EMPOWERING THE BLIND AND THE DISABLED: 
THE BLIND PEOPLE’S ASSOCIATION

I. Abstract

In the last five decades of its existence, the Blind People’s Association (BPA) at Ahmedabad, India, has emerged as an internationally renowned voluntary organization for the blind and people with other disabilities. It has a number of innovative programs, such as schools, a national rehabilitation engineering institute, a computer training center, an electronics training center, a bakery and food products division for disabled women, and a number of vocational courses. It also provides an employment and placement service, runs urban and community-based programs for rehabilitation of the aged and disabled, and provides parental counseling and training.

The BPA tends to look at the abilities of the disabled and the blind and consider them as “differently abled” and important members of society. This philosophy has helped in training and assisting the differently abled to become self-reliant, which contributes to their socioeconomic rehabilitation and empowers them to lead a near-normal life.

II. Background

The BPA began in 1954 in Ahmedabad as the Blind Men’s Association (BMA), a recreation club for the blind started with the efforts of a few blind persons, including Mr. Jagdish Patel. Mr. Patel lost his eyesight in early childhood, as a result of meningitis. However, he grew up to become an approved physiotherapist in a leading hospital, and a leading philanthropist dedicated to promoting self-reliance among the blind.

In 1998, the name of the Blind Men’s Association was changed to the Blind People’s Association, because the name BMA led many people to believe wrongly that its activities and services were confined just to men. However, the name Blind People’s Association is also a misnomer, as BPA works for and provides services to people with different kinds of disabilities. Besides the blind, the organization works for the deaf, the mentally retarded, the orthopedically impaired, the mentally ill, the aged, and other groups. It also has been working for the multiple-disabled since 1989. BPA works to rehabilitate disabled people irrespective of their class and background. However, around 80 percent of the people supported by BPA belong to socially and economically disadvantaged classes, because their disabilities usually are a result of lack of medical prevention and care at an early age. Dedicated philanthropists, social workers, and professionals run BPA. Dr. Bhushan Punani, a management graduate, is now heading the organization.

The mission of BPA is comprehensive rehabilitation of people with diverse disabilities through education, vocational training, employment, research, publications, human

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resource development, integrated education, and community-based rehabilitation, in addition to providing medical aid and other support.

**Education and Training**

BPA operates a secondary school, a higher secondary school, a school of physiotherapy, and a technical school. It has educated around 300 blind adults to a higher secondary level.

BPA has implemented integrated education programs all over Gujarat, where all types of disabled and multiple-handicapped students study together with normal children. The physiotherapy school at BPA is the only government-recognized school of its kind in India. The Technical School for the Blind offers a one-year government-recognized certificate course in professions such as motor-rewinding, general mechanics, weaving, carpentry, and canning. The course is offered to 70 blind trainees each year. The Computer Training Centre for the Blind and Disabled offers a six-month course in Basic and Dbase. The physiotherapy school and other training centers usually have students from Gujarat, but there are some students from other Indian states too.

BPA also runs a bakery and food products division for disabled women, an electronics training center for the blind and disabled, a receptionist and telephone operating course, an English stenography course for the blind and disabled, and training centers for adult and multi-category handicapped.

Besides service delivery at the state level, BPA offers capacity-building programs ranging from one-hour orientations to three-month training programs at the national and international levels. Participants in such programs may or may not have a disability, but they work for the development of people with disabilities. Such programs are usually offered to interested voluntary organizations operating in other states or countries. For instance, persons working at the managerial level in voluntary organizations in Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka attended a training program in February 2003.

**Placement**

BPA maintains regular contact with various government departments for the placement of its trainees. BPA helps disabled people in taking out loans and getting the benefit of microfinance schemes. It also provides training for railway recruitment, examinations for government jobs, and entrepreneurship development.

**Aid and Rehabilitation**

BPA provides help to the mentally retarded, mentally ill, multiply disabled, deaf, blind, and aged in the slums of Ahmedabad. It works for the prevention of blindness and disability through eye camps and surgery for cataracts and polio, and through the manufacture and free distribution of supportive devices, such as crutches and
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wheelchairs. BPA also provides parental counseling and training. In addition, it trains the disabled to perform their daily activities without the help of others.

BPA runs a daycare center for the mentally challenged, because it is determined to give meaning to their lives. It looks after the activities of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of India in the Gujarat region. BPA has initiated urban and community-based village programs for the rehabilitation of the aged and disabled. It has been involved in some of the initiatives for the victims of the January 2001 earthquake that hit Kutch. BPA runs the National Rehabilitation Engineering Institute and the Centre for Ortho-Prosthetic and Other Rehabilitation Aids and Appliances. In collaboration with the National Association for the Blind, BPA initiated the Comprehensive Rehabilitation of the Rural Blind program, which is operational at a national level. Under this program, medical aid, counseling, and other support services are provided to the blind living in rural areas. BPA has emerged as a major force in training and human resource development for community-based rehabilitation.

Box 1: Abilympics

At BPA, “disabled” people are looked at as “differently abled”; for example, a girl without hands may do embroidery with her undeveloped arms and legs, or a blind boy may design a Website. The “Abilympics,” the Olympics of abilities, were organized in 2001 at BPA to emphasize and encouraging such abilities. The events were meant for disabled people living throughout the western region of the country. The Abilympics are held once every four years at five zones, namely the North, East, West, South, and Central zones. The Abilympics gives the disabled a chance to show their talents and helps them to get recognition in society.

BPA has started a Resource Centre for disabled children in one of the commercial areas in Ahmedabad, under the Integrated Education scheme. The center provides support to the disabled children of Ahmedabad and nearby areas through materials and counseling. It also gives counseling to their parents.

In order to provide materials, support, and counseling for the disabled in different parts of Gujarat, BPA has established Gujarat Satellite Centres for the multiple-handicapped at Jamnagar, Viramgam, Dahod, and Kapadwanj, with assistance from the Hilton/Perhins International Program U.S.A.

BPA insists on forming a network with other organizations. Besides working in collaboration with a number of other agencies like itself, it also provides guidance and support to other welfare organizations working for disabled persons in Gujarat.
III. Impact/Results

The following review of the results of BPA’s work is based on interviews with key leaders and staff members of the Blind People’s Association.

Education

By 2001–02, more than 26,700 disabled students had benefited from the Integrated Education Program across the state of Gujarat.

Training

Professional training courses for the disabled started in 1976. During the 25 years through 2001, more than 5,000 disabled people have attended such courses.

Employment

As a result of BPA’s efforts, the number of blind music teachers increased considerably in schools supported by the government, and blind subject teachers also were appointed in such schools. Later, placements were made for physiotherapists (class III and IV positions) in the Bank of India and in the Post and Telegraph Department.

Since the establishment of BPA’s employment cell in 1976, around 2,500 disabled people have found employment. This number includes 600 teachers, 200 packing and stamping department workers, and 200 typists and laborers. In addition, some 700 persons are employed as lecturers, lower-division clerks, motor-rewinding mechanics, mechanical operators, telephone operators, and so forth. Some of these disabled people are also working as tour and transport operators, dairy farmers, and cycle repairers. As self-employed persons, the disabled operate more than 360 telephone booths across Gujarat, and they also run milk booths, shops, canteens, and other small businesses.

Rehabilitation

The Maharshi Ashtavakra Community-Based Rehabilitation Yojana is a combined initiative of the Gujarat government and BPA, started in January 2001, to extend medical aid, counseling, and other services to all the disabled, including those living in the remotest of villages. In two years, more than 45,700 disabled people spread across Gujarat have benefited from the program.

BPA has received numerous awards at both the national and international levels for its services in the field of disability management. In 1982, it was given the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) award for “Outstanding Placement of the Disabled” and a state award for the “Placement of Persons with Mental

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1 Based on information supplied by Dr. Bhushan Punani, Mr. Tarak Luhar, and other BPA staff.
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Retardation.” It received an International Golden Award for “Community Development Services Overseas” from the organization Help the Aged International in 1991, and a national award for “Outstanding Performance in the Field of Handicapped Welfare” in 1995.

BPA develops and distributes a host of simple and innovative educational aids and practical devices to people with disabilities. Because of BPA’s work on development of new techniques and innovations for the disabled, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research has recognized it as a Research Institute.

IV. Key Elements of Empowerment

Information

Information is one of the keys behind the empowerment of the disabled at BPA. The students and trainees obtain knowledge of how to do routine activities in their own way, as well as receiving career training. They are kept informed about the concessions, facilities, and government policies established for them. BPA’s association and contacts with other voluntary organizations facilitate further dissemination of such information. Seminars are conducted regularly to spread awareness about the Disability Act and to share information on employment opportunities.

BPA highlights problems and issues concerning the disabled in society, so as to make society understand their problems and accept them. The Abilympics, radio and television programs, and seminars have proved instrumental in raising public awareness on these issues. However, there is sometimes a lack of coordination among different departments in BPA, and the allocation of roles and responsibilities is not always clear. Interdepartmental relationships and coordination need special attention.2

Inclusion/Participation

The organization is dedicated to the disabled and includes them at every level of decision-making. Currently, about 25 BPA employees are people with disabilities. For instance, the principal of the Adult Training Centre/School for the Blind and the manager of the Braille press are visually impaired, and an accountant and a computer programmer have locomotor impairment. The inclusion of the disabled in the process of training and later integration into society has resulted in more than 2,500 disabled persons working in different occupations, and more and more disabled are being involved in BPA’s initiatives. Integrated Education is one such initiative, in which students with any type of disability are given instruction with other students who are not disabled. This helps to promote mutual acceptance, and helps disabled people to adjust more easily to the outside

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world when they step out of the safe and protective BPA environment. The active participation of the disabled in different activities at BPA—for instance, in co-curricular activities such as the Abilympics—shows that more and more people with disabilities are coming forward to benefit from BPA’s initiatives.

Local Organizational Capacity

In terms of providing organizational development support and capacity building, BPA supports other organizations working for the disabled. A self-reliant economic cooperative of disabled people has not yet been formed at a wider level. However, the Blind Women’s Association, one of the groups supported by BPA, has recently started manufacturing cottage goods, such as artificial flowers and lamps. Currently, five girls are involved in this activity, and their number is likely to increase.

With BPA’s support, people with disabilities have organized themselves into several associations to help themselves. The All-Gujarat Blind Teachers Association works for the welfare of blind teachers and its membership comprises blind teachers across the state. The Blind Service Association works for mill and factory workers. The Society for the Physically Handicapped is an association that works for all types of disabled persons. These groups, which consist of disabled people, address the problems the disabled face. They also maintain relations with the government and with officials working at the policy level.

V. Issues and Lessons

When it started in 1950, BPA had meager resources. Modest donations helped keep the organization running in low gear. A change toward professionalism started happening when the current Executive Director, who has an MBA, joined the BPA and then attracted other professionals. The growing impact of BPA led to a noticeable increase in donations and support from the community. The most important lesson learned was that professional management is required for NGOs. The other key lesson was that when an organization is operated with high dedication and professionalism, financial and other support follows.

Challenges

As teaching and learning Braille language can be difficult, innovations to simplify the teaching and learning of Braille can be useful. BPA is planning to open a Braille language laboratory in the near future to address this problem.

The lack of coordination between the two departments mentioned earlier can obstruct the effective implementation of a program. Clear allocation of authority, roles, and responsibilities can reduce these ambiguities.
Considering the number of disabled people in the state (around 700,000 according to the National Sample Survey of 1991), there is a need for more initiatives like BPA and a network of such agencies.

**Key Factors for Success**

- Training for self-reliance, including financial independence, continues to be a prominent factor contributing to BPA’s success in rehabilitation of the disabled.
- The active participation and enthusiasm of the disabled in BPA’s initiatives, such as the Abilympics and the Integrated Education Program, have boosted their sense of empowerment.
- Information dissemination and awareness building by BPA have been considerable, but its activities have yet to reach a number of remote areas. The specially targeted Maharshi Ashtavakra Community-Based Rehabilitation Yojana can help in this regard.
- BPA supports associations like the All-Gujarat Blind Teachers Association, the Society for the Physically Handicapped, and so on. Through such associations and groups, the disabled can not only address their own problems, but also can put forth their requirements at a policymaking level.
- More than any aid or training, BPA’s philosophy of empowering the disabled by enabling them to handle their affairs independently has helped its cause. Once motivated, the disabled often realize their capabilities and work toward leading a life of economic self-reliance and dignity.

**Outlook**

Besides continuing its routine activities, BPA plans to build a human resource development complex, which will have an international training center, training centers for computer and contemporary trades, and a training center for the Teachers’ Training Program in collaboration with the Ahmedabad Education Society. Every year, the program expects to train about 100 teachers in the instruction of people with a visual impairment, mental retardation, or a hearing impairment. This would lead to a considerable scaling up of BPA’s activities.

**VI. Further Information: References and Worldwide Web Resources**

*Interviews with Officers and Staff of the Blind People’s Association*

Dr. Bhushan Punani  
Mrs. Nandini Rawal  
Mr. Tarak Luhar
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———. 2002. *BMA Newsletter*. Vol. III (October 2002). (“BMA” signifies the Blind Men’s Association, which was the former name of the Blind People’s Association.)


Web Links

<http://www.bpaindia.org/>
<http://www.differentindia.org/bma.html>
<http://www.duke.edu/~dnp2/bma/bma.html>
<http://www.humanscapeindia.net/volun/ngos/bma.htm>
<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwsed/wc/cbs/pro/ind/bma.html>

*Note:* “bma” signifies the Blind Men’s Association, the former name of the Blind People’s Association.