

JAWAHAR LAL KAUL

A Life Dedicated to the Empowerment
of the Blind in India



CHANDRA NISHA SINGH
JAGDISH CHANDER

All India Confederation of the Blind

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the Blind in India

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A biography by

CHANDRA NISHA SINGH & JAGDISH CHANDER

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For
My husband, Saten
and my little Mirai from her Mai.
Nisha

FOREWORD

Jawaharlal Kaul belongs to a category of pioneers in the world, who have initiated services for the empowerment of the blind people. It is heartening to know that his historic contribution to the field of blindness in India has been documented by two scholars from the University of Delhi: Dr Chandra Nisha Singh and Dr Jagdish Chander. This biographical sketch is a great effort to document his selfless and relentless contribution as a service provider and an activist to the blind in India and it is definitely a very valuable contribution to the history of blindness. It will prove to be a great source of learning for the readers about the historical evolution of services for the empowerment of the blind in India.

The International Federation of the Blind, (IFB) was founded in New York in the year 1964, to spread the philosophy of self-advocacy among blind people around the world, particularly in the developing countries. But there were few leaders in the developing countries who were really enthusiastic and committed to promote this philosophy and even fewer who was offered even the possibility. Kaul happened to be among those rare leaders and he took full benefit of whatever could be learnt from the inspiring leadership of the early generation of IFB. Through his close association with Dr Isabelle LD Grant, who was then Treasurer of IFB, he was inspired to form the National Federation of the Blind in India in 1970 and laid down the foundation of self-advocacy movement of the blind in this part of the world serving as an inspiration both nationally and internationally.

Later, his immense contribution through the All India Confederation of the Blind has been acknowledged and he has been conferred upon several honours and awards at the national level in India. But this recognition is not confined to the domestic level

alone. He is considered to be a highly respected leader in the field of blindness in the Asian region and that is how the World Blind Union bestowed on him the highest honour in the field of blindness internationally, i.e. the Louis Braille Medal, in the year 2012. It is a rare honour which has been conferred upon very few leaders and activists in the field of blindness in the world and the fact that he has been among those chosen few, in itself explains the amount of respect he enjoys among the blind activists in the world.

Kaul's life story is not only a story of the development of services for the empowerment of the Blind in India, but also of the entire historical context of the socio-political struggles and challenges in the second half of the 20th century: the challenges which we as blind and partially sighted people have faced while pursuing education and employment in a prejudiced society and based on negative attitudes. On the personal level, it is a story of transformation of a helpless blind youth into an empowered blind person who writes the script of life for himself and for others too.

Jawaharlal Kaul is well educated and a writer himself. Although he has written about the various facets of his life in his autobiographical articles and books from time to time, this Biography fills the much-required gaps of the earlier works, documents his life and ideas to some extent and does justice to his contribution to the field of blindness. It is a great contribution to the history of blindness not only in India but internationally, and will prove to be an important source of knowledge for the future generations to know about the life of the blind people growing up in India during the second half of the 20th century.

Dr. Diana Stentoft
Secretary General, World Blind Union
June, 15, 2022.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Dr. Chandra Nisha Singh taught English at Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi and worked as Officer on Special Duty at the Equal Opportunity Cell, a rights and service providing Cell to the disabled community in the University for four years before her **retirement. She has a Ph.D. on women's writing in Indian languages** examined from feminist perspective and is a dedicated activist in the field of disability.

Dr. Jagdish Chandra is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Hindu College, University of Delhi. He has documented the history of self-advocacy movement of the blind in India as part of his Ph.D. thesis in Disability Studies from Syracuse University, New York. He is currently engaged in writing the biography of Lal Advani, who pioneered services for the empowerment of the disabled through Stat-led initiatives in India.

PREFACE I

The life story of Jawahar Lal Kaul is not the record of the activities of a great man, born and brought up great, who achieved great things. This narrative is the life account of a simple and humble man who achieved great results. That life can and should be lifted out of odds and that holding on to hope and aspirations is meant for human beings only, is the purpose with which this book has been written.

The biography of Jawahar Lal Kaul is based primarily on a series of interviews conducted by us: Dr Jagdish Chander, a friend and colleague, myself and another friend Chandralekha Malviya, a retired IAS officer who too wanted to meet the man, Kaul, a little enigmatic to all of us. The interviews, about 12 in number, were conducted on a regular basis around April and May, 2018 almost four years prior to the completion of the writing work and its publication. Most of the interviews took place in the office of Kaul Saheb and a few in the familial atmosphere of his home. On one occasion, we also went around the campus of the AICB to familiarize ourselves with the functioning of the Organization. In the total number of nearly 12 interviews there were as many cups of tea and biscuits and a lunch at the AICB hostel, since our time of meeting had coincided with the lunch hour, Kaul Saheb had decided **to extend his hospitality. There wasn't a single occasion when we** would have beaten Kaul Saheb in terms of time and if we were late even by a few minutes, which often happened as our punctuality was more of the Indian kind, we would be shaken up with a matter of fact phone reminder. Each interview lasted for about 2 hours during which time we were rapt listeners to a narrative which moved in a kind of chronological order. From time to time, interjections came from all of us and Kaul Saheb stopped patiently

to reply to our enquiry and satisfy our curiosity. Knowing about **Kaul Saheb's short temper**, we were somewhat prepared for some reactions from him on our probing and uncomfortable questions. No, but that did not ever happen. He was patient and, to me, it seemed that he was also enjoying himself and was tickled by the challenges of the marathon talking sessions. The fear of facing the inimitable Kaul Saheb gradually disappeared and each session left a hint of unrevealed new shades and layers in his personality.

Our data was collected not only from the 12 connected interviews, there were more than 20 follow up sessions of interaction with Kaul Saheb in his office and at home and often over the phone along with frequent exchanges of information through e-mails during the last four years. Hence, most of the narrative of this biography is built on the authenticity of the data from these interviews and sometimes cross-checked by what others had to say **about him, some published material here and there and Kaul Saheb's** tacit acceptance of the literary sketch that we had prepared. The documents that were consulted included the literature of the All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB) as well as the magazines brought out by it. We also went through some of the books relating to disability, particularly the ones which deal with the historical background of our subject and some biographies which, we found, relevant to the field of blindness. Apart from these published or printed sources, we interviewed some of the associates of Kaul Saheb for his work-related associations, and his wife, Mrs. Usha Kaul and cousin, Promila for familial relationships. But, somehow, the interview with **Kaul Saheb's son, Vineet, could not materialize.**

Our interpretation of Kaul Saheb's life could vary because we were at different levels of familiarity with him. Jagdish, being a fellow visually disabled person and also an activist himself, knew

Kaul Saheb very well personally. In fact, it was Jagdish who had convinced me to take up the project of writing the biography. He deeply respected Kaul Saheb, had worked with him and was sure that Kaul Saheb's life needed to be documented for the future generations to remind them of his seminal contributions to the Disability movement.

I had heard Kaul Saheb's name in the office of the Equal Opportunity Cell of the University of Delhi during the four years of my tenure as its Officer on Special Duty. But he never visited the EOC nor did the EOC make any special effort to invite him to its programmes. Kaul Saheb did not fit in with the culture of inaugurations, speeches and public platforms. How could he waste his valuable time in these unproductive activities? I believe there was an unspoken distance observed at the EOC too as Kaul Saheb's plain speaking and unapologetic words were considered avoidable.

Kaul Saheb is an activist and a man of action. He has his own clear views on what will bring the disabled into an equitable space, especially in India, how mainstream perceptions will change about the disabled and what the disabled themselves need to do to deserve that space. Kaul Saheb chose an approach which may be termed as a healthy and viable accommodation of self-advocacy, activism and social support, his personal amalgamation of the three discourses of disability, in his own way. Although his approach may be accessible for a critical jibe from the purists in the field, its good intentioned practical utility cannot be questioned.

Now the question arises for whom a man like Jawahar Lal Kaul has so much relevance that his life should be retold, analysed and preserved in human memory. An ordinary child born in an ordinary set up who lost his sight at the age of five and who became circumstantially a part of the blind minority condemned to a

peripheral position in the privileged mainstream of the sighted people! So, **in a sense, the relevance of Kaul Saheb's life is, perhaps,** only for his own community, the not so small world of the blind, if we may say so. However, if that had been the case, we might not have been able to justify to our own selves the relevance of this project. But we do not think that the biography of Kaul Saheb has such restricted relevance; such biographies build hope, resilience, courage and persistence against natural and manmade odds. **These are subaltern tales of small 'big' men who inspire to make sense of life and give a purpose to life.** This is how the biographies or auto biographies that narrate the struggles of minority groups, women, dalits, disabled and various other sufferers become inspirational material for the record of reality, introspection and social correction. The disability discourse is no longer a meta-text meant for exclusive absorption, but an integral part of the main text, in the same manner as, politically, problematizing disability is not any more a minority issue, but a universal social issue.

A dilemma we faced during the course of our writing was how we should address Jawahar Lal Kaul in our biographical narrative. Not used to addressing him or speaking about him in any other way than Kaul Saheb, we might be in sync with our readers in India, but as we also had to keep in mind the international readers as the target readers of this book and had to adhere to the standard practice of biographical writings, we jointly resolved to address him by his first name, Jawahar, in the initial chapters about his childhood and early adulthood and, subsequently, by his family name, Kaul, to describe the remaining journey of his life as an adult. We must also add that **all the quotations without citations in the book are Kaul Saheb's own words, picked and translated by my co-author, Jagdish with complete authenticity and honesty so that the purport of his**

statements does not get modified in any way.

Finally, a biographer's ultimate goal is to recreate the world of his or her subject, highlight the changes that the person and the world mutually record and focus on those transcending moments that also offer universal life lessons. I hope that my co-author, Jagdish and I have been able to justify the purpose for which this initiative was taken.

Dr. Chandra Nisha Singh
Mumbai
12.06.2022

PREFACE II

My Preface is a sincere effort to place the protagonist of this Biography, Jawahar Lal Kaul, in a just and unbiased perspective and to disperse confusions and beliefs that abound around him due to significant historical developments of the 1980s in the set-up of the blind community in Delhi.

I remember learning about Kaul Saheb when I was studying in Andh Mahavidyalaya, the residential school for the blind located at Panchkuian Road, in New Delhi during the 1980s. This school was located at an important location of Central Delhi which was less than 3 kms from Rajiv Chowk, considered to be the most important area of Central Delhi and about one km from the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) office then located at Paharganj in New Delhi. Being at an important location and at the same time impacted by the deteriorating administrative conditions of the school, the students of this School often comprised the main force of the political rallies and all kinds of activities carried out by the NFB under its young leaders. Another organization which had its stronghold in the school and frequently utilized the man force of its students for political activities, was the National Blind Youth Association which earlier collaborated with the younger generation of the leaders of the NFB, but later distanced itself from it. All the political activities were primarily directed against the Government in most cases and in some cases against the school administration too. These students were primarily groomed as active advocates of their rights who would go to any extent to assert themselves against the school administration, the Government authorities and even those who were close to either of the two. In their views, Kaul Saheb, who was then involved in service delivery projects through his newly founded organization, the All India

Confederation of the Blind (AICB), and was known for being close to Ajai Kumar Mittal and Lal Advani, the two top-level position holders in the field of blindness, was their opponent. They were also made to believe that Kaul Saheb had been defeated and ousted from the leadership of the NFB in 1978, (a subject discussed in detail in Chapter 10) through ‘popular mandate’, a position they readily believed in despite all efforts by Kaul Saheb and his other senior companions to contradict it and present their point of view. Just because Kaul Saheb was also close to the people in power, which ostensibly made him a part of the power circle as well, his image in the minds of the students got projected as that of a strict and autocratic authoritarian. Hence, most students studying in various schools for the blind in Delhi during the 1980s, which included me as well, were convinced of this image of Kaul Saheb presented to them primarily by the second generation of leadership.

The Andh Mahavidyalya was shifted from Lahore to Delhi at the time of the partition of India in 1947. It was thus, the oldest school in Delhi and had done well till about 1976, although it was run on the charity model. In 1976, its current administration was attacked and the students took over the control of the school. That was the beginning of jungle raj (anarchy and chaos) in my school. Since then, the school has been witnessing regular fights and tussles like typical gang wars between different groups of students who violently seize power from time to time and even beat up people who stand in their way. This has continued till recently when the residents comprising unemployed alumni who were using its premises merely as a hostel, have been removed from there. Such highly vitiated atmosphere that was least congenial for studies persisted in the Andh Mahavidyalya and some other institutions in Delhi and the neighbouring states, and it proved detrimental to the

scholastic atmosphere of these educational institutions. It was the students or the alumni of these specific institutions only, who constituted the major manpower for the political protests and demonstrations during the 1980s and the 1990s.

Being educated in Andh Mahavidalaya, while I too was quite familiar with the political protests and advocacy activities carried out in Delhi, I was also, at the same time, somewhat involved in the disability rights movement during the 1990s. I was introduced to Lal Advani, whose biography is being written by me at this point. I developed respect for the public personalities who had contributed to the empowerment of the disabled, particularly, the blind in India. Kaul Saheb happened to be among those eminent persons, who undoubtedly, deserved high respect because of the contribution to this field and whose side of the interpretation of the movement I could understand.

Later, as part of my Ph.D. thesis in Disability Studies from Syracuse University located in New York, I decided to document the history of self-advocacy movement of the blind in India. Based on the method of primarily oral history, the data for my Ph.D. thesis mainly comprised the information drawn from the interviews of the second generation of leadership and whatever was being documented as a part of the self-advocacy movement of the Blind in India also came mainly from the perspective of this leadership. It is true that this leadership continues to lead the NFB, which is definitely the largest self-advocacy organisation of the Blind in India at the national level and is recognised as such internationally also, but for this leadership, Jawahar Lal Kaul, unfortunately, remained a target of criticism, not necessarily on purely ideological basis.

With my academic background and the respect that I shared with a vast number of members of the blind community for Kaul

Saheb (other than a few members belonging to the second generation leadership of the NFB), I sometimes, reproached myself for a rather one-sided documentation of the self-advocacy movement of the blind and the portrayal of Kaul Saheb in my Ph.D. thesis. Those who admire him, and they are in large numbers, almost eulogise him. Like Lal Advani, Kaul Saheb happens to be another significant contributor in the field of blindness, who has created milestones in personal and community lives. That the founder of the NFB, who initiated a mission for self-advocacy could be portrayed as an opponent of the same, left a sense of guilt within me. I had the realization that it was unfair on my part to present **one-sided portrayal of Kaul Saheb's image. I realized that an effort** needed to be made to rewrite Jawahar Lal Kaul, unbiased, based on facts, through perspectives that had been ignored and through a fair chance to him to retrospect his own life. I was keen that his perspective should be documented and his contribution definitely acknowledged as it is not merely an individual life, but a life that builds and represents the history of a community and its radical growth. Now there was a hitch: I had still the unfinished task of completing the biography of Lal Advani on my hands. I was therefore, on the lookout for a suitable person who could give ground to my dream.

During the last 15 years, I have been extremely privileged, honoured and fortunate to have come in contact with the main author of this Biography, Dr Chandra Nisha Singh. I found her to be very rational, progressive and humane when I began to meet her at the Equal Opportunity Cell of the University of Delhi. She had begun to work rather late in this field in the last four years of her career, but this was a commitment to stay. While she had to shift to Mumbai, perhaps permanently, to help in bringing up Mirai (the new born granddaughter), she continued to be mentally engaged with the field of disability too. I was convinced that if I requested

her to work on the biography of Kaul Saheb, she would willingly involve herself with this mission. On one of her visits to Delhi from Mumbai, I requested her to consider writing the biography, and after a little hesitation about the feasibility of managing the task from a distance, she agreed to it. Mirai and the Project of the Biography started growing simultaneously. We decided to start working on collecting data for this book almost immediately and this is how we conducted the initial round of a series of rigorous interviews in the months of April and May in 2018. In this journey that we had embarked upon, my role was primarily to introduce the author with the subject and support her indirectly. But going to the AICB and meeting and speaking to Kaul Saheb was a privilege I **could not resist. Nisha Ma'am also insisted that I should continue** to be with her during the interviews. And now, while my name appears here as a co-author, my role in the preparation of this book has been more of an assistant to Dr. Chandra Nisha Singh and in all humility, I would like to acknowledge the fact that this Book is actually her work. My primary written contributions to the Book are Chapter 10 and the Preface and Acknowledgement. She has however, generously granted me the credit of being a co-author simply because, she believes, tasks like conducting interviews, translating and transcribing them from Hindi to English, reading and critically advising her on all the chapters, setting up interviews with Kaul Saheb and taking care of the other logistics in the process of the completion of the manuscript of the book and, above all, recreating the actual historical background to which only I could be the witness, are, in no way, less important than the actual writing. Therefore, together we undertake the responsibility for any shortcomings in the Book which might have got overlooked by both of us.

Jagdish Chander

July 4, 2022

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of a book is not a solo job although its credit is claimed by an author or two. The friends and colleagues have important roles to play at various stages of the writing and the publishing of the book. In our case, this was particularly so as we were devoid of any professional help especially in the editing and correcting of the manuscript. The All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB), that decided to publish the Book is a well-established Non-Governmental-Organization that has been bringing out several publications including reports, magazines, monographs and a lot of Organization related matter. However, it is not a professional publishing house and therefore, does not have a dedicated team of professional copy editors. Fortunately, to fill the gap, our own sincere and dedicated set of friends and colleagues spared their valuable time to give us honest critical feedback on our drafts and made constructive editorial improvement in preparing a presentable script. We are deeply indebted to Chandralekha Malviya, Dr. Sadhna Arya, Dr A diti Mukherjee and Vikram Dutt, who read the entire manuscript or parts of it to suggest improvements at all stages: ideas, structure, language, relevance and consistency, which enabled us to bring this book in its final shape. Satish Kumar, the personal assistant of Jagdish Chander, who typed all the interviews conducted for this book, also deserves our appreciation.

To obtain the necessary competence in conceiving and preparing the book cover, we received the full expertise of Rudra Narayan Sharma, an expert in the publishing field. He not only guided us with the basic information about the preparation of the cover, but also took upon himself the task of getting the job done under his guidance.

It has been our privilege that Ms Diana Stentoft, from the Danish

Association of the Blind, a leader of high stature in the field of blindness not only in her home country, Denmark, but also internationally and who is currently serving as the Secretary General of the World Blind Union, has written the Foreword for the Book. Jawahar Lal Kaul worked towards creating basic amenities and support systems, taking the discourse on visual impairment out of the charity approach to empowering the persons with blindness, focusing on creating a social environment that enables a person with disability to get out of dependency syndrome and lead a life of self-worth and self-esteem. His life is completely dedicated to this cause in India. At the same time, his contribution to the largest national and international level self-advocacy organizations of the blind in India and abroad remains exemplary. **Ms. Stentoft's Foreword to the Book** is a befitting tribute to the eminence of Kaul Saheb and a privilege for the authors. We are deeply indebted to her for sparing her invaluable time for writing the Foreword.

Finally, we express our gratitude to everyone who took out time to talk to us and agreed to be interviewed. Prof. Ved Prakash Varma (the first blind Professor in the University of Delhi and the founding President of the National Federation of Blind Graduates), Prof. Anil Aneja (the President of the AICB and Head of Department, English at the University of Delhi), Mrs. Usha Kaul (wife of Kaul Saheb), Mrs. Promila Kaul (cousin of Kaul Saheb) and Rama and Shashi Dharan Krishnan.

Our thanks are due to Jawahar Lal Kaul, who is not only the subject of this biography but also the biggest constant support in the completion of the Book. Despite the innumerable Interview sessions which could have been extremely exhausting and repetitive for him because of constant prodding and uncomfortable questions, Kaul Saheb was always willing to take out time to talk to us extensively

at any given time upon our request and promptly responded to our queries over the e-mails. It was entirely our motivation to write a book on him while he tried to discourage us as he actually believed that a book on his life would have no value for the coming generations. We believe, this biography is a historic work which not only narrates the personal story of Kaul Saheb but also documents a historical juncture of Indian society reflecting the social attitude towards blindness and the challenges and struggle arising out of it.

Once the project of writing got on to its feet, Kaul Saheb's disciplinary- self took over and he propelled us, like a task master, to complete the job within a time frame. We express our sincere thanks to him for all the support and encouragement through the time of writing and for immense learning of a life-time seeing that man in action. Hopefully, the Biography of Jawahar Lal Kaul will act as a repository of knowledge in the field of blindness for the current as well as future generations.

JAWAHAR LAL KAUL

A brief biography

Timeline:

- 1942 Born in Sri Nagar, Jammu and Kashmir on 28th July.
- 1947 Lost sight due to smallpox at the age of five. Studied at the Institute for the Blind (Andh Mahavidyalya), Amritsar and distinguished himself as a student with outstanding merit.
- 1967 Completed B.A. (Hons) Sanskrit from Punjab University with first position in the University and became a Gold Medallist.
- 1967 Shifted to Delhi in May and immediately plunged himself in the Training and Rehabilitation Centre for the Blind, **an organization established by Kaul's** London returned former school Principal, Madan Lal Khandelwal.
- 1968 Married Usha Lekhi in a simple ceremony in April.
- 1969 The couple had their only son, Vineet.
- 1970 Appointed as a Lower Division Clerk (LDC) by the Delhi Government in May.
- 1970 Established the National Federation of the Blind Graduates (NFBG) with his colleagues which later became the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in 1972.
- 1972 Left the National Federation of the Blind.

1980 Set up the All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB)–an umbrella organization with its Headquarters in Delhi and became the Secretary General of AICB.

Organizations served:

1967-70 Training and Rehabilitation Centre for the Blind on the position of Secretary

1970-1978 National Federation of the Blind on the position of General Secretary

1977-1985 East Asia Committee of International Federation of the Blind on the position of Executive Secretary

1980-till date All India Confederation of the Blind on the position of Founder & Secretary General

2000-2012 Asian Blind Union on the position of Secretary General

2009-2012 World Blind Union on the position of Chairman

Awards and Honours:

2000 FICCI National Award

2000 Thomas Memorial National Award

2000 Man of the year Award by American Biographical Institute

2002 World Human Rights Promotion Award

2003 T.P. Jhunjhunwala Award

2003 NCPEDP–Shell Helen Keller Award

- 2006 R.M. Alpaiwala Memorial Award
- 2006 Marga Schulze Award (Germany) for rendering best services for empowerment of blind women in Asia and Africa conferred on him in Kuala Lumpur
- 2012 Louis Braille Gold Medal—the highest award in the field of blind welfare, awarded by the World Blind Union for his outstanding international service to the blind community
- 2014 Padma Shri—the fourth-highest civilian award of the Republic of India, awarded by the Government of India
- 2017 Louis Braille Award of Rs. One Lakh by CU Shah Pagna Chakshu Mahila Seva Kunj, Gujarat

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Chapter One

Childhood

Located on the north-western side of India bordering mainly with Pakistan, mostly on the mountainous terrain of the Himalayas, Kashmir was a unique kingdom. It was ruled by a Hindu dynasty despite majority of its population being Muslim prior to its accession to India after independence from the British rule. Despite being accorded the status of special category of statehood with a much greater autonomy as compared to the other states of the **Union of India, Jammu and Kashmir became a part of India's** democratic republic system. This also enabled the democratic governments in power in the State to enact land-reform laws. Through these laws, the owners of excessive land were deprived of their land and it was redistributed among the landless peasants.

Jawahar Lal Kaul was an average child born in a typical Kashmiri Pandit family that enjoyed, once upon a time, the privilege of owning lands in the Pulwama district of Kashmir. And as it happened universally with the inevitable decline of the feudal system, the family kept on losing its lands to the actual cultivators and was forced to find other ways to survive financially. Pulwama has been an extremely fertile area in the south of Srinagar; but **Jawahar Lal Kaul's family did not enjoy the fruits of that opulence** that rich lands offered, at least around the time when Jawahar was born. The Kauls were not wealthy, but were certainly counted amongst the privileged segment of Hindus in the province in the pre independence era. In the prevalent zamindari system, the landowners or the zamindars were not farmers. They normally leased out their land to cultivators or the Ryot in return for an assured annual income. This income ensured a comfortable standard of living for the landowning families. But by the end of the 1940s,

the zamindari system was abolished and the land was transferred to the actual cultivators. As a result, many, including the Kaul family, lost most of their land ownership rights and thereby, the stream of **income from it. The family's home was in Rainawari**, a suburban part of Srinagar on the Srinagar-Leh highway about 12 km away from Lal Chowk, the heart of the city. Rainawari, as the name suggests, must have been the hub of the Kashmiri Pandits known by the surname Raina and thus a totally Hindu basti (locality).

The family left Rainawari when Jawahar was a small child, about two years old, and moved into a rented accommodation in a residential quarter called Raghunath Mandir, also in Srinagar. This was due to the family's **shrinking resources, expanding family**, family squabbles and disputes and various other constraints.

Jawahar's family history begins for him from his grandfather, **Tota Kaul**. There wasn't much that could be recorded about his ancestors except adding a few family anecdotes. His grandfather, Tota Kaul was fairly learned though his formal education was limited to class fifth only. Tota Kaul had to start earning quite early in life as his father had died young. Good at drafting material in both Urdu and English and maintaining accounts, Tota got employed with a Shia Muslim family and acquired the name Jalalie. Hence, Jalalie also became an add-on family name and was used commonly to identify the family.

A popular story in the Kaul household was regarding a valuable imported wall clock in the house. The clock, with its rich magnificent looks, was certainly out of place in the rather ordinary functional middle-class house. It was a gift from the Maharaja of Kashmir, probably Maharaja Gulab Singh, to one of the ancestors of the family who was a regular visitor to the palace and was on close terms with the Maharaja. The clock had a place of pride in the

household as it offered the family a chance to boast of its high connections with the monarchy. It was believed that the clock had been around for about 100 years when Jawahar was born. Maharaja Gulab Singh was Maharaja Hari Singh's father, the monarch who was responsible for Kashmir's accession to India in 1947. It is believed that the then ruling Maharaja had received three similar clocks from abroad and had gifted one to his friend. As Jawahar's grandfather was married into this family, the clock was further gifted to the respectable son-in-law as sons-in-law in India hold a place of special honour in the Indian family system. The family's own social status would not warrant such a royal gift. The clock is now with Kaul's younger brother in Jammu.

Apart from the old clock propped in the house, the family had no pretensions of high connections nor had it any active role to play in the socio-political upheavals of Kashmir. The family was also not a part of any major political exodus. In fact, the Kauls moved from Rainawari to Raghunath Mandir and subsequently to Banihal primarily in quest of occupation, driven by a need to earn to survive. Although their lands had so far been supplying sufficient quantities of Kashmiri nuts, dry fruits and other kinds of produce to meet domestic needs, yet not enough for other expenses. Banihal, a small hill town only about 110 kms from Srinagar on the way to Jammu and Pathankot was a natural choice as that was where one of Jawahar's uncles, his father's younger brother, had moved with his family and was running a Chemist shop.

The second child of Prithvinath Kaul and Prabhavati and their first son, Jawahar was born on July 28, 1942 at Rainawari. Jawahar Lal Kaul had two brothers and two sisters. Jawahar was born a normal child with his vision intact; like other children, he could see till he was nearly five years old when he fell prey to smallpox. The

family had already moved to Raghunath Mandir when Jawahar was afflicted with smallpox and the year was probably 1947. The Colonial State had little interest in the formulation and execution of programmes and policies in the social sector. Hardly any heed was paid to the disability sector for the most period of the colonial reign and work in this field was left to the missionaries and other charitable organizations. It was only towards the end of the Colonial Rule that the Government began its involvement in the disability sector. Yet, driven by the exigencies of the World War II, the British Government took two initiatives to pay heed to issues concerning the health and education of the blind people in India. These two **initiatives were: the establishment of St. Dunstan's Hostel for the War Blinded** in 1942 in Dehra Dun to rehabilitate the war blinded soldiers during the World War II (since re-christened as National Institute for Empowerment of Persons with Visual Disabilities) and, the setting up of the Committee on Blindness in 1943 in India to identify causes of blindness. They were to suggest measures for the prevention of blindness and for the promotion of education of the blind. The Committee submitted its report in 1944 and came out **with its findings that "smallpox and Ophthalmia Neonatorum are the main diseases from which the loss of sight results."** 1

Smallpox has been the cause of a large percentage of visual disability in India as it has been witnessed among people born during the decades of the 1940s, the 1950s and the 1960s. The disease has been counted as one of the major causes for blindness in the Report: **"In smallpox, the eyes frequently become involved, and this could all be prevented by the rigorous enforcement of proper vaccination and re-vaccination... Good vaccination saves more eyes than all the eye hospitals put together."** The report also stated, **"It is deplorable that the rules and regulations with regard to efficient vaccination in**

infancy in India are not being universally enforced.”² Although vaccination for its prevention had made a big breakthrough universally, the State intervention in a systematic way had just begun in India around the time when Jawahar was born and it was not until the late 1960s that the vaccination programme came to be executed effectively. Ignorance, lack of education and a poor reach out of the Government’s awareness programmes relating to vaccination back in the 1940s had their toll on Jawahar too as his parents could not get him vaccinated against smallpox. At the age of five, he had lost his sight to smallpox.

Smallpox had snatched Jawahar’s sight and the catastrophe devastated the family. Seeped in irrational beliefs and superstitions, the Kaul family too believed that blindness was a curse for unknown sins and was a punishment for the deeds of earlier births. Prayers, rituals, penitence, offerings to appease gods are people’s way to deal with providential calamities. Jawahar’s family too did all of these very sincerely and with conviction. He was isolated and kept closed in a room for many days. In the Interview, Kaul commented, “This was a very common belief and even now it exists among many Hindu families; smallpox is considered to be a manifestation of Sheetla Mata (one of the Indian goddesses) and the person affected is kept separated and isolated. Since smallpox was regarded as the impact of the goddess, no unholy person could come in contact with the affected person. Only the pure and the holy would be permitted to be in the proximity of the patient. I too was kept isolated for 40 days. “When the forty days were over or on the fortieth day, there was a pooja (worship) arranged by the family at home and some prasad (Holy offering of food) was also prepared. Sometime in the afternoon, a woman appeared. While I had had no vision in my eyes so far, I suddenly began to see. Everybody was overjoyed. Lots of

people had come from the nearby locality and everybody was pleasantly surprised with the miracle that had taken place.” In the ‘Reminiscences’, Kaul narrated the incident somewhat poetically and dramatically. “Lo and behold! To the surprise and joy of everyone, my eye-sight appeared to have been restored. I could clearly see everything around me. I could even see a beautiful lady as a stranger moving around nearby. This continued for round three to four hours. People thronged from all around to witness this miracle. Shouts glorifying Shetla Mata rung loud in the air. It was indeed proclaimed to be a unique event.”



Bottom line (left to right): J.L. kaul, Surender Kr. Kaul (brother) and Rajkumari Kaul (eldest sister)

Upper line (left to right): R.N. Kaul (uncle), Tota Kaul (grandfather), P.N. Kaul (father) and D.N. Kaul (uncle)

Standing line (left to right): Sushila Rani (aunt), Gunwati (Bua), *Sanmali (father's Bua), Prabhawati (mother), Saubhagya Rani (chachi)*

"But alas! Everything grew dark again by the time the afternoon was over. That beautiful woman was no longer visible. A deep darkness shrouded my eyes, disillusionment gripped my family members. **'There must be an evil person in the room, that is why the 'Devi'(Goddess) has got angry', people were heard murmuring'**". 3

To the rational and logical minds, this belief seemed incredulous. There were also doubts regarding the credibility that could be accorded to the memories retained at the age of five. But Kaul was very sure of the miraculous restoration of his vision. He **claimed, "It is not something based on my memory alone;** it is something based on confirmed news. My restored vision stayed with me for nearly three hours. As soon as that woman left, I lost my **sight again"**. Kaul also had an **explanation for this, "My parents used to say that perhaps some impure person had arrived there. The annoyed goddess therefore, left the place in rage."** Although Kaul added that he did not know how true this interpretation was; he had absolutely no doubt about the temporary restoration of his sight. However, he concluded his experience stating: **"To be honest, till date I have not been able to understand how this had happened"**, but he was sure that it had happened. Kaul also added, though somewhat hesitantly, another explanation for this traumatic loss which his mother strongly believed in. It seems she repeatedly expressed her **belief that the loss of her son's eyesight was the result of a curse from a close family member who had been insulted and humiliated in the house earlier at the time of his yagyopaveet (enunciation) ritual.**

In the small community of any parochial society, an unknown person is immediately noticeable and causes curiosity. This woman was a stranger to all: the family and the neighbours. This is what led to the presumption of everyone present there that she had to be the goddess herself who had mercifully come down amongst them; but

perhaps a vicious, impure presence had led to her return. If such was the wish of the goddess, who could dare to meddle with what was ordained! It has been seen that resignation to fate makes human efforts meaningless. Nobody thought of medical intervention as they either did not possess awareness about it or were too deeply steeped in their superstitions to think beyond it. As smallpox had hit him fiercely, Jawahar not only lost his eye sight but was also left with smallpox marks over his face and body. Jawahar did not allude to this during the Interview, but he wrote about it in his autobiography, *Reminiscences*: “**Later I heard [some of] my family members saying that I should have been vaccinated for smallpox. It was a mistake which would have lifelong consequences.**” 4

Though the impact of smallpox was very strong and it had made him blind, it did not leave too many scars on his face. The family was shocked at this sudden misfortune, their five-year-old son had gone blind. A blind boy had no future; there was neither any awareness, nor any resources. Totally shattered and disturbed, they resigned themselves to their fate. Schooling did not begin for children till they were six years old in those days. Therefore, child Jawahar did not go to a school at all before he lost his sight and going to the school after the tragic loss of his eyesight; the question did not arise.

Though it may sound rather surprising, transition from sight to sightlessness was not very traumatic as Kaul recalls now. It did not throw him into restless, violent and aggressive behaviour as it often happens in deep frustration. In fact, as a child his capability to adjust to circumstances was greater. As the school life had not yet begun **in any case, Jawahar’s daily routine remained unaltered.** There were no great changes in his life. He was well taken care of by his siblings who would take him along wherever they went. The parental care

increased to the extent of extra attention which probably made up for what was lost. He believed that he had become a highly pampered child, “My grandfather, especially, used to love me and pamper me a lot. Even my mother pampered me with her love and care. That was very natural. If an organ of our body is relatively weak, we have a natural tendency to protect it or care for it more. In fact, a family manifests its attitude towards a disabled child in two opposite ways: either the family becomes overprotective or is detached, apathetic and bitter. I think, in my family they were overprotective towards me.”

Jawahar’s family did not think, comprehend or plan about his future. The only effort to train him into anything at all was to teach him music. In fact, the family was resigned to the stereotypical belief that blindness incapacitated a person totally, forced him into complete dependency and denied him a life that could be considered fruitful. In this situation, the family arrived at a presumed conclusion that the boy would have to be cared for throughout his life as all paths to progress were blocked. Child Jawahar fell sick again; hit by typhoid, he was confined to bed for nearly six months. The desperate family depended more on fakirs (mendicants) and saints who used to visit the Kaul home to advise his mother. Whether he got cured by the oral medication of the mendicants or not is another story, but they certainly gave to his mother, consolatory stories about his past life. Kaul mentions, “Most of them said that I was involved in a big tapasaya (deep meditation) and that I had been removed from my base of tapasaya. So, they told my mother not to be bothered much when they saw me crying because of my illness. The fakirs and saints were really respected in those days. And those fakirs and saints also used to say that my future is very bright. Even though the fakirs and the saints were highly

respected, it was hard for anyone to believe that my future was going **to be bright.**” The saintly forecasts are usually oracles but it was hard for his family to believe that his sightless future could be bright. The family was unable to pin their faith to the prophecies. There was no access to education in those days, no special schools and, even if there were some rare ones, the comparatively isolated family with limited resources was not aware of these. So, this led to a major change in the attitude of the family members towards Jawahar. They resigned themselves to the fact that he would always stay at home and that caring for him and protecting him was now a lifelong obligation. This resulted in another rather practical decision to focus on and prioritize the education of the other children as money spent on them would be more beneficial. After all, life also had to be assessed on ground realities. Jawahar was growing up fast with no recourse and purpose in view and with a history of futility and social marginalization that had been the fate of the blind people. The dotting parents looked for traditional alternatives that were available **to the blind as occupation.** “During the 1940s, the blind people had only three choices for their career, i.e., to be a musician, a Vedic preacher and a chair caner.”⁵ **It is believed even now that the blind** are good singers and musicians. Deprived of sight, they are blessed with a good voice and understanding for music. Music is a field that does not require vision. However, it is simply a stereotypical belief that deprived of sight, the blind are compensated with extra sensory powers of a good sense of music and a good voice. Therefore, the **only option for a career that Jawahar’s parents could think of** was to make him learn music. This way they could keep the child occupied. They found a musician who used to sing in the local Gurudwara. Gurudwaras, the religious places of worship of the Sikh community, are known for highly melodious and soulful rendering of religious hymns by trained singers, the ragis (singers of devotional

music). Jawahar was sent to the bhajji (the respected Gurudwara cleric who looks after the Holy Book) regularly to learn music, but he had no desire to do so. Jawahar was not then mature enough to either know or to resent the pigeon-holed connection between blindness and music that the society chose to believe in. He was too young for that. He simply did not like music and had no aptitude for it. He was, in fact, challenging the myth of this correlation. Music, consequently, could not become the source of his future livelihood of **Jawahar's two uncles, the chachas (father's younger brothers)**, Durga Nath Kaul worked in Amritsar, Punjab, and had his family there. In fact, his father, Prithvinath Kaul, too worked in Amritsar for some time. The other chacha, Raghunath Kaul, was a compounder by profession and had his shop in Banihal. Deeply respected for his knowledge of medicines that he had acquired over years; he was almost a doctor for the local people and his shop had become popular far and wide. It was him who invited his elder brother, Prithvi, to join him in his business and this is how the family moved from Srinagar to Banihal. Always a joint family, here too, the two families lived together for many years. The two sisters-in-law ran a kitchen together happily and the children did not discriminate between the two sets of parents. Jawahar said in an interview that they hardly knew who their biological parents were. The stay in Banihal was a happy one where he spent his early years after losing his sight and returned to, whenever he came back from his school in Amritsar. An almost idyllic world: quiet, peaceful and without anxieties; a good example of Indian joint family system. The joint family broke up finally in the 1990s when perhaps the younger generation grew out, spread its wings and looked at such collaborations with less emotions and tolerance.

However, unlike many families which sent their blind children

out to beg for money and exploited their blindness as a convenient asset and tool to get more sympathy and alms, Jawahar's family showered extra love on him and pampered him with special place in the family. His family was not rich and resourceful and could barely manage to meet its requirements; yet it adopted the approach that usually families with resources could adopt towards their blind offspring. "The parents would rather keep their sightless children at home in the state of idleness and ignorance than send them to some blind institution in order to learn some art or industry; and this is explained as nothing but a natural exhibition of the overwhelming parental affection for their helpless sons and daughters" 6 They considered it "simply unnecessary and troublesome for their blind children to receive education. For, as they have not to earn a living for themselves, why should they be burdened with work when they are already stricken by the hand of Providence?" 7

Although the State and the society had started taking note of the need to address the issues of rehabilitation and education of the blind around this time, people were either ignorant of the possibilities that were opening up and the dedicated institutions that were coming up in the country for the education or some form of welfare of the blind or preferred to keep them at home in a state of idleness and ignorance in their own care in the environment of the familial familiarity. Back at the rather cut off Banihal and with its own limited awareness, Kaul's family was most likely unaware of the possibilities that the world was trying to open up for blind children medically as well as socially. They did, in their limited way, what they thought would be good for their child.

Chapter 2

The Beginning of Jawahar's Education

The Amritsar Days

‘The advanced countries have recognised that a blind child has a right to his education and, therefore, his maintenance in a school for the blind is conducted in an honourable way-- his school or college is not classed as a charitable institution. In other advanced countries schools for the blind are under the category of educational institutions, but in our country, they are under the head of **charitable institutions.**’¹ Halder is here talking about the status of educational institutions for the blind in the 1940s.

In India, the early institutions for the blind were not so much educational avenues as they were homes for shelter and centres for **manual training.** They were symbols of the society's real or perceived sense of involvement with and duty for this peripheral social community that required to be looked after. Thus, the schools **for the blind did not figure on the State's responsibilities** for a very long time and were simply labelled as charitable institutions unlike the regular mainstream institutions run by the State. Historically, the approach towards disability has largely been dominated by religious thinking. In Hinduism, it was the theory of karma (actions of past lives) and, in Christianity, a belief in good deeds being the pathway to Heaven, that led to the charity-oriented approach. Even during the colonial rule in India, there was hardly any identifiable example to demonstrate the interest of the State in the development of services for the empowerment of the blind. There were, however, two measures that the colonial Government took during the last five years of its rule, namely, the preparation of the Report on Blindness by the Committee on Blindness in 1944 and the establishment of St.

Dunstan's Hostel for the war-blinded soldiers in 1943. 2 Work in the field of disability was left to associations, trusts, and charitable organizations, which at that time were guided by religious considerations, leading to a charity model.

According to the abovementioned report, prepared by the British Government in order to generate statistics regarding population of the blind in India in early 1942, there were 32 schools overall for the blind in the whole country - 19 of these 32 schools were controlled by societies specially formed for the purpose and five were run by Christian Missions. Evidently, the State played very little role in attending to its duty towards the blind citizens. The private societies were not funded by the State; therefore, they were dependent on donations and charity to meet the expenses of the institutions. 3

The Amritsar Blind School, formally known as the 'Institute for the Blind', and informally called by the generic name 'Blind School' or Amritsar's 'Andh Vidyalaya', a name given to all such schools that house blind boys and girls, was established in 1923. By 1942, when the Survey and the Report were published, it had a strength of 63 on roll out of which 3 were adults. It was one of the 32 schools mentioned in the Survey and was run by a private society constituted for the purpose and funded and supported by the affluent business class people of Amritsar. The Amritsar 'Blind School', like most other schools, depended on charity and donations for its finances. There were no official channels of financial aid and the Government had yet to wake up to its social responsibility towards the handicapped. There was no concept of grant-in-aid and therefore, for the running of such altruistic institutions, dependence on donations was the only way out. The idea of charity may not necessarily be a selfless sentiment. It emanates sometimes from a

sense of self satisfaction and pleasure of social eminence and from a tag of being kind and charitable. One is also earning punnya (sanctification) for one's future lives by performing one's dharma (moral duty). Kaul, however, disagreed with our view that charity might be a cover for narrow self-interests or commercial gains. He asserted that it was actually founded with the intention of charity.

'The Institute for the Blind' was not the first institute in the region. The first school for the blind was established in Amritsar, Punjab, in 1887 by an Irish Christian missionary, Annie Sharp. Following this, a competition started within various religious bodies to open schools for the blind - within a span of two decades, almost a dozen schools were opened in various leading cities of the country including Mumbai, Kolkata and Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu. They provided boarding and lodging and were called **'residential schools for the blind'**. Annie Sharp later moved her school to Dehradun in 1903 due to its healthier climate.

In the late 1940s, **'The Institute for the Blind'** was one of the earliest in Northern India for the education and training of blind boys exclusively, besides the **'Sharp Memorial School'** for girls. As inclusive education as an approach and strategy had not yet been considered a choice by then, these were the only institutions available to the blind. Such residential institutions had just about started coming up and were therefore not yet widely known to the public.

The Kaul family sent Jawahar to Amritsar for school education when he was about eight years old or a little older. In Banihal, where **Jawahar's family was located when he was ready to join the school**, the existence of these special schools or centres may have been unheard of. It was **Jawahar's sheer good fortune that his father's younger brother, Dwarka Nath Kaul, was working with the**

railways in Amritsar and stayed there with his family. Although Jawahar's father had also worked in Amritsar for some years, it was Dwarka Nath who introduced the Institute to the family and prepared ground for Jawahar to be sent there. It was not an effortless task to persuade the family that had already given up on any positive channels of growth for the young boy. The uncle did his best to convince the family that this was the only sensible course for Jawahar's future. While narrating this incident, Jawahar's cousin, Promila said, "My father even fought with our grandfather on this issue as most of the members of the family were not in favour of sending him to the school. Dadaji said, 'We have enough food for him and he doesn't have to go away from us'".⁴ Using all kinds of emotional and rational arguments including threats and boycotts, Promila's father reminded the family that later in life, when the parents would not be there to support him, Jawahar would have no one to take care of him and he would end up becoming a beggar. He finally succeeded in convincing the decision makers of the family to send him to Amritsar by assuring them that he and his family would look after him in Amritsar. As expected, his mother could not reconcile herself to send the boy to live without her personal care. She was extremely reluctant to do so and needed a lot of persuasion to agree. "Initially, my mother resisted sending me there. She said what would the people say about me sending my blind child away and then how would I live without him. It is a similar situation for parents of blind children even today. Even now, when you go and ask the parents of a blind child to send their child to special school, they always resist strongly. So, the same kind of negative attitude that prevails now regarding sending a blind child to a special school existed those days also." Finally, Jawahar, the eight-year-old boy with almost no vision in his eyes, left for the special school in Amritsar accompanied by his father and mother to begin a new life

for himself.

Jawahar's leaving home, family and his surroundings was a jolt not only for those left behind, but also for him as he had to adjust in a completely unfamiliar environment with unknown people **without the nurturing hands of his parents**. Jawahar's early days at the school were not pleasant ones as he was terribly homesick.

There were many other reasons which added to his unease. The child who had never travelled beyond Banihal knew no language other than Kashmiri. He was now with people who spoke Hindi, Urdu or Punjabi: languages that were alien to him. Besides, most of the fellow students at the school were much older than him - many of them being twelve or thirteen in age; they had matured considerably and had already entered their teens. Jawahar was just a child for whom age gap and language were barriers that added to his loneliness and isolation. He would often cry when alone. However, his uncle would bring him home over the weekends and the **affection received at his uncle's home made him cope with his new life**. These were great moments of solace that compensated for the unhappy experiences of the school.

With the passing of time, Jawahar began to settle down and got used to the routine of the school. He even began to enjoy it as he became more confident and empowered and started displaying leadership qualities.

The Institute for the Blind (Andh Vidyalaya, Amritsar)

Kaul's descriptions regarding the structure and the routine followed at the school were rather generalized and cursory. He had limited memory of those days. To fill the gaps and to complete the picture **which had a lot of historical significance**, Prof. Ved Prakash Varma's Autobiography '*Ek Yatra Smrition Ki*' 5 came in handy. Verma,

visually impaired like Kaul, had joined the same school, although some years earlier. There were some common years when they were both together at the school.



from left to right: Mrs. Sarla Kaul (younger sister), Mrs. Rajkumari Kaul (the eldest sister) and Mrs. Prabhawati Kaul (the mother of J.L. Kaul)

“Our School was situated between Lohagarh and Durgayana Temple. After some time of my stay there, I learnt that near to the school building was a cremation ground from where the foul smell of burning flesh would waft in. I have always noted with deep pain that most of the blind schools have been established in such dirty places only places where respectable people do not like to live. This goes on to prove what value the blind children have in the society’s outlook. Although the environment was not good, yet on the whole our School could be considered, somewhat, all right. The school building was large enough and had good arrangement for children’s stay, their studies, eating and drinking, toilet facilities and

other daily routines. There was a well inside the school that catered to the water requirements of the school. One can say that, from this point of view, all of us, the children, were on the whole happy at the school” 6 Coincidentally or as a significant fact, the ‘Blind School’ to which Dr Jagdish Chander (co-writer) went and which was the oldest school of Delhi known as the ‘Andh Maha Vidyalaya’, was also located on a graveyard. Likewise, the BRA, the ‘Blind Relief Association’, which runs many projects on its premises, including the Jormal Periwal Memorial School, was located at a sparsely inhabited place on the outskirts of the town, next to a Muslim graveyard in the 1960s. The city expanded, and the BRA is now next to the prestigious Oberoi Hotel, which is considered a posh location.

Jawahar had joined the school during the last few years when Varma was still at the school. The experiences of the two students at the school were, however, different. Contrary to the view that Varma held about the School, Kaul said, “As far as the atmosphere at the school was concerned, it wasn’t really good. --- Even now 75% of the schools are still continuing to exist in the same kind of environment. There was a lack of hygiene and the toilets used to be dirty. Even now they remain dirty in most such schools,” Kaul did not recall the cremation ground behind the school premises though he agreed with Varma’s view that the blind schools are often accorded spaces left out, rejected and isolated from the main city and this fact reflects painfully the prevalent mainstream social detachment from the disabled.

Those days, the school had about 60 boys on roll (the school has almost the same strength even now, according to Kaul). The rooms at the school were of varying sizes but had, on an average, a strength of 7 to 8 students residing in each room. Jawahar was particularly

fortunate in this matter, as he was made to share a room with one of the teachers and hence escaped such crowded accommodations. It might have been due to his relatively young age or because he was a clean and presentable young boy, along with being an outstanding student. The only other student who shared this accommodation was Ved Prakash Varma.

The school followed a proper system of education and the boys were promoted from one class to another. The school offered languages like Sanskrit and Hindi and other subjects like History.

The School Routine with a Heavy Dose of Religion

The students had to follow a set routine, which made getting up at six in the morning mandatory. They, then, had to get ready and join the school prayers, which were also mandatory. As expected, there was a heavy dose of religious activities, mantras, prayers and havans. Religion is, in any case, completely intertwined with the daily routine in Indian life and more so with the education of children, **for religion is believed to be the source of all life's ethical behaviour** and good habits. It becomes all the more essential for the disabled because it is believed that they must have transgressed in the earlier lives and their blindness is the punishment for their sins. They, therefore, need a heavy quota of religious practices. There would be sandhya and prayers in the morning. The breakfast that would follow and all other meals would be preceded by the recitation of mantras. The boys had a shantipath or recited the gayatri mantra before their mid-day meal and other mantras as well, before all other meals. There would be havans on Sundays; the boys would be taught how to conduct havans. The books with mantras were made available in Braille for this purpose. Kaul remembered that though the school did not have any Muslim children, there were some Sikh boys. The school, however, stuck to Hindu scriptures and

propagated the same without hesitation. It is difficult to establish whether the school shut its doors on boys of other religions or that they themselves felt discouraged to approach the school for admissions. As the management of the school was in the hands of businessmen whose orientation was not just religious but strictly Hindu, it was possible that there was an anti-Muslim bias in the admissions. Another theory has been that perhaps this demographical composition of the school had to do, to some extent, with the process of partition as a significant Muslim population had already shifted to the other side of the borders.

The greatest achievement of the school was that it had a great library of Braille books. It was a rare achievement, as seldom did schools have such collections of books in Braille. The school had employed a transcriber who would be dedicatedly transcribing books into **Braille**. **“This was certainly a great thing to happen** because hardly anybody had thought of giving such a great importance to books in those days. Our School had a Braille copy of every book. Even if there was only one copy for 8 to 10 students, every book was **available in Braille.**” Kaul explained in detail, **“Some of the Braille** books we had were in the Bhartiya Braille which was a standard form of Braille developed in the post-independence period. But some of the books were in the traditional Braille called *syahi* Braille prevalent during the pre-independence period. It was not a part of the standard Braille. But the books written in this type of Braille were read in only specific parts of the country. The *syahi* Braille was, therefore, replaced with the standard Braille, the Bhartiya Braille. Now since the people had begun to learn the new Braille, the books written in the older form of Braille started to get redundant for those who were trained in the Bhartiya Braille only. So, I decided that to utilize the books in the older form of Braille,

we should transcribe them into the new standard Braille. I requested the Braille transcriber, who was an amiable gentleman, to lend me the braille typewriter so that I could transcribe the books into the newer form. He agreed. This is how I transcribed a few books into the new Indian Standard Braille to make them useful for the future generations. I even remember transcribing eleven Braille volumes of the Mahabharata with the help of a sighted volunteer because it was not available in the Braille form at that time. That copy in Braille is **still there in the school library.**” Kaul added, **“The current version of the Mahabharata that we have in our Braille press runs into fifty two Braille volumes but the one I transcribed in those days was only in eleven Braille volumes. The one that I am talking about which is in fifty-two Braille volumes is the one which has been prepared by the Geeta Press of Gorakhpur.”**

Everyday Meals and the Associated Indignities

The charitable schools for the blind are treated as places for the propagation of a doctrine of dharma and karma and for earning punya. Paradoxically, while on one hand, the disabled are believed to be penalized for their sins in earlier lives, on the other, it is **believed that serving and feeding them can wash away one’s own sins and help attain God’s forgiveness. Almost every day someone came to the school to distribute food or a little money. The children would await such visits and the day nobody turned up, they would be disappointed. The food that the school served simply consisted of the basic dal and roti, while the food that people brought was richer in quality and variety.**

Both Kaul and Verma speak with a great sense of humiliation and pain of a practice at the school which might have raised mixed feelings then, but which now, as adults, they find extremely repugnant. **“We would be made to walk by holding on to a long**

rope and, thus, parade us through the markets,” said Kaul, while Verma wrote, “The practice to take the children to feed on someone’s invitation was strange and indecent. A long and thick rope was used for the purpose. At the two ends would be two sighted employees who would hold the ends of the rope. Then the children would be divided into two parallel lines. The boys would hold the rope tightly from both the sides and walk in a line. Two or three more workers would walk besides, instructing them to walk straight. Seeing so many blind boys like this walking mechanically in a line, people would stare at us with curiosity from buses, cars and the pavements. Sometimes the kids of the sighted employees would tease us by shouting loudly, ‘Look, look! There goes the army of the blind (andhon ki Sena)’ 7 The authorities of the school compelled the boys to walk like this.

Every two or three days in a week, the boys would be sent thus to someone’s house for a feast on being called. This kind of feast was called in Punjabi, dhaama. The boys were informed about the next dhaama in advance. Sometimes, in homes where the boys were called, there was not enough space to sit. In that case, they were made to sit in rows in the street, which had dirty open drainage on the sides and where dogs too wandered around as men did. Whether one liked it or not, there was no choice. If one refused to accompany others, he would have to go without food. For the most part, these visits for food outside school used to be an excitement, but, sometimes, they also had to put up with such unhealthy conditions. It was quite obvious that more than educating the boys, the authorities focused on the charity that came in the form of food and clothes. They were least bothered about its impact on the psychology of the children and the impression it would leave behind on the public.

In a candid response to our question, Kaul conceded that it was always attractive for them to receive money besides the food. Their families could never afford the luxury of pocket money; therefore, the boys waited expectantly that somebody would come to offer food and dakshina (a fee or gift to the brahmanas) too.

Kaul remembered how a lady used to take him to her house because he was not only blind but also a brahmin. She used to wash his feet and then bow down to touch his feet with her head. After that, she would feed him with kheer laced with pistachios and almonds. On top of that she would give him dakshina and then drop him at school. **“This would perhaps in her understanding help her to wash away her sins”, Kaul added.**

Undoubtedly, the selfish world of the sighted was using the blind innocent children for its own salvation. In a subtle way, it was exploiting the fragile, not yet developed, young minds to become, by habit, recipients and always remain recipients. This was child abuse in an indirect way. It tainted their minds and made them dependent. **“The worst impact of that culture is that you imbibe a value system of being a recipient all the time and you always keep expecting to gain something. --- It is very difficult to change the mindset later as it becomes part of one’s personality. You keep expecting to receive and you think this is your fundamental right. The greatest harm that these special schools have caused to their alumni is to give them the culture of always remaining recipients.”**

Donation of clothes that didn’t reach the boys

The school provided the boys with clothes; but of very poor quality. They were made out of cheap and coarse khaddar (plain cotton cloth). The boys had to wear the same set of clothes for three to four days in a week. A washerman in the school would then wash the

clothes. Interestingly, several times when the boys would be invited for food at people's houses, they would also get gifts of clothes. If the clothes were of good quality, they would be taken away from the boys by the staff. The clothes were, perhaps, appropriated by the staff for their own use. Although the boys felt cheated and unhappy, they could not raise voices against it as there was a great risk in fighting with the staff. The management would, in most instances, favour the staff in case of a conflict between the staff and the students. If a student was rusticated from the school, there was no system for redressal. The staff and the management were not accountable in any way and, therefore, no one dared to protest.

Chhatrasabha, the Student Union: A Collective Fight for Dignity

It seems that the boys were never comfortable with the rope assisted parade they were subjected to through the bazaars and streets of Amritsar to walk to and from the location where food would be served to them. The protest erupted finally through a student body formed by the inmates, named the '*Chhatra Sabha*'. The combined strength of the students, as a part of this Union, facilitated resistance to the practice. Although the management opposed this agitation vehemently, the boys refused to accept further humiliation of this kind. They did not succumb to any pressure, although they had to even go without food sometimes. The first victory came for the boys when the administration dropped the use of ropes and started sending the boys on tongas (horse-carts). This was relatively more respectful than the earlier method. The Chhatra Sabha eventually turned into a constructive student body that was engaged in conducting several activities, like organizing musical events, debates and other competitions. It also invited eminent personalities as guests to interact with the school students. An important role that

the Sabha played was to provide a platform to the students to develop their leadership skills.

Jawahar was certain that the boys did not have political or politics-related discussions in the school; but they did advocate for their rights and their dignity. They were able to take decisions collectively because they were united. It would not have been possible to do such a thing by an individual. The Sabha, unlike many rights conscious organizations, was a beneficial platform that was used both by the students and the authorities for running the Institution. The Sabha would be entrusted with the task of maintaining discipline at the school. If there was a case of stealing in the school, it used to be the responsibility of the President of the Sabha to find out the culprit and prescribe suitable punishment. While Jawahar never faced punishment this way, he had the opportunity to play the leader and award punishment to another defaulter. One of the boys, who was **known to be very shrewd and who had stolen another boy's pair of socks**, was punished by the Sabha with whipping with a baint (a cane).

A novel project that the Chhatra Sabha started was the opening of a small shop within the school. It was an essentially need based productive idea. As the students were not permitted to go out of the school unassisted, the idea developed that they should have a shop within the premises. Such a shop would enable them to make some profit that could go to the Chhatra Sabha. On one hand, the shop would serve the boys with the goods they needed, and on the other, it would give them some experience in managing a shop, a prospect likely to be useful later in life. The boy, (Kaul did not remember his name) who was chosen to run the shop, was totally blind; but had three qualities essential to run a shop: he was excellent with weights and measurements; was good in communication with people and

knew how to negotiate prices while purchasing stuff. As he came from a baniya family (baniyas are traditionally traders), he was considered capable for this work. The goods to be sold from the shop were loaded on two small shelves in the cupboard of his room. The articles in the shop were things of daily use for the boys like toothpaste, soaps, biscuits and candies: essentials that they needed for personal use, which they could now procure at their convenience. He would go with one of the peons to the market to purchase fresh supplies for the shop. The school administration, this way, absolved itself of the responsibility of arranging for escorts for boys to go to the market. The goods were sold at a price slightly higher than the market price, yet the idea was not to make profit. In fact, the small profit that was finally made also went to the Chhatra Sabha. Kaul recalled that this boy was relatively younger than him and that the shop was still functional when he left the school. However, it seems that the shop discontinued after that boy left the school.

The Sabha organized a Ramayana Paath every year, which was not possible unless the Organization that managed it made a sustained and organized effort.

Despite being a very active organization and a useful unit, the Chhatra Sabha was not an advocacy organization that would always entangle with the authorities for rights and reforms. Its primary aim was to enable the students to develop their talent in music, debates and other such activities. For a long time, the Sabha kept on organizing such creative programmes. However, when people form a collective group, it is natural that their thinking also acquires a collective power for collective gain. Rejecting the practice of walking through the streets holding on to ropes was one such collective gain. The Chhatra Sabha had the positions of a Chairperson and a Vice Chairperson and the process of election for

the positions or opportunities for leadership were some of the ways to acquire confidence and self-reliance for the boys.

Jawahar was in class 7 or 8 when the Chhatra Sabha was formed by his seniors. Later, he too got involved with it and remained one of its leaders till class 11. Although he continued to reside in the school premises even after joining a college for graduation, he was not active in the Sabha. Kaul recalled that being an office bearer in the Sabha had its advantages, as the school administration dealt with the office bearers of the Sabha slightly differently. They understood that the leaders had at their back the support of all the boys.

Love and Sexuality: Inhibitions and Repressions

Kaul openly and candidly spoke about the boys' obsession with sex. Rampant in all the same sex boarding institutions, the Blind School was also not free of socially unacceptable sexual misconduct and communication. Most of the boys, who were entering into adulthood, were certainly aware of the female presence too. There were no female students in the school, but the Superintendent of the school had a daughter who stayed on the Campus. Similarly, the Braille Transcriber, a sighted man, had a daughter who was almost as old as many of the boys. Often when caught and found guilty, the boys would be punished for their misdemeanours. Kaul recalled that their headmaster used to punish the guilty boys severely. He used to shout, 'murga bano' and make the boy sit with his head between his legs. He would then thrash him on his back with sticks. Kaul distinctly remembered hearing the headmaster say to a culprit, 'Hey stupid! Why don't you at least watch that you are not being observed during your act.'

The Braille Transcriber's daughter used to cook and bring vegetables for Jawahar when he did not have the food of his choice in the hostel on particular days. She was Jawahar's inspiration when he wrote a much-appreciated love letter later during his graduation days. Kaul

added, “Nowadays, mobile phones have made it much easier for boys and girls to interact. In those days, we did not have mobile phones. You will be surprised to know that many sighted girls learnt the Braille script to communicate with their blind boyfriends. If they wrote in Braille, their parents would not be able to access their secrets.”

The Teachers and Guides

Some of the teachers of the school used to stay on the campus, while some stayed outside. The three teachers who had contributed to the establishment of the school lived there. It was natural as they had spent all their lives in the school. Kaul remembered two of his teachers who were not residents there; the teacher who taught Sanskrit and Deep Chand, a new young faculty member. All the faculty members in those days were blind; only the blind came to teach the blind or one may say that the institutions chose to employ the blind. However, perhaps the selection of blind teachers was not due to a sentiment of benevolence on the part of the management, but due to the lack of choice, as hardly any sighted teacher would **have the training to teach such students. In fact, the formal teachers’** training programs for teachers, who would teach blind children were formulated during the late 1960s. As it is, one also needs to keep in mind the fact that there used to be a dearth of educated people those days. The blind teachers, who had been living on the school premises, had no opportunity to get married and have a family. They could not afford to live independently without any support system for cooking or for other daily chores. In fact, Mr Khandelwal, who joined the School as its Headmaster for some time, had also begun to reside in the school premises.

Another significant fact was that the three founding faculty members of the school had wives who were also blind and were

uneducated. Matrimony for the blind is a very sensitive issue, and it touches upon many socio-economic and psychological concerns, which would require detailed consideration at a later stage in the book. The children of the teachers were reasonably educated.

Talking about his teachers, Kaul said, “They were dedicated teachers and were sincerely concerned about the education of the students. However, the older teachers were strictly formal with the students and focused only on teaching. The teachers who joined later, the comparatively younger teachers, were relatively more comfortable and informal with us. In the class, there would be informal discussions, sometimes lasting till the end of the class, making the classes livelier.”

Of all the faculty members at the school, the most memorable person for Kaul was a gentleman called Madan Lal Khandelwal, who joined the school as its Headmaster in 1957. Jawahar must have been in class eight or nine then. A blind person holding an M.A. degree was a rarity then, unlike now when a fairly large number has succeeded in achieving Ph.D. degrees too. Mr Khandelwal brought some radical changes in the school as soon as he joined as its Head. He introduced the idea of a dining hall with proper tables and chairs, replacing the old and uncomfortable method of squatting on a taat (sackcloth) and eating. This was the first step in modernising life at the school. No transitional step is easy to achieve; Khandelwal too had to persist in his pressure on the unwilling Management to agree. For finances, he approached a Trust founded by the Jain community. The Trust agreed to fund the entire project and thus he **managed to bypass the Management’s reluctance to provide funds.**

Among some other radical moves made by Khandelwal was the provision of tape recorders for the boys to record their reading material. They could listen to it at their convenience rather than

completely depend upon human readers to read out for them. Most important of these revolutionary steps, which was till then perhaps hardly considered by the management of any special school for the blind in India, was the provision of typewriters. The boys could learn to type, thereby, making themselves independent by typing in print form. The provision for tape-recorders and typewriters was an expensive proposition in the 1960s. The use of such equipment was not considered an affordable and viable option for educational purposes for the school going blind children. However, there was a general excitement in the air and the boys, after so many years, were experiencing fresh approaches and new prospects. Jawahar started learning how to type, although there was no teacher to teach typing at the school. Khandelwal encouraged him to keep trying. Although he himself knew only the basics of typing, he was convinced that the blind could type efficiently. Typing helped Jawahar a lot later in life and finally enabled him to acquire the government job. As explained later, his performance at his job was entirely dependent on the skill of typing efficiently throughout his career. This was a skill that he had acquired through training and practice during his school and college days. Kaul provided an interesting reason rather **light heartedly for his keenness to learn typing.** “**This helped me** type out love letters myself and was, therefore, a big incentive for me. I might not have learnt typing if the incentive had not been **there.**”

Khandelwal's most challenging though rational act was to question the idea of havans (a fire ritual in Hinduism) at the school. A strong Arya Samaji Managing Committee could not tolerate a challenge to the practice of havans that form a fundamental ritual in Arya Samaj faith. According to their Arya Samaji understanding, the impurities of the environment are burnt and so are the ashudhies (impurities) of

life by burning pure ghee. **Khandelwal's plea was that if there was so much shortage of resources, what was the sense in wasting expensive ghee in rituals like havans.** Although this plea was not acceptable to the Management, Khandelwal succeeded once again in fighting with the authorities with his strong personality and firm convictions.

The ultimate turning point came and brought victory to the Management when Khandelwal had a love marriage with his **girlfriend Prem and she eloped with him.** The girl's parents filed a court case against him, alleging that he had seduced their daughter and had lured her into eloping with him. Whatever might have been **the court's verdict, the School Management could not tolerate such** an activity which they perceived as an immoral activity in the school and thus managed to kick him out. After all, it was a private institution run by the local businessmen at a time when things such as **an elopement were not socially acceptable.** Khandelwal's ouster was the biggest loss to the students and a setback to the school that could have grown into a modern developed institution.

Chapter 3

Higher Education

It is not difficult, nowadays, to find persons with visual disability who are graduates, postgraduates or even Ph.Ds. in their respective disciplines. One important policy decision that has made this possible is the provision of reservation for the persons with disabilities in the education system. As a result, many, with disability and especially visual disability, have been able to join colleges and universities to make a career for themselves. **“While there have been instances of some blind people managing to get decent jobs based on their merit, it is primarily through the provisions of reservation in educational institutions and employment that the bulk of them are now able to secure higher education and employment”**. The lives of the educated blind are now transformed: they are living with self-respect and dignity as a part of the mainstream to some extent.

But, in the 1960s of India, higher education was an aspiration and a not so easily attainable possibility for the blind. Till the end of the 1970s, the career options and infrastructural support available for the persons with disabilities were almost nil or negligible. The blind graduates were probably a handful. The 1931 census conducted by the Government did not even consider college education for the blind worthy of assessment. There were no candidates and no institutions for entrance in higher education catering to the blind; hence, there were neither any statistics nor any reports. Moreover, there was no official data compiled on them even as part of the overall population count of the country, i.e., the Census, which is conducted after every ten years.

It was only in the year 1981, the International Year of the Disabled

People (IYDP) that the Indian Government finally acknowledged the globally developed roadmap for the persons with disabilities. This was followed by many other initiatives of which the most important was the landmark Disability Rights Act first introduced in 1995 and later on, its refined and revised version, in 2016. According to the Department of Persons with Disabilities, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, the 2011 Census showed the total number of persons with disabilities at 2.68 crores or 2.21 % of the total population. Amongst the persons with disabilities, it is the visually impaired or the blind persons who constitute the majority.

The world over, the limitations perceived to be inherent in blindness had already been overcome and the gap between the sighted and the sightless had been bridged to some extent, but in India, offering even school education to the blind was a challenge. There were various factors such as, the complete apathy of the Government on this issue, the biased social attitude and the lack of economic and other developmental facilities available for the disabled

Jawahar joined a college in 1963 to study for his graduation. His decision to join an undergraduate course in a college in Amritsar had its own background. In the 1960s and the 1970s, there was no reservation for the disabled in educational institutions. Moreover, getting a teaching post after completing his higher education would not be easy. At the most, one could aspire to be a school teacher, but the opportunities to be a school teacher in the mainstream schools were also not available. One could think of becoming a teacher in a special school for the blind if there were any vacancies. Such vacancies would only arise when death created one! With a rather wry sense of **humour**, **Kaul** commented, “**People would keep**

a tab on how many teachers were old and thus likely to vacate seats for others.”

The boys at the school were always discussing career possibilities for themselves after they finished their schooling. The prevalent options were confined to chair-caning or weaving charpoys. A blind person could be a music teacher and for the intellectually gifted, there was teaching; but that too in a blind school if a vacancy arose. There was no incentive and encouragement for Jawahar to go in for higher education.

Against these roadblocks that stared at him was the fact that Jawahar was deeply interested in studies and had proved his calibre as a scholar. At school, he had already demonstrated intense aptitude for studies and his teachers were impressed by his results. Diligence, persistence and hard work were his qualities from the beginning. Using the Braille books consistently, transcribing them whenever he got time, studying till late into nights and learning and memorizing his texts till he achieved perfection: all had made him a suitable candidate for higher education. Jawahar had already expressed as a child that he had little interest in music, therefore, he would be least inclined to accept music as a profession. At the same time, with the strength of his potential and diligence, he could not confine himself to the traditional manual tasks as caning and weaving. The arrival of his new Headmaster, Mr Khandelwal, had infused in him a new enthusiasm and optimism. He was one of the few and, perhaps, the first one of Mr Khandelwal's pupils, who got inspired by him to learn to type through slow and steady struggle on the typewriters. “Typewriters came, but there were no instructors to teach typing to blind students. But this did not deter my motivation to become independent by learning how to type. Some volunteers who used to regularly visit the school came handy

and with their help, I started learning both Hindi and English typing **which I picked up rather fast.” 1**

Moving from school to college was a major transition both personally and socially. A blind candidate seeking admission into a college was rare, if not unheard of. While they all desired it, the boys knew that this path would not be an easy one. In the absence of reservation, admission to a higher education institution proved to be a difficult task. As Jawahar had scored quite well in his matriculation examination, admission in a college should have been smooth and easy. However, Jawahar was blind and the Principal of the college had a prejudiced mind against the blind about their abilities to cope with the complex pressures of higher education. His bias was further compounded by a single experience he had had with **Jawahar’s blind predecessor who had failed to clear his exams.** Therefore, Jawahar had to struggle really hard to convince the Principal to allow him admission in the College. This put tremendous pressure on him to succeed so that he could change the mindset against the entire community. It was important for Jawahar **“to highlight the difficult path the youth of my generation had to go through to even secure admission, let alone other facilities in the colleges.” 2**

The DAV College, affiliated with the Punjab University, one of the leading universities then, was at a distance of nearly three miles from **‘The Blind School’ where he continued to stay even after completing** his schooling. Jawahar walked the distance between the Hostel and the College and the minimal vision that he had in his eyes helped him to handle his walk. The Punjab University followed a four year undergraduate course in which the first two years were called **‘Standard College’ or Pre-University** and the latter two, **‘Graduation’**. Jawahar completed the Course between 1963 and

1967. He studied Philosophy, History and Sanskrit in the first two Pre-University years of his graduation.

Jawahar did not have many friends at the College to start with and was, therefore, rather lonely, unwanted and unabsorbed in the ethos of the College. The students, who were sighted, were inexperienced and unsure of the ways to approach a blind person amidst them. It was when Jawahar scored the highest marks in the very first test in the entire Arts group of 511 students in the eight sections of the College, that everything changed dramatically. Astonishing both the teachers and the students with his stupendous success, Jawahar changed the whole perception. He was suddenly noticed and became very popular and many of those people, who had stayed away from him, now began to get closer. The result of the first home test had a magical impact and the students who were initially anxious to interact with him and hesitant to approach him, now, sought ways to establish contact with him. Jawahar was inundated with the offers of support in all possible ways. The support came both in terms of financial help and in transportation to go for his regular tuitions. He got scant financial help from home. It was not more than five or ten rupees that he received in a month from home. Moreover, his government scholarship came to him only towards the end of an academic year. The exaltation from fellow students that he earned with his performance became very useful, as his new friends supported him in his days of want by lending him money, which he returned when he received his scholarship. His affluent friends stood him in good stead and helped him to survive through this tough period. His main expense was the payment he would make to the person who would read for him. Although his reader, Lal Chand, was a friend, he paid him for his services. Lal Chand came from a relatively poor family background. He used to work as a draftsman

and also pursued his studies. He himself survived through such small help.

Jawahar depended upon two basic methods for studies: he noted down important points from the lectures of his teachers and later returned to school to get reading sessions from Lal Chand. He would then put together the matter he received from the two sources and transcribed it in Braille. This was his primary source of gaining knowledge. There were hardly any facilities for recording those days. He would stay up till late in the night to read the material he had collected. Sometimes he retired for the night only at 2 or 3 am and had hardly a few hours of sleep. As was natural, such rigorous labour, sleepless nights and exhausting schedules had adverse impact on him. He was also abusing his health with stimulating tablets to avoid sleep. His health deteriorated and he got black spots on his body. He was working under a lot of pressure as he had to prove himself and his ability as a blind student in the world **of the sighted. He wanted to reverse people's pre conceived notions.**

Jawahar did not have the facility of contractions (a contraction is an abbreviated way of writing something in Braille) available to him in Hindi. Furthermore, he did not try to make his own contractions; he prepared all his notes in standard Hindi Braille, which must have made the process of noting much longer. In addition, he got some books converted into Braille by the School Braille writer. These were the books, which he needed badly and for which he made payments too.

When Kaul recorded his experiences in the '*Reminiscences*', he could introspect and assess the value that his educational journey holds in building up his personality. He could also discern and record the changes that time had brought in the lives of the blind in India. **"Such experiences may appear rather unbelievable, and at times even**

irrelevant considering the number of visually impaired persons studying in colleges and universities today. But it is precisely in this **relatively easier access that the meaning of my experiences rest.**" 3

Jawahar achieved a milestone when he typed his answers himself in both Hindi and English for his first quarter examination. He had already been typing his assignments and now a visually impaired Jawahar surprised the whole College with this unbelievable feat. The University had no precedents probably where the blind would type their own exam papers, but a strong recommendation from the Principal of the College made the University permit him to do so. Kaul said in a matter-of-fact way, **"Perhaps I was the first blind student to have typed out exams myself in the entire country. --- When the results were declared, everyone was mystified and surprised. The person who got the first position out of a total of 511 students was a visually impaired young man and that too, someone who did not even use a writer."** **"This in my view, was an important step in re-defining visual impairment on my part. My blindness appeared to be an eye-opener for many sighted persons in the college. As praises were showered on me, I felt as if the image of blindness itself underwent a transformation."** Kaul's unambiguous comment on the astonishing success of a blind person in the world of the sighted established that sightlessness was not an obstruction in achieving success. It also counteracted the self-defeating attitude the disabled generally adopted to justify their diffidence.

Jawahar had his share of difficulties and anxieties, more so as the systems were not in place. During his Philosophy exam, his typewriter, although new, stopped functioning just before the exam started. The mechanic was called and it was repaired but the repairing cut into an hour of the exam time. Jawahar was granted an extra hour by the Superintendent to make up for the time loss. However, the day being a special Hindu festival made the insensitive

Invigilator extra anxious to get his task over and be relieved from the Centre. Therefore, he kept reminding Jawahar to be quick and pestered him every now and then to finish writing. This further added stress to an already tensed examinee and his concentration was affected badly. He submitted the answer even before the actual submission time. **Jawahar's over all result was affected; although a topper of Sanskrit, the Philosophy result brought the aggregate down to less than 60%.**

“Now, it was my turn to prove myself. The stress on me was rather strong. I was troubled with the worry that if I did not perform well, then the Head of Department, my teacher, would lose faith in me. The negative attitude of the Principal also weighed heavily on me. So, I studied hard and tried my best not to belie the expectations of my teachers. As the quarterly and half yearly examinations went by, the tally of my successes continued to grow.” 4

Jawahar's performance opened many doors to him particularly for social inclusion. There was a dent in the Principal's bias and resentment; he began to accept him though even now half-heartedly. There were many who received him with warmth and respect. He was looked upon as exemplary on the College campus. He began to make friends.

Although meritorious and an outstanding performer throughout, even at the University level, Jawahar had an equally hard and uphill struggle awaiting him when the time came for the selection of the subject for Honours at the third-year level. Jawahar wanted to study Sanskrit for his Honours; but as the Head of the Sanskrit Department predicted, his principal refused to allow him to study the subject. The Head of the Department said, “If you want to opt for Sanskrit, I will support you, but I don't know if the principal will agree.”



J.L. Kaul was the first blind student using typewriter in university examination

The reason for the refusal given by the principal may sound absurd today, but in the light of the prevalent bias in the 1960s, it was not unexpected. As there was only one candidate for Sanskrit, the

Principal surmised that if that one student failed, the College would have a 100% ratio of failure, which would certainly affect the success ratio of the College. It was obvious that he still lacked faith in the capabilities of a blind person. He was of the view that Jawahar could be the only student in the Sanskrit class and would have no peer support. He also feared that Jawahar's grades could slip down as Sanskrit was a difficult subject for the visually impaired. His fears did not seem to be without prejudices. "He still lacked confidence in my performance". Jawahar's disability was a hurdle. Though not entirely wrong and also somewhat practical, the Principal simply represented the beliefs of a fully conditioned mindset regarding the capabilities of a blind student.

The real assertion of faith was manifested by Jawahar's teacher who was also the Head of the Sanskrit Department. He argued vehemently with the Principal in Jawahar's favour and offered, that if Jawahar failed, he would not demand any salary for those two years. He knew very well about Jawahar's capabilities. He came forward to speak for him and firmly stood by his side till such time, that he graduated with success. "This was a huge statement indicating immense faith in the capacities of a visually impaired student." 5

It was because of his insistence, that Jawahar finally succeeded in getting the subject of his choice. And when finally, Jawahar topped the University in Sanskrit Honours, it was established how well placed was the teacher's confidence in the capability of his student! An extremely happy and overwhelmed Principal embraced Jawahar when the result was announced. Although both the student and the teacher were expecting a good result, no one could imagine the extent of the good result. Jawahar had got the highest position in Sanskrit Honours in the entire Punjab University, one of the biggest

universities of the region. “The joy of our college knew no bounds when the results of the Punjab University for the academic year 1966-67 were announced. The students of this college had secured gold medals, that is the top positions in the University in as many as three subjects: History, Mathematics and Sanskrit. What was most surprising for the most was the fact, that the student who had secured the gold medal in Sanskrit Honours and thus had brought laurels for the college, was none other than a visually impaired student - Jawahar Lal Kaul. In extreme rapture, the Head of the Sanskrit Department hugged me and kissed my forehead. The Principal called us to his office, thumped my back and said, ‘I am sorry I did not recognise your talent. I am grateful to the Head of the Department, who had faith in you, resulting in the crowning glory for our college.’”⁶

Sanskrit was considered a difficult subject and because it did not provide much opening in the job market, it attracted very few candidates. The popularity of a discipline depends on its commercial value. This was why, perhaps Jawahar’s College also did not have any other student offering Sanskrit. Interestingly, these days, a number of blind students opt for Sanskrit as their main subject for higher studies.

During an interview when Kaul was asked to narrate some interesting incident from his college days, he recalled that he was once asked to write something for the College magazine. He wrote a love letter that was published along with his photograph. The fact that the letter was written by a blind person made him very popular in the College. Kaul was elusive in his reply when asked whether the letter was meant for a real person or was a result of his imagination. He tried to explain, that though the letter was addressed to someone, it might be considered a product of his imagination and perhaps

would not have been read by the person to whom it was addressed, as she was not associated with the College. This brought up another question whether the College also had girl students. It was a co-ed college. Interestingly, this is why another blind boy named Rajkumar Lamba was often found in the College canteen. Lamba had rather flamboyant tastes and he always visited the College canteen in order to socialize with girls. He was not good in studies; he visited the college only to spend time in the canteen.

Socializing for Jawahar was a luxury for various reasons. As he was always short of money, he rarely visited the canteen. He did not want to take favours as he could not return them. Nurturing friendships for fun was also a big waste of time, which his long and laborious hours of studies did not permit. Extremely self-respecting, Jawahar did not want to exploit his blindness for easy benefits and humiliating charities. Some of his friends took him to their homes to meet their families. As his friends had already put in good words for him, he was received very well. He always left a good impression on his hosts. Recalling those days, Kaul mentioned the names of some of his friends. Vinod Gupta came from a rich family and lent **him money sometimes, but he wasn't a very intelligent student.** Jawahar not only received a lot of respect and care at his house from his family members but was also enquired about when he did not visit them. Nearly sixty years have passed since then, Vinod Gupta visits Kaul at his residence whenever he comes to Delhi. He also has a flat in Gujranwala town, Delhi, not very far from Kaul's **residence.**

Kaul told us about two other boys from those days: Lal Chand and Anil. He distinctly remembered, that he did not go to their homes in those days in Amritsar. Although Anil never came to his house in Delhi, Kaul visited Anil in Mumbai where he is now a successful **businessman and runs a big company.** Kaul's information about

Anil however, is nearly fifteen years old when he owned a company titled 'Isha'. He is not sure about Anil's present status. Anil came from a rich family and was a cricket player.

Kaul didn't keep in touch with his old friends. He was so fully dedicated to the Organization that he had little time for, what one may call, frivolous and time-consuming social interactions. Moreover, he didn't want to ask his friends to be associated with the Organization lest they carried the impression that he was basically begging for money for the Organization.

Kaul stated that Vinod Gupta, Lal Chand and Anil were his big support during his college days. While Lal Chand read for him, Anil contributed by offering him lifts in his car to his tuition classes. As a busy cricket player, he had no time to spare to read for Jawahar. Vinod Gupta occasionally read for Jawahar when he was in great need.

Kaul recalled some other school companions too. Prof. S L Talwar, who did his B.Ed. and then MA in Music and became a teacher in an Inter level School for mainstream sighted children, now lives in Noida with his son. Laxmi Dutt Sharma served as a teacher in a Government School in Lucknow, but who passed away recently. S C Khatiyar became the principal of a school in Indore and later lived in Lucknow for some time before his demise. Then there was Mr. Tej Singh Tak who completed his Ph.D. from the Banaras University and the Teachers' Training Programme from the Blind Relief Association. He made his career in music in Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. Basically, a violinist, he authored many books on music in Hindi language. Jawahar's friendships were, it seems, largely motivated by his needs. Most of his friends were providers and givers in some form or the other. Practical in attitude, consciously or unconsciously, Jawahar snuggled to persons who

would render him support, or rather turning over the premise, we may say that Jawahar did not seek friends; friends chose him either out of appreciation for his merits or out of empathy for his disability or further still, for wonder at the merits of a person with disability. It is indeed true that there were other blind candidates too for higher education, but the discipline chosen by most of them was music, reinforcing the connection between blindness and music.

It is not as if Jawahar was then the only visually impaired student pursuing higher education. But what was different about him was his grit and determination to compete and the resolve to break the myth that a blind person can only aspire to be a good musician or else a skilled cane or charpoy weaver.

Chapter 4

The Shattering of a Dream

Jawahar completed his graduation in 1967 with a gold medal for getting the highest position in Sanskrit Honours in Punjab University. Nearly 24 years in age, he had been treading the expected routine course in life. Now he was on the crossroads of various options and choices, many of them defined by the compulsions of his physical condition. Confusion and dilemma as to which road he should take left him deeply perplexed. The final goal was clear; he must get a job and earn. But now, the question was which occupation would make a job possible for him and further, what steps he should take to realize this target. One straight and expected path was to go for a post-graduation degree in Sanskrit, a subject in which he excelled. His family was, in those days, in Jammu, and the Jammu University had recently opened, and had made provision for an M. A. in Sanskrit. The family had asked him **to return, stay at home and pursue his Master's.** “**When I returned** to my hometown Jammu, everyone rejoiced because I had returned home after doing so well in my studies. The joy was all the more compounded because I was the first in my family who had achieved **the distinction of being a topper.**”¹ With his excellent performance in B.A., admission to this higher degree course would not be difficult. He was offered admission without any hitch and the University also promised to give him a scholarship to pursue his education. Although he took admission in the Jammu University and was, perhaps, the first student who would be studying for his M.A. in Sanskrit from that University, it did not make Jawahar very happy. He returned home and kept on contemplating regarding his future prospects. Being a practical person, he was constantly disturbed with the question, what would he do after his post-

graduation. “I kept thinking for a long time as to what was the utility of pursuing my master’s as there were hardly any employment opportunities.” He knew very well that academic positions, and those too in a subject like Sanskrit, were hard to come by. It was quite difficult to get a Lecturer’s post in colleges. Even today, the curiosity and astonishment on people’s faces is palpable when they hear about a visually impaired person’s appointment as a teacher. How will a blind person manage in a classroom?

The first provision for 3% reservation for the handicapped in the (C) and (D) categories of jobs in the Central Government, and public undertakings was made through an Executive Order on 4th November, 1977. But, the Act to reserve jobs for the handicapped was passed by the Indian Government much later in 1995. In the existing circumstances, it was rather occasionally that a teaching job came up in the schools for the blind when the earlier incumbent passed away. Therefore, Jawahar wondered what was the point in wasting two years in obtaining a degree which would not alter fundamentally anything in the possibilities of fetching a job. But then, if not post-graduation, what else should he be doing; there was no job in sight. With a prestigious degree in hand, he could not possibly be a chair caner or a music teacher for his livelihood. “I thought long and hard, but was not in a position to take a decision.”

“Choice and suitability of employment on account of education, talents and interests are mere dreams for most visually impaired even today. The scenario was much worse nearly fifty years ago.”²

In fact, Jawahar wasn’t prepared for further studies. To have the tag of a post-graduation degree to his name, mattered to him little. The urgency for a job hovered over his future course. “Ultimately, I would have to face the difficult battle of finding an appropriate job.”

³ In addition to the insecurity that Jawahar lived with because of his

physical and social conditions, staying at home was also generating acute psychological problems and conditions of depression and despair. **The family started talking about the marriage of Jawahar's younger brother.** They took it for granted that though older in age and hence a candidate for marriage first by the Indian traditions, a blind Jawahar was, understandably, not one to be considered. Nobody talked about his marriage. Although Jawahar realized that naturally, no one could think of his marriage, he was saddened by **the family's attitude. He understood that he was at a double disadvantage as he was not only blind but was also without an occupation: and this ground reality made him bitter and frustrated.** "I continued to be at home, but every day made me feel alienated from it. The feeling of being excluded even among my own kith and kin continued to increase resulting further in my rather overpowering depression."

While he was in Jammu, Jawahar's mother consulted an astrologer for a study of his horoscope and forecast for future. However, she pre-empted with information that Jawahar was a gold medallist from the Punjab University before the astrologer could begin his predictions. **The astrologer's job was made easy and the predictions became pleasant for his mother's ears.** "The goddess Saraswati is behind him. She is sitting on his back and he will really excel well in his academics." A sense of revolt against the astrologer's glib forecast and his concocted lies added to Jawahar's sharp urge to prove him wrong and not to touch the academics at all. Surely, this was not the primary cause for his turning away from studies; multiple factors worked in crystallising a process of thinking. The struggle to begin all over again in a new environment with new people and new challenges at the Jammu University demanded efforts which seemed futile.

Coincidentally, just then, a letter in braille arrived for Jawahar one day. As it was in braille, only he could read it. This was from Madanlal Khandelwal, the England returned Headmaster of the Amritsar Blind School, who had, after some significant reforms at the school, but with a scandalous elopement attached to his name, returned to England. Jawahar had a deep regard for him. In 1967, Khandelwal returned to Delhi with a desire to render services to the blind and started an organization called the ‘Training and *Rehabilitation Centre for the Blind*’, briefly called the TRCB. In the letter, he had sent an offer to Jawahar to join his Organization as Jawahar was his esteemed pupil. He explained that the Centre would meet Jawahar’s employment needs and the Centre would also benefit by his contribution. Jawahar was really excited. What could have been better than this; to get an offer for a job without having to make any effort! Yet, though the choices were difficult, Jawahar took little time to make up his mind and sent his acceptance to Khandelwal in a reply in braille. “The offer of a job was too luring to be refused and I decided to go to Delhi.”⁵ No one in Jawahar’s family had an inkling regarding this major decision that Jawahar had been hatching in his mind.

The biggest challenge now, was to slip out of the house with his belongings without the family members realizing that he had left. He knew that his family would oppose any such move and make it impossible for him to move out. “If I decided to go alone and perhaps in secret, then the question was how would that become possible and how would I carry from home even items of daily use?”

⁶ Although, Kaul could not recall the details of his almost insurmountable adventure, almost 50 years after the incident in 2018, he was able to recall that he had left home in secret with only two sets of clothes and with very little money to go to Delhi. He literally ran away from home in May, 1967. This was the end of the

first part of Jawahar's journey of life; the family ties were snapped and the bird had flown the nest.

Jawahar was to reach Lajpat Nagar in Delhi, where Khandelwal had rented a flat and set up the TRCB. "As I look back on those days, even today I am unable to share the difficulties with which I was able to reach Lajpat Nagar in Delhi." ⁷

Jawahar's admiration for his London returned Headmaster, Madan Lal Khandelwal, the representative of unexpected reform and modernization in the Blind School, was exemplary. Once again, he had returned from abroad with fresh ideas and a new enthusiasm. He was an extremely impractical idealist and made himself believe in the dream projects that he envisaged. Khandelwal, who had returned to India, with his savings that amounted to almost a lakh of rupees, wanted to create a centre where he could train the blind for entry into professions. He sincerely wanted to rehabilitate them with jobs and the possibilities to earn their livelihood. He knew that the only way to offer equality and respect to the blind in this world was to make them stand on their own feet financially. Now, he needed a reliable, honest, hardworking and educated young man who could be entrusted with the running of the Centre. This is how he shortlisted Jawahar, who according to him, could shoulder this responsibility well.

Khandelwal had rented a three-room flat in Dayanand Colony, near Lajpat Nagar. The flat, an office cum residence, was to be put to all the uses, personal and official for all the members associated with the Organization. "We used to live there, work there and sleep there."

With an invitation for a job from Khandelwal, Jawahar had not felt the need to ask him about the salary he would get. He believed he did not have to worry about salary or emoluments. He had immense

regard for him and then, in those days people who were foreign returned, and they were so few, were held in high esteem. Such persons were either great scholars, businessmen or were extremely affluent; every such person was a distinguished person. Jawahar was confident of a good position and good emoluments.

So, when Jawahar arrived in Delhi in the hot month of May, and met Khandelwal, the latter proposed, “Let us get the work started.” The problem was that no one knew what work to start with. “For quite a while, I was unable to figure out my precise role in this Centre.” Jawahar would clean the premises in the morning and had to perform the duties of the cook too, when the need arose. He would then go out and purchase the essentials for the house. During the day, he would write letters as directed. Disappointment and frustration started setting in soon and, “during moments of solitude, I sometimes wondered whether this was the kind of employment I wanted, if this was the kind of job, I was destined to do leaving bright prospects of studies?”⁹ Besides, Jawahar saw no scope of any salary coming his way for his services. He was slowly coming to the conclusion, that his hard work was to go futile in every way and that there would be no dividends for him from this job. He had left behind an enviable offer to pursue higher education and had opted for this job. It seemed so ironical that in the name of a job he was performing simple menial jobs and that too without any financial advantage. Although a desire to return home to his family began to haunt him, he did not have enough courage to face their derision.

Some idealists have the ability to assess how far their vision can withstand the blows of reality. They are idealists but also pragmatic in their thinking. Khandelwal, unfortunately, lacked pragmatism. He had returned to India with a significant amount of money with him. Though this was considered a substantial sum in those days, it was not a fortune by any means unless it got augmented with fresh

additions. He was ready to invest this money to run the Organization, but he was principally averse to seeking donations from any source. He expected that what the workers would learn and subsequently produce in the Organization, would bring them profits. He did not expect any profits or returns for himself from his initial investment; his investment was to be a pure selfless investment for the others like him. As in his own case, it would be an access without vision. He wanted to give them opportunities to learn a trade or craft to become self-sufficient. He was making this investment to make them financially independent. He actually believed that once the Organization took off and started functioning, they would begin to earn their livelihood. The initial idea that came to his mind was to transcribe books in Braille which **would be bought from the TRCB by the Lion's Club. In order to** provide jobs to the blind persons, he interviewed and selected 10 young men and women for his office for various small jobs. Some of the selected candidates were employed as chair caners, some others as craftsmen to make purses and still others to transcribe books into Braille. Most of the people were assigned some job or the other.

Jawahar was employed primarily to handle the correspondence. He was also supposed to see to the publicity of the work they were engaged in. Now, supervising the other office workers became his responsibility as well and he remained busy from morning till night. Cooking, cleaning, house-keeping; Jawahar was a multitasker who had to fit himself in all the vacant places of the Centre. All the persons who had been picked by Khandelwal resided at the Centre; the Centre functioned like a commune.

Although some articles started getting produced at the Centre, their sale, on which the success of the Project rested, became an issue. They could not find buyers, for example, for the purses they had

produced. Khandelwal ordered that they should hold the stocks. After some time, he came with the suggestion that he would sell the whole stock in London on enhanced prices. Unfortunately, they did not get sold in any market. He kept revising the prices upwards every two months without getting any buyers. In this manner, the items that the staff produced could not be sold and they remained dumped in the office.

For about three months, from May to August, the Centre continued to function in this manner; but by August, Khandelwal ran out of money. Till then, his wife, who was based in London and worked there, used to send a small amount of money from there. Now, she too stopped sending money as she probably realized how futile and **unrealistic her husband's dream project was. Money being over,** goods not selling and Khandelwal, still not ready for donations: matters came to a standstill. There was no money to pay the rent for the accommodation; as a result, the landlord asked them to leave or that he would get them evicted.

And then suddenly, there was a ray of hope. One Mr Jain, a businessman from the Jain community, who had constructed a huge **building called 'Ahimsa Bhawan' offered them free accommodation** in the building. Situated in the R Block of Rajendra Place in Delhi, **it had been recently constructed in 1967. "As he opened this huge building for our use and assured that he would not charge any rent either, we saw in him a real benefactor."**¹⁰ It was all very well in the beginning and all the 10 or 12 workers of the Centre had a roof over their heads; but soon this illusion shattered, at least for Jawahar. The spacious house added to his work. He had to sweep and maintain a **much bigger place than the previous one. "It was so huge that cleaning it every day became an uphill and painful task for me."**¹¹ The other jobs remained as they were: cooking when the cook was

not available, office work and the shopping for essentials. “At times, I would pray to God that I should get respite from this toil.” Whatever little money was there, was used in buying the basic provisions. Apart from this, free accommodation, there was no other support from anywhere. Some of the colleagues left the Centre as there was no occupation for them. Hardly a month had passed when the Jain owner of the building, fearing that the building might not get vacated ever, asked them to vacate it. He gave them a month’s notice to vacate the building.

Jawahar and the members of the Centre continued to occupy the place, “...where could we go with around a dozen visually impaired inmates? So, we persisted in our stay and battle tents were pitched on both sides.”¹² Harassment began through water and electricity disconnection. They had to procure water and manage without electricity supply. How long could they have survived in such a situation! It would have been impossible to continue, had they not have had an immediate alternative in sight. The situation got alleviated when another business person offered them some space in an acre of land, that he owned in the same block in which they presently lived. But here they had to put up tents for their stay and their activities. In the months of November and December in the Delhi cold, shifting to a completely unprotected and unconstructed space was no less than a nightmare. They appealed to the well-known Jain religious leader, Sushil Muni, revered in India and abroad for promoting ahimsa and humanism, who had come to visit them, to intervene on their behalf and let them continue to stay at Ahimsa Bhawan, but he conveyed his inability to help.

Finally, the helpless members of the TRCB packed their few belongings and moved into the tents in the vast open area which was primarily a pasture ground for the cows and buffalos to graze. “It

was the dead of winter, we continuously shivered as we struggled with cold and the stray cattle who used to come grazing there. At times, I felt as if we also, like those cows and buffaloes were left there **for grazing only.**" ¹³ There was a serious crisis facing them, sometimes they could not even afford two meals a day for themselves.

Jawahar had to manage with only two pairs of clothes. He would wear one set and wash the other for the next day. One day, a loitering cow munched away the clothes hanging outside. Now completely without a change of clothes, Jawahar sent a boy to his home in Jammu to fetch his clothes and certificates. He somehow put together some money, enough for his return journey. Although, the boy was able to collect from home a big trunk with the required clothes and certificates, he lost it on the way in **the train.** **"I badly needed clothes but they were gone with the trunk."** The boy brought back the bedding only. It was sheer irony that Jawahar had inadvertently opted for a life like this, sans food, clothes, shelter and money against a cosy stay with his family, well protected with food, care and other amenities and a degree from the Jammu University. He was very frustrated and he cursed himself for the blunder that he had made in his life. Now he did not dare return home, as he was sure his family members would be furious with him for having left home like he had, defiantly and secretly.

The person responsible for this state of affairs, Khandelwal, was also, no longer a happy person. In fact, he was a disturbed man suffering even more for the collapse of his dream project. He had come down from England to help the fellow disabled persons with the good intentions to rehabilitate them and to initiate a self-help movement to make the blind self-sustaining. He wanted to establish a very promising new model for his people, but his idealistic project did

not take into account the strong antipathy of the harsh realities around. Kaul concluded, **“Idealism is good in the books. It really sounds like a great idea, but it does not really give you bread.”**

The situation was out of control by now. Sometimes, they had food for only one meal and they had to stay hungry for the rest of the day. Khandelwal was very frustrated but had no money left with him. Finally, he left for London sometime in the month of January or February in 1968, leaving behind Jawahar to fend for himself and **his colleagues. “Burdened with our responsibilities and the realities** of his fast-shattering dreams and with visions of our bleak future, one day, leaving the entire responsibility on my fragile inexperienced shoulders, he flew back to London.¹⁴

Mr Khandelwal’s was a small individual experiment to support the visually disabled as the under privileged and the unattended by the State. Why did it not succeed despite the fact that it was an honestly-run effort? Khandelwal had a sizable amount of money, but unless **it would be a ‘sustained source of funding’, it could not last for long.** Moreover, he had totally overlooked the principles of production and consumption. His production was not generating any revenue and the only movement was in the form of consumption. Khandelwal was obviously quite stubborn and self-absorbed and was, therefore, not willing to concede that his plans were unrealistic. It seems that his working was also quite undemocratic and he believed in treading on his own road. Because of his half-baked ideas and unrealistic expectations, he caused more harm than good to his fellow blind persons. Kaul commented that Khandelwal could not transform his effort into an organized setup and develop the TRCB **into a platform for advocacy. “You could talk about advocating for rights if you had the place where you could get together and discuss common things. The people do not support you from outside unless you have some ground work to show to them.” “He used to brag a**

lot about his ideas. My differences with Khandelwalji were that he wanted to start everything on his own without support from others. Unless we consolidate our own services into a model, nobody will come to support us and it is not easy to run any service without **some support.**” Further elucidating his point, Kaul reminisced that Khandelwal wanted the blind community to live with dignity and to this end, he took his well-intentioned small steps; however, he was neither good at it nor did he have much clarity as to how he should act. He built his edifice on speculations and theories. He spoke on the philosophy of self-help and dignity, which was certainly a very progressive and advanced standpoint for the visually disabled then. But the problem was that he would not pay heed to the suggestions and corrective measures that came from Jawahar and the others. The example of the purses produced at the Centre which never got sold because of his neglect of the marketing requirements, exposed the gap between his intentions and the ground reality.

Khandelwal was a unique person who left an indelible mark on **Jawahar’s life. He willed his house to the ICB to be taken over after his wife would be no more to use it. He did not have children because he would say, “All the children of the world are my children. So, I don’t need my own biological children.”** Although he was accustomed to a comfortable living in London, he stayed **with the others in the tents. Kaul agreed, “Had he not invited me to come and take up the job, I would have continued with my higher education, completed my masters and perhaps would have got a job also in academics and lived a routine life.”**

Jawahar was on the crossroads once again; not leading but led by the circumstances that were not of his own making.

Chapter 5

Romance and Marriage

There is a popular belief in the Indian society that marriages are made in heaven and there is a life partner for everyone, fixed by the divine powers somewhere up there. If it is so, there is no doubt that God doubly disables the disabled and probably punishes them seriously for some unknown earlier sins, as only the very fortunate among them manage to find life partners and succeed in getting married. The vast majority is probably disqualified and there are no partners waiting for them. A large number of the blind persons, both male and female, spend their entire lives without finding their match. They live incomplete lives of loneliness and frustration. They learn early enough in their lives not to dream of sexual companionship, conjugality, a complete home with a spouse and children, the security and warmth of relationships and shared economy. Therefore, not only do the families, but also the blind resign themselves to the reality that their world is dark and bleak and that it can never be filled with the contentment of marriage. Paradoxically, although the society segregates and marginalizes human beings on the basis of their physical disabilities, it cannot **minimize the disabled's sexual urges. This may be assumed to be the ground reality.**

However, it does not mean that the blind people never enter into matrimony and that the doors of this mammoth social institution are totally barred for them. The possibility of matrimony depends on socio-economic factors. The families with money and position could negotiate for their blind children with poverty driven needy families. And in such cases, the matrimonial matches were arranged **usually with sighted persons. Kaul's friends, S. L. Talwar, Laxmi Dutt Sharma and Tej Singh Tak; all had sighted wives.** These friends

came from resourceful families that were well settled and could, therefore, negotiate with families that were financially weak. But it is also a fact that most of these sighted women were poorly educated. However, such arrangements and negotiations are made only for the male blind persons. It is certainly more challenging to find a husband for a blind girl. Gender disparities persist here too; the dominant factor in this transaction is the male partner. It is taken for granted that a female blind child would now spend her entire life in her parental home under the protection of her parents till they are alive and later, on the mercy of their kith and kin. There are instances of love marriages between two blind persons, but not so often between a blind and the other a sighted partner. It may be so more often due to the lack of opportunities to meet at common get-togethers and occasions or because of an inhibitive social stance that suspects love marriages to be examples of individual defiance. There are greater instances of love marriages taking place between a blind man and sighted woman but instances of such marriages were relatively fewer during the 1960s. When such marriages took place, class and gender played major roles (which are great determinants even today and all the more during those days of the conservative era of the 1960s.)

Marriages that take place occasionally, with sighted partners, are the result of high idealism on the part of the sighted person and of deep appreciation for the merits of the blind partner. Once in a while, such relationships have taken the society by surprise and also addressed the issue in a more positive way. One such case is the marriage of Dr. Ved Prakash Varma who met his highly educated and professionally well-settled wife through an advertisement. From their first meeting, it was a story of love and mutual admiration which demanded a battle from her against her, understandably, unaccepting family. Severing all relationships with her family, she

set up a life of complete devotion and dedication to her husband, left her own job and supported him in achieving his goals. However, sighted-blind marriages did take place during the 1980s and thereafter, but here too, majority of sighted partners were female. Instances of such marriages were relatively fewer during the 1960s when society was more conservative. However, the factors of class and gender are great determinants at any point of time.

What is a matter of longing for a vast majority of the blind community even today was certainly worse about a few decades back when principles, beliefs and traditions were far more conservative and inhibitive? However, education among the blind, reservation in jobs for them and the changing social norms have brought a gradual change. The prospects through technology, the advent of the cyber world and the shrinking of distances are filling up the gaps at a fast pace. There are even some matrimonial and dating websites these days, that try to fix marriages exclusively for the blind.

Irrespective of this historical view, Jawahar was certainly rather fortunate in this matter. While he was a young resident at the Blind School in Amritsar, he had the privilege of being the chosen one for **the female visitors. The School's Braille typist's daughter too** expressed her affection for him, often with food cooked for him to substitute for the distasteful hostel food. While narrating this attraction of the girl, Kaul disclosed his secret that the love letter he had penned in the college was actually addressed to her. But this remained mainly a student-life romance and did not have much chance for fruition. Teenage **infatuations in many cases don't work** out, but in this case, there was so much of societal pressure that the girl could not have expressed her love, nor would she have been in a position to revolt against her parents and the society and take a

radical decision of marrying him during those conservative days. However, the main reason for the failure of this relationship perhaps was its untimeliness and lack of deep emotional involvement. This tender age romance, if it could be called one, also generated a lot of jealousy among fellow students. It was natural and expected as there were very few opportunities for them to get the attention and affection of the members of the opposite gender in such a set up. Incidentally and may be significantly, it must be mentioned that both the father and the daughter were not visually impaired.

Jawahar's focus on his studies in college kept him away from further such involvements. In his interviews that focused on his college days, he made no reference to female friends or their attraction. How important was marriage to him was only realised by him when he found that his family not even considered him as a person suitable **for marriage. Jawahar's parents had begun to look for an appropriate** match for his younger brother despite the fact that in India, marriages are fixed by seniority; the eldest first; and jumping the queue has major social implications. But obviously, a blind boy is **not in the reckoning and bypassing him is absolutely 'reasonable'**. Jawahar was both hurt and frustrated. Considering this to be one of the reasons that egged him on to run away from home, Jawahar changed the direction of his career and came to Delhi to join Mr. **Khandelwal's organization.**

As Mr. Khandelwal was a very progressive person, having lived in the West for a long time, he permitted both the boys and the girls **to stay together at the 'Training and Rehabilitation Centre for the** *Blind*' (TRCB) under the same roof. There were really no objections to this arrangement. It was socially easier, as the Centre was operating from a place that was completely cut off and was in an isolated location; and also, because the TRCB was constantly

shifting bag and baggage from one place to another. The group hardly stayed at one place for more than three months.

Usha was one of the female members who had come to work and stay at the Centre. She got to know about this place from an advertisement that Mr. Khandelwal had released. While studying at the Christian School in Dehradun, she had read about this novel idea for learning an occupation and decided to join the group. There were other girls too, who had joined the Centre and had started living with them. This is where Jawahar and Usha fell in love with each other. Neither of them had a job and any source of income; yet Jawahar took, what he called, a radical decision to go for marriage: **“I thought the following: as I am surviving, she will also survive with me. There was no other choice. So, we decided to get married and Khandelwal supported us.”** There was another reason for this hasty decision. Usha’s parents were not comfortable with the idea that Jawahar and Usha should be staying there together without getting married. They compelled Usha to either get married or return home. Usha, however, did not want to return home; she wanted to stay at the Centre and build her own life and career. This, therefore, added to the already built-up pressure to solemnize the marriage without delay.

As both Jawahar and Usha had no source of earning, there were no finances even for the arrangements that had to be made for the marriage ceremony. Some interesting developments took place then. The then Congress Minister, Shri Gulzari Lal Nanda, owned a Trust. A committee of the Trust called the ‘Sadachar Committee’ was going to have a press conference just about then. The secretary of the Committee suggested to Jawahar to get married on the same day as the press conference. His practical suggestion was that this way the refreshments served for the Press Conference would also

serve the purpose of the wedding and thus make some saving. So, Jawahar and Usha decided to marry on the day the press conference was to be held. Usha had her mother, sister and a cousin, Mr Pran Nath Lekhi, a well-known advocate, present at the wedding, but to represent Jawahar, there was only Mr Khandelwal. Neither did he have the courage to invite his family members nor were they expected to come. They would not have agreed to this marriage as Usha was blind, even though it would not have been easy for them to find a sighted girl for Jawahar. In any case, he had already been hurt by the attitude of his family in this matter. He was certain that they were not even concerned about finding a match for him. So, this settled the matter for Jawahar and he decided not to invite them or seek their participation.

Interestingly, the marriage became an important event of the day. **Kaul said, “When our marriage ceremony took place and there was an exchange of garlands, the whole focus of the Press Conference shifted from the coverage of the ‘Sadaachar Committee’ to our marriage ceremony. The Press, that had come for the official coverage of the proceedings of the Committee, focused on our marriage instead.”** Later on, when the couple shifted to another rented accommodation at C-20, Model Town, there was also a documentary made on their marriage by the Films Division of India, to be screened in the movie theatres preceding the main movie, as used to be the practice back then. The marriage of a blind person and specifically, a marriage between two blind persons was rarely heard of, and the society was not yet accustomed to witnessing such marriages. It was uncommon and so, totally astonishing. **Kaul mentioned, “Our marriage was covered in several newspapers and magazines, of which, I still have some press clippings.”** The most interesting thing was that for the documentary to be shot, Jawahar

and Usha had to perform the marriage ceremony once again. This was the simplest possible marriage with neither romantic frills nor ritualistic traditions. It brought no change or interruption into **Kaul's priority for his commitments.** In fact, later on, the ground floor of C-20 was utilized to accommodate the boys who performed the chair caning work and the mezzanine to accommodate the other boys and girls separately with bunk beds fitted in.

Chapter 6

The Days of Struggle and Survival

Madan Lal Khandelwal's return to England in 1968 marked a turning point in Jawahar's life and Khandelwal's pet organization, The Training and Rehabilitation Centre for the Blind, the TRCB, became, in truth, Jawahar's karmabhoomi (land of action). Suddenly, the responsibility of this resource less, nonfunctional and sinking ship called the TRCB fell on his shoulders. Khandelwal had founded the TRCB with a genuine concern for the blind and with an intention to actualize a belief that the blind in India needed both training and sincere steps for empowerment (the term used then was 'rehabilitation') if they were to be brought out of the twin curses of dependence and charity. Pumping in his self-earned resources, declining any charitable offers, training a select group of the blind into crafting things and finding commercial viability for their products: here was a complete ideology and an opportunity for demonstrating a rehabilitation model that worked. However, the last rung in this ladder was missing and thus the project collapsed. But no one could doubt the sincerity, selfless dedication and the idealism hidden behind this exemplary exercise, just as no one could overlook the inherent failure of the programme because of its impracticality and the ground realities. The West for Khandelwal was the breeding ground for new ideas and aspirations; which he wanted to borrow and implement for his own blind countrymen. On the personal front, Khandelwal did not seek any special treatment for himself in food or accommodation at the Centre despite being used to the comforts he was receiving in the west; he shared what his group members got.

The legacy of Khandelwal that fell upon Jawahar as his natural successor was certainly not a bed of roses. The TRCB was a failing

and beleaguered organization that was initially a dead log weight on his shoulders, but, as many of its members looked up to him for survival, he had to take over the responsibility of steering it. **“In one stroke, from being a job-seeker myself, I assumed the role of finding employment for many, and that too, while being penniless myself. Left with no choice, I assumed my new responsibilities as the Head of the Centre.”**¹ Though sincere, hardworking and extremely dedicated to Khandelwal, Jawahar often regretted making a choice in favour of Khandelwal. Though there was unwavering faithfulness and unfailing respect for him, Jawahar’s decision to take the plunge to work for him was dictated by multiple factors, of which, not all evolved out of a sense of allegiance. Jawahar was very practical and grounded and worked with a wisdom that moulds itself as per needs, although in the latter years he was assessed by people as being strict, firm and uncompromising on principles. In short, after the departure of Khandelwal, when Jawahar took the reins of the Organization in his own hands, he began to focus on the most essential factor: financial resources for the Organization and the practical ways to manage funding. Meanwhile, some educated blind persons, who were also looking for jobs, decided to join him.

“Many visually impaired persons flocked to me in the hope of getting employment. While being almost a beggar myself, I had to be a provider for many. Could I have acted otherwise? Surely not. A way had to be found and I lost no time in acting.”²

So, the TRCB started approaching various funding organizations for assignments of transcription of books. The first assignment came after some efforts from the Jawahar Lal Nehru Memorial Fund to prepare the Braille copies of the well-known works of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru. The books titled The Discovery of India and An Autobiography were to be transcribed in Braille in both Hindi and

English. Likewise, Arya Samaj Pratinidhi Sabha agreed to get Satyarth Prakash by Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati transcribed into Braille. The TRCB got decent funding from the Funding Organization and they paid around one rupee per Braille page to the transcribers. This was a decent amount of money to be earned by anyone in those days. The TRCB also provided chair re-caning work to the uneducated blind persons who were staying at the Centre. Altogether, there was a positive development and the Centre, now, had a fair amount of fruitful activity happening under its banner **after Jawahar's forced takeover. The Organization's name got highlighted and received good public attention as the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs Indira Gandhi herself, released the Braille versions of Nehru's books; thus, providing the much-required public recognition.** The Organization could now afford to rent the Ground Floor and the mezzanine of C-20, Model Town too; the first floor of which had already been taken on rent to house the Kauls. The newly rented parts were used for the working and accommodation of the blind boys and girls associated with the Organization.

“The task of making Braille copies of such books was rather difficult those days. The Braille transcription was done either on Braille boards [slates] or through Braillers (Braille typewriters). Yet there was a lot of enthusiasm about this work. When the Braille copies were ready, they were released with much joy and excitement by the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi.”³

There were some other changes that the TRCB, now introduced. To pay the building rent of Rs 250 (quite a large sum in those days) donations in small denominations of Rs 10 to 20 were collected. Every member of the Committee began to contribute ten or twenty rupees as per his paying capacity towards the rent. In most cases,

people did not pay voluntarily, therefore, Jawahar had to go from door to door asking people for their contribution. Both the educated and the uneducated blind, associated with the Centre, began to get work according to their capabilities. “...efforts ultimately seemed to pay off, and it appeared as if the Centre had finally got into gear.”⁴

TRCB was confined to the role of a service delivery centre; there were no presumptions yet to seek satisfaction from it of self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is a rights-based movement and discourse among the disability groups. It translates into the fact that the disabled must speak up for themselves and their interests to get rightful space in the society. In those days of the 1960s and the 1970s, the disability rights movement was taking over gradually from the service delivery models. It was possible that the people, including Jawahar, managing the Centre, never faced the ideological confrontation between the two, or the service model was then the priority in any case. Although the American blind organizations had already started their self-advocacy movements by the 1940s and the Indian Blind organizations were accessing their literature through monthly magazines such as *The Braille Monitor*, a monthly magazine published by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of the United States, the social conditions in India yet depended heavily on philanthropic sentiments. The reality was that the model of providing occupation to the blind according to their qualifications and skills and pulling them out of financial dependency was a progressive step. However, the potential of a collective fight for rights against the establishment and the need to realize that the fight has to be waged by the victims themselves to be truly gainful was a distant dream then.

Although the Centre started serving its purpose, Jawahar was still not getting any salary. He used to work only on daily meals and no

other compensation. He was married now and had a wife to support; therefore, the life of a bachelor was not possible now. He was getting desperate, but seemed to have no solutions.

Among the founding members of the TRCB was Krishan Kumar Bhatia, a sub-editor at the Navbharat Times, a well-established Hindi Daily. **Seeing Jawahar's condition, Krishan Bhatia suggested that** since he knew typing so well, he should put his skills to good use. Jawahar had mastered typing in school days and could now perhaps earn his livelihood by taking advantage of it. So, a strategy was worked out by both of them. Krishan Bhatia suggested that Kaul should come to his office every evening and take dictation from reporters. He was hopeful that Kaul would be noticed by the newspaper management and offered a job if his work was good. The idea appealed to him and was also the need of the hour. As he had recently got married, and that too a love marriage without the **approval of Kaul's family and hardly any support from either of the families** on both sides, the need for a steady livelihood had become all the more pressing. His wife Usha also approved of this proposal and so his routine changed.

Jawahar found the offer quite interesting. He began to travel by bus carrying his portable typewriter with him every day from Model Town, where he resided, to Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, a distance of about 15 kilometres, where the newspaper office was situated. He would reach the office around five in the evening and type the reports for the reporters, free of cost, till about eleven in the night. The reporters would come to him with their reports, dictate their **matter and he would type it out in Hindi.** “**Though all appeared to be happy with my work, none thought of giving me any money for it, the offer of a job appeared at the best, an oasis in the desert.**”⁵ Jawahar poured out his agony in Reminiscences very openly:

“My situation during these months, was worse than pitiable. Everyone saw me working in the office for more than six hours every day, but none of the officials of the newspaper even once thought of my plight, that I am a human being, that I have my needs, that money needs to be paid to someone who is so efficiently working for so many months. All this made me feel rather depressed and self-pitiful. What kind of life was this? What kind of self-imposed altruism? Working from morning to 11 pm in the night and yet not expecting any remuneration! How terrible were those days of unemployment and ceaseless struggle!”⁶

Every night at around 11 pm, Krishan Bhatia and Jawahar would return home together in Krishan’s vehicle. Nearly nine months passed this way and the quest for livelihood seemed unending. It was an endless struggle with no concrete reward.

However, all investment of labour leaves some impact, at least indirectly, if not directly. In the span of 9 months, Jawahar had earned a lot of goodwill and made personal contacts with the journalists who helped him in publishing his own articles. His articles got published: some in the Hindi Navbharat Times, some in Sarita, a monthly magazine published in Hindi, and the rest in a few other journals. He used to get paid a sum of rupees thirty for one article in those days. If the article was accompanied with photographs, it would fetch him rupees forty per article. A fairly substantial amount, this money could help him tide over his financial crisis. The publication of articles was facilitated because of his personal rapport with the journalists; thus, the seemingly wasted evenings at the office of the Navbharat Times had some compensations.

No one could predict how long things would have gone on in this condition of limbo and how long this endless struggle would have

gone on without any discernible change, had not the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB) had its international level conference in Delhi from October 8-18, 1969. Hosted by the Government of India, this meeting was attended by a large number of visually impaired representatives from national and international organizations from different parts of the country and the world, respectively.

“This Conference of the WCWB was significant in two ways in triggering the founding of the NFB in India. First, since the conference was attended by a number of international representatives from different parts of the world, it provided an opportunity for the young educated and frustrated blind activists to establish connections with people working in the field of blindness from different parts of the world and learn about what was going on in other countries; second, the emerging blind leaders of the movement of the unorganized blind in India organized a protest in front of Vigyan Bhawan (venue of the conference) in Delhi during its proceedings, demanding jobs for the educated blind.”⁷

Among the protestors was a visually impaired Ph.D. holder, Dr. Santlal Thareja, who decided to utilize this highly visible occasion to be on a fast until death. He wanted to bring the limelight on the plight of the educated blind who, even with their highest degrees of the country, were jobless. Thareja demanded a job for himself. “He carried with him his Ph.D. thesis and his Ph.D. degree. He sat outside the Vigyan Bhawan with the pledge that he would die burning with him his thesis and his testimonials unless he was given employment as a Lecturer.” It was becoming embarrassing for the Indian Government to face the situation in front of so many visiting international delegates as it was a clear case of systematic apathy and neglect towards the blind people: both on humanitarian grounds and

as an important symbolic manifestation of the right to employment.

This protest would go into the history of self-advocacy in the world of the blind as a **very important milestone**. “—for the first time, a protest was organized which coincided with this conference which proved to be the most important international event organized in **India in the area of blindness.**”⁹ A few blind activists stood picketing in front of Vigyan Bhawan where the Conference was being held. The agitation was focusing primarily on educated blind persons, the ones who had recently completed their graduation and were now demanding jobs. Jawahar and his friends, despite not yet having a well-defined organisational structure, felt the need to pitch in to lead it in a logical direction. **This is where Jawahar’s association with the *Navbharat Times*’** journalists and reporters became helpful. The agitation required media attention. Jawahar was able to help in press coverage by typing out whatever Thareja dictated or the press notes that Jawahar produced and his goodwill with the journalists ensured **their publication**. “**This created a lot of pressure on the Government.** There were very few Ph.D. holders those days and here was one with such a degree despite his blindness. It was certainly **very embarrassing for the Government.**”

“**The pressure of the protest in the backdrop of the ‘meeting of the WCWB’ [It was the most important and, by far perhaps, the largest international conference organized in the field of blindness in India] became difficult for the Government to bear. So, the Delhi Government declared that it was appointing Dr. Thareja as a Lecturer.**”

The Chief Executive Councillor of Delhi, Mr. Vijay Kumar Malhotra, who incidentally was himself a college lecturer before his foray into electoral politics, appointed Thareja as a Lecturer at the Shradhanand College, University of Delhi with immediate effect.

This was a breakthrough moment in the history of the educated blind in India; and even more so the fact that Mr Malhotra also invited a delegation of the blind to meet him to discuss the issues of unemployment and the possible means of employment of the visually impaired.

The foundation for the formation of a strong self-advocacy organization was laid and a conducive atmosphere was created by the beginning of the 1970s. Jawahar, and from now on for the purpose of this biography, Kaul, had a significant role to play in it.



Receiving the First Marga Schulze Foundation Award 2006 in ICEVI Conference, Malaysia

Chapter 7

Steps Towards Identity

The International Conference of World Council for the Welfare of the Blind, held in October, 1969, at Delhi's Vigyan Bhawan, suddenly turned many pages in Kaul's personal biography. Stagnating for nearly nine months in the musty offices of Navbharat Times, typing reports till late hours in the evenings for the self-centred and ambitious reporters who took full benefit of his free services, Kaul had little hope of any magical change in his life. His reach was limited to his articles that got published occasionally, comforting him with some amount of money that would see the young married couple through for a little time. A source for steady income in the form of a job was an unimaginable dream; to get a job was a marvel that not even sighted persons experienced with ease in the early post-independent India.

The only imaginable occupation for the educated blind was teaching, which had become, by then, somewhat of a reality, though in a limited sense. Apart from getting teaching posts in special schools for the blind and those too in subjects like Music, Hindi and Sanskrit, the educated blind, with adequate higher education, were still jobless, with meaningless rolls of paper as their degrees. **Therefore, Thareja's appointment as a lecturer at Shraddhanand College, University of Delhi, after a do or die struggle, was an enormous community achievement and a milestone in the history of the blind people.**

Following the appointment of Thareja, the Chief Executive Councillor, Vijay Kumar Malhotra, agreed to meet a delegation representing the educated blind community. Jawahar Lal Kaul was a part of that group of delegates. Mr. Malhotra expressed his

satisfaction that Thareja had finally called off his hunger strike as he had got his appointment. There was a frank and open discussion between the members of the delegation and the authorities regarding the unemployment of the visually impaired persons. But now Malhotra wanted to know what else blind persons were trained in **and could do to be eligible for a job. In the mainstream's perception,** visual impairment was a totally debilitating condition and the question of involving the blind in jobs performed by sighted people was unthinkable and unrealistic. **Malhotra's question was expressive** of the same sentiment. However, Kaul promptly informed an **astonished Malhotra that he could type. "Can a blind person type?" Malhotra exclaimed. Kaul replied, "Yes sir! I can type very well."** Malhotra instructed one of his subordinates, there and then, to test him on his claim and check his typing skills. On seeing him typing absolutely correctly and that too at a high speed, the astonished authorities decided to send him for a test to be conducted by the concerned department.

Kaul went to meet the concerned authorities, carrying his portable typewriter by his side. Without a demonstration of his skills, naturally he could make no one believe him. So, he was tested for his typewriting abilities. The concerned people were impressed with his flawless typing with 48 words per minute in Hindi and 40 words per minute in English. The small crowd of onlookers was equally astonished.

Shortly after this test in early 1970, Kaul was appointed as a Lower Division Clerk (LDC) by the Delhi Government in the Directorate of Education, Old Secretariat building, Delhi. He joined his job on 5th May, 1970, as he vaguely recalls, on a salary of Rs 250 per month, a sum which was no less than a fortune for a man who was accustomed to manage life with thrift and prudence.

The Conference of World Council for the Welfare of the Blind, thus, became an indirect cause for some landmark accommodations in the history of the blind. It established that the blind were now gaining a group identity and were learning the skills of collective bargaining through agitation. It also established that the percentage of young blind persons with higher education was increasing and consequently, their discontentment and frustration on not getting suitable jobs was also increasing. Further, with adequate publicity through media, the educated blind community, though still small in numbers, could evoke enough public sympathy and disdain to compel the State to some sort of positive action. The impact of this action was visible. The mainstream perception was shaken, and the society was forced to sit up and notice that the blind were actually competent and eligible for many more professional channels than what they had presumed. And lastly and perhaps the most pertinent and noticeable gain was that the blind could fight their own battles and that the best battles fought and won, were through self-advocacy.

Jawahar Lal Kaul worked for 30 years in the Establishment Section of the Old Secretariat, till he opted for voluntary retirement, about **4 years prior to his slated retirement. Kaul's years of service are a typical example of the mainstream response to disability and constant effort for reasonable accommodation of the disabled in the mainstream.** “For about one month, I was not assigned any responsibility. On reaching the office and marking my attendance, I was left with nothing else to do except to go back home. Either no one came to me for work or if one did when the staff was busy, the response would be, ‘Why are we bothering this poor man? Why cannot the others do this work?’ Obviously, Kaul's appointment as an LDC was treated as an act of sympathy despite his having proved

his merit beyond doubt; and all the people around him: the colleagues and the public, excluded him from the day-to-day work. Now, this is another major hurdle in a harmonious inclusion of the disabled in the mainstream. Rejection, disbelief and pity are too deeply ingrained in the social fabric to get over and change attitudes. **The ‘person’ in the ‘disabled person’ is overshadowed by his or her disability.**

Kaul was suffering from overindulgence and pity; instead, he would rather work! He was suffering from not doing anything. He tried to explain to his colleagues that they were doing a disservice to him by their sympathetic kindness, and begged for work. He went and sat next to the Head Clerk and volunteered to pitch in with some typing on and off. Gradually, some dictation work came to him that he had to type. Soon, Kaul started to store all the rules and regulations in his memory and as soon as a petitioner explained his case, he typed the entire matter for him. Seeing his ability to draft such applications, the Department finally allocated him a seat where he was to deal with the cases of appointments on compassionate grounds. If the employees succumbed to death while on duty, their dependents had to be suitably compensated for their loss, as per law, in the form of jobs that the Government had to offer them. Developing great expertise in preparing such cases as per law, Kaul made many friends amongst his colleagues with whom he would discuss the merits of the case and complete the file almost on his own. At last, Kaul was working independently and meaningfully. The Department of Establishment of the Directorate of Education had about 15 to 20 employees. While the recruitment process was attended to by the Service Department, the Establishment handled the files of the petitioners and decided which names had to be forwarded for a specific job.

With time, Kaul developed friendly relationships with co-workers and, significantly, on grounds of equality and merit. The barriers of disability disappeared when, realizing his potential, the officers started referring to him many complicated cases. His drafting was good, so was his ease with two of the major languages in use: Hindi and English. Rather than evading responsibilities, Kaul felt a sense of pride and honour when he was chosen to handle difficult cases. The young man in Kaul wanted to act as a mature, responsible and able adult; like any sighted person. The post in itself spelt empowerment, which, till then, a blind person could not imagine to possess. Besides its ability to offer him the safety of a regular income, the position addressed an urge for role playing and to prove himself **in a real world.** **“I believe if you have the skill and the willingness to do the work, you can always excel in your work. Your blindness doesn’t obstruct your goals. It was not difficult for me to prove my potential.”** Gradually, Kaul’s colleagues had started accepting him as an equal and shared the time spent at the Office on terms of equal give and take. He, too, ensured that he should not be indulged out of sympathy and pity. If they spent any money on him, he too returned the favours.

In 1977, when Kaul had started taking active interest in organizational work for the blind and joined the East Asia Committee of International Federation of the Blind, he went on deputation from 1977 to 1985. As a rule, the longest duration of deputation could not exceed 5 years. **Kaul’s was an unusual instance** of a long deputation of nearly 8 years. The sanction for this did not **come through in a regular way.** Kaul’s colleagues, who always supported him, took care not to process the files, and the functioning of the Indian Government Departments being what it is known to be, missed noticing that the file was not being processed.

The files were kept away from view and memory. At last, a query came from the Ministry of Home seeking a reply from Kaul's Department how a person could enjoy an 8 year-long deputation period flouting rules. It was then that he had to join back in 1985. His colleagues supported him in enjoying such an extended deputation and took the risk for it, offering him full cooperation and goodwill.

His first international visit could also become possible because of a tacit, but substantial support from his colleagues. Kaul required permission from his department to go on his first international visit. His Assistant Director sent his file to the Vigilance Department to get its approval for Kaul's travel outside the country. Actually, he could not comprehend that a blind person could manage to travel abroad on his own. Procuring permission from the Vigilance Department proved to be an enormous task. Kaul had to put in a lot of stretch and push to get the required permission and that too, just before it was time to travel. With his increasing role and involvement with activism, he often needed such sanctions. The tough experience of soliciting sanctions for such international travels, however, made him practical, and he decided to avoid applying for them. This is where his colleagues stood by him. Although most of them knew about his travels, they did not express any knowledge of them. "They were always kind to me and that is why they never exposed me for my international travels, which happened without proper sanction from the Department." Kaul would manage his trips using his casual or other kinds of leave. It was all illegal and Kaul could have been suspended for this dereliction of duty, had the colleagues not remained quiet about it. Was it because Kaul was blind and hence, not really one of them or because they were genuinely kind and above petty natural

jealousies? It could also be due to his goodwill that he had earned from his colleagues as a result of his sincerity, hard work and cordial relations with them. It is difficult to reach a conclusion and, in any case, it is outside the purview of this work.

Kaul had realized that it was difficult for a blind person to prove his capability easily due to pre-established biases among others. It was largely ignorance, lack of exposure and typical notions that were set in their minds. Kaul, who later on negotiated with many employers to get placements for eligible sightless persons through AICB, was confronted with ludicrous questions from the employers. At the time of one such appointment of 8 people in one company, he recalled, the employer asked him naively what would happen if there were an earthquake or a fire. How would the blind workers protect themselves or reach the staircase to find their escape route? That Kaul himself could perform the least expected and unusual task of typewriting and could land with a permanent typewriting job with the Directorate of Education, established that the stereotypes of **'not meant for the blind'** could be debunked. Having a skill and then performing the skill with efficiency would automatically receive acceptance and inclusion.

Kaul took voluntary retirement from his job on January 1, 2001, while he had 4 more years of service left. He retired as a Head Clerk. If he had cared for it and if it had been so important to him, he could have worked till the end of his tenure and could have retired from the position of a Superintendent for which he would qualify before his retirement. The Circular of 1989 had mandated reservation in promotions in the C and D categories of jobs. Retiring as a Superintendent could have made a substantial difference in his retirement and pension benefits, which would have increased in that case. **However, Kaul's other and more important involvements had**

taken over. His own and the family's needs were limited and life confronted him with newer challenges.

Summarizing this phase in *Reminiscences*, Kaul wrote, "What is of significance is the fact that it took me as many as three years to find even such junior level employment. Nonetheless, it was an immense game-changer in my life. At last, I could get rid of the label of being unemployed. An important step towards self-reliance; it marked a salient turning point in my life."¹

Chapter 8

Kaul and the Philosophy of Self-Advocacy

Kaul's evolution from personal to the impersonal, subjective to the objective and from duty to conviction was neither sudden nor impulsive. For about 30 years, he had been nurturing himself to fit into a leadership role. There was, perhaps, not intentionally, but circumstantially and ideologically, a process churning within him all through to obtain a principally purged and organizationally trained master-builder who could pick up the baton of leadership of a community that still needed to fight for societal recognition and accommodation for human rights. Surely, he would have been strategically planning and establishing contacts in the international arena, from where the leading directions, approaches, theories and political struggles were percolating, to establish his identity and visibility. Importantly, what made him different from others were the personal qualities he had nurtured within himself all through the formative years of his life: consistency, honesty, hard work, perseverance and conviction. In his journey of life, he did not come out as ambitious for leadership, power or recognition. His was a selfless involvement and whenever he had to face antagonism, opposition and challenge to his position, his fight was for the protection of the organization from the forces that were bound to use the platform for their own vested interests. However, it is possible that others in the field might have questioned his intentions.

In order to understand the working of the self-advocacy movements of the blind in the 1970s, it is important at this point of time to look historically and critically at the global arena to see how the movements for the rights of the blind were taking shape and how various organizations had come into existence to carry out this agenda. Without going too far back in time and study the beginning

of the small steps for unification and rights, the starting point for our understanding can be the passing of the Social Security Act of 1935 in the United States. ¹ A fertile ground had been created with the opening of the special schools for the blind in different parts of the United States during the latter half of the twentieth century. The concentration of the blind students from these special schools created an urgency for the commencing of a solid movement for advocacy. The Social Security Act acted as a catalyst in the foundation of National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in the US in 1940. The blind activists began to wage a united struggle for their rights and a radical movement of the organized blind in the United States began at the national level. They had organized themselves to **fight for their rights in a unified manner; hence the term ‘organized blind’ came into use. It is at the inaugural speech in their first convention that Jacobus ten Brock, the founding father of the movement, spoke the following famous words, “Individually we are the victims of discrimination...Collectively we are the masters of our own future.”** ²

By the 1960s, NFB of the United States had grown into a strong movement of the organized blind and had drawn towards itself the attention of prominent administrators of the country. The early leaders of NFB including Jacobus ten Brock and Kenneth Jernigan realized that apart from Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, countries where strong organizations were working on the philosophy of self-advocacy, other countries had small service-oriented organizations only. ³ Therefore, they decided to establish International Federation of the Blind (IFB) in order to carry the philosophy of self-advocacy through it. Established with the mission to connect visually impaired persons across the world and strengthen the self-advocacy movement, the IFB came into existence

on July 30, 1964, in New York. Its goals and purposes were set forth **in the Preamble of its Constitution.** “**The International Federation of the Blind is an organization of the blind of all nations, operated by the blind of all nations, for the blind of all nations. It is-- dedicated solely to serving the common needs and aspirations of blind men and women everywhere in the world.**”⁴ The NFB of the US tried to promote its philosophy all over the world through its **monthly magazine, ‘The Braille Monitor’.** Isabelle Grant,⁵ who volunteered to act as an ambassador of NFB to carry the self-advocacy movement to other countries, helped Dr. Fatima Shah in Pakistan to establish Pakistan Association of the Blind between 1969 and 1970. ‘*The Braille Monitor*’ and Grant’s travels globally to more than 30 countries helped spreading the self-help movement widely.

Almost parallel to the growth of NFB, there was another organization that was working internationally and that also had its origin in the U.S. This was World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB), established in 1949. It was an umbrella organization at the international level that comprised of service agencies that worked in the field of blindness. WCWB and the IFB were two international bodies working in the area of blindness but their approaches to the issues concerning blindness were very different from those of each other. The focus of WCWB was on service and that of IFB on self-advocacy. Yet, despite their fundamental differences in approach, there was an overlapping membership and continued participation by members on both the fora.

As already mentioned in the earlier chapters, WCWB organized a conference at the Vigyan Bhawan, Delhi, from October 8th to 17th, 1969, to discuss matters regarding the welfare of the blind. The Conference was hosted by the Government of India and was attended by a considerably large number of delegates from all across

the world. The Conference had a historic role to play in the consolidation of the blind into an organization in India. This Conference was the first international level event in India in the area of blindness and it was attended by the representatives of both IFB and WCWB. Most importantly, Isabelle Grant too, participated in the Conference as a representative of IFB. What worked as a great inspiration was the opportunity this Conference offered to the **young, educated but frustrated blind activists “to establish connections with people working in the field of blindness from different parts of the world and learn about what was going on in other countries.”** 6

Isabelle Grant became acquainted with the emerging leaders of the organized blind movements in India. These were, by and large, young, university educated unemployed blind activists who were dejected as they were unemployed. These activists were looking towards the more developed self-advocacy movements of the blind for meaningful directions. Jawahar Lal Kaul was also one of those whose life was completely blended with the emerging movements **of the organized blind in India. “He was thoroughly embroiled into the exchange of views inside the Vigyan Bhawan and the dramatic demonstrations outside and was proactively contributing to the do and die ‘morcha’ (an organized rally) of Dr. Thareja. This was the first recorded demonstration of the educated blind in Delhi demanding jobs for themselves. He was highlighting through the media, Thareja’s demand for a suitable job as a right (as elaborated in the previous chapter). Not only that, he was a part of the lead delegation that met Mr. Vijay Kumar Malhotra, the Chief Executive Councillor of Delhi, to press for a job for Thareja and to let other blind persons also get employment according to their education and capability.”**

The blind youth knew that they had to fight their own battles with the systems on their own land; but they desperately needed tried and tested strategies, which could make the battles effective. The Conference had put forward two distinct approaches in front of them: the service model and the fight for rights through self-advocacy. The disabled had only received charitable support, largely from the Christian missionaries, in the pre-independent India and their past had been one long dark history of condemnation and curse. Post 1947, the rise of a democratic-socialist polity, an equality-promising Constitution, global reforms, access to education and the success of the bargaining powers of organized movements were all creating a new ground for sustained and organized movements of the blind. These reforms would raise the agendas of education, employment and other basic rights of the blind. The 1950s and the 1960s saw only some welfare initiatives undertaken by a few sensitive officials like the scholarship schemes, the development of Uniform Braille Code and the establishment of residential schools for the blind. The two decades might not have contributed much to the ideology of self-advocacy and the power of proper organization, but they did inspire a group of educated but unemployed and frustrated blind youth to fight for their rights, particularly, right to employment. **“A fertile ground was prepared for the emergence of an organized struggle.”**⁷.

Jawahar Lal Kaul met Isabelle Grant in 1969 at WCWB Conference. **“Isabelle Grant must have met many people besides me. But as you know, I like to remain connected with the person who expresses a liking for me. I responded promptly and she remained in touch with me even after she left India. We had kept on communicating with each other since November 1969. It was she, who inspired me to start a self-advocacy organization to fill the gap in India and she**

continued to encourage me to start one.” It was not feasible for Kaul to start a national level organization on his own singlehandedly. Around this time, Aja Kumar Mittal, a student of the Perkins School for the Blind, US, returned to Delhi after completing his teacher training studies for the blind. He had already completed his Masters in English in India. Mittal, who was deeply inspired by the philosophy of self-advocacy propagated by NFB in the US, found a job in a leading residential school, the JPM School for the blind children in Delhi upon his return. The school was run by the Blind Relief Association. His fellow Indian students at Perkins had also started contemplating the idea of establishing a self-advocacy organization for the blind. Mittal and Kaul, both were independently exploring the idea of setting up a self-help organization in India similar to NFB, USA, set up around the same time. While Mittal was deeply influenced by his direct exposure to the writings, ideology and the impact of the developments in the West, Kaul was concerned about the angst of the educated yet unemployed blind college graduates who were increasingly frustrated by the lack of concern and interest of the Government towards their needs. They also wanted an organization which would act on principles different from the ones adopted by the well-established service-providing organizations, that were already active in India, like National Association for the Blind (NAB) and *Blind Men’s Association*, the former working nationally and the latter confined to Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Kaul did not know Mittal personally, but was inspired to meet him to discuss the idea of setting up a self-help organization. He met Mittal, who was now the Headmaster of the JPM Blind school over lunch and the two shared their views on the matter. Sharing a common philosophy and vision, they decided to establish an

organization that would follow the ideology of self-advocacy. National Federation of the Blind-(NFB, India) thus, came into existence in September,1970 with 13 members initially. In the beginning, it was called National Federation of the Blind Graduates.



Late Smt. Indira Gandhi, Former Prime Minister releasing the autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru in Braille written by J. L. Kaul and his team

Chapter 9

Kaul and NFB

When NFB was founded in September, 1970, Kaul had already secured for himself, a permanent Government job with a monthly salary of Rs. 250. Considered a fairly handsome salary during those times, the money was enough for Kaul and his family's personal needs. His passionate struggle to form NFB was the pursuit of a commitment to spread self-advocacy as a means for the visually impaired persons to secure a life of dignity and equality under laws of the land. He was not motivated by narrow self-interests. He was committed to a cause that focused on the larger development of the whole blind community.

As noted earlier, the need for such an organisation represented the requirements of the educated unemployed blind graduates, a new class among the blind, who had filtered through the residential blind schools all over India. The organizations like National Association for the Blind (NAB), dedicated to the goal of service delivery could not address their concerns and interests. In their meetings in the summer of 1970, Mittal and Kaul shared the belief that the service agencies, run by sighted persons and a few well-settled blind persons, were primarily based on the principles of philanthropy and were thus acting on the charity model and not on the rights-based model which was the real goal.

The Organisation, when it was founded in 1970, was named National Federation of the Blind Graduates. Both Kaul and Mittal were quite apprehensive of the prevailing culture among the blind community of frequent fighting and bickering whenever there was an attempt at organizing and consolidating them into a strong group. Scenes of uncivilized behaviour, rude and abusive

interactions and ultimately a culture of total anarchy were frequently witnessed in many such organizations. The Organisation that Kaul and Mittal wanted to give life to, had a serious purpose. They were, therefore, debating about the quality and qualifications of members who would join the Organisation. Should every blind person be eligible for the membership of the proposed organisation? While Kaul wanted the organisation to be broad based to represent the interests of the blind people from all strata and class **backgrounds, Mittal felt that unlike the US, 'in India the educated blind should take the lead'**.¹ Among others who took the lead in the formation of the Organisation, the majority supported restricting the membership of the Organisation to college graduates. Therefore, because of this majority view of a group consisting of people like Mr. Mittal and Prof. Ved Prakash Varma, the eligibility criteria for membership to the Organisation became graduation and a large number of the blind, who had not been able to receive proper education, were thus rendered ineligible for the membership.

The group of decision makers was working on the assumption that those who were at least graduates could be expected to be capable of dependable rational interaction and that they would not destroy the Organisation with unprofessional and uncivilized ways. It was a very challenging proposal as the Organisation was being established without any resources. The group was formed with only 13 members. There were many hurdles to cross. Firstly, there were very few employed blinds who could contribute to it monetarily and secondly, it was difficult to mobilise educated blind persons from different places. A. K. Mittal was one of the pioneers in the Organisation; among the 13, some were teachers or retired teachers and some others, well accomplished in their respective fields. Yet the primary responsibility of running the Organisation fell on the

shoulders of Jawahar Lal Kaul.

Kaul and Mittal approached Lal Advani, who was then the biggest name in the field of disability due to his position as an officer in the Government of India and because of his path-breaking contribution to development of services for the empowerment of the disabled. It was Advani, who helped them to draft the constitution of the Organisation. The Organisation was finally registered as National Federation of the Blind Graduates (NFBG). All the members of the Organisation were blind except one, the Treasurer. The position of the Treasurer was given to a sighted person, Mrs. Krishna Varma, **Prof. Ved Prakash Varma's wife. The decision to have a sighted person as the Treasurer of the Organisation was a well-considered one and there were two reasons for it. Kaul explained, "Most of the blind people were incapable of signing uniformly at a given place. While I could put my signatures on all the cheques, not everybody else had mastered the art of signing."** It was, therefore, not only mandatory for the Treasurer to sign all the cheques, the ultimate responsibility for all the money matters also rested upon her.

NFBG got registered immediately in 1970 and proved to be a historic step in the mobilization of the organized blind in India. **NFBG had no grant and hence, no funds. "We all started contributing in small denominations: 10, 20 or 50 rupees as much as one could afford. The Treasurer, Mrs. Varma, got a receipt book printed for rupee-10 donations and succeeded in collecting small donations from people in the University of Delhi where Prof Varma was working as a lecturer. Rupee-10 was also the membership fee for all those who joined the Organisation."**

The Organisation did not have a very well-defined agenda of activities to be undertaken. There was no office space for quite some time. **As there weren't many activities, the main task remained to**

write representations on behalf of the members regarding their problems and various other issues. One of the representations, for example, was about the need for concessions in the daily transport buses and the Interstate routes.

NFBG used to convene conferences every year and through the regular General Body meetings at the conferences held annually, a sizable number of the educated blind were mobilized into joining the Organisation. Kaul reminisced with a great sense of pride that, **“about 250 blind persons from round the country got involved with NFBG in a very short time.”**

Though the primary agenda of NFBG was advocacy, it also continued with service delivery. Initially, NFBG focused on raising relevant issues with concerned Departments of the Government through letters of request or petitions whenever any issues pertaining to the blind were brought to attention. But the Organisation was also very keen to start service delivery projects. The big hitch here was the non-availability of funds. There were no ongoing projects where NFBG could demonstrate the involvement of a significant number of beneficiaries to attract and motivate donors to come forward and contribute money for new projects. It was definitely a challenge to raise funds for the service delivery projects.

NFBG was fortunate however, as despite its initial struggles, it received international visibility and also recognition. Till 1974, Kaul worked for NFBG from his own residence as the Organisation could not afford exclusive office space. Therefore, the office functioned either from C-20, Model Town where Kaul resided in a rented house or a house in R Block, Model Town, a rather backward area of Model Town where he had to shift for a while. It was here that one day unexpectedly, a couple from the US visited Kaul at his

house. The lady, Joanne Fernandez was a totally blind American woman. However, her husband, Joseph Fernandez, who was Indian, was sighted. **“Our house in R Block was a very humble accommodation comprising of only one room and a very small adjoining room. There were no chairs to offer them to sit. As we were sitting on a charpai (cot) we offered them the same to sit on.”** Kaul had employed a part-time worker to come for 90 minutes a day and help in the clerical work. She was paid Rs. 75 a month. When Joanne and Fernandez arrived, the clerical work was already complete and the letters were being put into envelopes to post. Joanne, who had been introduced to them through Dr. Isabelle L.D. Grant, expressed a wish to have a look at the files of the Organisation. Kaul had no problem with handing over his files. So, he told Joanne to select the files she wished to study. Joanne carried some files with her and studied them over 2 to 3 days.

On her subsequent visit, Joanne told Kaul that she and her husband had visited two organisations in Delhi. Besides NFBG, they had been to the National Association for the Blind which was well staffed with three sighted employees and one blind officer, named C.D. Tamboli. All through the visit, the staff sat with the guests for hours just chatting and doing nothing. While recording her disappointment with NAB, she openly expressed her appreciation for Kaul. She was extremely pleased to observe that Kaul was found busy working at the time of both her visits. She had also examined the files and had found that the files contained proof of solid work being done through representations to various Government bodies that the NFBG had been sending from time to time. She was very optimistic about the successful growth of NFBG, especially as all its work was being managed without any resources. This served as a great morale booster, especially as it had come from someone of a

first world country. During one of the interviews, Kaul quipped in his customary sarcastic tone,¹¹ “As it is, we Indians feel highly honoured and proud if there is patting from any first world country people.”

There had been a growing debate within NFBG and also outside within the blind community, about the rules of membership of the Organisation. Many activists in NFBG were putting pressure that its membership should be open to all the blind irrespective of their educational qualifications. There was also a strong recommendation from Isabelle L.D. Grant to open the membership to all. She had a valid question: if NFBG would espouse the educated blind only, who would represent the interests of the uneducated blind! As a result, at the General Body meeting at Ahmedabad in 1972, the Organisation was opened to all the blind and the word ‘Graduates’ was dropped from the title. From then on, it was called National Federation of the Blind (NFB).

NFB held General Body meetings successfully every year in different parts of the country. In 1972, it was held in Gujarat, in 1973 in Pune and the one in 1974, in Delhi. In 1976 it was held in Jaipur and that was the one that was perhaps the most successful. It was attended, among others, by the President of the International Federation of the Blind and some representatives from Germany.

The Organisation progressed smoothly as there was no clash of interests among the founding members. Most of the founders were very committed and accomplished people. Kaul mentioned the names of some of the founder members of NFB, “Mr. P.P. Subramaniam was a school teacher and was a well-recognised leader of the blind in Southern India. Similarly, Jagdish Patel was a highly respected figure among the blind in Gujarat. Prof. Ved Prakash Varma was a Lecturer in the University of Delhi. So, such were the

people who joined us in the Organisation. To start with, Krishna Varma, Prof. Varma's wife, joined as our Treasurer. Later, Govind Prasad Bansal and B.D. Dave, a leading industrialist joined as our treasurer.”

As NFB became more and more visible, it started receiving decent funding too. Without ample funds, the annual General Meetings would not have been possible. By 1974, NFB had succeeded in establishing its own office in a rented building at Paharganj. It was a big jump from the one-and-a-half room set in Model Town to an eight-room office in Paharganj. Soon the Organisation got a property of almost 500 yards in Bahadurgarh, Haryana. A building was successfully raised on that property where NFB started a Braille library and a Braille transcription unit. NFB managed to get a grant from Austria to set up a recording studio. In addition, it received a donation of 250 cassette recorders. The Organization had taken off by now and the work started progressing.

By 1978, NFB had 8 well established branches in states of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and cities like Ahmedabad, Aligarh, Ajmer and Dehradun, etc. Kerala Federation of the Blind and National Federation of the Blind of Maharashtra became its affiliates.

One of the major issues, NFB was advocating for, in the 1970s, was a demand for reservation in C and D category jobs of the Government of India. At that stage, most of the members of NFB qualified for the jobs under these two categories only. There were very few candidates qualifying for the primary A and B categories. Maintaining practicality, the demand for reservation was confined to C and D categories only. “With the support of Lal Advani who was a part of the Government structure and with our consistent effort, we finally succeeded in having an executive order issued on 4th November, 1977 for 3% reservation for the disabled in the C and

the D categories of the Government jobs.” It was the result of a long and persistent effort launched during his leadership that this path breaking achievement became possible for the Organisation. It was the result of a long-drawn struggle that started way back in 1972. Even during the time of various protest movements in 1972 and 1973, this was raised as a major demand. Kaul and his team were constantly interacting with the Government officials and forwarding their representations on the issue all through the years till the demand was finally conceded in 1977.

NFB also started a leadership programme and held it consecutively from 1974 to 1976 at Dehradun, Kashmir and Mount Abu respectively. In a week-long workshop, the attendees were introduced to the organisational qualities for leadership. They were trained in topics like how to register an organisation, the nature of executive council, conducting fund raising and other similar topics. The resource persons were members like Ved Prakash Varma, A. K. Mittal and Gopal Vadegaonkar--an authority on International Laws and some others. NFB also brought out a training manual, containing information regarding how to manage an association. This was a constructive educational programme towards self-development and hence, self-advocacy.

Chapter 10

The End of the Road: Break from NFB

Most leaders, who are pioneers in their field, launch their journey to fulfil the mission of their life with a sense of great optimism and aspiration. However, life goes through its own twists and turns and just as it happens among common people, leaders also have to go through their fair share of frustrations and disappointments in life. This is what happened to Kaul, a forerunner of self-advocacy movement of the blind in India. Despite scant resources and ample challenges on all fronts, Kaul had managed to lay the foundation of NFB. Never in his wildest of dreams had he imagined that the Organization which he nurtured from its inception would soon be out of his control once it started growing up. Having had eight highly constructive and productive years of nurturing from 1970 to 1978, he and the other founding members shared a great sense of satisfaction and fulfilment from its accomplishments in such a short duration. Kaul had succeeded in making it the largest self-advocacy and, to some extent, a service delivery Organization in India. Now suddenly he was beset with a threat from the same young generation of leadership whom he himself had groomed. Santosh Kumar Rungta was one of these young activists, who were trained in the leadership programme that NFB had launched to develop skills of managing an organization. Neither Kaul nor his close associates from the first generation of leadership had anticipated that someone like Rungta, who had been encouraged to be elected as the Secretary of the NFB to inspire and involve the young generation and create a wide base in the Organization would soon become a threat to the power and position held by the senior leadership of NFB, particularly Kaul himself.

There was no conflict of interest among the founding members

because, in Kaul's opinion, they were very committed and accomplished people. But NFB, which had no resources or money in the initial years had succeeded in mobilizing plenty of resources and money and thus causing a base for conflict by 1978. While hardly anyone was initially interested to work in developing the Organization except a few dedicated and selfless pioneers who extended their support to Kaul, many had now their eyes on the resources of the Organization and the clout it had acquired by the mid-1970s.

Kaul has been quite proud of the people who worked with him during the formative years of NFB. For him, they were all quite accomplished although they were living in times of scant resources and highly prejudiced attitude towards the blind. While the main accomplishment of NFB during this period was mobilization of resources, Kaul had also initiated the process of self-advocacy. They were successful in getting the first landmark legal provision for ensuring jobs for the disabled through an Executive Order issued in November, 1977. **“While trying to manage resources for promoting educational and employment opportunities for the blind, we did try to lobby for reservation in jobs from time to time. But you know, nothing happens overnight and hence, the issuance of this order was definitely the result of a long drawn out struggle that we were carrying out. We started the campaign for a legal provision ensuring jobs for the blind in government services as early as in 1972-1973. Even this was one of the major demands, during the time of two-day long hunger strike at boat club and the use of strategy of shoe polishing, which was organized by us under the banner of NFB at that time. Then, we definitely continued pursuing this matter and met the government officials from time to time and gave our representations to the government regarding this demand. This is**

how after prolonged process of representations and requests to the Government of India; our demand was finally conceded and the executive order for 3% reservation **in ‘C’ and ‘D’ categories of jobs** in Central Government Services and Public Undertakings was issued in November 1977. That was before the new leadership could engage itself in any kind of advocacy after taking over the power in 1978.”

While Kaul defended the position of early leadership and rejected the accusation of his opponents for not engaging in advocacy, he was also clear that philosophy alone does not bake bread and it was very important to mobilize resources to promote services for the educational and employment opportunities of the blind. Hence, it was the result of his efforts that NFB had, by now, mobilized enough resources, and its impressive annual General Body meetings were garnering extra attention and vested interests. He believed that it was perhaps the same seemingly ample availability of easily accumulating resources that ironically made some ambitious persons launch a campaign against him and the other leaders of his **generation to wrest power from their hands**, “A well-considered campaign was launched to mislead the young blind members by creating an impression that we were not focused on advocacy for employment and it was no longer on our agenda. But we were not much bothered with this kind of a campaign as, we thought, actions speak louder than the words and we were quite confident that our actions would speak for us. In our opinion, we had already achieved a lot and expected that people would appreciate our accomplishments and they would, accordingly, vote for us in the following elections **to be held during the General Body Meeting.**”

What went wrong leading to disastrous consequences?

The unemployed blind youth of those days were getting frustrated

and desperate in the absence of opportunities for employment, a reality that the leadership of NFB failed to comprehend. Although **the order for reservation in the 'C' and 'D' categories of jobs in the Central Government Services and Public Undertakings** was finally realized in 1977, a year before Kaul was ousted from the leadership of the NFB, he and the other leaders perhaps failed in convincing them regarding their efforts to ensure employment opportunities. Nor could they convince the youth that the senior leadership was actually creating a support system to enable them to pursue requisite higher education for white collar jobs smoothly and efficiently.

Obtaining a sizable number of cassette recorders, the most beneficial means of self-education, texts and other relevant books in Braille, efforts to establish a modern Braille press: all of these were, undoubtedly, major steps towards their final goal of preparing the youth for white collar jobs. Where the senior leadership missed the point, as Kaul himself conceded, was that it overlooked the need to reach out to this group of younger generation to make them aware about their achievements. They assumed that their actions would speak for.

It was unimaginable for Kaul that someone like Rungta, the senior leadership's own prodigy, would become a challenge to their stronghold over the Organization. Hence, in a classic case of **miscalculation and misunderstanding, Rungta's campaign** was brushed aside and taken lightly and with complacency, Kaul and his associates fixed Kanpur to be the venue of the annual General Body meeting and the elections to be held as a part of that meeting in 1978. They rather thought that it would be advantageous to hold elections there as two important position holders of NFB namely, Mahendar Rastogi and Rungta, were from Kanpur. Rastogi was then holding

the position of Public Relations Officer. Likewise, Rungta was then already holding the position of Secretary of the NFB and it was hoped that his social base, comprising his family and friends in that city, would be helpful in facilitating the holding of the General Body meeting and conducting the elections smoothly. This decision of holding elections in Kanpur, however, proved to be a blessing for Rungta and was perhaps a blunder made by Kaul and his friends as **Kanpur happened to be not only Rungta's native place, but also the place where he pursued his undergraduate studies and had a fan following.** He had a wide base among the sighted youth of his college who, perhaps, played an important role in manipulating the situation in his favour and, as Kaul claimed, in sabotaging the elections.

Kaul is of the opinion that Rungta and his close associates succeeded in getting the atmosphere vitiated by creating conditions leading to anarchy and chaos. There were 250 registered members of NFB who were legitimate participants in the election. But Rungta got additional 100 badges printed and succeeded in getting additional 100 illegal participants smuggled in, whereas the arrangement for boarding and lodging was geared to accommodate 250 members only. As a result, there was mismanagement and chaos at the time of allotting accommodation and distribution of food. The simmering discontentment burst at the time of election. Before the elections for the post of General Secretary (the position being contested by Kaul and Rungta) could take place, there was a pandemonium as people began to physically assault each other, fight and throw furniture around. Fearing harm, Kaul and many others left the venue to save themselves. Kaul believed that perhaps Rungta had hired some people to sabotage the elections. Some of those even chased him right up to the railway station. Fortunately, they did

not know Kaul personally and so inquired from him where Kaul was. Because of their unfamiliarity with him, he succeeded in misleading them by saying that the train to Delhi had already left and Kaul had gone too. Hence, Kaul and the family, which included his wife and young son, were safely able to return. Such was the severity of that life threatening incident.

The pertinent question here would be who these people were among the supporters of Rungta who succeeded in disrupting the election **and creating mayhem. According to Kaul, “there were also some of them from among those 250 who were officially registered. Some of them may have been from Maharashtra and even Gujarat, but most of them were these young people from Kanpur who were newly recruited. They were those members and relatively younger people who did not have an experience of working with us earlier. But most of the educated members, who were either the founding members or who were associated with us for a long time, were still very much with us.”**

Once people returned to Delhi, Rungta and his comrades took over the office in Delhi claiming that Rungta was now the legitimate and duly elected General Secretary of NFB and the authority was now owned by him. The General Secretary of NFB is the Executive Head with all real powers basically vest in him. Kaul and his comrades, however, refused to accept the legitimacy of that election as they argued that the elections were not completed as the chaos that took place during the election for the post of General Secretary disrupted the proceedings of the election. There had been no counting of votes and following the chaos and departure of most people from the venue, Rungta had unilaterally declared himself to be the elected General Secretary. Because the proceedings of the elections had not been completed, the presumed election had no validity and,

therefore, Kaul was still authorized to function as the General Secretary of NFB till the election was held again. Rungta could only work as an acting General Secretary till the election to be held in 1980.

It is important to assess these developments in the larger political context of the Nation. By the mid-1970s, North India was witnessing major socialist movements led by leaders like Jai Prakash Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia, who were inspiring the youth to fight against the anti-democratic practices of the Government in power in those days. The anti-emergency movement brought almost all the political forces in opposition to the Government to get together to fight against the imposition of emergency and suspension of democracy. Finally, the Congress party lost hold and, for the first time, a non-Congress alliance formed Government at the Centre in Delhi in 1977. A culture of political resistance was in the atmosphere particularly in the Hindi states. It influenced the frustrated and desperate educated blind youth, particularly from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, and Haryana, who were capitalized by the emerging leadership championed by Santosh Kumar Rungta to challenge the then leadership of Kaul.

Aftermath of Kanpur fiasco, a phase of trauma and struggle

Rungta pursued his bachelor's degree in Law from the University of Delhi where Prof. Ved Prakash Varma was a highly respected blind Professor in the Department of Philosophy. Kaul claimed that upon **Professor Varma's advice, Rungta had relented and could have** perhaps even stepped down had there been some pressure from the men of influence. Another person who could have perhaps played a crucial role in this matter, was Lal Advani, who was considered to be the most important figure in the field of disability in those days. He was the one who had helped Kaul and his colleagues in drafting

the constitution of NFB at the time of its founding. He was holding a very senior position in the Government of India and was the key figure in deciding the provision of grants to the non-governmental-organizations.

Kaul is of the opinion that had Advani really wished to make Rungta **step down, he would have succeeded. But to Kaul's utter** disappointment, Advani perhaps did not make serious efforts in this direction, whatever might be his reasons.

A humiliating experience of the kind that Kaul went through during his last visit to the office of NFB after the Kanpur fiasco, would be difficult for anyone to bear and it was bound to be heart breaking, particularly, for someone like Kaul who gave his blood and sweat to the building of the Organization and had managed to create that office for it. So, this was a very painful and stressful period for Kaul. He had led a public life for almost a decade by then, and having a strong inclination to work for the blind, the community that he always strongly identified with, it was not possible for him to become a recluse. Hence, in no way could he have distanced himself from public life and be content with routine life. The Executive Secretaryship of the East Asia Committee of IFB and the family life had limited involvement for him and this had been the case right from the beginning when he came to Delhi. Gradually, as the break with the NFB became final and all possibilities of continuation were ruled out, Kaul tried to become a part of some other established organizations that were engaged in service delivery in Delhi or Punjab. He recollected painfully that he got disappointing response from the organizations that he approached with a request to join them and that is how he was left with no choice but to start a new organization.

It was not easy to accept the fact that he was redundant to the

Organization in which he was in a position of power and decision making and which was primarily the baby he had nurtured. For this very reason, Kaul decided to contest election for the position of General Secretary again during the following scheduled elections in 1980. He had been encouraged by his friend, Mittal and some other close allies to do so. Dirty politics was again on its job. While nominations for both Kaul and Mittal were posted together through registered post, the NFB office declared that there was only one from Mittal. He again sent two nomination forms to the President of NFB, Mr. Sadhan Chandra Gupta, who was residing in Calcutta, in which he also enclosed the receipt of the earlier registered post. Gupta finally approved his nomination.

But during this time, Kaul and Mittal were thinking hard on the whole situation. They finally concluded that the vitiated atmosphere and the increasing influence of Rungta and his comrades in NFB, would not let them work even if they succeeded in getting in somehow. They suspected that Rungta and his associates would always try to obstruct the smooth functioning of the organization. So, finally, Kaul decided to leave NFB forever and started thinking on alternative lines. Thus, Kaul soon embarked upon a new journey of his life within two years of his exit from NFB and he set up All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB).

His torture did not end with the loss of leadership of the **Organization. He used to get harassing calls from NFB's office** phone abusing and threatening him and his family members in a routine manner and at times, he had to seek police protection too. This went on till the time he succeeded in establishing AICB well and the Organization started growing by the mid-1980s. Fearing any kind of attack on him or his family members, he also developed a self-defence mechanism--**Finally I resolved to deal with this**

situation with my own strategy. Of course, we used to keep our doors closed because we live in the market area. I got a big box of red chilli powder and told my family members that if anyone came with any kind of threatening idea, they should throw the red chilli powder in their eyes.”



Delegation of AICB, under the leadership of J.L. Kaul, meeting the then Prime Minister of India – Late Shri Rajiv Gandhi

In addition to these routine calls, the most torturous and humiliating experience which happened to be perhaps the worst and the most painful memory of his life in those days was the incident caused by the young students studying in JPM school located in the premises of the Blind Relief Association. As the Executive Secretary of East Asia Committee of IFB, Kaul had his office in one of the rooms of the Blind Relief Association. One day, the young blind students of the Blind School entered his office and put around his neck, a garland made with shoes. They also raised defamatory slogans against him to chase him from there.

It is an irony that A.K. Mittal, who was Kaul's comrade and perhaps his best friend, who always stood by him in his social and political journey, also happened to be the principal of that school. Despite that neither he nor the school staff could come forward to his protection. That was perhaps so because the incident happened in a sudden and unexpected way and was spontaneous in nature. However, even in the long-term, the school administration did not take any disciplinary action against the culprits. They might have feared that any kind of strict disciplinary action against those boys, who in Kaul's opinion were instigated by Rungta, could have a wave of revolt under Rungta's leadership against the school administration. As mentioned in Preface 11, several educational institutions for the blind in Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh were a victim of the failure of administration, leading to a situation of anarchy and chaos due to students' violent revolt. That had become the common culture of some of these institutions, and the administration of the JPM School too, feared some sort of violent reaction if the boys were taken to task.

When this incident took place, Kaul was on deputation from his Delhi Government job and was working as the Executive Secretary of the East Asia Committee of International Federation of the Blind. This incident and the fear of its repetition compelled Kaul to shift the office of the Committee to his rented humble accommodation in Model Town. First, he sued these young boys, but as he calmed down, he later withdrew the law suit and forgave the boys as he realized that they were innocent in their own ways. They were too young to be able to plan all this on their own and were incited to do so. He mentioned in Reminiscences that thinking of that incident makes him feel like crying even now. He could never get over the hurt it caused him.

Kaul, however, survived the hurt and trauma this sad incident

caused. He was intensely engaged in the work of East Asia Committee of the IFB while he slowly started preparing for the establishment of AICB over the next two years during 1979 and 1980. AICB started with a humble beginning but kept on growing (Chapter 11). NFB, on the other hand, faced severe financial crisis and there used to be times when their employees had to wait even for six months to get their salary paid. This kind of condition of scarcity continued with NFB and they really had to struggle for their survival till late 1990s.

Certainly, Kaul's ousting from the leadership of NFB was very painful and humiliating and had affected him badly. But perhaps, it was also a blessing in disguise. He did not lose the battle of life to despondency and defeat. He built up a new organization, All India Confederation of the Blind, and made it stand on its own feet in a short span of less than a decade. This time, he and his fellow founding members of AICB could plug and prevent the mistakes they had made earlier. He thus continued to contribute to empowering the blind people through his hard work, honesty and dedication in an organized and sustained manner throughout his life. **Looking back, he now has no regrets. He concludes, "Recollecting now, I think it was perhaps a blessing in disguise that I got out of NFB; otherwise, maybe it would have been a lifelong struggle to work with those people. So, I feel whatever God does, it is all for our betterment. While I did feel disturbed and mentally tortured, I kept myself busy and was able to get over it soon. I had a realisation that it is better to get over it and move on in life rather than being worried about what goes on in the office of NFB. Once I left NFB I decided to let it go completely and did not make any effort to join it again nor did I challenge the incomplete election of 1978 in the court."**

Chapter 11

The Unrelenting Kaul and the Formation of the All India Confederation of the Blind

The unexpected turn of events, the sudden ouster from NFB and the fall from the pedestal of unquestioned respect and idolization—all of this left Kaul suddenly anchorless and directionless. Though thoroughly grounded, practical and pragmatic, for Kaul, this removal was unforeseen and hence, shocking. He could not have been totally unaware of the wily strategies and underground schemes readying themselves for explosion at the 1978 elections of the NFB; but he had either too much faith in his own credibility or was rather too helpless to handle any toppling in the structures of the Organization to ward, counter or neutralise mass appropriation of NFB.

There could be multiple perspectives to analyse the 1978 fiasco. The founders and the other senior members of NFB, who had established, developed and nurtured the Organization according to their own ideologies and beliefs, faced serious challenges to their priorities. With a much larger membership of the blind from all over India with different orientations, education levels and requirements, the original plans and goals were now being debated. This was a rational questioning of the causes of the debacle. Another important reason was a power struggle that had been brewing gradually in the Organization. Many more educated, leadership aspirants had come into the fray who were not only ambitious for positions in the Organisation, but were also dissatisfied with the rather slow and formal way of the functioning of the existing office bearers. Their time and role and manner of functioning was old, obsolete and out of use by then. This younger generation of enthusiasts was more rebellious and impatient than before and wanted to make the

struggle a matter of rights. The struggle between the two kinds of approaches and the manner of working evolved from two fundamentally opposite schools of thinking, but the clash was a systematic historical process which was bound to take place at some point of time. The ideological shifts reflected the general mainstream restlessness too.

In his early 30s by then, with a secure government job and a decade of dedicated contribution to self-advocacy and service programmes for the blind through organisations that he himself had found or managed, Kaul suddenly found himself unwanted and purposeless. This was a disaster and he was in a state of shock. On deputation from his government job to serve as the Executive Secretary of the East Asia Committee of International Federation of the Blind, he had a lot of time at his disposal. The job did not necessitate much involvement. This could be the end of the road for him if he did not proactively seek participation. He must bounce back. And that he did. He approached several NGOs. He told them that he was now free and had practical experience of work of nearly 8 years in NFB. He was also on deputation from his government job and could therefore offer quality time to the organisations. But at all places, Kaul found reluctance to take him in. They avoided him and discouraged him and would not give a proper answer. **The Delhi Branch of NAB was rather small then. Kaul said, “Everybody in Mumbai and Delhi, including C.D. Tamboli, who looked after the Delhi Branch, felt threatened by me and tried to avoid me.” Kaul wasn’t left with much choice if he were to have meaningful space in the disability field, except create and develop new spaces and begin afresh.**

What propels a person to seek the adventure of new risks if lures of lucrative gains and benefits are missing? Surely, Kaul was not in

search of a solid money-spinning N GO to help fill his own pockets. His bare spartan unassuming life proves otherwise. He could have easily lived a relaxed normal life with the ease of a comfortable and secure government job, following a routine typical life course followed by a majority of people: timely retirement, the ensuing benefits and a slow entry into the twilight of life. Is it then an urge for name and recognition, applause and appreciation that makes people leave their cosy cocoons and invite the rigours of social exposure and open antagonism? Observing Kaul, neither of these two motives seems to fit his restlessness in the late 1970s. Having worked relentlessly and untiringly in one organization after another, building and establishing some of them and protecting and saving them when they began to flounder, Kaul was like a trade unionist who had to have a union to establish, nourish and develop like a baby of his own. It was his primary mission, occupation and **hobby. It doesn't mean that** the organisations that he gave life to were mere play toys for him; he had invested in them with his own convictions and beliefs. How could he now accept a life of purposelessness, a lack of passionate mission and want of overpowering schedules of activities and tasks; how could he come to terms with a vacant future and a gnawing emptiness? The only path available to him was to launch a new organisation with the same objectives that he and his like-minded friends were wedded to. Some of them, like him had left NFB or were bypassed by the new regime of NFB. Once again, A. K. Mittal and Kaul met to confront the situation. Both of them felt strongly that they had to start a new organization of their own. As soon as they made up their minds and assessed their position, Kaul decided to reach out to other like-minded people who had always stood by them and were likely to share their vision. In Indore, he met M. V. Shirdhonkar, a well-known blind activist. Then he stopped at Ahmedabad to meet

Jagdish K. Patel, who was heading *The Blind Men's Association* in Ahmedabad and was a prominent name in the disability field. In Andhra Pradesh, he had meetings with B.V. Reddy and Rehana Ahmad Ali. In Tamil Nadu, he had met P. B. Subramanyam. In Karnataka, he met with B. S. Vasappa, the leader of the Karnataka Welfare Association for the Blind. (Unfortunately, all these pioneers are no longer alive.) In all these meetings and many more, he not only received enthusiastic response and encouraging push for the proposed organisation, but also constructive inputs for its slowly evolving blueprint. By the time he returned to Delhi, he had a broad but loosely drafted framework for the organisation which now required chiselling and critical examination to develop a strong Constitution, within which to function.

Having burnt their fingers once, as they thought, in turning NFBG into NFB and opening its doors to the entire blind community irrespective of their education and background, and now stepping cautiously, the activists who got together this time, put on board certain ground rules. It was decided to keep the membership selective and to keep control over the granting of membership in the new Organization. In order to achieve this, they resolved to include, among the founding members, only those persons who in their common wisdom appeared to be mature, educated and rational and had a track record of sincerity and dedication. As a confederation, All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB) was meant to be different, both structurally and functionally from the earlier NFB. AICB was supposed to be an organisation that would have affiliates: such organisations and associations of the blind with like-mindedness and without conflict. AICB would not have individual memberships and this way personal whims, aspirations and vested interests were taken care of. The founding members representing

their mother organisations had control over the entire membership process. With the Constitution framed, it became easier to identify organisations with similar views, programmes and agendas.

The first Central Executive Committee meeting of AICB was held on March 9, 1980; but it could get officially registered only on **September 12, 1980** as the '*All India Confederation of the Blind*' when the Certificate of Registration was issued to them. AICB had 10 founding members. Nine out of the 10 members who joined as the founding members of AICB passed away gradually over time except Kaul, who has actively and dedicatedly steered the Organization to its present form. Bound by the primary rule of the Organization, the only member who has the right to nominate a new member is now Kaul. When the last founding member, Mr. M. V. Shirdhonkar passed away, Kaul nominated a young man, Sachit Saihrawat, to take his place. Kaul mentioned that to overcome the crisis that would someday arise, as there would be no founding members to have the right to nominate members, the General Assembly of AICB would have to amend the rules. The man who gathered people around him to establish AICB in 1980 seems to have the providential responsibility to see it through. During the interview, Kaul commented light heartedly, "This may happen before I die or may be after I am gone. Perhaps God wants me back in heaven soon to found a federation there too." And he laughed. He Added, "I am just trying to make myself more important." Often cynical and sometimes sarcastic, Kaul gave occasional glimpse of the sunny side of his personality.

Though technically, AICB was conceived, planned and executed by a group of like-minded people, it was in every sense of the term, **Kaul's creation. It was his personal need to not let his experience of nearly 8 years in NFB turn futile. The personal need to occupy**

himself once again meaningfully, involved a larger desire to utilize that experience into projects that needed to be implemented. One of the rooms at his residence at C-20, Model Town, Delhi, once again, got transformed into the first office of AICB, where the first meeting took place and the Constitution was approved with minor changes. It was there that 10 representative men and women from the disability field with high credibility and years of social contribution to the community, were selected as founders of AICB. It may not be an exaggeration to claim that if Kaul had not displayed the itch to set up the Organization, it would not have existed; at least not in this form and dimension.

While speaking about AICB and recalling his journey of 42 years in AICB, Kaul mentioned the many hurdles that he and his associates had to face. It cannot be denied that to start any organization, you require first of all, a basic fund to acquire at least the very rudimentary infrastructure. The issue of space was resolved with **Kaul's own rented house, but there was hardly any money to buy** even file covers and stationery. The blind community, being by and large hand to mouth and earning only meagre amounts as chair-caners, with no reservations and incentives in sight, could barely contribute a minor membership fee of AICB. The corpus of the membership fee could not have sustained AICB. The major impetus came with the solid financial support from Sheikh Abdul Alghanim of the Royal family of Saudi Arabia who donated ten thousand dollars into the accounts of AICB. Sheikh Alghanim had been the President of the IFB and later that of the WBU. This contribution put AICB in a position to initiate its programmes and activities and **Kaul's vision got wings.**

AICB today has an impressive building in an easily approachable part of Delhi with sufficient space to run its activities and provide

decent accommodation and boarding to college going young blind women. It also has well-developed office blocks, conference rooms, a Braille library and advanced Braille production machinery. Surely, this could only be possible as funds in support came from various national and international organisations. But the trust and confidence that AICB could generate in its over 40 years of existence was the result of the unquestionable integrity, honesty and commitment of one man: Jawahar Lal Kaul. In 1987, when AICB organized an international conference, Dr. Rajender T. Vyas from National Association for the Blind commented, “How can this ‘loha kutne wala’ (literally one who pounds iron, being a typist) organize such a magnificent conference!” Kaul, who had been an accomplished typist by profession and was, therefore, called a ‘loha kutne wala’ had astonished everyone with the great success of this international conference.



Receiving second time Best Braille Press Award from the then President of India

Chapter 12

Wife Usha and the family life

Are marriages made in heaven? Is one's companion to be in marriage predetermined and born and nurtured somewhere in the world as a part of a divine scheme? Whether it is true or not, it is useful to nurture this belief as it comes handy to both, individual and social set up. When the right kind of indicators point to a particular match, there is not much justification in refusing the alliance. All terrestrial forces begin to support the celestial ones to make the match work. There is also the right amount of romance in this unknown and mysterious enigma who may or may not be the perfect person of dreams. And then, such alliances cannot be broken lightly because of the sacred stamp of approval on them. This is how the order of the universe is maintained and this is how largely, the bricks of our social institutions remain in place.

Kaul and his wife Usha's marriage of nearly fifty-five years also has all their investments in this alliance. Their respect for it has been complete and unquestioning. Both wanted companions who were like them: without sight. This was rather unusual as the blind community desires for companions who are able bodied and can **support them to make their life's journey easier and complete.** It is true that such companionship is hard to find unless the sighted person is so much in love with the blind person that his/her disability becomes insignificant. Such considered choices accompanied with idealistic determination have most likely been made more by able bodied women than men. Such choices may be determined by sentiments of pure love or a sense of sacrifice and social commitment: both the sentiments are sometimes inherent in such relationships. In the cases of Kaul and Usha, the possibilities of such marriages existed, but Usha firmly refused to marry a sighted

person. There was a **visible dichotomy in the stance of Kaul's family**. If their son was to marry, he should marry a sighted girl only. And yet there was least effort to look around for a possible alliance despite the fact that Kaul was not only pleasant in appearance but also a well-educated person. Adding insult to this injury was the **family's open search for a bride for the son second in line by seniority**. He was being bypassed definitely. Kaul not only refused to entertain any such match making but also turned away from his family and did not visit them for years out of annoyance.

Usha (Lekhi), was one of seven siblings with five other sisters and a brother. The 5th child of her parents, Amar Chand Lekhi and Kaushalya Lekhi, she was not born a disabled child. Her father worked in the army and her mother was a professional nurse. Due to an accidental fall, the father had to quit the army and start a shop for subsistence. The mother had been a qualified nurse but did not pursue the occupation when the family resided in Lahore. After **moving to Punjab and after her husband's changed circumstances**, she too began to work. As the mother had a transferable job, the family frequently moved from place to place. Never very easy on resources and barely managing for its needs, the family very well knew the value of education. Her father, therefore, insisted that each child must complete the requisite education to be able to get a job and earn a livelihood. This was a fairly advanced approach in the times when the education of a girl child was rarely a concern in North India. Consequently, all the sisters were reasonably educated **from matriculation to graduation**. **"The idea was to make us financially independent. It was not the degree that mattered. It was to make sure that we had the qualification to choose a source of earning in life. Only after being financially independent did, we all get married as this was the wish of our parents."** ¹

Usha was born in Hoshiarpur, Punjab in 1946. She lost her vision

when she was barely one year old as a result of unforgivable and irrevocable human negligence. Her mother took baby Usha to an eye specialist as her eyes looked red. The doctor, who was deeply inebriated, washed her eyes with acid instead of cleaning them with a suitable medicine. **“He was drunk and instead of using a suitable medicine for my eyes, it was an acid bottle that he had with him from which he actually poured acid in my eyes. I kept crying, while my mother put a bandage on it and the next day when she opened the bandage, she saw there was a lot of blood in the eyes. She went to the doctor again.”**² The Doctor apologized and expressed regrets, but the harm was done and the child had lost her vision forever. The parents did not sue the doctor; practical as they were and also hard to mouth, they did not want to waste their money on legal battles. The eyes could not be retrieved and the hard-earned money was **required for the children’s education, a more beneficial cause. In a lot of cases, blindness has been a result of factors beyond human control, but Usha’s blindness was a result of tragic and unforgivable human mistake.** However, Usha did not harbour or communicate any rancour or self-pity when she described the tragic incident. She neither blamed anyone nor wished for vision in her eyes. Having lost it very early in her life, she had seen only one kind of life and was quite comfortable with it, like many other blind persons who are so reconciled with their sightless world that they remain content with mental strength and steadfastness.

Usha did not speak much about her childhood and the formative years of her early life. With time, memories might have faded; it seems she lived more in her present than in the past.

“I went to the missionary school in Dehradun and after that I completed two years of training in Dehradun itself in the Government Centre of the Blind, which is a part of National Institute of the Blind (NIVH) now.” Usha was with her family in

Punjab when she saw Khandelwal's advertisement offering jobs to blind candidates in Delhi. There was a wedding in the family and the family wanted her to stay back, yet Usha insisted on going to Delhi immediately. The significance of a job and being self-reliant, which had been instilled in her by her far-sighted and perceptive parents, made her take a stand that she must go to Delhi and not miss this opportunity that had come her way. When she received support from one of the sisters, the family at last gave in. The family helped her to board a train with an understanding that she would be received at the Delhi railway station by someone from the Centre, (TRCB). But there was no one awaiting her when she got off at the station. She confidently hired an auto for Lajpat Nagar, from where the Centre was operating and reached her destination.

At the Centre, she was immediately taken in as an instructor to teach the making of handicraft items, as she had her training in the same field at Dehradun. She started her job from the very next day of her arrival. This is where Kaul and Usha worked side by side and their marriage plan was formulated and executed. Was it a love marriage or a marriage of convenience—that is hard to say. Usha said in her interview, “Actually Kaul Saheb had wanted to marry me for quite some time and had also tried to probe how his own family would respond to this match. Since the family opposed his marrying a blind girl, he felt disappointed.”⁴ Desire and beliefs seemed to work hand in hand; this was also perhaps a manifestation of love. Ostensibly, Usha's mother asked Khandelwal for the names of some eligible boys and Kaul was chosen from among them as a rather ‘nice boy’. Usha's Cousin, P. N. Lekhi (later a famous Supreme Court legal luminary whose daughter-in-law, Meenakshi Lekhi is a current Union Minister) advised them to perform some basic ceremonies, while he took it upon himself to complete all legal formalities and to get the marriage registered. That is how this only one of its kind

marriages was solemnized in the most extraordinary way in front of the most unexpected guests: journalists and of course some family members and friends. The marriage took place with an exchange of **garlands but without the sacred 'pheras' around the holy fire.**

The couple started their married life at C-20, Model Town, which was also used as an office and residential accommodation for the blind. They have continued to reside in the two-room unassuming apartment till date. Except for a few years during which they moved into a government allotted accommodation in Gulabi Bagh, they have lived, managed and raised their only son in this very house.

It is true that Kaul was frugal by nature and had a straight, one point programme in life: to act for the benefit of the blind community. But Usha, his wife, could have had other needs and aspirations and this could have led to mutual disagreements, pressures and conflicts. In the interviews conducted with both of them, sometimes in the presence of each other and sometimes separately, it was interesting to note that they often corroborated each other and Kaul supported and validated whatever Usha said about their relationship. Kaul had no interest in the household work and he did not participate at all in any manner in their family or her personal life. He had a life outside the family threshold and that was his organisation and his **social work. Their child's upbringing and the nitty-gritty** of the household were her responsibilities and she had to manage them without his assistance. At the time of their marriage, Kaul put down **a condition to Usha, "We will have only one child because with our limited resources, we can give our best to only one child."** So, the question of having a second child never arose between them. Although a woman with her own mind and fairly self-reliant, Usha chose to play the role of a passive and silent wife and acquiesced with Kaul in every matter.

Kaul's family got to know about the marriage from the press reports and from the documentary on their marriage that had been shown in cinema halls prior to the main movie. Accepting the reality of the step taken, they soon started approaching him for a reconciliation and to re-establish ties with him. Kaul, however, was angry, bitter and adamant and for a long time he did not step into his house in Banihal. The family then tried to rebuild bridges through Usha, their daughter-in-law. **Kaul's mother and sister came to his place all the way from Kashmir to take her home with them; but Kaul refused to allow her to go.** The news of her pregnancy intensified **the family's efforts to establish ties again and Kaul's** dacha and chachi (uncle-aunt) came to take Usha home to look after her during her pregnancy. But Kaul would not have any of this; therefore, he refused to send her and made the doctor convince them against the journey in any way. After the birth of the child, Usha persuaded him to finally relent and accept to send them to join the family for a namkaran (naming) ceremony. It was the moral, ingrained value systems and an appeal that he must set up an example of obedience to his own son that finally worked; yet Kaul refused to accompany them at any cost. After the completion of the namkaran ceremony, the family insisted that they should let the child be looked after by them till he was a little older. This suggestion was probably made keeping their disability in mind. But neither Usha nor Kaul accepted this proposal. The family that was earlier opposed to having a blind daughter-in-law at one point, was now insisting on bringing up her child. Usha wanted to return to Delhi but without being rude to her in-laws. She sent a letter to Kaul who, on the pretext of an interview that Usha must attend, got her back in Delhi. Usha, however, stated in her interview that she received a lot of love and regard from her in-laws **and that they remained indebted to her for facilitating Kaul's** return to the family subsequently.

The dynamics of their relationship fell into place on its own, at the outset of their marriage. It was amply and definitely stated by Kaul that he would have no involvement with the management of the household. He was a man of the outside world with his programmes and commitments which he had to pursue. He had his own convictions and targets and he followed them almost rigidly and stubbornly. The functioning of the household was left to the devices of Usha. Whether she was supple enough and trained to look after the daily grind of the household and whether she cherished the role of a home keeper was, in most probability, not considered at all. **Usha said quite candidly and honestly in her interview, “Kaul Saheb had no interest in the household work or in supporting me in the family or personal life in any way.” But she said this without any regret, bitterness or rancour.** It seems she accepted the role that automatically fell into her lap calmly and remained contented and at peace. The house, however, functioned on his principles and values and sometimes eccentricities. How would a woman like Usha with strong views and convictions of her own accept compliance, obedience and tolerance as her primary tools for a happy survival of this marriage! The adjustment process had been almost unilateral; then, how should one reconcile the contradictions between what she stood for and what she followed. Actually, a large section of women not only depend upon marriage as the purpose of life but also prepare themselves to follow **passively their husband’s rulebook.** It was a structured pattern of a specific class; in this case, the middle class, for a long time. But they were not women who would be brought up to stand on their feet and be economically independent and who would strongly decide upon a course of action for **themselves.** **Usha’s reasons were perhaps manifold. Kaul had already established himself as a man of integrity and strong principles and had earned a lot of respect among his colleagues. He had displayed a lot of leadership qualities and was extremely focused on his work. It**

was clear to her that he was so dedicated to his work that anything other than work was waste of time for him. Usha understood the significance of this kind of dedication and idealism and therefore, seeking from him, a diversion from his cause and attention for herself and companionship, were short-time luxuries which she too could not justify. If Kaul did not mould himself to play a 'good' husband, he also did not press her to live as per his choices. Usha was a wise and practical woman who had learnt the lesson that to make a marriage work, one of the partners would have to remain passive and patient and not challenge the relationship for equality. Most important of all, she evolved her own little strategies and tricks to get what she wanted without toppling the cart of marriage.



Left to right: Vineet Kaul (Son), J.L. Kaul, (front line) Usha Kaul (Wife), Shashi Kaul (Daughter -in-law), Siddarth Kaul and Deepanshu Kaul (Grand Sons)

Usha narrated many incidents from their life together to reveal how she managed to steer through her life single-handedly and without **Kaul's support. Their only son, who was named Ashwani by his grandfather and whose name was changed by Kaul to Vineet because it was short in length, maintained that his father did not even know which school he used to attend. The school admission, the school fee and any other matters related with the school automatically became Usha's concerns as Kaul had no time for them. Although she always had someone to accompany her, she used to take care of everything herself. When Kaul initially agreed that Vineet be sent to a private school, she went for his admission to Lilavati Vidya Mandir in Shakti Nagar, a private school close to their then home in Gulabi Bagh. It was sheer merit that got Vineet a seat in the school. The seats were full and the principal had expressed her regrets, but Usha managed to convince her to at least test his potential. That day she did not even have money enough to settle the admission fee and other expenses and was helped out by a clerk. By the time Vineet reached class VI, Kaul decided that he should study in a Hindi medium Government School where they would not have to pay tuition fee too. He was adamant that the child should go to the Government School at Ludlow Castle, North Delhi, considered back then as one of the best among the State-run schools. The English medium schools were too demanding for money on some pretext or the other. Without protesting, Usha approached his School for a school leaving certificate, but the principal protested against this decision and offered to exempt Vineet from paying fees as he was a brilliant student. Yet, Usha carried out Kaul's instructions and finalized his admission in the Government School at Ludlow Castle. "I had no choice in the matter; I was helpless. I had great regrets later whenever I visited the school for, I would never find classes being held as the teachers would either be having their tea or would be in the library. I told Kaul Saheb too how**

wrong the decision was to shift Vineet to this school. But nothing could be done now.”⁵

There was only one instance when Kaul was compelled to visit the School as the School had specifically asked for him to visit. Vineet had fared badly and was scared to carry his report card home as he feared his father's fury. To push him to visit the school, Usha arranged that a direct message be sent to her husband so that he was compelled to visit the school. When the Principal informed him how scared his son was of him due to his performance, Kaul affirmed that he would certainly thrash him for not studying enough. But when the principal added that the boy would run away out of fear and that Kaul would lose his son, he promised he would not raise his hand on him. He always kept his word and his son too did not disappoint him. Kaul, sometimes, helped him with his English lessons, but lifting a hand in anger was totally kept out.

Kaul's anger is well-known and has often been a part of the introductory statements made by others about him. However, Usha draws a line between his private and public facets. According to her, there were no fights or serious disagreements between them and hence no bouts of bad temper. He was always calm and quiet. Perhaps he understood that if he crossed the line, Usha would begin to disobey him. But in his public sphere, he was impatient, intolerant and angry. Usha herself saw him losing his temper. The office people would often comment sarcastically, Sir ko kaun see chhakki ka aata khilatehain jo itna gussa aata hai? (What food is being served to him to make him what he is!

The couple's household management has been stereotypically North Indian: Usha claims she has had no idea what Kaul earned and what his monthly salary was. Till date she has been unaware of his financial standing and the pension he receives. He would hand

over a fixed amount of money to her and she would run the household within those limits. He had made it clear at the outset that he did not want her to overspend and expect to live lavishly. But this had rather hard and somewhat comic consequences. In spite of the firm control that Usha imposed on herself, she still had the need for certain essential commodities like a pressure cooker and a fridge. According to her, she kept requesting him for a pressure cooker, but he always turned down her request with the plea that **he preferred the taste of cooking done in a simple sauce pan. “I don’t want a pressure cooker in this house” was his firm reply.** Usha had then to use her simple tricks to get what she wanted. She cooked up a story that someone was trying to get rid of a pressure cooker by selling it dirt cheap. This is how the pressure cooker made its entry into the Kaul household.

The story about the fridge is hilarious. Kaul would never allow a **fridge to be bought.** ‘Hamen ghoda nahin palna hai (we don’t want to pet a horse), he kept saying. Usha requested her sister, Asha, who lived nearby in Kingsway Camp to book a fridge in her own name **and get it delivered at Usha’s house. The fridge arrived without Kaul knowing about it.** The cat was out of the bag when the neighbours congratulated Kaul for acquiring the fridge. A furious Kaul took Usha to task and scolded her for buying a fridge without his permission. Usha was ready with her reply. She had not bought it. It was her sister who had given it to her. What could she do? He was **still very angry. “What will you do with the fridge? Will you put sitafal (pumpkin) in it?” And she quipped, “sitafal or no sitafal, the fridge has arrived now. I am certainly going to use it.”** The fridge had been bought with the little savings she had been making out of **her monthly allowance. She wasn’t working and she had no income** of her own except at the very beginning when she had some currency exchanges with Khandelwal for a short while. A mild

craftiness is used by most non-working women in Indian households when they raise their own piggy banks out of their domestic budgets. Being rather cynically committed to lead a frugal life, when Kaul was resistant to have even a pressure cooker and a refrigerator, no way would he approve of having an air conditioner at home. In his opinion, it was a luxury. When a family friend expressed a desire to gift an air conditioner **to the family on one of Kaul's birthdays** and requested Usha to accept it and let it be a surprise to Kaul, Usha left the matter to be handled by her son, Vineet. She had had a history of strong reactions from her husband on the issues of even small purchases. Vineet informed his father regarding this offer and **tried to convince him with the argument that his mother's 24-hour long stay in their one small room, top floor flat in Delhi's scorching heat** would find some relief, if there were an air conditioner. But Kaul was furious and told his son that he did not want to spoil his **mother's habit as they could not afford such luxuries, even though they were getting it as a gift. His sharp response was "Uska bill kya tera baap bharega? (Who will pay its bill—your father?)"** Their only son, Vineet, **completed his graduation from Delhi University's Shradhanand College.** Not much was being done on the front of **his marriage. However, Vineet's grandparents were interested that he should make a match with a girl from Kashmir. Vineet's friends,** who also began to feel worried about his marriage, registered his name for a match in a nearby temple without letting the parents know about it. In India, the temple organisations also serve as match makers and matrimonial sites in addition to being divine places for worship. Usha got to know about it when she started getting calls from the family of a prospective match. She was shocked initially on how their son could proceed in this direction without taking them into confidence. Vineet then clarified that it was his friend who had taken this initiative on his own. Though reluctant to make an alliance with a non-Kashmiri girl, they let a meeting take place

between Vineet, his aunt and a friend on one hand and the girl and her family on the other. The meeting resulted in Vineet giving his acceptance to the match with Shashi, who belonged to a Punjabi family. He had not waited to seek approval for the match from his parents. The Kauls however, had no problem with his decision. They did not feel offended that their son had not consulted them in the matter. Most Indian parents feel that it is their prerogative to **render approval and put the final stamp on all of their children's** major decisions, particularly, in matrimonial affairs. But the Kauls were clear that so long as Vineet was happy with this decision, they **had no reason to object. Vineet's marriage ceremonies, unlike those** of parents, were elaborate and ceremonial; attended by all the relatives and friends. A special reception had been organized on a separate day so that all the friends from the blind community could attend it and full attention could be paid to them. Though well **qualified with a teachers' training course degree in hand, Shashi had** expressed her reluctance to take up a job unless necessary. This suited Vineet and now they live happily in an independent flat with their two sons. They visit the parents regularly on birthdays and festivals. Kaul visits them at least once a month to spend the night with them, although Usha is unable to do so because of her inability to climb the stairs to reach his top floor accommodation.

In another interview held with Kaul, questions were raised about **Usha's contribution to his life. He admitted that she has had a major** role to play in making it possible for him to channelise his activities. **"If I have escaped giving in to corrupt practices and misuse of office,** it is due to Usha. She is a contented woman and has never pressurized me to provide objects of comfort. She has not bothered me to purchase things which I could not afford out of my humble salary." He explained that **AICB had such a huge turn over** throughout that if one siphoned off even a percent or two out of it,

one would have easily made a sprawling bungalow with it. But he stayed away from such temptations and had a flawless moral character. His integrity and honesty could not be challenged even by the bitterest of his adversaries. Usha's contentment with a simple and frugal way of living, on conditions that were spelt out at the outset by her husband, provided the essential clean terrain on which he could experiment with his idealism.

“Usha did not ever fuss about my being always away from home for most part of the day.” He might not have a salaried job; but he had a growing organisation to look after on a more than full-time basis. He would leave home early in the morning and not return till late in the evening. He would also be travelling out of town for organisational work. This pattern got established immediately after their marriage, but Usha did not demand his attention as she understood his responsibilities and passion for his work. Kaul, therefore, had a peaceful and undemanding companion who would let him have unhampered time and space to meet his goals.

In the interviews that focused on their personal predilections, some interesting views came up from both Kaul and Usha. Kaul confessed to having been attracted to other women in life and did not shy away from accepting that there had been some serious involvements too. He also accepted that age was no bar for romantic involvements or for marriage. His own mentor and ‘guru’ Khandelwal had entered into a third marriage with a 50-year-old woman when he was 75 himself. According to him, Usha always knew about his involvements but chose not to make serious issues out of them. She accepted them as it is natural for anyone to be attracted to others. She was always aware of these angles in their relationship. Her unexpected modern outlook was quite amazing. Equally modern and unanticipated was Kaul's own position to Usha's involvements, if any. He said, **“No! I would have never objected to it. I have never**

expressed curiosity to even know who she is talking to on the phone.” Living on a levelled ground, both of them have maintained a sense of reasonable gender equality between them on all fronts. However, and rather interestingly, he does not consider Usha’s staying at home and not actively joining work as a regressive step. It is not essential to perform jobs outside. There was no stigma in being just a housewife. Usha was happier that way. And why not! And yet in her own way, she was doing a lot of counselling work with those who came to her. She would summon blind women or blind couples, most of whom happened to be alumni of AICB and were passing through troubled times and counsel them to the best of her abilities. This, in itself, was a major social contribution.

On the question of the blind opting for marriages with sighted persons, Kaul and Usha came up with interesting insights. While Kaul confessed that he had no objection to marrying a sighted girl if he had had a choice, Usha gave reasons why the blind girls preferred not to marry sighted men. First of all, such offers don’t come their way and even if they do under extraordinary circumstances, there is a constant fear of being deserted after a while. In rare cases where such marriages have taken place, the husbands are compromised choices who have no standing against their blind spouses. They are mere puppets with inadequate capability to be suitable companions to their wives. There is yet another practical dimension to this idealistic premise: a subconscious fear of the breakdown of such a match and also, of a constant submissive and obliged position for the blind partner. The sense of indebtedness works as a deterrent.

If Kaul had no reservations to marrying a sighted girl and also had a family that desired so, why then did he prefer to marry Usha? Perhaps it was due to mutual attraction between them that had already set in. Usha mentioned having read a letter written by Kaul’s sister in those days dissuading him from marrying a blind girl. The

narrative of their romance and marriage was packed with the features in a typical Bollywood tale of the times: love, romance and sacrifice. In their case, fortunately, the story ended happily.



Receiving the Louis Braille Medal from the outgoing and incoming Presidents of the World Blind Union in November, 2012

Chapter 13

International Recognition

Late Arne J. Husveg was the International Director of the Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted (NABP) and the former first Vice President of the World Blind Union (WBU). When he was on his death-bed in Oslo in 2004, he told his wife, Anne, to send ten thousand dollars to Kaul for AICB. She promptly sent the amount as desired by him with an addition of another ten thousand dollars of her own. An amazing acknowledgement and appreciation of commitment, dedication and honesty, for which no recommendation was required! This was an honour for Jawahar Lal Kaul, higher than any medals or citations!

Kaul's biography would be incomplete if no mention is made of the positions and honours that he received from the luminaries of international blind organizations. Kaul got his first opportunity to represent India at a two-week training programme for the leaders of the blind community, organized by the Swedish Federation of the Blind (SRF) in partnership with the International Federation of the Blind (IFB) and the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB). This programme was held in Kuala Lumpur in 1975. This is where he met the Chairperson of IFB, Pakistan, Dr. Fatima Shah. The self-help movement being in early stages then in Asian countries, IFB had very little presence in these parts.

In 1976, Dr. Fatima Shah was invited to attend the national convention of NFB in Jaipur. A great success with the presence of a large number of delegates from India, the Convention created a platform for the formation of the Asian Arm of IFB. This is where the East Asia Committee of IFB came into existence under the leadership of Lal Advani. This Committee was not able to proceed

much in its programmes as both Lal Advani and Kaul had other engagements and were not in a position to give adequate time to it. Advani was, then, at the peak of his career and was deeply occupied in discharging the duties of his government job. Therefore, on Lal **Advani's** recommendation and pursuance, Kaul managed to get deputation to the East Asia Committee of IFB and in 1977, he became the Executive Secretary of the Committee. He had to look after projects in East Asia and other parts of Asia—New Zealand, Australia, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. This was his first major involvement at the international level and it continued for many years. **Kaul's organizational skills came in full view when he** organized an international event on behalf of the East Asia Committee of IFB in 1978, and managed, among other things, the framing and passing of its Constitution, programmes and making logistic arrangements such as travel, boarding and lodging for the foreign delegates. The stature of the ceremony and that of the Committee was enhanced with the presence of the then Prime Minister of India, Shri Morarji Desai, who was invited to inaugurate the ceremony of the Convention. Representatives from about 10 countries and the office-bearers of IFB added great importance to the success of the Convention. NFB, thus, achieved international exposure and acclaim from the Event.

In the year 2000, A.K. Mittal and Kaul attended the meeting of the World Blind Union held in Melbourne, Australia as the delegates of AICB. In that meeting, it was decided to restructure the Asian Blind Union as one wing of WBU and the different committees of South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia were merged into it. **This meeting was chaired by Mr. Husveg who had been following Kaul's** contribution and had full faith in him. As the most active and

suitable worker to be entrusted with the responsibility of the **Organization, Kaul's name was proposed by him and he was elected** as the first Secretary General of the Asian Blind Union. Mr. Rabani from Pakistan was elected as its President. The challenge in front of the office-bearers was to open ways of communication with people from member countries of the Union, as many of them spoke in only their own language, which was Russian and had no exposure to English. So, they employed a part-time office assistant who knew English. He also translated some of the important documents like the Constitution of Asian Blind Union, Minutes of the meetings, etc. into Russian and Arabic so that all members of ABU could have access to them. These strategies were very useful as they opened up the communication process.

In the year 2003, the Danish Association of the Blind decided to organize a leadership training in Asia. Kaul took the initiative of organizing it in Delhi under his leadership. Interpreters in different languages were provided during this training programme so that the participants could understand and gain from the programme. At the training programme, a three-member Fact Finding Committee was constituted, with Kaul as one of the members. There were many astounding facts that came to light. Some of the communist countries had very well-established structures of the organizations of the blind starting from local level to the top level. During the Soviet era, hardly any blind or disabled person was unemployed. But unfortunately, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the situation had deteriorated.

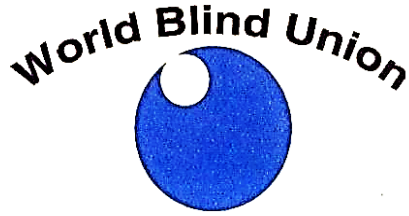
The Organization tried to lend greater support to the new born economies or the new born societies with funds, but, as in the other countries too, the funds would be siphoned off by some people who were shrewd and manipulative. Incidentally, the Asian Blind Union

was one organization, which was not short of money because the Norwegian Association for the Blind and Partially Blind (NABP) was providing a lot of support to it. Kaul remained the Secretary General of ABU till February, 2012.

In 2008, Maryanne Diamond from Australia, who was then the President of the World Blind Union, suggested that one of the strengths of the blind people at the international level was the World Braille Council and that it should be revived. It was decided to revive the World Braille Council and **Kaul's name was proposed for its Chairmanship**. The aim was to revive and encourage Braille at the International level. It was a difficult task to revive the old body and a task of immense responsibility. Although Kaul knew Braille well, he was not a professional in the field of Braille. Despite all **drawbacks, Kaul's handling of the Organization's agenda** was ingenious. A committee of fifteen members from different regions was formed and additionally some representatives from six different regions were included. A.K. Mittal represented the Asian Region and rendered invaluable support to Kaul, who divided the agenda among seven different people and made them in-charge of different activities. This not only got the work divided but also made everyone feel included and respected as a part of the Committee. They also organized a large level international conference in Germany on Braille, which was attended by almost 350 people. It included exhibitions on different aspects of Braille and equipment relating to Braille. The final meeting of the first World Braille Congress was also held in Germany where they tried to combine the results of research on Braille conducted in different parts of the world. Kaul worked on the principle of broad participatory approach and team work. It was an honour for Kaul to address the large solemn gathering at the inaugural session of the Congress. Kaul

left the Congress in 2012, but in the course of those 4 years, he gained immense experience and knowledge about the state of affairs in the world of the blind in different regions of the world. During the period of the functioning of Congress, the Braille Council of India was also constituted in 2008.

Kaul remained meaningfully engaged with international work for more than 40 years. He also received great appreciation for his involvement with the various organizations to which he wholeheartedly contributed. One of the biggest manifestations of that appreciation was the General Assembly of the World Blind Union held in 2008 in Switzerland, where Kaul was granted lifetime membership and that too, in absentia. It was a rare achievement. Subsequently, in 2012, the General Assembly of the World Blind Union at Bangkok not only appreciated his contribution to the visual impairment sector at the international level, but also bestowed on him the prestigious Louis Braille Medal, the highest honour given by an international blindness organization. Kaul was the first on whom this coveted honour was conferred in the group of Asian, African and Latin American countries. While his own country honoured him with the Padma Shri, the fourth-highest civilian award of the Republic of India, the global nodal organization did it with the Louis Braille medal. The honest and efficient services of a selfless worker received their due recognition.



LOUIS BRAILLE MEDAL

The Louis Braille medal is the most prestigious award accorded by the World Blind Union to individuals who have made a substantial and outstanding contribution to people who are blind or partially sighted through international service or to the WBU over a number of years.

**At its 8th General Assembly
Bangkok, Thailand**

The Louis Braille Medal was Presented to

JAWAHAR LAL KAUL

In recognition of his over 40 years of unstinting hard work, indefatigable zeal, enduring commitment, visionary leadership, administrative acumen, unimpeachable integrity, fearless commitment to braille learning and promotion, and as a beacon of hope and promise for millions of blind and partially sighted persons in India and worldwide.

M Diamond

WBU PRESIDENT

November 16, 2012
DATE

Chapter 14

A Thinker's Point of View

During the writing of the Biography, our focus had been on Kaul's public life and his contribution to the empowerment of the blind in India. Having completed its first draft, we realized that an important aspect in any **intellectual's life is his views about life and society** and they must be presented to the readers without any intervention. Therefore, on the 2nd of April, 2022, we engaged Jawahar Lal Kaul in a question-answer session held telephonically and recorded simultaneously. This, we felt, was the best and the most authentic **presentation of his views on various contemporary issues. It is Kaul's** worldview over a range of issues that actually makes the person he is: his mindset, value system, way of thinking and ideology. Though each of the preceding chapters, when read keenly, reflect his philosophy of life, this exclusive session with focused questions on different aspects of life has clarified many other points—how he looked at the issues of the blind, how he worked towards changing the perception of society towards the blind, how persons with disabilities should deal with themselves and their social environment, issues of religion, secularism, household work, women empowerment and many other such questions. We have here Kaul, in first-person, speaking what he believes in:

Q: The Philosophy of life

A: I am not a philosopher, but a practical man who believes in the Karma (the cycle of cause and effect) theory. I really have no other philosophy. My philosophy is karma. I have no faith in dharma (righteousness, merit or religious and moral duties). I have never been to any temple or gurudwara. There used to be a temple next to my school; but I never visited it. In fact, I have never visited any religious place, for that matter, throughout my life. I always try to

remain busy in my work and not waste any time; that is why I feel hale and hearty even at the age of 80.

Q: Secularism Vs. Religion

A: I am neither a religious person nor do I pray at all. I do not remember any day when I have read the Gita, the Ramayana or any other religious book. I do believe in Hinduism. When it comes to my own work, the work that God has assigned to me, that is, the work of AICB, I do not distinguish between people on religious grounds. **We entertain everyone irrespective of one's religion.**

In theory, our Constitution is committed to secularism and that everyone should be treated equally. However, I do not believe in so-called secularism. In practice, it gets tilted in favour of the minorities, particularly, the Muslims. It is very clear that if a Hindu is killed, no one makes a noise about it, but when a Muslim is killed in communal exchanges, the so-called secular people send out messages of strong condemnation. (Kaul narrated a few examples of **one-sided responses from the country's intellectuals.**) **Recently** a Muslim activist of the BJP was killed in Kashmir and two others have been receiving threats to life, yet nobody is highlighting this issue. In the year 2000, after the earthquake caused devastation in Kutch in Gujarat, I too had gone there to facilitate the making of a building accessible. I was shocked to see that Muslims were funding the project meant for the Muslims only. Hindus usually do not make this kind of distinction. They are in majority but still, at many places, they are being deprived of many facilities, as has been **depicted in the recently released movie titled 'The Kashmir Files'**.

Q: The change in social perception towards the blind

A: I do not think that the social perception towards the blind has undergone a change with time. Of the 10 calls we receive from our donors, 7 of them are about serving food to the members of our

hostel even today. It means that about 70% of the donors are interested in only serving food to the blind. When I used to be a student, the donors would even peel the banana that they gave us. Now they do not. They give us an unpeeled banana because now they have learnt to accept that the blind are capable of some small actions like peeling a banana themselves. That is the level of change that I can perceive. But their involvement in serving the blind people is still confined to serving food or bananas.

Q: Reservation in the legislative bodies

A: I am not at all in favour of reservation for the following two reasons: if we have reservation and have our own representative in positions of decision making, only he is expected to raise issues concerning the disabled. If we have one disabled person to represent us in the parliament, then we cannot approach any other member of the House from any other political party as it is expected that our voice should be raised by our representative only. In the times of Shri Morarji Desai as the Prime Minister, the blind persons, if they approached him with any request, were told to go with their problem to their own officer on special duty, the OSD, Mr. Lal Advani. **'Why don't you go and convey what your problem is to him and he will deal with it,' they were told.**

Secondly, the persons who are nominated to represent their community in the higher positions and organizations are not necessarily the right people chosen for their dedication and commitment. In most cases, people who are able to win favours from the government of the day or who have access to the top power circle, become the representatives.

Well, we definitely need our voice to be raised, but there is no need for a special nominated member to represent the voice of the disabled people. I believe, we are also citizens just like any other

citizens of the country, and we have equal rights to approach any member out of the 545 members of the Parliament and they should all attend to us also in the manner in which they represent any other citizen of the country. I would like to give you the example of the three blind parliamentarians who have been elected on their own merit. **One can reach this position as a result of one's own merit.** Then what is the need for reservation? In the past, concerns related with the disabled have been raised from time to time by the members of Parliament. These days, for example, Muralidharan, the General Secretary of the National Platform for the Rights of the Disabled (NPRD) has been very active and has recently succeeded in getting questions raised in the Parliament regarding the vacant posts in the field of disability compelling the Government to issue an appropriate response. He is not even a Member of the Parliament.

It is another matter that it does not really make much difference. The party in majority takes its own decisions arbitrarily. But we can see that one does not have to have a representative of the disabled to raise issues relating to us. Political reservation for the disabled is not going to benefit anyone.

We must take active part in politics to make our own place in various political parties. Many blind persons like Late Sh. Mukut Bihari, Late Sh. Yamuna Prasad and Late Sh. Sadhan Chandra Gupta were members of the Parliament. They came without any reservation because of their active role in the society. The last one, Mr. Sadhan Chandra Gupta was the Advocate General for several years in West Bengal during the CPM government.

Q: Methods of advocacy

A: In 1980, there was a lathi charge and one of the blind activists was injured. The rumour, however, spread that he had been hit badly by the police and was bleeding profusely. The methods that were

adopted during the 1980s will not work anymore. If you keep repeating your strategies over a period of time, they become ineffective. These days, you can rarely gather people for rallies. Many among the disabled have got jobs and those of the others who **still don't have jobs, have hardly any time to go for political advocacy activities at the street level.** In addition, we have now, a new forum which can be approached for our grievances. First of all, one can approach the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, and in case the problem does not get addressed, one can go to the judicial courts for the intervention of the instruments of law. The problem is that very few organizations working in the field of disability, allocate enough financial resources to engage in advocacy, whether it is a court case or some kind of representation that needs to be made to the Government. People are not willing to spend money for advocacy through their organizations.

Sometimes, radical approaches are also essential, but I am of the view that these should not be used too often. Every organisation should have an Advocacy Cell attached to it. The Cell should invite its members and ask them about the major issues which, they feel, should be solved immediately. After getting the information, the Advocacy Chair or the Advocacy Officer should prepare proper drafts of the content to send to the concerned Government Department. If redressal of the problem is not achieved, the Chair must take the matter to the Court of Law. Sometimes, redressals can be achieved through agitations, but nowadays, the method of agitation has also lost its bargaining power.

Q: Women empowerment

A: I believe we still live in a very patriarchal society. Yet women empowerment has really given a lot to the blind women, just as it has helped women in general in the society. After all, blind women

also live in the same kind of cultural value system as other women do. When a blind woman is financially independent, she is in a position to take her own decisions. But you can see a difference between women residing in urban areas and women living in far-flung villages in rural areas. In the rural society, very few blind women are financially independent, and even if they are, they cannot take major decisions in crucial matters like marriages and divorce, the way the urban blind women may now be able to do. Social changes do not take place easily, but they can be noticed over a period of time. A blind former female student of ours, has chosen to be in a live-in relationship, an unimaginable proposition a few years ago. I do not feel offended by anything that women choose to do today. I think women of modern India, who are economically rehabilitated, are performing their roles well. Economic growth is essential for both men and women, but it is more so as the first step of freedom for women. Yet, it is also equally true that due to our patriarchal shackles, only economic freedom shall not be enough.

Q: Literature in Braille

A: There is a dearth of literature available in the Braille script. There is a very small collection of literature available in Braille because the cost of production in Braille is very high. It costs nearly six thousand rupees to convert one book of 100 pages to make the master copy and then about 2 rupees per page to get it printed. A book of 100 printed pages would get converted into 200 pages in Braille. In case somebody wants to fund the printing of a book, one should contribute Rs.6000 for the master copy and the Braille printing cost can be borne by the person who buys it. The best solution would be for each publisher to agree to sponsor at least one book for printing in Braille every year. It would be a big support. There is no copyright issue involved when it comes to converting of printed literature in Braille. In fact, donors can divert their desire for daan

(alms) into sponsorship for the conversion of books into Braille.

Q: Dependence on donations

A: On the 14th of January, the Sankranti (a Hindu festival) day, there is a huge line of blind people in Prashant Vihar, Delhi, because they will receive the donation of articles they have asked for from the donors. The donors try to meet the need of each individual and have already made a list of individual requirements like blankets and pressure cookers. Interestingly, most of the blind persons who queue up are the people who are well employed. Even if they are well employed, they do not feel humiliation in taking donations. Such is the attitude even towards donation among the members of our blind community. Many people who sponsor a lunch or a dinner at AICB insist that they would like to serve the food themselves. We do not allow this. We tell them that if this is what they want, they can go to organizations where people will be happier to get served by them.

I agree that the attraction of freebies and free food is a common human trait. I have seen that even at the Rashtrapati Bhavan high-profile get-togethers, many highly educated and well-to-do guests rush after food as soon as it is served. The food gets over in no time. In fact, if you stand patiently on your good manners, you will end up staring at empty plates. The problem is that the blind are so deeply entrenched in the culture of receiving that they are not able to get over this attitude even when they are well employed and self-sufficient.

Why is such an attitude still continuing? Well, the reason is very simple. In the donation-run special schools for the blind, students are still taught to expect donations because of their special condition. One is used to the idea of receiving and this attitude stays for the rest of the life. Most of these charity institutions are least interested

in the empowerment and education of the blind. All that they want is to have a few blind people on roll in their institutions so that they keep getting donations on their behalf. This is a standard practice. However, the students who are educated in inclusive education settings, are fortunately spared of this kind of attitude. Yet, we must not forget that inclusive education can work well only in the metropolitan cities. In the rural areas, it may not be effective since inclusive education has its own problems.

Q: Organizations other than AICB with creditable work

A: In our country, there are more than 300 Organizations of various kinds like schools, associations, societies etc. and I think all are trying to achieve their objectives according to the resources available with them. However, it depends on the objectives that they have for opening a school, society or association. It would be wrong to say that this or that organization is not trying to achieve its objectives. Yet, I feel very strongly that more than 75% of the organizations have been set up only to earn funds. I know of many organizations that have been formed for commercial interests only.

Q: Forming a strong joint movement of the disabled

A: No, I think each category of the disabled has its own problems and, therefore, they should fight for their rights in their own capacity. We realized this when a committee was set up for the preparation of a draft of RPWD Act, 2016 and it took several years to finalize the draft. All categories of the disabled were trying to achieve their goals separately. However, there may be some issues on which the disabled people can have a common approach.

Q: Household work

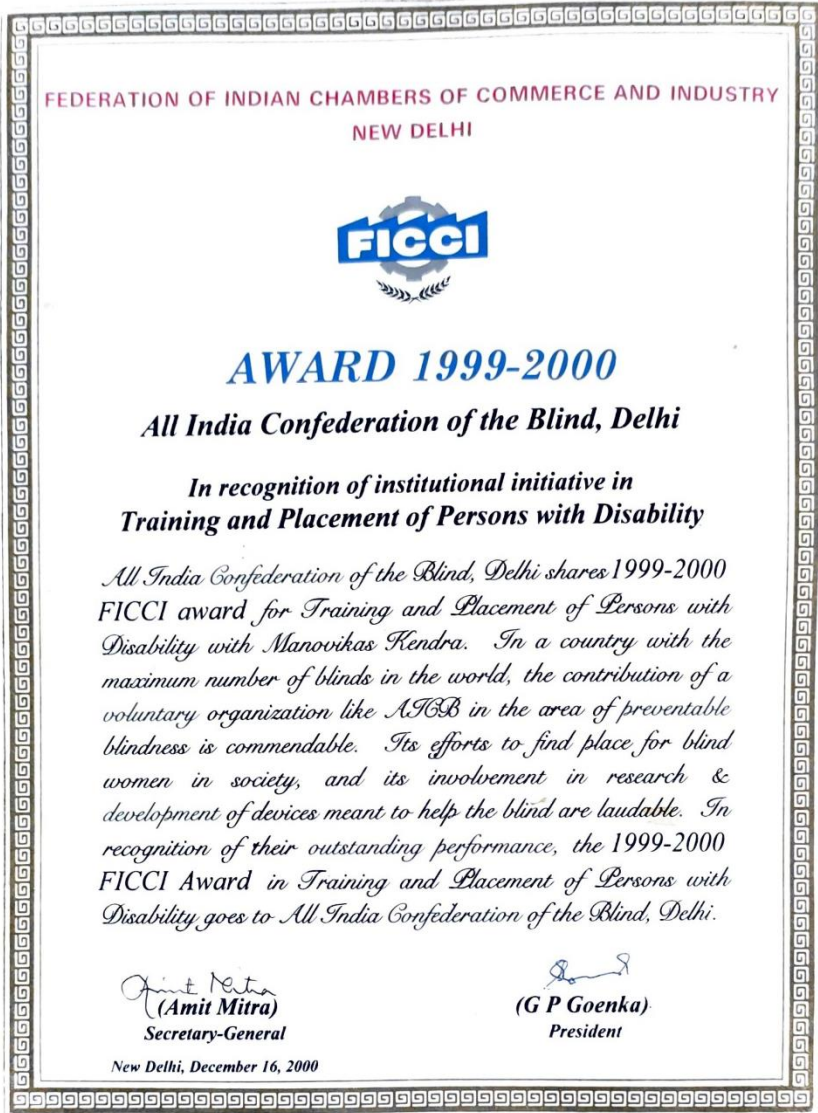
A: Should men contribute to household work? Why not, if they are capable of contributing, they must do so.

Q: Favourite music, films and books

A: I like some ghazals and good film songs. But I have not seen any movie since 1967 after I graduated from the college.

I like the following books the most:

'Devdas' and 'Brahman ki Beti' by Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay; 'Anandmath' and '*Devi Chaudhrani*' by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay; '*Rasmani ka Beta*' and 'Bahurani' by Rabindra Nath Tagore; '*Gunahon ka Devta*' by Dharamvir Bharati; '*Manas ke Hans*' and '*Subag ke Nupur*' by Amritlal Nagar; '*Subah Dopahar Shaam*', '*Kali Aandhi*', '*Samunder mein Khoya hua Aadmi*' and '*Kitne Pakistan*' by Kamleshwar. Many of my favourite books are written by Bengali authors. I read them because I had to read them for proof reading before Braille conversion.



Citation given to AICB for best training and rehabilitation services by the then Prime Minister of India on behalf of FICCI in the year 2000

Chapter 15

Kaul and the people who know him

To complete the Biography of Jawahar Lal Kaul, it is important to know how people, who came in contact with him in different capacities, feel about him and remember him. Though prompted to speak through question-answer sessions telephonically or through online interactions, the speakers and the writers expressed **themselves uninhibitedly and gave valuable insights into Kaul's personality.**

Professor Ved Prakash Varma

[Prof. Ved Prakash Varma is the first blind Professor of the University of Delhi and has a number of publications in Philosophy to his credit. He is also the founding President of NFB and happens to be from the same school as Kaul Saheb. He now lives a retired life.]

Nearly 70 years ago in 1952, which was my last year in the Blind School, Amritsar, we learnt about a cute little fair looking boy from Kashmir having joined the school. He must have been about 10 years old and, therefore, much younger than me, but we did not have any interaction. As I did not know him, there was no communication between us for the next seven years. In 1960, when I got the first division in M.A. (Philosophy) and also topped my University, I was invited by the then Headmaster, Mr. Madan Lal Khandelwal to the School. He had perhaps learnt about my achievement through newspaper coverage. It was then, in 1960, when I visited my school in Amritsar after a gap of seven years that I met Kaul Saheb properly. It so happened that I needed to send a letter to my family at home and I asked Mr. Khandelwal if someone could write it for me. Mr. Khandelwal told me that there was this young boy Jawahar, who typed very well. He could take a dictation

and type it out for me. I was astonished when I noticed how fast and accurate, he was in typing the letter from me to my family. It was a revelation that even a blind person could type. I was deeply impressed by him.

Another decade passed and we had no interaction. In the meantime, I came to Delhi and pursued my Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Delhi. I was offered the post of a teaching assistant for about two years and in the year 1968, I finally got the position of a lecturer. Kaul Saheb, who was also in Delhi then, learned about me from some University contact. One day, he and Mr. A.K. Mittal approached me. They told me that they were going to form an organization and that they wanted me to join it. I agreed to work with them. Although both Kaul Saheb and Mittal Saheb worked together, the Organization known as NFBG was primarily the baby of Kaul Saheb. Of course, Mittal Saheb helped him in a big way. When any document had to be prepared, Mittal Saheb would dictate the content and Kaul Saheb would type it. Since Mittal Saheb was an M.A. in English and had also done his teacher training from the U.S., his English was impeccable and usually he drafted all the documents himself. All my education and my writings being in **Hindi medium, I wasn't at ease with the English language. I would still join them while preparing a document. We worked together while preparing the Constitution for the Organization. Once the Constitution was prepared and the Organization was established, Kaul Saheb requested me to be its first and founding President and my wife to be its Treasurer. This is how we began to work together during the initial days. I remember we all had travelled together in the same bogie of the train to Ahmedabad for the conference of NFBG. Kaul Saheb had made extensive preparations for this trip. It went on for the next couple of years and we remained associated with each other. But I don't know what happened and how it**

happened in 1978, that there was a severe crisis and Kaul Saheb had to leave the Organization. So, obviously, my association with NFB also ended.

Once again, our association got renewed when AICB came into existence in 1980. My earlier experience with the sad developments in NFB made me reluctant to join another organization. My wife also discouraged me, as she felt such involvements did not suit my intellectual pursuits and my sober image. However, when Kaul Saheb assured me that I would not be asked to give too much of my time to the Organization but must be a part of certain important committees like the Selection Committee, I agreed and joined AICB. This is how I once again got associated with him and that association has remained till now.

In today's corruption ridden world, it is perhaps impossible to find such an honest person. He is honest to the core of his heart and this is why I have tremendous respect for him and am associated with his constructive work. I contributed both with money and my time to the Organization to the best of my ability. I have always been willing to do that for his organization. When I was staying in Gurgaon, I used to go and teach in the school run by AICB. Since I **have left Gurgaon, I'm not able to meet him, but** we are regularly in touch with each other over the phone. I also contribute about Rs. 36,000 per year in the memory of my parents and my wife Krishna to AICB. I have full faith in Kaul Saheb: every penny that I contribute is going to be used for the welfare of the blind. I am indeed a true admirer of Kaul Saheb. No one can ever doubt his intentions and his complete dedication to his organization. I am confident that so long as he is there, the Organization will keep flourishing.

On a lighter note, let me say as they say in English, I am a great fan

of Kaul Saheb. Another aspect of him is his hard work and sacrifice. I know he has sacrificed a lot at the individual level as well as on familial grounds, to bring AICB to its present level. It is indeed impossible to find such a dedicated soul these days. I have known him for the last 50 years and I know he has not been greedy for any position. He joined AICB as a Secretary General and till date that is the position he is still holding. Most people want to go up higher on the ladder and so, had there been somebody else, he could have soon become the Vice President or the President of AICB. But he has chosen to stay where he started. He has received many honours and even got many positions in some international organizations, but as far as AICB is concerned, he has never asked for a higher position, though he has been quite capable of getting any position in AICB if he wanted to. We are of course extremely proud that he has been honoured with the Padma Shri.

Kaul Saheb's life is exemplary and carries a message in itself for everyone. If you wish to contribute to the community, have the dedication and honesty that Kaul made his mission.

When it comes to AICB, it is impossible to find someone like Kaul Saheb. So, I feel if there could be somebody who may not be as committed and honest as him, but could be somewhere close to him, **that would be the great luck of AICB and perhaps that's the only way AICB would be able to survive.** My greatest worry these days, is that perhaps, it is really impossible to find someone like him because everybody is after power, position and money. But I do not know what can be done. After all, nothing is eternal. Kaul Saheb is 80 years old now and human body has its own limitations. The day **when he can't get out of home and be at the AICB, will be a very painful one for him** because that is what life has been for him.

Finally, I just want to emphasize that, for me, it is a matter of great

satisfaction and happiness that Kaul Saheb has led a very happy, contented and respectable life and I really wish him well for a healthy life for the remaining years of his life. I hope he can continue to contribute to the growth of his organization as long as he can.

Prof. Anil Kumar Aneja

[Prof. Anil Kumar Aneja is the President of AICB and also the Head of the Department of English, University of Delhi.]

My relationship with Kaul Saheb actually evolved somewhere between 1998 and 2000. He formally called me for a professional assignment sometime in October 1995, to work on the final draft of the RPD Act. I had known about him right since the late 1970s, when I was just a student at the Blind Relief Association. It was a casual interaction on and off. I was close to Mr. A. K. Mittal and through him, I had met Kaul Saheb a few times during the 1970s and the 1980s.

I have known him in various capacities. He is a different man when he is working in his office between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. He compartmentalizes his time very well. Before the Covid pandemic, I used to travel with him, sometimes, after office hours. He would open up and share his personal matters. I have travelled around the country and around the world with him on most of the important occasions when he was to receive various international and national awards including the most prestigious Padma Shri award. But he was always down to earth and unassuming. He also did not feel **overwhelmed by others' status. I remember, sometime in 1978, my brother who was an income tax officer, came to pick me up from the NFB office. He wanted to make a phone call on the landline. The telephone facility was rare in those days and not too many people had access to it. Mr. Kaul would let anyone make a phone call, but would charge a rupee for the call. When my brother offered**

a rupee to Kaul Saheb, he took it without hesitation. An income tax officer was a man of position who would take such things as a matter of course, but Kaul Saheb treated him just like anybody else, unhesitatingly.

In another very interesting event, when A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the President of India, came to grace the silver jubilee function of AICB, the security persons, before and after his visit, spent a lot of time taking care of the safety procedures as prescribed. Kaul Saheb was quite upset and he said, **“These people have wasted so much of our time.”** The security protocol would go on for days for an hour every day before the day of the function and every time Kaul Saheb would **whine about the wastage of time. He was unawed by other peoples’** rank and position because he did not seek favours from anyone.

Although, his family is secondary to his work, after 4.30 pm, his time is for his wife and the news on his radio. In some ways he is very close to his wife. He shares most of the things with her and his wife knows everything about him.

He does not have a strong network for public relations, but whatever he has done so far, has worked. He has been able to organize resources and he has been able to carry out massive projects and all that has worked. I can't say **whether it will continue to be** effective in the future as well, but so far, his way of working has yielded results.

I will be very candid. No organization can be entirely the result of the contributions of one individual. Mr. Mittal, for instance, played a very important role, or perhaps, the most important role in bringing AICB to where it is now. He worked without any position for almost 27 years and he used to do most of the writing work that needed to be done for important communications on behalf of AICB. Yet, there are certain projects which are primarily the

contribution of Kaul Saheb: for example, the Braille Press, the School in Haryana and the vocational training projects. Apart from these three projects where he has played a pivotal role, I think, the fourth most important contribution of Kaul Saheb is towards **women's empowerment. The contribution that he has made to the empowerment of blind women in India is perhaps, unparalleled.**

I think the 2023 elections of the AICB are going to be very crucial in deciding the future form of the Organization. There have been a lot of changes even now. Every organization change with the passing of time and if it does not change even after 30-40 years, it may not be worthwhile as an organization. We do expect more changes with new people coming up. We do not know what changes will happen in the Organization in the future, but certainly, the Organization is well founded and strong. The vision and labour put into it by its founding members like Mr. Mittal and Mr. Kaul will keep it firmly grounded for a long time to come.

I must say, what I am today is due to the influence of Mr. Kaul's personality on me. I have learnt a lot from him, particularly his punctuality, discipline and efficiency. No doubt, as Mr. Mittal said, no organization is the sole contribution of any one individual. Organizations comprise of individuals and they have their contribution to make, but an individual is not an organization and organization is not an individual. However, I have learnt a lot personally from Mr. Kaul and, of course, his contribution to this sector has been significant.

Rama Shashi Dharan

[Mrs. Rama Shashi Dharan has been working in the Central Bank of India, Mumbai on the post of 'Sahayak Prabandhak' Assistant Manager since 1991. Her husband, Shashi Dharan Krishnan, too, is a Deputy Manager at the Punjab National Bank, Mumbai. Visually

challenged, both of them took their training in Stenography at AICB in 1991.]

Rama Shashi Dharan, born in a small village in Maharashtra, completed her schooling from the Kamala Mehta School for the Blind, Mumbai and thereafter completed her graduation.

“I was not really sure in which direction to go after graduation. Around that time, two of my blind friends returned from Delhi after receiving their training in Stenography from AICB. They told me that if I could take my training in that course, a job was more or less guaranteed. Excitedly, I went to Delhi and appeared for the entrance test. I was told by Kaul Saheb that I was making lots of mistakes in my typing and writing and needed to improve upon it. I could then come back. Kaul Saheb introduced me to Sushila Madam, one of the Alumni of AICB, who guided me on how to improve my writing. Under her guidance, I improved my Braille typing and then reappeared for the test. I was finally accepted for the training programme in Stenography in July 1989. Because I was not used to the harsh weather of Delhi, I fell ill. We were also scared of Kaul Saheb because he was very short-tempered. He used to lose his temper very quickly; but then he also used to recover from it very fast. Soon, we realized that actually he was very soft at heart. Kaul Saheb was particularly concerned about the welfare of blind girls. While he paid equal attention to the blind boys as well, he was more concerned for the empowerment of blind girls. He was not only caring but also protective of all of us. There was strong discipline at AICB and he made us work very hard. Finally, I completed my training and got a job after I came back to Mumbai. Kaul Saheb had not only paid attention to our training, but had also guided us on how to behave in the office and how to develop our mobility skills. Rarely do the NGOs focus truly on the post-training life of their trainees. But Kaul Saheb trained us in a holistic manner so that we

could lead our lives successfully. I have no words to thank him and I have no hesitation in saying that whatever I am today, is largely because of his contribution to my training. I also want to add a few more things: when I joined the training, I was somehow unable to type correctly in Devanagari as I could not understand the difference between the small 'e' and the big 'e'. For example, if I had to type timahi, the letter 't' was supposed to have been written as (ति) and the letter 'h' as (ही). Because of the difference between the Braille script and Devanagari, I was facing difficulty in understanding it. In addition, we did not have a trained instructor for the most part of that year, so our seniors used to teach us. Kaul Saheb also gave us lessons and this is how I could understand or rectify this mistake of mastras while typing in print. Generally, Kaul Saheb offered 2 to 3 chances to each candidate to appear for interviews, but in my case, he allowed me a fourth chance also. For the third interview, I went to Jaipur. There were two other Maharashtrian trainees who were selected, but I wasn't. Therefore, when he sent me for the fourth interview which was held for the Central bank in Delhi, he did not send two other trainees, who were perhaps, better than me because he wanted me to get selected. He said that this was my last chance for the interview. On the one hand he had taken a calculated wise decision not to send the names of candidates who would raise tough competition for me and on the other, he had displayed deep human consideration for me as this was probably my last chance to get a job. He did this because he was definite that the other too would easily fit in anywhere with their merit.

Kaul Saheb is not a religious man, but on the day, I was leaving for my fourth interview, he asked me to go and pray at the Sanatan Dharm Temple before proceeding for the interview and I did that. This was a great gesture on his part despite the fact that he is not a religious man at all.

After I appeared for the interview at the Central bank, I was told that this was my last chance and then I was sent back home. I was told that if I got selected, they would inform me telegraphically. This was a very clear decision on the part of Kaul Saheb because he had to maintain the norms of the AICB. He wanted the Institute to remain a training institute and once my training was complete, it was time to give an opportunity to the other candidates and send me back home.

Kaul Saheb definitely has great administrative skills. I remember once there was a fight between the Marathi speaking group of girls and the others who spoke Hindi. Kaul Saheb could sense the nerve of both of these groups and he handled the situation so well that he was able to resolve the conflict instantly.

Shashi Dharan Krishnan

“My name is Shashi Dharan Krishnan. I completed my M.A. from Mumbai in 1991. Around that time, I learnt about this training opportunity in Stenography at AICB, Delhi, which was being conducted by Kaul Saheb. Rama, who was then my friend and is now my wife, was already pursuing this training from there. There was another friend, Mangla Suryavanshi, who also joined with me that year. When I met Kaul Saheb for the first time, I was kind of scared because there was an image of him of being a very strict man. He is actually a very strict and disciplined man; there is no doubt about it. But we discovered over a period of time that he was also a very caring man. He told us that we had the whole life to enjoy ourselves, but during that one year, we must focus on our training and work hard. Unless you work hard and train yourself well, you will not be able to get a job. Therefore, he instilled the habit of working hard in us. Even today at the age of 80, he is so disciplined and punctual and reaches the office on time. This discipline has

always been a part of his life. I remember that he used to come to the Training Centre by 7 in the morning, called us to the office and made us work. He told us that those who are not punctual, can never succeed in life. This lesson has stayed with me throughout my life. He constantly reminded us throughout that one year about the importance of punctuality. I still remember an incident: on the day we were leaving for our job interview for Jaipur in the morning, the train was sometime around 6 AM and one of the boys got late in getting ready. As a result, the driver had to drive very fast to the train station. Somehow, we were able to manage to get into the train at the last minute; otherwise, we would have missed our interview. When we came back and Kaul Saheb asked the whole story, he said that we could have left that boy behind. We did not have to wait for him, even though he would have missed the interview. It was his mistake because those who are not punctual and cannot keep up with time, can never succeed. So, he was very clear that one has to maintain discipline and those who do not maintain discipline can never succeed particularly, when it comes to punctuality.

Promila Kaul

[Promila is Kaul's cousin, his chacha's(uncle) daughter]

My father, (Kaul's chacha, Late Durga Nath Kaul) started his job in a sugar mill in Amritsar and later shifted to a workshop that manufactured parts for the Railways. He was allotted a residential accommodation at a place that was not more than 10 minutes' **walk** from the Institute for the Blind where Bhajjan (Kaul) was admitted. Since the Blind School was almost in the middle of the distance between our home and our school or college, we would stop by, sometimes, to have a chat with him. Before he had learnt to type and subsequently, type his own papers, he used to take the help of a writer to write his exams. Sometimes, I too became a writer for him.

My father had to work very hard to convince Bhaijan's parents to send him to Amritsar for education. In the beginning, Bhaijan used to cry a lot and my father would often bring him home to console him. But later, he settled down and became so confident that he was almost a dada (bully), who had a lot of influence on other persons. He was a favourite of his teachers and, in fact, shared a room with one of the teachers whom he used to address as 'Miyanji'.

Bhaijan was fiercely independent right from his early childhood. We used to be amazed at his sharp sense of direction. He would come and go from the school to our house without any problem and had no difficulty in making it to the front door of our house, where the rickshaw dropped him.

For our holidays, we used to go to Banihal, where there was a big clock and a radio, but I have no memories of Rainawari in Srinagar. Neither my father nor I have any recollection of any miraculous episode connected with Bhaijan's loss of eye sight. My father does recall that Shri V.V. Giri, the then President of India, had conferred a gold medal on Bhaijan for getting the highest position in Sanskrit Honours at the Punjab University. He had said, 'His external eyes are closed, but his internal eyes are open.'

Bhaijan used to write poetry during his school days. At the time of his elder sister's marriage, he recited a self-written poem, full of emotions that drove everyone to tears. Similarly, he sent me a letter describing the beauty of nature in the mountains. He could not see, yet his descriptions were so vivid that I felt an instant urge to return to the mountains.

Whenever I get a chance, I join him at the functions where he is present. We are twelve siblings and cousins together in the family. I can claim with pride that I am the closest to Bhaijan.

Chapter 16

Jawahar Lal Kaul: A Meaningful Journey

With a life journey of nearly 80 years, more than 55 years of which have been offered in service to the community to which circumstances made him belong, Jawahar Lal Kaul of today is iconic, formidable, enigmatic and transparent. In the grey of life and alone despite an endearing family, --wife and son, the large set up of AICB and innumerable contacts, some friends and many others critics, Kaul may be read as a book but with so many pages yet unread. He is a simple man with limited needs and resources, who lived a spartan life by choice, even when comforts of life could have been his, legally and deservedly. Kaul had only to express an inclination for more!

A retrospect of his life does not throw up a spectrum of an extraordinary life with striking events, daring deeds, flawless decisions leading to huge achievements, launching of path breaking movements and unquestioning loyalists and followers. The attractions of countenance and personality that often work as magnets did not matter in his world. He was always headstrong and adamant; a job once begun must be taken to its logical end. There was no wavering or conflict that would weaken and compel him to leave the job midway. Or perhaps, despite the conflict and doubt, he could still foresee some positives in the final outcome.

And that became a virtue and quality because Kaul had the strong sense to act by his own convictions and not be swayed by what others promoted or dissuaded him from. As a very young student at the Blind School in Amritsar, he was different from the other boys. From the beginning, he had been focused on his studies and used his time as dedicatedly as possible to learn from the sources available to

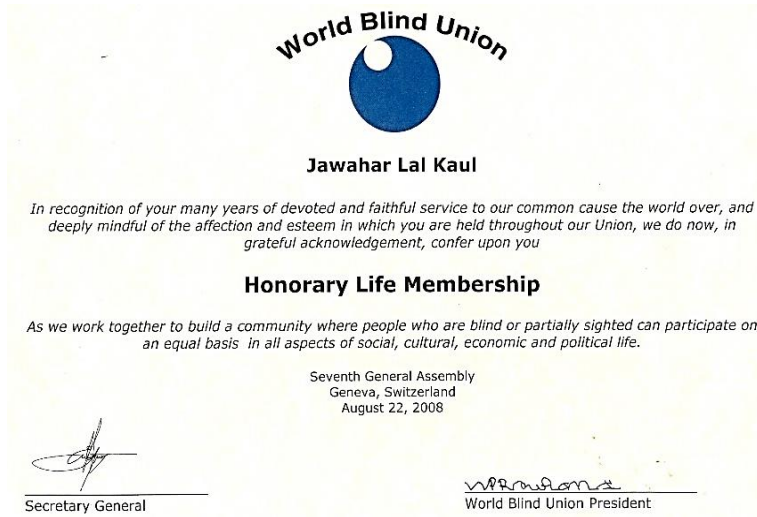
him. While most of the other students largely accepted and compromised with the societal image of a blind person's life, Kaul tried to break it by fully utilizing his own personal strength and diligence.



Receiving the award for best National level NGO from the then President of India late Shri APJ Abdul Kalam in the field of disability on behalf of AICB, 2006

As a very young pupil at the Blind School in Amritsar, he was slogging deep in the nights to convert books into Braille. The rather unkempt environment of the school was unpleasant to his immaculate Kashmiri familial upbringing, but he adjusted to it after the initial dejection. In the generally classless community of the blind, he represented a class that he inherited from his family and maintained it and yet accommodated himself in the mainstream of the blind. Accommodation and detachment came naturally to him. Consequently, even in the ordinariness of his young world, he was

innocently making his way towards a purpose and mission. Absorbing the embarrassment of living on charity, donations and the kindness of others, he was trying to build for himself a future of dignity, identity and self-respect. One of the few blind graduates who went against the mainstream and opted for a subject like Sanskrit for his graduation, with not much support material available in Braille and with discouragement from his sceptical seniors, Kaul displayed a strong will, determination and trust in his own choice. He not only touched the summit with his astounding position in the University but also gained respect for his acumen and ability. He had thus scored a point that his disability could not nullify his merit. Significantly, it meant that a blind person could outscore those who were not disabled, despite the want of equalizing resources. And if the obstacle of disability could be overcome with adequate steps, the gap between normality and abnormality would cease to exist.



Honorary life membership, WBU , 2008

Detachment, not from one's karma (a person's actions in life) and duty, but from all that is material and worldly, remained the core principle of Kaul's life. Did he imbibe it from the literature that he had read as part of his education or it was ingrained in him from his childhood, is not very important. He took to every phase of his life as a serious vocation. He excelled in learning and used all extra time meaningfully. If nothing else, he converted some books in the old Braille into the standard Bharti Braille. At an early age, he used to spend late nights in preparing the more readable forms of some Braille books. At college, he topped in B.A. Sanskrit at the University of Punjab; but the important factor was that he was dedicated and focused on his target even in this phase of life when students tend to be easy going, frivolous and fun seekers. He was using his time and every little resource to a constructive purpose.

His devotion to Mr. Khandelwal was exemplary. The fact that he had been Kaul's Principal in school made Kaul his Aiklavya.¹ Usha Kaul commented in her interview, "I was very impressed how Kaul Saheb used to look after Khandelwal Saheb. He would polish his shoes, wash his clothes and keep them ready along with a copy of The Bhagwat Gita in the drawing room for him, when he came out of his bath. I used to wonder why he was so dedicated to him."² A successful college graduate, Kaul had no qualms about sweeping and mopping the floor and washing the dishes for the Centre that Khandelwal had founded. The same single mindedness and moral fibre were on display when he established various organisations and resolutely made them grow. He established his marital life on the same hard ground of personal denial and minimalism. His lifelong abode remained his two-room apartment in Model Town, which was also being used for innumerable other organizational tasks. He chose to have a small family and opted for a Government School for

his son's education because his son could get free education there. Although he could easily afford to, he preferred a simple life for himself and his family. The organisations, of which he was a founding member and which were managed primarily by him for day-to-day activities, were never exploited by him for personal use. The organisations with sound financial base and well supported by national and international funds could easily facilitate a means of conveyance for him; but he never asked for a vehicle to take him to office. He used public transport for years and then became a pillion rider with an office staff member who helped him to and fro from his office every day, whether it was rain or sunshine, the hard winter breeze or the harsh summer sun. He reached his office on time and never left it before the time of departure. He did not miss his office a single day and strictly followed a seven-day working week. To help him in this, he had been bestowed with a strong physical constitution and he never fell ill. Kaul trained himself to manage on just two meals a day and for decades had been skipping his lunch.

A man of limited words, whose language is without pleasant and explanatory adjectives, who doesn't mince his words and is candid and straightforward, who doesn't seem to brood over the impact of his words on the listeners, Kaul is universally regarded as brusque and rude. It is true that his external manifestation is somewhat forbidding but to regard him as disdainful could also be a personal bias against his straightforwardness. The man who is running a race against time and wishes to tie up as many loose ends as he can before he has to put his baton down, will possibly not tolerate the wastage of any moment of his life and will be intolerant to any obstacles that may hinder his objective. It may be regarded as his impatience with the casualness of others and not his own arrogance and impertinence. But it has also been noticed that during the interviews

and amidst questions that could be termed as challenging and uncomfortable, he has dropped his task master visage and accompanied his unembarrassed answers with a naughty half smile.

Mankind and ambition correlate and co-exist. It is almost anomalous to expect human beings to walk through their lives completely selflessly and without ambition. The expression of ambition may be subtle and sophisticated and perhaps so garbed that it makes actions look selfless. Moreover, ambition may not be harboured in a stark and crude manner as a strategic choice of actions for gain of wealth, name and fame. If not one of these, there certainly would be a desire for immortality and for a name and remembrance after one is gone. **T.S. Eliot's** *Murder in the Cathedral* 3 talks about selflessness even in martyrdom. In every interview, we tried to gauge what propelled him to do more than was required. What compels some people to opt for community service and social work? Many of the so-called philanthropists seemingly work selflessly, but in their safe and comfortable zones. Community work lifts you higher in social consciousness and also boosts your self-esteem. The services offered by such social workers are often pretentious and hollow. There are other seemingly benevolent persons, who use the NGO platforms for many kinds of nefarious ends. Unfortunately, many of the non-governmental agencies allow themselves to be used for laundering of massive amounts of unaccounted money. Every deal is shady and run for self-interest. But in the case of Kaul and his family, no such motive came to light; both he and his family subsisted on the borders of basic needs. The man who did not let himself own a property and spent all his life in the small two-room set rented in the late 1960s, **the man who considered his wife's desire to purchase a pressure cooker and a refrigerator as unwanted luxuries and whose wife had to invent ways to smuggle the very essential goods to get ease into**

her life, was definitely not using his public platforms for personal profits. Was he looking for name and recognition through the organisations he had founded? That also seems unlikely, as he **doesn't project himself as the most important** office bearer in the Organization. Not only does he give equal credit to many others in the Organization, but is also hardly to be seen in the forefront before the camera, while undoubtedly, he is the primary service provider who has kept AICB on its feet and made it grow. His dedication and commitment have been unwavering.

It is not surprising that his friendships and associations have been long lasting and abiding; but this is also true that the permanent ones are those that he built at his work place and those built on the brickwork of AICB. Without any hesitation, he discarded those who either challenged his power, position or principles or tried to sublimate him. Not a man of diplomacy, he voiced his sentiments bluntly and openly and hence had as many detractors as admirers. His association with A. K. Mittal began in the summer of 1970, **when he had his first personal meeting with him after Mr. Mittal's** return from the US with a new understanding of the social construction of blindness and other radical views for the upliftment of the visually disabled. Kaul, aware of the need to begin his work and with more time at hand after landing a secure job, just needed a likeminded person to start work with. And this association lasted till, as they say, death did them apart. Together they found and left NFB; and together they formed AICB. Together they shared the growth of AICB, but in 2020, Mittal succumbed to the Corona virus **attack and passed away. This time Kaul's grief was visible; he** sounded lonely, when he touched upon it rather ruefully that now, he was the only one left from among those who started together on this journey.

Do you have any role models—past or present?

On being asked whether Kaul had any role models in the past or in the present, he **had a definite affirmative in reply.** “I have my role model in our past President, late Sh. A.K. Mittal who always remained in the background and assisted me to come forward. I remember when I was a Chair of the World Braille Council or the Asian Blind Union, he was merely a member of the former Organization and not even a member in the latter; yet he supported me fully to achieve my good name in both the Organisations.”

Prof. Ved Prakash Varma, who was also a primary contributor to the formation of NFB from the outset in the 1970s, remained a close associate. “**Dr. Ved Prakash Varma is my other role model.** His work has taught me the value of hard work. During the course of teaching, Ved Prakash Varma wrote 13 books on the subject of Philosophy and most of his books are prescribed in various universities today. He was a gold medallist in Masters. Definitely **he worked hard to achieve these heights.**” Kaul commented sadly how unfortunate it was, that the majority of the students in the present times would not take inspiration from such disciplined persons and also did not follow in their footsteps.

People gathered around Kaul due to their basic trust in him and his philosophy of self-advocacy. People made their organisations affiliates of AICB due to the sincerity of this man and his mission. He personally travelled to them and convinced them about the purpose of AICB and to believe in the necessity of shift from the model of charity and social help to self-advocacy and self-help. The fast-changing shift in the **disability discourse was not Kaul’s original perception;** the world over disability discourse had undergone a qualitative shift. But what was new was the need for a policy and programme shift that required to be implemented in the disability

sector in India. From the childhood model at the Amritsar Blind School where the poor blind boys lined up on both sides of a long rope to traverse through the streets of Amritsar to collect 'daan'(alms) of cash and kind, Kaul and his associates had learnt, that the only way to achieve a dignified life, identity and social equality was through self-advocacy and through one's own effort to stand on one's feet. It was on these principles that NFB was founded and it was once again the same perception that formed the objectives of AICB. All the initiatives of AICB tried to equip the blind to train themselves for responsible jobs in the mainstream job market, to be able to overcome the handicap that their disability caused and then to help them obtain suitable jobs according to their qualifications. Economic freedom thus obtained, would finally raise the social, political, individual and psychological status of the disabled person. This is the only way to move from the periphery to the centre and therefore should not be treated as an aberration.

The Importance of Braille

There are two fields in the disability orientation, the credit for which goes to Kaul alone: the role of Braille and typing and **Stenography**. Kaul's firm belief in the absolute importance of the Braille script in the lives of the visually disabled cannot be dealt with as a mere personal passion. He is one of the few people who irrevocably believe, that no new technological intervention can replace Braille and there is no substitute for Braille. The magic of the six raised dots in various configurations as invented by Louis Braille, is the identity and strength of the blind and should be respected as such. The normal world would not respect the power of a script that gives independence to the blind and makes the mainstream world approachable. With the arrival of the computers and other helpful gadgetry, the world tried to bypass dependency

on Braille learning. The irony is that even the new blind generation chooses the easier route and does not pursue Braille seriously. The special schools for the blind that should be guiding the blind youth into Braille competency are doing it half-heartedly and the inclusive institutions do not have a strong base into Braille teaching. Kaul wrote many small articles in Hindi on multiple subjects between 2003 and 2015 which were collected under the title 'Jharokhe' (peep-holes or windows) by AICB. Some of these articles carry his strong views on subjects of interest to his blind community and Braille is an important topic that he speaks about.

In the years between 2008 and 2021, AICB sponsored various national and international conferences on the relevance of Braille. The 2008 conference decided upon a plan of action to promote the learning of Braille. It was resolved that every country should form an independent and self-regulated Braille authority that would see to education, production and the development of Braille. The production in Braille was made more systematic with increased production and data entry units in smaller and remote places that could be linked with larger libraries of Braille. There was an ambitious but utilitarian manifesto for the spread of education in Braille. It was a proud moment for AICB when on the 4th of January, 2009, AICB was selected as the Best National Braille Printing Press of the country and was honoured with a monetary award of one lakh of rupees from the Union Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment. It received the Award again in the year 2012.

The World Blind Union constituted the **'World Braille Council'** in 2009, which had its first meeting in Spain on November 5th and 6th, 2009, and was presided over by Jawahar Lal Kaul. There were many significant areas of research that would lead to great progress in Braille. The main emphasis was on universalizing Braille, so that it

could competently handle subjects like arithmetic and science through common codes, and the research work conducted in various developed countries could be made available in the languages of the developing countries.

In his article of August 2012, titled *'Kya Braille Sachmuch Outdated Ho Gayi Hai'* (Has Braille become really outdated?), Kaul expressed his anguish when a high official of the Delhi branch of National Association for the Blind spoke at the 'Drishti' programme of the All India Radio that 'Braille has become outdated and it is the age of CDs now.'⁴ Kaul wrote, "Braille represents our identity. The ways to read and write Braille may change, but we cannot tolerate the statement that Braille is now outdated. If that were the case, why did the said officer from the NAB not get his own children educated with the help of C.D.s and computers only?"⁵ Braille as the most powerful, authentic and irreplaceable tool for a blind person's growth—that is what he believes in till date despite the availability of all the modern devices that depend more and more on the capability and efficacy of hearing. The knowledge of Braille signifies self-help and self-reliance and is a blind person's symbol of identity.

The Sanctity of Daan (Charity)

Despite being blind and a representative of the blind, Kaul's sharp and uninhibited denunciation of his community in certain practices, is unparalleled and astonishing. Unembarrassed, the blind in India, live their entire lives on the kindness and sympathy of others. The special schools, where they spend a good part of their early days, embed in them the belief that without vision, they are helpless and unfortunate and are a burden on the society. Therefore, they have to depend on the mercy and benevolence of the kind hearted donors to survive in this world. The poverty and deprivation of the families, in which they are born, further strengthen their justification for

‘daan’. From their childhood, they easily learn to spread their hands in front of others like beggars for alms. The institutions, that shelter the blind, are created generally for social, economic or political gains. Sometimes they are used for money laundering and often by the believers for the cleansing of their souls through charity and donations. Paradoxically, while a disabled person is treated as a curse of God, he is also treated as a resource for soul’s redemption. The young blind residents in these schools and also outside in the society are taught to exploit the common human empathy and collect maximum donations of cash and kind. It is ingrained in their minds that begging is their birth right. In his essay, ‘Tum Maango Dwar-dwar, Louis hove Sharmsaar’ (You Beg from Door to Door making Louis Ashamed), he mentions in his characteristic sarcastic tone, many incidents that expose the blind man’s ingrained greed for freebies. 6

“I received many calls before the Louis Centenary. Our people wanted to know whether on this occasion, we would distribute some gifts—sticks, watches, blankets—anything for that matter. In their eyes, the Louis Centenary Function is incomplete unless free gifts are distributed. Poor Louis would be ashamed! He must be thinking that although he gave enough power to the blind by making their fingers learn to read and write, he still failed in invoking in them some self-respect.”⁷

The Fundraisers

Corruption is rampant in most walks of life and every profession is exploited to the fullest through loopholes in the systems allowed by those within, and also those who can turn them around for their benefit. The organisations that collect donations for the benefit of the blind also misuse the sympathy factor to encash it for personal benefits. Many NGOs run their centres in shabby, narrow lanes in

small tenements, where the blind needy students are herded on poor quality, meagre supplies of food and other requirements. The donations in cash and kind are diverted towards the benefit of certain individuals who run these centres and the entire façade of the organization gives a cover and sanctity to their nefarious ends. **Donation collection is a definite racket. In his essay titled ‘Chando ek chokho dhando’ (Collection of Donations is a lucrative business),** Kaul is taken by surprise at the commercialization of the practice of donation collection. Kaul narrates an incident when one day, two well-built and hefty donation-masters came to his office and offered to collect donations for AICB. Curious to know about their business, Kaul asked them about the prevalent rate of percentage in the commission given by the organisations for collecting donations. Their reply was shocking—there are organisations that collected donations and now the organisations further give over the job on contract basis to the best bidders. If the organisation has a bad name or is less popular, there is more profit for the donation-master. But for a renowned organisation like AICB, more money will have to be paid for the contract. But on the other hand, there is benefit too. For an organisation like AICB, donors are more forthcoming and donate liberally without fuss. The two professional donation masters could not believe that AICB was functioning without collecting funds in such devious ways. They had no inkling of the fact that this was one Organization where no one was sent to collect donations and donors came on their own to contribute.

Kaul expresses his shock at the state of affairs even in organisations that are working for the welfare of the blind and have an explicit social commitment to serve the disabled. The entire process of charity has become a ruthless business enterprise, where the collection process is also outsourced. When Kaul quipped in a

sarcastic remark to the two men, why they did not start their own business rather than run every month for contracts, the hopeful and jubilant masters seriously said, “There cannot be a better idea if only you could give us a little support.”⁹ As if this was not enough, they told Kaul that he could help them by providing them with three to four blind persons who could be sent to collect funds. “*Khud ke naam par kaam karne keliye maal to hona chahiye.*”¹⁰ (There should be enough resources with you if you want to do business in your own name.)

Responding dispassionately and objectively to varied issues confronted by the blind student community and taking a critical stance, however unpleasant it may be to the community sentiment, Kaul stands out as a rare representative of his group and is often pulled up for his outspokenness. He notices a paradox in wanting inclusion as a discourse, especially in the field of education and yet seeking special rights and concessions. In *‘Sochiye, Zaraa Sochiye!’* (Think, do think!)¹¹ he writes, “On one hand, we want inclusion and on the other, we want to operate the world as per our own wishes. But if we desire for inclusion in the world, it is important that we do not demand for concessions and relaxations. In fact, we should aim at making ourselves capable to be able to walk in the society, shoulder to shoulder.”¹²

Ironically, the organisations for the blind in almost all the states have themselves demanded that Arithmetic and Science should not be taught to the blind students after class VIII and some do not teach mathematics to the students from class VI. Their arguments are that the blind students cannot manage Algebra and Geometry, nor can they do the experiments in science. There are very few teachers available, who can teach Arithmetic to the blind students. On the contrary, Kaul claims that there are at least four visually disabled

who have qualified as Chartered Accountants. Many in the public schools are studying Maths and Science successfully. Now a well-equipped science lab has been built by AICB, where the blind students have established that they can perform almost 85% of the experiments without any hitch. The problem is not with the capability of the students to learn Maths and Science, the problem is with the System that likes to promote its prejudices against the blind and prefers to maintain the notions about their inabilities.

These are only some of the issues, Kaul highlighted, with the rationality and objectivity that the problems of the blind demanded. His mind was constantly absorbing, problematising and addressing them and he spoke about them with the hope that reiterating them would create some dent in some thinking at some point in time.



श्री जवाहर लाल कौल

मैं, भारत का राष्ट्रपति,
प्रणब मुखर्जी, व्यक्तिगत गुणों के
लिए आपके सम्मानार्थ, पद्म श्री
प्रदान करता हूँ।

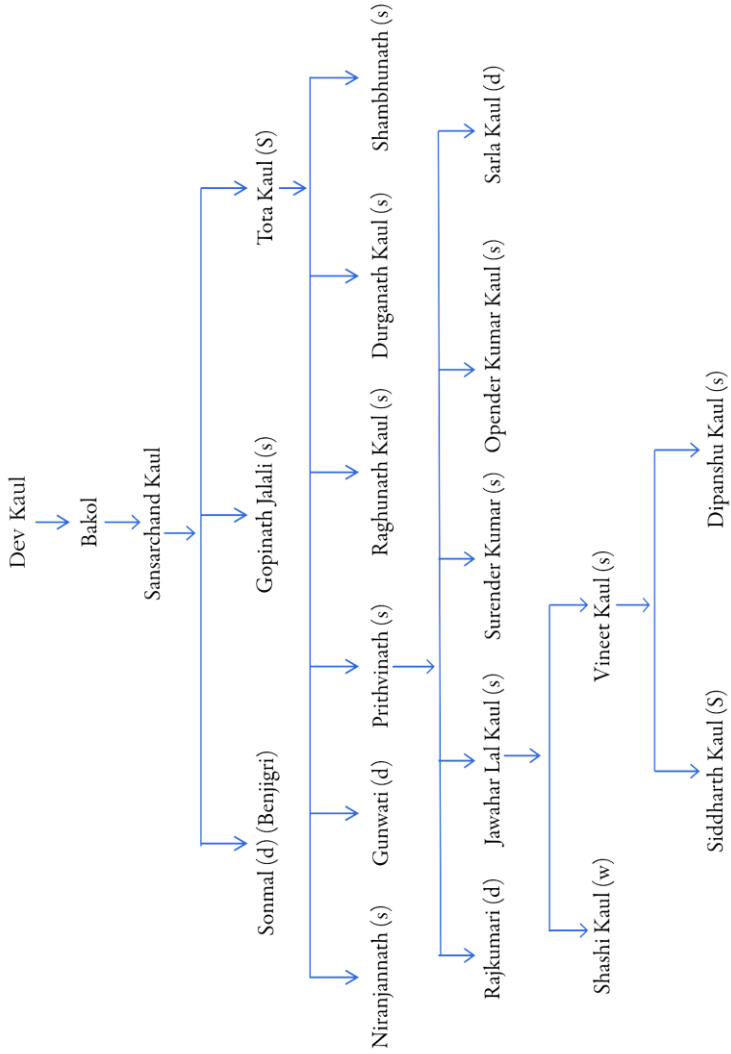
नई दिल्ली
दिनांक 31 मार्च, 2014

प्रणब मुखर्जी
राष्ट्रपति



Citation of Padma Award presented to J.L. Kaul by the then
President of India

THE KAUL FAMILY TREE



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Chapter 16 Jawahar Lal Kaul: A Meaningful Journey

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The Biography of Jawahar Lal Kaul is an ideological statement on what he believes should be the approach and strategy to maximize empowerment of the blind in India. Generally agreeing with the typical disability-rights discourse, that rests upon socio-economic and cultural discriminations and disparities, Kaul, nevertheless, believes in more pragmatic ways of self advocacy and places some responsibility on his own community also for an evolving relationship between disability and society. He believes in a practical and selective amalgamation of disability discourses.

Kaul is the founder of two prominent organizations of the blind: the National Federation of the Blind and the All India Confederation of the Blind, that earned international recognition because of Kaul's impeccable personal integrity and dedication. He has contributed to the biggest international organizations for the blind: the East Asia Committee of International Federation of the Blind, the Asian Blind Union and the World Braille Council.

The Biography of Jawahar Lal Kaul is an inspiring narrative of determination, self-respect and self-help. Kaul is highly respected as a blind activist and visionary and has iconic status among the Indian blind community.



Jawahar Lal Kaul receiving the Padma Shri award from Honourable President Pranab Mukherjee

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