this new school there were no Braille books available. I could not study alone. I could only listen to what people were saying.”

“The integration lobby says that integrated schooling takes less

Another Pakistani student at the AICB, Humehra Haseez hopes to study law. She lost her eyesight while she was in her second year of B.A. Even after she lost her eyesight, she remained active in extra-curricular activities and finally became the best debater in her college. She also continued writing, which was something that she loved. She writes poetry in both Urdu and English, as well as articles and short stories. Initially she had wanted to study medicine, but after losing her sight she has now decided to become as a lawyer.

money, but they fail to regard one important aspect. Rural and semi-rural areas have such low-level schools that blind children do not get the individual attention they need. Only a person who can read Braille can check his or her work. Paucity of equipment is another major hurdle. Integration is possible only after appropriate infrastructure has been introduced.”

Ideally, integrated education should begin only after class VIII. Until then, the blind students are taught the basics of every subject. “Science, geometry, and the other disciplines are taught to them and they attend laboratory sessions. They gain knowledge and self-confidence. They have a place to stay in our hostel. They do not face difficulties because they have picked up the required skills. They are mature.

They know how to use things and function with a degree of independence,” says Kaul. The AICB also provides volunteers to help their students. With these prerequisites, integrating them is not a problem anymore, whereas this would have been too difficult at a younger age.

These education programmes are organized at two levels—open employment and self-employment. Children up to 15 years of age are integrated into the CBR programme for training and rehabilitation. After that, the AICB attempts to give them sufficient skills to make them economically independent. Self-employment is mostly offered in villages and rural areas. These jobs help people earn a living. “They are trained to run stores, recognize currency notes, and so on. We also give them money to help set up shops, so that when they start earning they can pay us back,” says Kaul about AICB’s strategies. This so-called

Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) programme is mostly held in rural areas. The difference between the urban and the rural blind, according to Kaul, is “as big a difference as between the sky and the earth. In rural areas, people are not aware that blind people can also study. They are apprehensive and say, “What will our neighbors think if we send our children away to school? They may think that we could not even raise them.” He adds, “We run the self-employment scheme in villages because if we loan them money, they repay it. In urban areas also we tried to loan money, but people would take the money and disappear. People in the villages do not run away. They have a sense of values and shame. We usually get 80 per cent of our money back. So, we lend money for self-employment in villages and adopt a strategy of finding open employment in cities because of the differences in attitudes and level of knowledge.”

Another area of special emphasis is women’s empowerment. Although the first blind school started in 1887 was for blind women, even today only one-fourth of the services for the blind are available to women. Anjum Taj first joined the AICB as its regional coordinator for South India for the Women’s Empowerment Project. Unable to cope with the restrictions imposed on her by her orthodox family, she secretly found work as the principal of the Surdas Residential School for the Blind and later joined the AICB. In her spare time, Anjum loves to write poetry, short stories, and novels. There is very little female participation in blind organizations where people like Anjum contribute. They are almost non-existent in the decision-making bodies of blind associations. This is because of two factors. As Kaul explains, “Sometimes organizations do not let them come forward, and

sometimes women are too reserved to participate. The problem is at two levels. There is a need for motivation and leadership training amongst women who need to realize that they have to help themselves. There is also a need to motivate organizers to address the issue of how and why women are denied leadership.” His solution for the problem is to give women more economic power than they have today. “Some people say that women are not capable of assuming leadership posts, but then neither are many of the men. They only become capable through participation. Education and employment are the best ways to empowering women, he thinks” According to him the situation is really terrible for blind women because they lack economic independence. He points out this fact by giving the example of Rajasthan: “In the villages there, there are many cases that when the elder sister gets married, the younger blind sister is also sent along to do the housework. These girls are depressed and frustrated. But once they get economic independence and a leadership position, they feel much happier. The attitude of the girls and that of society towards them undergoes a change for the better.

A 19-year-old AICB student, Fareeda, originally from Kabul, however brings hope in this regard. She is working in the office of the Afghan Association of the Blind and believes that she can teach everything that AICB has taught her colleagues back in Pakistan. At this young age, she is the chairperson of the Women’s Committee of the Afghan Association of the Blind in Peshawar. Humehra Haseez, another Pakistani student at the AICB, hopes to study law. Even after she lost her eyesight, she remained active in extra-curricular activities and finally became the best debater in her

college. She also continued writing, which was something that she loved. She writes poetry in both Urdu and English, as well as articles and short stories. Initially she had wanted to study medicine, but after losing her sight she decided to take up law, as she felt she could help more people as a lawyer.

All too often, women who become blind later in life are asked to leave by their in-laws, for many consider blind women to be of no use in the domestic sphere. After they are chased away, the husband will soon re-marry. Kaul remembers well the case of a young girl who had been abandoned by her in-laws and had to go back to her parents. Her mother brought her to the AICB centre. “She was very depressed when she came here. She was just 22, had graduated and had her whole life ahead of her,” he says. “We encouraged her to become independent, and it took her no longer than one and a half months to learn how to cook, sew, and iron without sight. Then, suddenly her husband appeared at our institute to take her back. I asked him, “How come? You had chased her away, so why do you want her back now? She is doing well here, so maybe it is better if you leave her here with us.” But the husband insisted. So then Kaul asked him again, “If you had suddenly become blind and she had refused to take care of you and left you, how would you then have felt?” The man replied that he had not thought on those lines and had accepted his mother’s decision, but now he wanted to meet her. Then the husband went to see his wife and no one told her about his presence. He was impressed by how well she was doing. They then moved to another state and are now living happily, this time without the in-laws.

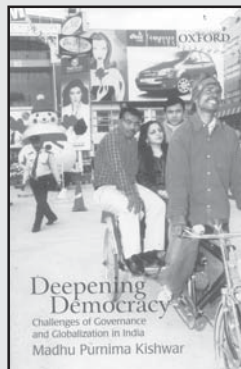
The AICB has 40 scholarships of Rs.1000 per month for girls at the post-graduate level. “We provide our girls

with hostel accommodation,” says Kaul, “This education also helps to empower them. Because of male discrimination, women have not got their share. So special efforts need to be made.”

Support for these projects comes from the government and international organisations, not necessarily in that order. Kaul then reports about the ongoing improvements. “International organisations are getting the message that we take economical measures and do not waste money. Therefore there is goodwill towards us. Organisations do not leave us easily. A Dutch agency has given us money to publish 100 Braille books, 25 in English and 75 in Hindi, for general reading.” So, AICB’s funds are secured through international support. “But as far as the Indian Government is concerned, for them a horse and a donkey are the same,” adds Kaul. “Whether we perform well or not, it does not make a difference to them. We cannot function by depending just on the Government. They are in a bad state; there is no proper evaluation system and they have a step-motherly attitude to NGOs. Teachers in NGO schools get paid only Rs.2800, while in the other ‘normal’ schools they get paid Rs. 9000 per month, even when they have the same qualifications and skills. They think that one cook and one helper can handle this hostel of 100 students, and that too being allowed to avail leave. It does not work that way.”

Exchanging experiences, however, is the most important issue for AICB and its students. Kaul remarks: “We want to share our experiences and the solutions we have found with other people. It is not only about taking. We want to give. That is how we have gained respect.”

Kristina Bellach is a graduate student from Germany who works as a volunteer with MANUSHI. □



Deepening Democracy Challenges of Governance and Globalization in India (Oxford University Press)

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