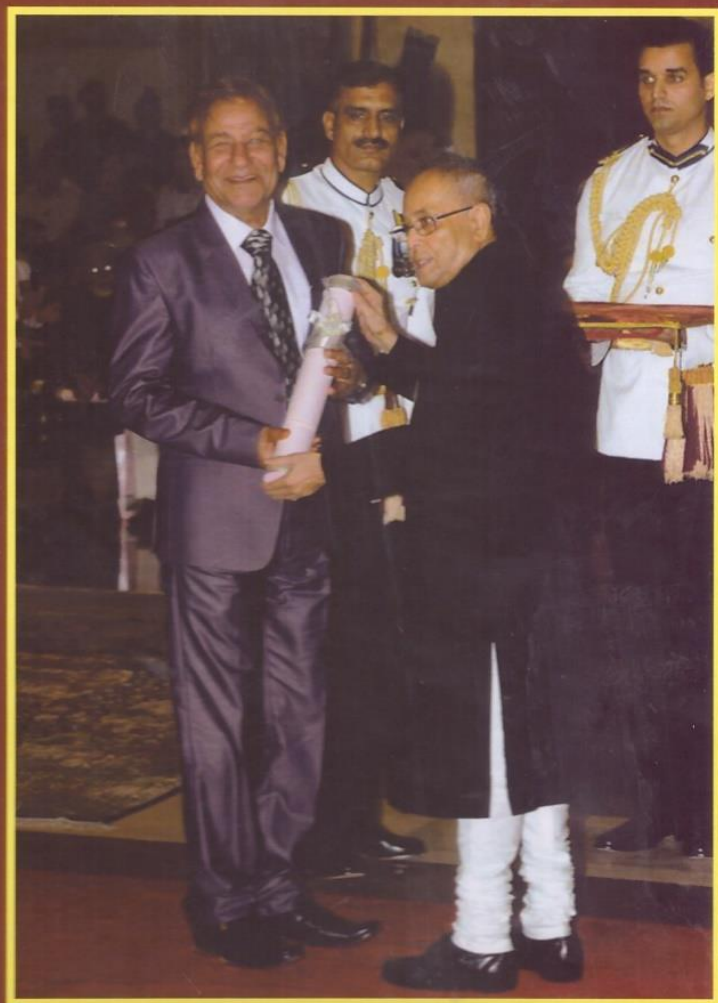


REMINISCENCES



J. L. Kaul

Translated from Hindi by
Mukta Aneja

Reminiscences

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J.L. Kaul

Recipient of Padma Shri 2014

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Foreword

As Lord Krishna has stated in the “Bhagvat Geeta”, a sense of purpose, the medium or the actor, diverse strategies, multiple actions and the divine blessings are the five essential elements to ensure the success of any undertaking. A task achieves its fruition only when these elements unite and operate in unison.

If the purpose is pure, the success is sure to come ones way—so says the following Sanskrit ‘shloka’:

“Adhishthanam Tatha karta karanam ch prithik vidham,

Vividhashach prathak cheshta devam chaivat panchamam”.

‘Life begets life’ is one of the fundamental laws of nature. This principle refers to the creative instinct of man to foster life in his own image and likeness. For instance, a father endeavours to prepare his son for entering the trade in which he is himself engaged, a leader of an organization prepares worthy persons to carry forward the work of the organization. This principle thus ensures the continuity of life and work.

The ultimate purpose of life is happiness, peace and freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Attractions such as riches and treasures, a life of glitter and luxury etc. are the manifestations of the desires for a material life. However, these in no way ensure peace and contentment. On the other hand, a life immersed in a social cause, in bringing smiles and a sense of happiness to others, for certain leads to fulfillment, particularly when one sees the beaming faces of those whom one has chosen to serve. This is the spirit of service in the real sense of the word.

The end of all such actions is ‘moksha’ or freedom from the cycle of birth and death. A life dedicated to a social cause is but a means towards this end. Most of us however, being too preoccupied in ensuring a life of material comforts, are unable to follow this

path. Only few have the courage to break free and dedicate themselves to such a life of serving others. As has rightly been said:

“Seva Dharama param gahno yoginampyagamyā”.

Only very few, who can sever ties from the material world and dedicate themselves to a life for others, get the rare opportunity to live a life of surrender for a social cause.

The creation of strong foundations and formations of organizations is one way to address the immediate and fundamental wants and needs of the exploited deprived segments of the society. Treading this noble path of serving others, Mr. Jawahar Lal Kaul has been able to accomplish so substantially. It is rightly said “where there is a will, there is a way”. The environment and circumstances become positive and supportive on their own when one moves forward to accomplish something good with determination. Mr. Kaul’s life is a living testimony of this fact.

I strongly believe and trust that this memoir of Padma Shri Mr. Kaul—the experiences of his life, will prove to be a beacon of light as well as inspirational for those wishing to tread a similar path of serving the community and society. May God give him the strength to steadfastly continue to move forward on his chosen path.

In the service of my Mother Land,

Dr. Kamlesh Kumar Pandey.

Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities,

Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment,

Government of India.

23rd May, 2017.

Translator's Note

I consider it a privilege and an honour to be given the opportunity to translate this significant memoir foregrounding the life of an individual who is an important icon in the visual impairment sector not just of the country, but also at the global level. Translating the work of a man, whose life is so intricately woven with significant parts of the histories of a number of organizations, woven to the extent that it is virtually impossible to separate the personal from the man who has effaced his own self to work for a worthy cause, is not an easy task.

I have been fortunate to be closely associated with Mr. Kaul and his work for more than twenty years not just owing to the deep involvement of my husband, Anil in various capacities in AICB, but also due to my personal interactions with this noble soul and the opportunities he has provided me to work for AICB at various times both in India and abroad. This translation is a rather small but pure token of gratitude to all Anil and I owe to the author of this book and also a tribute for all that he has done for lakhs of visually impaired persons across the country and at a number of international platforms.

Mr. Kaul has his own peculiar style of writing, a style which makes it at times difficult to carry the original in translation, particularly his unique mix of formality and informal writing, a blending of irony and humour. Idioms such as “Nandan ghista raha chandan” are hard to carry in translation. Despite such limitations, I have done my utmost to adhere to the original given the limits which any translation may have the danger of suffering from. Whether I have been successful in carrying the spirit of struggle and the validity of values which Mr. Kaul has been so easily able to communicate in the original, is now there for the readers to determine.

Mukta Aneja.

List of Abbreviations

AICB: All India Confederation of the Blind.

BCI: Braille Council of India.

IFB: International Federation of the Blind.

NFB: National Federation of the Blind.

VRTC: Vocational and Rehabilitation Training Centre.

WBU: World Blind Union.

WCWB: World Council for the Welfare of the Blind.

Introduction

It gives me immense pleasure to offer this memoir to my readers. I wonder though whether this publication will achieve the intended ends. I am also uncertain regarding the receptivity of my readers towards my views and beliefs. But it is a matter of satisfaction for me that I am able to place before you my fifty years' work as well as in some way hold up to your scrutiny the evolution of the organizations with which I have been associated.

We often notice that the organizational histories are presented through a certain lens keeping in view certain particular perspectives suited to those who so present these histories. This is often motivated by a desire of self-projection and to create an impression that the work of that particular individual equals the work of the organization. However, such accounts apart from being misleading serve very little other purpose either for the concerned individual or for the organization.

This memoir, in addition to being a presentation of my personal life, is an attempt to present the histories of the two major organizations of the blind, namely, the National Federation of the Blind and All India Confederation of the Blind. Glimpses of the role of some international organizations can also be found here. By way of objectivity I can only say that I have done my best to be completely impartial in my rendering of facts. The readers are the best judge of this endeavour.

It has also been my desire to share with you whatever little I have been able to do in the visual impairment sector during last fifty years.

During this period, I have always tried to live the life of a dedicated social worker. The extent to which I have been able to do so, is again up to my readers to determine. I can only assure you that I have neither used any organization as livelihood nor as a means to live a life of luxury while working for my blind brothers and sisters.

Some may regard me 'crazy; but I have always followed the call of my inner conscience and have acted with a sense of what I considered good and virtuous.

During this long journey of fifty years, there has perhaps never been a moment when I have felt myself alone. Well-wishers and companions have always been there to support and guide. When I look back at the international canvas, the first memory is that of Arne Husveg, the former International Director of Norwegian Association of the Blind and the Partially Sighted (NABP) Norway. He was also the Senior Vice President of the World Blind Union. Late Arne Husveg was my guide since 1996 who also motivated me to work on the international scene. This great personality remembered me as well as my organization till his death. When he was being moved to the Hospital for the last time, he told his ex-wife who was with him at that time, to send a sum of 10000 dollars to me for AICB. She was so generous as to add 10000 dollars of her own and promptly sent a sum of 20000 Dollars. Such was the unflinching trust of my well-wishers which never allowed me to swerve from my path even for a second.

Again, it was at the international front that I received the affection and complete support of the President of the International Federation of the Blind Dr. Fatima Shah and Dr. I.L.D. Grant, the Treasurer of the IFB. I am also grateful to the former presidents of the World Blind Union, Ms. Kicky Nordstrom, Dr. Marianne Diamond, Arnt Holte and the Founder of the Marga Schulze Foundation late H.E. Schulze. I was fortunate to receive the affection and support of such illustrious personalities. It was owing to their good wishes that I continued to progress on my path and never had to look back.

The credit of my fifty years of work in the visual impairment sector cannot rest with me alone. My lifelong partner, my wife Usha and a long-cherished and constant friend Mr. A.K. Mittal have an equal share in it. I have no hesitation in admitting

that but for the constant companionship and cooperation of these two individuals, neither my work in the blindness sector nor even the writing of this book, would have been possible. To a significant extent, I owe my success to these two individuals.

An eminent philosopher and like my elder brother, Dr. Ved Prakash Verma has also been instrumental in giving me valuable support and advice from time-to-time. I have also been deeply influenced by his philanthropic nature. He has always been a man of strong resolve and principles which have impacted me deeply.

How can I possibly forget Mrs. Mukta Aneja and Professor Anil K. Aneja? Without their active support, the English translation of this book may not have been possible. I shall always remain grateful for their cooperation.

I do hope and trust that readers will make my present endeavour successful by accepting this book.

J.L. Kaul.

I

Who Am I: An Atheist Or Theist?

Today, nearly at the age of 75, it has not been easy to conclude whether I am an atheist or a theist. Perhaps, there must be others as well suspended in this dilemma. Caught up in this predicament, it has been difficult to ascertain the existence or otherwise of God. One cannot help wondering, however, that if there is no God, then how does the Universe operate? If not God, nonetheless, there must be some power keeping this universe in perfect balance and harmony.

In the midst of these musings, I am suddenly struck by the image of a rich man's dog and a story comes to my mind. To take care of this dog, there are two servants attentive to him every minute; besides there is a grand air-conditioned car always waiting to take the dog for a drive. On the other side of the spectrum, there is a poor dog wandering aimlessly in the lanes; hungry, thirsty, itching and busy getting rid of the flies.

At other moments, an image of a person on a velvet couch smoking a 'hookah' and having people at his beck and call, conjures up in my mind. As I so imagine, the figure of a person in poverty, pulling the 'rickshaw' or tilling the ground overpowers me.

The poor man's child never gets to taste milk whereas there is plenty available for the rich man's dog. So much injustice, so many differences! The calm of my spirit is truly disturbed and I begin to lose faith in God. But if there is no God, then how does one reconcile with the theory of re-birth? Is there really something called 'previous birth' 'poorva janam?' I wonder whether one can ever resolve issues concerning God's identity and absolute reality?

I turn to my past for answers. Born in Kashmir as a healthy child, when I was five years old, I became a victim of small-pox. I did not know then what this strange experience meant or how

dangerous the disease could be. It was strange to find my entire face and body covered with pox marks. I learnt later that Hindus considered it a manifestation of 'Sheetla Mata' (one of the Indian Goddesses). Being bound to various religious superstitions appeared to be natural for me as I belonged to a middle class 'Brahmin' family. My family members ensured that no one entered my room.

Ultimately I got cured, but with a difference. The small-pox took away my eye-sight leaving me totally blind. The family found it virtually impossible to bear the grief that prevailed all around the house following my blindness. A pall of gloom enveloped my home for weeks. The sadness was all the more compounded as I was a son of the family and it was he who was now without his sight.

As per the superstition, the affliction was expected to last forty days. Somehow, thirty-nine days got over with both pain and expectation, on the fortieth day, the same Sheetla Mata who had snatched away my eye-sight, was worshiped. Sumptuous food was prepared and scores of people from the neighbourhood were invited.

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, though a stranger moving around nearby. This continued for around three to four hours. People thronged from all around to witness this miracle. Shouts glorifying Sheetla Mata rung loud in the air. It was indeed proclaimed to be a unique event.

But alas! Everything grew dark again by the time the afternoon was over. That beautiful woman was no longer visible. As deep darkness enshrouded 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.

This event took place nearly seventy years ago, when I was ignorant and could not distinguish between the God and the devil. In

my conception of the universe then, the ‘strong’ was equated with God. I had once asked my mother, “Is Sheetla Mata very powerful—so powerful that she could take away the eye-sight of an innocent child?” Though my mother was very sad, even then she scolded me saying “don’t forget, Sheetla Mata is a Devi. She can do what she pleases. What has happened to us is a result of our sins”. However, later I heard my family members saying that I should have been vaccinated for small-pox. It was a mistake which would have lifelong consequences.

Today, at the age of nearly 75, as I continue to be still debating this issue, a recent incident has come to my rescue.

It has been nearly twenty years since the All India Confederation of the Blind (popularly known as AICB) of which I happen to be one of the founder members and Secretary General, has been running a Braille press. This Braille press has had the distinction of receiving the National Award for being the best Braille press, twice. However, the year 2015 was full of difficulties. There was not a day when all the machines worked properly. Lakhs of rupees were spent on repairs, but to no avail. Every day a new problem was encountered resulting in the production being severely affected. As all efforts appeared to go waste, I was left with no choice (as is the case with many) but to take recourse to God and religion. Left with no other alternative, I looked for a solution among astrologers and priests.

One of the learned ‘pundits’ (priest) was of the view that worship of ‘Bagulamukhi Mata’ for five days would yield positive results. Also, the performance of ‘havan’ (a fire ritual) would help keep the obstacles at bay.

I was ready to follow as a drowning man clutches at a straw. As it was my personal belief which prompted me to follow this path, I could not use the money of AICB for this purpose. Out of my total savings of twenty-eight thousand rupees, I gave away a cheque of

seventeen thousand to the priest for the proposed rites. For five days, two learned priests spent five hours a day for these rites and rituals. I was also present at these prayers.

As the rituals got over, the working of the Braille press machines improved dramatically. Now these machines function uninterruptedly for twelve hours.

Can I still talk of being an atheist? After this incident the dilemma that troubled me over the years has been conclusively resolved. I feel there is God. Also, there is the power of prayers, perhaps there is something called past life too. Do not think I have reached this conclusion without strong reasons. The above-narrated two incidents tell their own tale.

II

Then and Now

Many believe that the advent of technology in the lives of the blind has opened for them flood-gates of accessibility and information. Smart phones, daisy players and computers are some of the more common devices used by the visually impaired at least in the cities.

When I look at all these, I at times wander in the alleys of my childhood and remember how difficult life was those days. Production of books in Braille was almost unaffordable owing to the heavy costs of producing even a single copy. Consequently, hardly any books were available in Braille or in recorded format. Despite these hardships, there was a desire to excel. It could not be imagined then that audio could be an effective medium of studies. Cassette-recorders, which are now obsolete, were hardly familiar to the common people those days. Even if some stray recorders could be seen in shops or with very rich people, those were primarily meant for music. Due to lack of materials and facilities, higher education remained only a dream for most visually impaired during those days.

Even those who could study beyond school, had to, and at times preferred to return to schools for the blind for their livelihood. One such person, who deeply impacted my life was Madanlal Khandelwal, the Head Master of my school at Amritsar. He was a forward-looking young man. Many changes were introduced by Khandelwalji soon after his joining the school. To the astonishment of many, typewriting by the blind was introduced. As the machines were brought in, we all wondered to what use these would be put? The Head Master gave no response, instead, though a blind person himself, he started typing on one of the normal, standard typewriters. Though he did not have much speed, the very act of his

being able to type despite his blindness was a thrilling experience for all of us.

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. I was particularly interested in learning Hindi typing. One of the advantages of learning typing was that now it became easier for me to write love letters.

Our Head Master, Mr. Khandelwal was an inspiring force for us. He was a post-graduate in Political Science, something we had not come across till then. Seeing him, dreams of acquiring higher education began to haunt us. On second thoughts, such dreams were but natural consequence of seeing a disabled person like oneself achieve so much. One is motivated to strive forward when there is an encouraging example to emulate.

Later in life, whenever I encountered visually impaired persons in AICB, who were full of despair, I tried encouraging them by sharing life-stories of successful blind persons who never gave up even in the face of severe obstacles. My experience tells me that such a method of bringing one out of the depths of hopelessness is more effective than even using a clinical psychologist.

To return to our aspirations of acquiring higher education, while we all so wished it, we knew that this task would not be easy. In the 1960s and 70s, there was no reservation for persons with disabilities in educational institutions. In such a scenario, admission to a higher education institution, itself proved to be a difficult task. My own experience is a testimony to this fact.

Though I scored well in the Matriculation Examination, however I had to encounter a prejudiced attitude of the Principal of the College where I was seeking admission. This was compounded

by the failure of some visually impaired students, my seniors in the college, to pass their examinations. At last, my persistence paid off and I got admission in the college of my choice.

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 rests. By such experiences, I wish 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.

But these hardships proved to be an advantage in a number of ways. I learnt the value of hard work. I had to prove to the Principal and my teachers that the visually impaired were second to none. During the class lectures, I used to take notes in Braille and later used to work on the same lesson with the help of my paid reader and prepare final notes. In order to stay up till as late as 3 am to study and memorize my notes, I had to resort to tablets which were stimulants and helped me remain awake.

Soon the time came for the first quarter examinations. I used my typewriting skills to take these examinations through Hindi and English typing. Though this mode of writing the examinations, and that too by a visually impaired, was totally new for the college, yet I got the required permission. When the results were declared, everyone was baffled and surprised. The person who got the first position out of a total of 511 students was a visually impaired 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.

As a reward for their good performance, bright students of the college were given extra classes at no additional cost. This

practice helped solve many of my difficulties. Even though the Principal now began to accept me rather half-heartedly, many others were more forthcoming in their warmth and respect. I was held up as an example in classes and the circle of friends began to expand.

However, soon prejudices again began to surface at a crucial juncture. The time came for me to choose an Honours subject and I opted for Sanskrit Honours. The Principal however, was not ready to accept my choice. One consideration, he said was that I would be the only student in the Sanskrit class and would have no peer support. He was also afraid of my grades slipping down as Sanskrit was a difficult subject for the visually impaired. “The College” he said “would get a bad name if this happened. Its past record of a hundred percent result would be reduced to zero”.

On the surface of it, his fears did not seem to be without basis. Needless to say, he did not still have confidence in my performance. Once again, my disability appeared to come in the way. But the Head of the Sanskrit Department was familiar with my capabilities. He came forward to speak for me and firmly stood by my side. The faith of my teacher was so strong in me that he offered not to take any salary for two years, till such time that I graduated with success. This was a huge statement indicating immense faith in the capacities of a visually impaired student.

Faced with such determination and strength, the Principal had little choice but to give way, albeit half-heartedly. Thus, I was allowed to take up Sanskrit Honours, the subject of my heart.

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 my 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.

As the time came for the final examinations, both my teacher and I were convinced that things would go of well. But neither of us could imagine the positive outcome of the result to the extent it was achieved. The joy for 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 most was the fact that the student who had secured gold medal in Sanskrit 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 recognize your talent. I am grateful to the Head of the Department, who had faith in you resulting in crowning glory for our college".

I was delighted to listen to his words and felt that my hard work was rewarded with the respect which I could now perceive in the eyes of my superiors. With all humility, I wish to say that all this could be achieved by me despite limitation of means and lack of materials in accessible formats.

Now, let us look at a different scenario. Do our visually impaired students lack anything today? They are equipped with computers, android phones, many screen-reading software through which they have access to thousands of books. Plenty of books are available even in Braille today. There are reservations for students with disabilities in schools and colleges. Multiple scholarships are available, free of cost or highly subsidized hostel facilities are not difficult to locate. A significant number of devices are available through the ADIP scheme of the Government. It would not just be a pity, but real tragedy if the attitude of the visually impaired does not undergo a positive change, towards their own selves, as well as towards society and future. While it is true that many visually impaired persons do have a very positive attitude and are doing

quite well for themselves, however, it cannot be denied that in comparison to the amount of facilities which are now available, the number of such persons is very small.

It is important that our visually impaired friends should keep in view the creation of a positive image of the blind behind their attitudes and actions. In order for the society to have a positive outlook towards us, it is imperative that our own attitudes should to be seen positive first.

III

In Quest of Livelihood

Finding a suitable livelihood is a daunting task for many. In my case, the challenges became more forbidding due to my blindness.

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. During those days, the visually impaired got jobs either in special schools for the blind, and that too on nominal wages, or alternately, in many cases, earned their bread and butter by teaching music. At times, they even worked as chair-caners.

However, all this may not be interpreted to mean that the visually impaired in late sixties were not capable of anything else. In fact, some of them did engage themselves in jobs which suited their profiles to quite an extent. But such instances were exceptions rather than the rule.

In my own case, after securing first position in Sanskrit Honours in the entire Punjab University, 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.

My mother consulted an astrologer about my future. Having already heard of my achievements, the astrologer at once replied, “Mother Goddess Sarswati is pleased with him. So he will acquire the highest education”. Having heard this, the family members encouraged me to pursue higher studies and enroll for a Master’s degree at Jammu University. I also felt that it was the best course and decided to apply.

When the day for admissions arrived, I waited for my turn to be called for the interview. To my surprise, the board members were very positive. Rather than subjecting me to any interview, they congratulated me and even assured me of a scholarship. Though this ought to have made me overjoyed, but somehow I continued to be in a state of sadness as I waited for the University to open. Something told me that it was not the right course to take. Somehow I was not mentally prepared for further studies. It didn't really matter whether I did my M.A. or not. Ultimately, I would have to face the difficult battle of finding an appropriate job. To add to this constant worry, there was another reason for my depression. As the time went by, family members began to discuss the prospect of my younger brother's marriage. But nobody talked of mine. But how could anyone even conceive of my marriage? First, I was blind and to top that, also unemployed—a kind of double disadvantaged eligible bachelor: a kind of bitter pill twice over.

All these made me feel rather inadequate and neglected. I continued to be at home, but everyday made me feel stranger from it. The feeling of being excluded even among my own kith and kin continued to increase resulting further in my rather overpowering depression. Just then rays of hope began to trickle in.

I received a letter from my former Head Master, Mr. Khandelwal who had recently returned from London. Those were the days when foreign-returned persons were held in high esteem in the society because very few people were able to go abroad. Even otherwise, I had always held Mr. Khandelwal in high respect.

The letter was in Braille, so its contents remained a secret. It was an invitation to me to come to Delhi and work in the Training and Rehabilitation Centre for the Blind, recently started by Mr. Khandelwal after his return from abroad with new ideas and fresh vigour. Though choices were difficult, it took me only a little time to make up my mind. On one hand was the prospect of my success in higher studies, my admission in M.A. and the offer of a

scholarship, on the other hand, was the temptation of a job. The offer of a job was too luring to be refused and I decided to go to Delhi.

Now the million dollar question was how to plan this travel? I knew my family would offer resistance. How to break this news to them? 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? All these problems seemed almost insurmountable. 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. All I am able to recall is that having taken only two sets of clothes and very little money, I left home in secret, without informing anyone and left for Delhi. You could say that I literally ran away from home. This was in May, 1967.

A three room flat in Dayanand Colony, near Lajpat Nagar, was both our residence and office. For quite a while, I was unable to figure out my precise role in this Centre. In the morning I would clean the place, at times even cook and during the day write letters as directed. 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? I also was unsure of ever getting a salary. Sometimes it appeared that my hard work would end up in vain, both financially and professionally. Thoughts of returning home began to visit me often, but the thought of facing my family was sufficient to dissuade me from this very tempting option.

As time went by, my work increased. Now I even had to do shopping for this office-cum-residence. Ten young men and women were taken in by the Office for various small tasks. Supervising them also became my responsibility and kept me busy from morn till night. All this was fine, but where was the salary? Of course, I got food to eat and a place within the Office to stay, but where was the salary? There was no income in the Centre, only expenses.

Prospects of any salary became even dimmer as the months went by. Soon the finances which had come from England got over and there was no money to pay even the rent of the flat where we were located.

Despite such problems, Mr. Khandelwal continued to persist with his idealism. He would not accept any donations. As a matter of fact, he was an idealist to the core, an idealist to the point of being impractical and unrealistic. He insisted that selling plastic purses made by visually impaired inmates and by selling Braille books sufficient money could be got. As many of us would testify, such idealism often does not work in real life. As this tale of turmoil is long, I would keep it brief by merely stating that soon a time came when we had to leave the house we were staying in as we were unable to pay rent.

As crisis struck, luck seemed to favour us too. A businessman belonging to the Jain community took us to a huge building called 'Ahinsa Bhawan'. 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. This illusion lasted for a while. Despite being spacious, the place had its disadvantages. It was so huge that cleaning it every day became an upheaval and painful task for me. At times, I prayed to God for relief from this toil. And, soon the time came when God appeared to listen to my prayers. The businessman, afraid that we would stay till eternity in that building, gave us one month's notice to vacate the premises.

But where could we go with around a dozen visually impaired inmates? So we persisted in our stay and battle tents were pitched both sides. The businessman disconnected water and electricity and yet we continued to persist. At last, the impasse was resolved by another business-person offering us the space within his housing society compound to put up tents for our activities. Left with no choice, we took up the offer and shifted to this make-shift home.

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. By now I had given up all hopes of receiving any salary. Sometimes even getting two meals a day also appeared a dream as difficulties continued to mount. My one time teacher and now my provider Mr. Madanlal Khandelwal was a disturbed man. Burdened with our responsibilities and the realities of his fast shattering dreams with visions of our bleak future, one day, leaving the entire responsibilities on my fragile inexperienced shoulders, he flew back to London.

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. 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. With some efforts and persuasion a major organization, the Jawahar Lal Fund agreed to sponsor in Hindi and English for the Braille copies of some significant publications of Nehruji such as the 'Discovery of India' and Nehru's autobiography. My friends and the educated blind residing at the Centre were very excited about it as they got some work in hand. The task of making Braille copies of such books was rather difficult those days. The Braille transcription was done either on Braille boards 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.

(Presenting first Braille copy of *Discovery of India* by Jawahar Lal Nehru to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister)

Seeing this effort, some other organizations also came forward to sponsor the Braille transcription of their publications. Arya Pratinidhi Sabha for instance agreed to sponsor the Braille transcription of 'Satyarth Prakash'.

Unlike Madanlal Khandelwal, I was not an idealist, but a man keenly aware of and in touch with realities. While the educated blind were engaged in Braille transcription, chair-caning work for the less educated visually impaired persons was undertaken. The rent of the building, which was Rupees 205 (a big amount) those days, was managed through small donations of rupees 10-20 per persons. But mobilizing these donations was no easy task. However, efforts ultimately seemed to pay off and it appeared as if the Centre had finally got into gears. But no salary for me yet. I used to work only on daily meals and no other compensation.

Seeing my plight, one of the founder members of the Centre Krishna Bhatiya, who was one of the sub-editors of a famous Hindi newspapers, the Nav Bharat Times once suggested that I try to put my typewriting skills, which I had acquired in school itself, to good use and see if a livelihood could be earned through these. So a strategy was worked out by both of us. Krishna Bhatiya suggested that I come to his office every evening and take dictation from reporters. He was hopeful of my getting a job there if my work was good and was noticed by the newspaper management.

The idea seemed appealing and also the need of the hour. As I had recently got married, and that too a love marriage, the need for steady livelihood became all the more pressing. My wife Usha also approved of this proposal and so my routine changed. Every evening around 5.30 pm I would reach the Nav Bharat Times Office with my portable typewriter, take down dictation from reporters on my typewriter, everyone would praise my work and then go away.

When it was around 11 pm, Krishna Bhatiya and I would travel back together in his vehicle. This ordeal continued for nine months and appeared that it would never end. 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.

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! The fault was ultimately mine that I chose this uncertain life of struggle leaving behind the prospects of a successful career in academics. Could I now blame anyone else for my plight?

Time passed and this seemingly endless struggle continued without any reward. Finally, it was in October-November, 1969 that the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind had its international Convention in Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi. Leaders of the visually impaired from various national and international organizations were in attendance. A visually impaired Ph.D. holder, Dr. Santlal Thireja chose this occasion to go on a fast until death demanding employment 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.

My friends decided to support his cause though at that time, we did not have any organizational structure. Our task was to prepare the news on his behalf, contact various newspapers as also the authorities who were under much pressure because this protest

was causing embarrassment for the government in the presence of many international leaders. The pressure of the protest in the backdrop of the World Blind Convention became difficult for the government to bear. So the Delhi Government declared that it was appointing Dr. Thireja as Lecturer. A significant gain for us was our delegation being invited for a discussion by the then Chief Metropolitan Counselor (equal to the Chief Minister in present structures).

My companions and I had a frank and open discussion regarding the unemployment of the visually impaired. The authorities wished to know about the kinds of jobs educated visually impaired persons could perform apart from being school and college teachers. I told them about the possibility of their being employed as typists. Astonished, they first found the idea as unbelievable and then advised us to meet the higher ups soon. It appeared as if the wind was turning in my favour.

With my portable typewriter by my side, I went to meet the concerned authorities. Naturally, one had to demonstrate to be believed. So I was tested for my typewriting abilities. The concerned persons were impressed with my flawless typing with 48 words speed in Hindi and 40 words in English. The onlookers were astonished too. As a consequence, after a few days, I was appointed as Lower Division Clerk in the Directorate of Education, Delhi. Perhaps I was the first visually impaired typist to be appointed on such a position. 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.



Presenting a Braille copy of "Discovery of India" to Late Indira Gandhi, former Prime Minister of India



Receiving the FICCI Award on behalf of AICB from Shri Atal Bihari Bajpayee, former Prime Minister of India, 2000



Shaking hands with Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, former President of India after receiving from him the BEST NGO Award for AICB, 3rd December, 2006



Mr. Kaul receiving the prestigious Louis Braille Medal in Bangkok from the World Blind Union President and the out-going World Blind Union President, 2012



Receiving the Best Braille Press Award on behalf of AICB
from the President of India, 6th February, 2013



Mr. Kaul addressing a gathering on the occasion of 191st Birth Anniversary
of Louis Braille (left to right: late M.L. Khandelwal, Mrs. Meneka Gandhi
(then minister of Social Justice & Empowerment) and
Mr. Rajat Banerjee, (Amway Foundation)



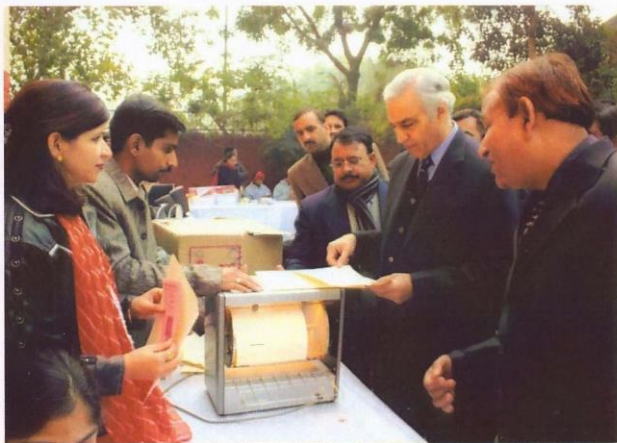
Dr. VP Verma, (former Head, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi)
receiving the Centenary Award from
former Vice President, late Shankar Dayal Sharma, 1987



Mr. Kaul addressing the participants of a
workshop organized by the Asian Blind Union in 2005



The Author speaking to the participants of a capacity building workshop organized by AICB in 2008



Demonstrating the special devices for the visually impaired to the former Lt. Governor of Delhi, Tejender Khanna on the occasion of Louis Braille Birth Anniversary

IV

The Foundation Stones

My experiences and struggles in search of employment led me to the conviction that such mammoth battles could not be fought alone. The strength and support of an organization was integral to one's success in such endeavours. Also, to succeed one must have good human and financial resources as well as experience. This is exemplified by the fact that had it not been for the World Convention of the blind at Vigyan Bhawan, neither late Sant Lal Thareja nor I would have been employed.

After working in the Training and Rehabilitation Centre for the Blind for nearly three years, I had gained some experience of running small organizations. As I was good both at the English and Hindi typewriting and had also acquired some writing skills, a thought of running my own organization suddenly came to my mind. This seed was strengthened after meeting Dr. I.L.D Grant, the then treasurer of the International Federation of the Blind, U.S.A. Grant encouraged me to set up the National Federation of the Blind in India and advised me in this undertaking at every step. I was fortunate to continually receive her guidance. Though I was convinced that it might be easier to set up an organization, but very difficult to establish a dialogue between the concerned organization and the Government. My dream was to set up such an organization in which the visually impaired were in the majority, controlled their own affairs and were active participants in its functioning. While conceiving of such a structure was easy, the actualization of it proved to be rather arduous.

Owing to unemployment, the visually impaired, by-and-large were not economically well-off. So while they were excited with the idea of a self-help organization, they too felt that the

realization of this idea might not be so smooth. They also expressed their inability to provide any financial support dismissing the whole idea as a mere day-dreaming. While it might have so appeared, I was not the one to be discouraged.

An important turn in my plans came when I learnt that Mr. Ajay Kumar Mittal had returned to India after obtaining training in USA. Soon after his return, he was appointed as Principal of a well-known school for the blind known as the JPM School for the Blind. I was keen to meet him especially because I had heard a lot about National Federation of the Blind USA, the self-help organization of the blind in that country. I had also read some literature published by them which had been sent to me by Dr. Grant. From all these, I had developed the conviction that the problems of the visually impaired could only be solved by their own efforts. Therefore, I wished to meet Mr. Mittal to understand more about the American experience and experiments. So I invited him to my home for a meeting.

This first meeting of ours took place during the early months of 1970. We discussed a number of issues leading to the decision that a national level organization be set up. During the next eight years, Mr. Mittal acted as the ‘think-tank’ of the organization providing invaluable expertise in many aspects without any expectation of any official position in the organization.

One of the qualifications to become a member of this organization was a B.A. degree. Many wondered why such a bar was prescribed. There is a little history to it. Prior to the formation of this organization, I had attended some meetings of the visually impaired which were rather unruly and at times coming down to the level of members hurling abuses at one another. This made me believe that a certain level of education would be necessary towards a civilized functioning of an organization. However, in 1978 I realized that I was living under this misplaced belief.

Coming back to our new organization; this organization was named "The National Federation of Blind Graduates". Its first Executive consisted of thirteen members out of which twelve were visually impaired. Dr. Ved Prakash Varma was the first President of this organization. His wife Krishna Varma was the Treasurer. I was asked to take over the responsibility as the Secretary General of the National Federation of the Blind Graduates.

The Office of the organization was in a small room at my home. It was in 1970. This was the time when neither financial resources nor the self-confidence of colleagues were easy commodities. What was however available in abundance was the zeal to put in hard work. It was this resolve which ignited us to move forward. A part-time female assistant who came for an hour and a half every day, used to help in dispatch work. The rest of the work-- such as writing letters, filing documents, writing addresses on the envelopes etc. was done by me. Upto 1972, the Office used to function only during mornings and evenings as I had to attend to my fulltime job and had to go to work during the day.

Suddenly in 1972, two distinguished visitors from NFB USA, Dr. Joseph B. Fernandez and his wife Jane Fernandez came to visit our organization which was then running from my R. Block Model Town one and a half room residence. Though I was in regular correspondence with the NFB, USA, particularly with Dr. Grant, there was no prior information of the possibility of any visit. In fact, I was quite embarrassed to receive these two visitors as the area in which the Office was situated was quite unclean. I was compelled to reside in that area as I could not afford rent in a better locality. But what could I do to change the scenario on the spur of the moment when these foreigners arrived?

When they arrived, I was working using a trunk as table and my bed as chair. Letters were being typed and the dispatcher was dispatching them. I stopped typing on their arrival, but continued to place the letters in the envelopes as I conversed with the foreign

visitors. Talking about our work, I shared with them that the organization was working to create more avenues of employment and lobby for concessions for the visually impaired. They demonstrated their desire to look through the files and I willingly obliged.

When they visited us once again after two days, my dispatcher and I were working on our usual tasks. Somewhat surprised, I welcomed them once again to our office. Mrs. Jane Fernandez with an encouraging voice, full of sincerity remarked, “Your organization will be very successful in future. During last two days, we have visited the National Association for the Blind in Delhi. There we noticed four or five employees idly sitting around and staring at us in surprise. The Officer there had a grand room to function from, but hardly any work was visible. In contrast, there are virtually no means and no infrastructure here and yet the best possible utilization of whatever is available is being ensured. This will take you a long way. We congratulate you for your efforts and hard work”. These remarks were truly an honour for me. I can hardly describe the joy and satisfaction which I experienced that day. In this comparison of resourceful and resource-less organizations, the latter appeared to fare better only because of the zeal and commitment of those at the helm of affairs.

Soon a demand grew from the less educated visually impaired persons for inclusion in the organization as members. Our earlier mandate was to have only those enrolled as members who had received education at least till the BA. level. When I discussed this matter with Dr. Grant, her stand was very clear. No visually impaired person, desirous of membership in the organization, should be denied this opportunity, he stated. The matter was also intensely debated in the Executive. Finally, in an ordinary General Body meeting in Ahmedabad, the name of the organization was changed to “The National Federation of the Blind”.

Following this important development, the membership continued to increase. Consequently, branches of the NFB in various states were established. By 1978, there were a total of eight branches of NFB. The organization had started becoming stronger and more effective in other ways also. National level conventions were held in Delhi, Ahmedabad, Pune and Jaipur. Of these, the conventions held in Jaipur and at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi were of more significance. With the active participation of some visually impaired persons of international acclaim, the profile of the organization was enhanced and the Government too, started paying more attention to our views and activities. At this time, NFB had renowned personalities such as Dr. Ved Prakash Varma as its President, and also persons such as Jagdish K. Patel, Gurudutt Arya and famous legal luminary Sadhan Gupta. Their active association no doubt helped to strengthen the foundation of the organization.

One of our long standing demands had been for the introduction of reservations for the visually impaired in at least groups C and D services. The harder we pressed for this demand, the more resistance we encountered from the Government. As there was no specific legislation for persons with disabilities at that time, we agitated for at least an Executive Order for introducing such reservations. Though it by no means was an easy task, but determination always leads to success is what I have always believed in.

It was a long and arduous struggle. In November, 1973, we organized a two-day hunger strike at the Boat Club, New Delhi. It was perhaps the first time in India when, through such an agitation, the visually impaired themselves realized their real strength and on the other, the Government was compelled to take note of our united might and difficulties.

An important aspect of this strike was the resolve of the visually impaired who had come on their own expenses not expecting any financial support. We had made arrangements for

tents etc. at the Boat Club. On the last day of the strike, leaving these tents, everyone moved towards the Rashtrapati Bhawan.

This had a salient and speedy impact. The media gathered in large number resulting in a comprehensive reporting of our concerns in many newspapers. Also, seeing our strength and the publicity of our agitation, we were invited to meet the President. A three-member delegation, with a memorandum of our demands, met the President and discussed a number of issues. On our return from the Rashtrapati Bhawan, we were accosted by the Police. This was not surprising because the police could not even detect the movement of around 200 visually impaired persons towards the Rashtrapati Bhawan despite being extremely vigilant about our agitation. We could accomplish this bold mission because the march to the Rashtrapati Bhawan was kept as a secret and the agitating visually impaired persons in tents were informed about the plan only on the morning of the event. I would term it the first major advocacy event, an event the like of which had never before taken place in the country.

As I write about this incident, a similar event comes to my memory, a bold defiance on the part of a few determined visually impaired persons on the 3rd Sunday of March, 1974. Those were the days when the World Disabled Day, which is now celebrated on 3rd December every year, used to be commemorated on the 3rd Sunday of March. Following our protest strike in November, 1973, we had hoped for some positive outcomes which did not appear to be forthcoming. So it was decided to intensify the agitation by other forms of protest to draw the attention of the Government and the public at large towards our issues.

Therefore, armed with their educational degrees on their chests and prominently displaying these degrees, a number of visually impaired persons went to the Teen Moorti Lange, from where the then President of India, V.V. Giri was to pass to attend a function, and started polishing shoes of passer-by people. The sight

of education degrees on our chests and shoe polish brushes in our hands, appeared to first amuse and then amaze everyone. As we got around the business of polishing shoes, the police confronted us and told us to go away. "If we had to go away, we would not have come here in the first place" we answered. The police wanted to know our demands. "Well, we are educated unemployed persons. So we thought we could earn some money by polishing the shoes of 'great men'. Do you have any objection to this? Do you want us to starve and die?" A heated argument ensued between us and the police following which we were arrested and taken away to the Chanakyapuri Police station. Arrest of blind persons was a rare occurrence those days. Therefore, it caught the attention of media and there was quite a good media coverage. We well knew that we could not earn our livelihood by polishing shoes. The idea was to attract Government and public attention towards the problems being faced by the unemployed visually impaired persons. In this, I believe, we succeeded to quite an extent. We were quite pleased and encouraged by this media coverage. Among those who led this agitation were M.K. Rastogi, R.S. Chauhan, Jagdish Luthra and Dr. Ram Avtar Sharma. To my memory and knowledge, such advocacy initiatives had never been taken by the visually impaired before in this country.

In the light of such unique advocacy initiatives undertaken by me and my friends way back in 1973-74, at such an early stage of the evolution of self-help organization movement in India, when today, I am told about some remarks of those who had started their work in the visual impairment sector as my juniors and under my leadership, remarks such as that I opposed the reservation on the post of Lower Division Clerk (LDC) for the blind or that I opposed the 1980 demonstration or for that matter, even the charge that I opposed the PWD Act, I feel quite shocked and surprised to hear such remarks because, as the facts indicate, I was perhaps the first to raise my voice and demand reservation in employment for the visually impaired. It is a matter to ponder whether a person who had

started his own career as an LDC can ever oppose the reservation of this post for the visually impaired, or, for that matter, a person who founded a self-help organization of the blind way back in 1970, can ever oppose any beneficial provision for the blind and the low vision? Would I have the mandate to continue working in the sector of visual impairment if I had said or done such things as are sometimes attributed to me? Could I, who had continually struggled for a legislation for persons with disabilities both in my capacity as the Secretary General of the National Federation of the Blind and later, as the Secretary General of All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB), would such a person as me, who has dedicated his entire life for the visual impairment sector, ever oppose steps such as reservation or any legislation for persons with disabilities? Sometimes, our friends, in order to prove themselves better than the rest, choose not just to overlook facts, but also do not hesitate to negate the work done by those before them. They surely would not even hesitate to negate the existence of the foundation stone of the blindness movement of India if it so suited their purpose of proving themselves as superior to all. Some of them have even decided to negate the existence of their organization itself before 16th March, 1980 as if there was no work done before 16th March, 1980, not just that, the organization, which was ten years old by then, did not even exist for some. One must ponder whether any building can stand without the foundation, and if the foundation itself is negated, then can the building claim to have any firm base to boast of or, for that matter, any real substance. The main cause of the blindness sector gets left behind when we start scoring points like these.

All this also happened in 1978. By then, the Federation had become strong. Its office was running in an eight room building in a central commercial area of New Delhi, namely, Pahargunj. We had also set up a sound-proof recording studio to record books for the visually impaired. Also, as many as 250 cassette recorders were available to meet the educational requirements of the blind and the low vision. The cassette recorders may be out of fashion today, but

in 1978, these were only beginning to enrich the educational access of the visually impaired and were considered an important and sought after equipment. Not far from Delhi, in Bahadurgarh, Haryana, a building had been constructed which housed a Braille library and a Braille transcription unit. Even a Braille press was about to commence functioning. The reservation quota in groups C and D, which we had struggled so hard to obtain, had actually become a reality through an Executive Order on 4th November, 1977. For these reasons, it must have become natural for some politically ambitious persons to conspire to grab the Federation.

At that time, the Executive of the Federation met to decide upon a venue for holding the General Body of the organization. The Secretary, Mr. Santosh Kumar Rungta proposed that the General Body be held in Kanpur. As he hailed from Kanpur, it was felt that making local arrangements would be easier. Therefore, the proposal was accepted. As until then there was no politics in the Federation, therefore, it could never have occurred to the members that any office-bearer could misuse and destroy the General Body to suit his ulterior motives.

It so happened that around 250 members had registered for the General Body and food and lodging was to be arranged for these persons. Special coupons were prepared for this purpose. However, instead of 250 coupons, over 350 coupons were distributed. The extra coupons were prepared with the purpose of creating chaos because of the non-availability of food for these over 100 extra persons. Such a chaos was sought to be created so that it could be made use of in the elections. Needless to say that their negative plans succeeded.

During the elections, instead of the registered 250 persons, many more gathered in the room and also captured the dais. Fight took place and chairs were broken. I then realized my mistaken notion that such atrocious behavior could only be resorted to by the uneducated persons. This spectacle was being orchestrated by an

educated leader with the help of misguided persons. Even sighted miscreants were arranged for.

That was the last time I and my team-members were present in the Federation. The grief we felt while leaving that organization cannot be expressed in words.

Chapter V

AICB: Milestones of an Eventful Journey

The unfortunate incidents which took place in 1978 during the General Body meeting of the National Federation of the Blind had shaken me and my companions to the core. We could not believe that the organization for which we had striven so hard to bring it from its foundation to a well-recognized national level body, could witness such happenings, that some of its members could stoop so low as to behave in the manner in which they did. After much reflection, we came to the conclusion that such outrageous incidents could occur only because of the over-ambitious character of some of the members. For them the organization became just a means to fulfill their ambitions. To achieve their ends, they indulged in false propaganda such as that the leadership was prioritizing services over advocacy, that the primary work of a self-help organization should be to engage in advocacy work etc. They also alleged that the concerns of the unemployed youth were being neglected. That this was not true can be seen in the facts pertaining to that period some of which have been highlighted earlier in this work. We were under the illusion that our members had a clear perspective and understanding, but as was proved, this assessment of ours was misplaced.

It appears however that the priorities and principles have now changed for those very persons who had worked against us and spread false perceptions. Today the same National Federation of the Blind runs many service-oriented projects. Clearly, the rules are now different for certain persons. But let this be the concern of those who today are at the helm of affairs in that organization.

What we are concerned with here are the circumstances under which All India Confederation of the Blind (popularly known

as AICB) came to be formed. As my friends and I resolved to form another organization, I went to various states to meet my close friends and associates and to share my thoughts with them. We were now of the view that this proposed organization should be an affiliate-based and indirect membership-based organization rather than being a direct membership organization. Thus, in addition to me, there were nine founder members, namely, Mr. A.K. Mittal, B.V. Reddy, E.M. Johnson, Jagdish K. Patel, H.S. Basappa, M.V. Shirdhonkar, P.B. Subramaniam, B.D. Dave and Ms. Rehana Ahmad Ali. Thus, on 12th September, 1980, AICB was registered as an organization in Hyderabad.

Once again, work had to be started from scratch. Perhaps always starting from zero was integral to my destiny and had become a natural habit with me. History was a witness to it: first TRCB, then NFB, then the Asian Wing of International Federation of the Blind and now in AICB, always the work had to be started from almost nothing.

Running an organization requires, among others, financial resources and I have always realized their value. Understanding the significance of money, I have always been careful to spend it and have often earned the name of a miser for having this trait. But I know that obtaining resources for an NGO is not easy. One has to win both the trust and hearts of people. Those contributing need to be assured that their money would be spent in a judicious manner.

The first sum gathered to form AICB was rupees three hundred collected from friends with which essential stationary and other items were bought. One faced almost unimaginable difficulties while working. It appeared as if a Graduate was asked to learn the alphabets once again. An overwhelming feeling of anguish used to envelope my whole being as I so perceived my state. One could not figure out where to begin work from.

The new venture was informed by a new learning, the learning of my past experiences. As one looked for resources to begin work, the Rotary Club came forward to support with a small grant. With their assistance, a pamphlet in ten languages was prepared to be used by the parents/guardians of the visually impaired children. This was circulated in various states. It was also sent to various schools. One of the intentions no doubt was to register our presence in the schools for the blind through a good project such as this one. This however was not the primary purpose. The objective of this project was to provide support to the parents/guardians of the visually impaired children studying in schools. In this we appeared to be quite successful.

Things seemed to go well for the new organization. Re-vitalizing old relationships, there came an opportunity of partnership with the International Federation of the Blind (IFB) with which I had been associated earlier. I requested the President of IFB, Sheikh Alghanim of Saudi Arabia to be our patron. He was kind to accept this request and was so generous as to donate 10000\$ towards the placement cell to support the employment of the visually impaired. This enabled us to help provide employment to several blind and low vision persons particularly in government and Public Sector industries. As more-and-more visually impaired gained work through our efforts, we gained substantial visibility and a good image among the blind across the country.

Our next project, undertaken in 1982-83, was training in short-hand and stenography for the visually impaired. When we began this project, many laughed at us and said that we were merely wasting money. To us it was a challenge and a kind of research in an employment area which we believed had tremendous potential for the blind. The results are there for all to see today. Hundreds of visually impaired persons, both men and women are gainfully employed as stenographers owing to our efforts and our conviction in their abilities. Several of these have also obtained promotions to

higher positions. As many as eleven stenographers, trained by us, have received the President's Award for being the best employees.

Seeing our work, an international organization, the Swedish Federation of the Blind, invited me to a training programme and asked me to represent the Asian region in that programme. It was a two-weeks' training followed by a study tour in various cities of Sweden. During the programme, there were discussions on ways to strengthen the self-help organizations of the blind in developing countries. I was of the view that management and leadership training programmes of three to four months' duration, involving not more than three or four leaders of the blind in each batch, should be conducted. That, I held, was the only way to train capable leaders of the self-help organizations of the blind. Also, I stated that a manual in organization management should be prepared because leadership training is virtually meaningless without making the concerned persons aware of the practical aspects of running an organization of the blind. A manual would help in serving this purpose and could be made available at a larger scale than a person-to-person training. The organizers appeared to concur with my views and perhaps therefore sanctioned the required funds to run leadership and management training courses on the lines proposed above.

This was a big boost and a valuable opportunity for our organization. Through management leadership courses, we, in addition to training leaders of our own country, also trained individuals from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Uganda etc. We were once again visible and active on the international canvas of the visual impairment sector.

The year 1984 presented a major opportunity and an equally significant challenge for the organization. It was a watershed year in the international sphere of the visually impaired, a year when two major international organizations, namely, the World Council of the Blind and the International Federation of the Blind merged to form a

consolidated global organization named the World Blind Union. As NFB (India) was the affiliate of IFB and NAB (India) that of WCWB, their membership of the World Blind Union was certain. We too wished to be a part of this important international initiative of the blindness sector. However, our request for membership was vehemently opposed by the National Association for the Blind. Fortunately for us, The General Secretary of SRF (Sweden) was also the first Secretary General of the World Blind Union. He knew me well since 1975 and our organization since 1982. It was through his strong support that we were able to get the membership of the World Blind Union. It was a major challenge for us and our victory an important leap forward both in our work and our international recognition.

We were now convinced of our strengths and our ability to gain ground once again. But our successes could not be endured by our opponents who continually instigated the innocent visually impaired persons by spreading false information and rumours. My wife and I received several phone-calls every day threatening us with dire consequences. All this was rather torturous both mentally and emotionally. But we continued to persist.

A particular incident, which occurred on 24th January, 1981 shakes me even today whenever my memory is stirred up with it. I was then heading the Asian Wing of the International Federation of the Blind as its Executive Secretary. At about 10 am on 24th January, 1981, when I was busy working in my office situated at the Blind Relief Association, an unruly mob of misguided students barged into my room and ransacked everything. They put a garland of shoes around my neck and forced me to parade in front of them. For a while I was so stunned and in such an unbelieving state that I did not realize what was happening. Then I saw too clearly how some people, to fulfill their evil ends and misplaced ambitions could stoop to the lowest depths of misconduct and uncivilized actions. This was no doubt a manifestation of the desperation of such persons. I knew now that working in my office at the Blind Relief

Association was no more safe for me, so I returned working in my same one room office at my residence in Model Town where I was also trying to work on the newly laid foundations of AICB. Though extremely shocked and shaken by this incident, I was by no means deterred from my commitment and my chosen path.

Another landmark in our perseverance was the year 1987 which was also the 100th anniversary of the work for the blind in India. Much was being talked off and planned to commemorate this important year, but there appeared to be no direction or clarity. Neither the Government nor long-established NGOs appeared to be taking any initiative. So AICB decided to take the lead and approach Christoffel Blinden mission (CBM) for support to jointly celebrate this significant occasion. Seeing our initiative, some other organizations now appeared to wake up. Proud and under misconceptions, some such organizations did not have any trust in our abilities. One important leader of the blindness sector remarked, “This typist cannot do anything, much less an event of this magnitude. Experience and skills are required for such undertakings”.

However, we knew that we would be able to prove ourselves as second to none. We also knew that our success was important to establish our mark and credibility in the sector. A three-day international summit was organized in New Delhi in which many national eminent personalities of the visual impairment sector as well as several renowned figures from abroad took part and bore testimony to our professionalism and success. The person who had called me “a mere typist” was also among these important personalities. At the end of the event he came up to me and said in amazement, “It was a wonderful event. Kaul, you have really done a great job”. A salient feature of this summit was the honouring of ten important personalities of the century who had made a signal contribution to the blindness sector.

This memorable summit was followed by another significant event, this time at the residence of the then Vice President of India, Late Dr. Shankar Dayal Sharma. Renowned visually impaired writers, legal luminaries, and academicians who had made exemplary contributions despite their visual impairment, were honoured during this function.

After these two commemorative events of the centenary year of the work for the blind, the Confederation was among the frontline organizations of/for the blind in the country. AICB was talked of with respect both in India and at the international level. In a brief period of seven years, we were able to achieve all that once again which we left behind while leaving NFB in 1978. There was no looking back after that.

Among a series of illustrious achievements of AICB during the years that followed were the first national Women's Conference for visually impaired women in 1996, two international technology conferences in 1997 and 1998, a Convention to mark the golden jubilee of the Bharati Braille in 2002, a number of major events to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of AICB in 2005, which were inaugurated by the then President of India Late Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam and the celebration of Louis Braille 200 birth anniversary in 2009. AICB was instrumental in the Government of India agreeing to release a postal stamp and commemorative coins on this occasion. A committee was constituted by the Government of India to commemorate this landmark year of which I was made the Coordinator. In this capacity, I continually networked with various ministries and departments to ensure the celebration of the Louis Braille's 200 birth anniversary in a befitting manner. The release of the postal stamp and the coins, a documentary on the life of Louis Braille and the establishment of the National Award for the best Braille Press were some of the important outcomes of our efforts. AICB also played a crucial role in the establishment of the Braille Council of India. To mark this occasion, the Confederation also released two important publications titled "Louis Braille Aur

Krantikari Avishkar” and “Ubhre Akshar”. The first of these was written by Dr. Ved Prakash Varma with much zeal and commitment. “Ubhre Akshar” was a collection of poems on Louis Braille and Braille script. These poems were written by various poets. An international convention involving countries of the Asian region was also organized which deliberated on diverse aspects concerning Louis Braille and the Braille script as such.

The distinction of AICB however, does not rest only in organizing conferences, conventions and workshops. The Confederation has received all round recognition and appreciation in successfully implementing numerous projects for the empowerment of the visually impaired across the country. The range of such projects is vast starting from running a high-production Braille Press to a special school for the blind, women empowerment programmes, advocacy work, community-based rehabilitation to research—AICB has been second to none in any of these spheres. Vocational training has been one of our exemplary projects.

All these have become possible not by a mere coincidence, but rather, by the hard work and sacrifice of many foundation stones of this organization. Prominent among these are our former President late Jagdish K. Patel, late E.M. Johnson, late P.V. Subramaniam, late Lal Advani, Mr. K. Tyagrajan, and the incumbent President Mr. A.K. Mittal. The illustrious contributions of Prof. Anil K. Aneja in taking advocacy work of AICB to new heights are unforgettable.

While all these have helped in their own unique ways to strengthen the Confederation, Mr. Mittal has virtually worked as the think-tank of the Confederation in all its activities. Owing to his acumen and efforts, AICB today has the identity of a professional organization.

A diversity of talents is integral to the smooth functioning of any organization. Our Confederation has continually functioned

as a healthy body—a body which has a versatile mind and other active parts.

Today is my 75th birthday. For nearly fifty years now, I have been dedicated to the work for the blind with various organizations. Time just blew over like wind. I never realized that such a long period had passed by. Well, this is the law of nature. The time passed because it had to by this very inevitability. But even today, as I muse, I wonder whether I have been able to achieve the goals and fulfill those aspirations for which AICB and other organizations were established. Have I been able to inculcate qualities such as dedication to truth, hard work and steadfast loyalty to the organization among my companions. Perhaps not, and this makes me really sad. What is the use of my fifty years of complete dedication if these traits could not be fostered in others? What have I then gained?

My rational-self urges me to look after my own concerns and not bother about others. But the mind has its own standards and methods. It weighs, it measures, it processes from every dimension of profit and loss and then comes to conclusions deciding how to act and what to ignore.

How I wish I could also take instructions from my mind!

I wish I could avoid listening to the call of my heart and inner conscience!

I wish I could also think in terms of profit and loss and work as per my own interests!

How I wish I could define good and bad as per my own convenience!

But Alas! It was not to be! It could never be being what I am!

Chapter VI

On the International Front

I had never contemplated the possibility of working for the empowerment of the visually impaired on an international level. The reason is obvious—I had neither considered myself capable of this nor conceived of any possibility of such a nature coming my way. But destiny had other plans and God's ways are known to none.

It so happened that Swedish Federation of the Blind (SRF) partnered with the International Federation of the Blind (IFB) and World Council for the Welfare of the Blind (WCWB) to organize a two-week training programme for the leaders of the visually impaired. This event took place in Kuala Lumpur in 1975. It was a matter of pride for me to be given the opportunity to represent India in this event along with Mr. P.C. Dandia of NAB (India). It was my first occasion to meet and interact with the important world leaders of the visual impairment sector. One such person whom I met here was the Chairperson of the IFB Dr. Fatima Shah. She hailed from Pakistan and was a courageous visually impaired lady. Discussing various issues of common interest with her was a real pleasure.

At that time, IFB did not have any presence in Asia whereas the WCWB had a strong base. When I asked Dr. Shah as to why no step appeared to have been taken in this direction, she replied that in Asian countries, the self-help movement was in its early stages. The availability of dedicated visually impaired leaders was scarce. "How then can an Asian branch be opened?" she remarked. I felt that the time had arrived for India to lead the self-help movement in Asia. I also discussed this matter with the General Secretary of SRF and on the advice of Dr. Shah continued to remain engaged with this issue. At that time, I was the Secretary General of the National Federation of the Blind (India) and hoped to see a significant role for NFB in the Asian chapter of IFB.

One person, who commanded all round respect of the blind in India was late Lal Advani. He had also indirectly supported the formation of the NFB. As I had very cordial and informal relations with him, I asked him whether he would be willing to take the lead in the formation of the Asian chapter of IFB. As he was holding an important government position at that time, it was essential for him to obtain permission from his employers before getting involved in any such venture. But he assured to do his best to secure this permission.

I invited Dr. Fatima Shah to India in 1976 on behalf of NFB. The occasion was the National Convention of the NFB in Jaipur. The Convention was a great success, owing among others, to the presence of large number of delegates from across the country. This success had a positive effect on Dr. Shah regarding our strengths and strategies.

This was also the occasion when Lal Advani first met Dr. Shah and discussed the formation of the Asian arm of the IFB. Dr. Shah seemed pleased with the outcomes of her visit. This was how the East Asia Committee of the IFB came into existence under the leadership of Lal Advani. Countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Nepal were included in it.

It was no easy task to push forward the work of the new Asian Chapter of IFB. Though this task was of the international level, the resources provided by the IFB were too little. What was however available to us in abundance was our enthusiasm to work and the above leadership of revered Lal Advani.

Due to his constant engagement with his regular work in the Government sector, Lal Advani could not spare much time for this new venture except Sundays. I too was in a fulltime job and therefore could only spare my mornings and evenings as well as Sundays for the work of both organizations: i.e. NFB and IFB. Due to this paucity

of time and man-power, it became difficult to take up any new task. As work was increasing, Advaniji advised me to take a deputation from the Government to IFB. This permission was granted in 1977 and then I became the Executive Secretary of the East Asia Committee of the IFB.

Though there was no financial advantage in this deputation, but the work commitment which I had undertaken with IFB, became easier to fulfill and more success came our way. I continued to be on this assignment till January, 1985. Now that the entire day was at my disposal, working for both organizations became much easier.

The first priority of the East Asia Committee was to organize the General Assembly and a regional summit for its member nations. Being our first time to manage an international event of this scale, the task appeared gigantic. It among other things involved the framing and passing of the Constitution and the programme as well as making logistical arrangements such as travel, boarding and lodging for the foreign delegates. The then Prime Minister of India, Late Morarji Desai was invited to be the Chief Guest at the inaugural ceremony of the Convention. The stature of the ceremony as well as of the East Asia Committee was enhanced by his presence.

Apart from representatives from about ten countries, the important office-bearers of the IFB also came for this event. In The General Assembly, Lal Advani was elected as the President and the Committee was applauded for its progress in such a short period. This success was a catalyst in the further work of the Asian Chapter of the IFB. This was also the moment when the NFB received international exposure and acclaim.

In 1978, owing to events which led to my separation from NFB, the Office of the East Asia Committee of IFB was shifted to the Blind Relief Association. We decided to start a bi-monthly journal titled Braille International. It was to include news about the activities in the blindness sector of the member-countries of IFB as well as

write-ups about the issues concerning the visually impaired. The publication of this journal was quite regular and found favour with the readers. As I recall around 800 copies of this popular journal were sent to readers every two months. It was printed at the Central Braille Press of the Government of India.

Apart from this, the Asian chapter of the IFB organized many seminars and conferences focusing on the problems of the visually impaired. Between the years 1985-2000, the visually impaired of India stayed aloof from the international scene. The reason was that after I left the NFB in 1978, I focused on establishing and developing AICB, the details of which have been discussed elsewhere in this book.

Towards the end of the year 2000, the World Blind Union held its General Assembly in Melbourne, Australia. I attended this mega event as a delegate of AICB. One of the decisions of the World Blind Union was to re-structure Asian Blind Union by including South Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia. The WBU also resolved on dissolving the Middle East Committee.

The meeting of the delegates of these countries was chaired by none other than Arne J. Husveg, the then Vice President of the WBU. He had the occasion to observe the work of AICB since 1996 and appeared to be much impressed with our work. He praised our work in that particular meeting and my name was proposed for the Secretary General of the re-structured Asian Blind Union. The election was unanimous. This began my second inning of work at the international front.

I remained as the Secretary General of the Asian Blind Union till February, 2012. In the meanwhile, in January, 2001, I took voluntary retirement from the Government service which allowed me more time to work for the visual impairment sector. Now, once again I had the whole day to dedicate to my work and did not need to rush to my office every day.

As the Secretary General of the Asian Blind Union, the most difficult challenge was to establish effective communication among member countries. This by no means was an easy task. In the Central Asia, only Russian was understood and in the Middle East only Arabic. To overcome this challenge, a two-pronged strategy was adopted. The important documents were made available in both Arabic and Russian apart from English and secondly, Part-time English speaking personnel were employed in the offices of the member organizations from the Central Asian countries. These strategies paid off very well and the flow of communication became quite smooth.

Preparing and getting approved the Constitution of the Asian Blind Union as well as a plan of action for the term were some of the more urgent tasks at hand. The Constitution of the ABU was so framed as to ensure equal representation to all the three sub-regions which formed the Asian Blind Union. The first General Assembly of the ABU was held in New Delhi in 2002 and was attended, among others, by the then President of the World Blind Union, other office-bearers of the WBU and a number of international personalities. The Union was supported by the Norwegian Association of the Blind and Partially Sighted (NABP). Besides holding a conference, the Constitution and the Plan of Action was approved by the General Assembly. There was never a looking back after that.

The work was carried out with full zeal and commitment. Several Special Educators were trained, a number of workshops, particularly in the training of Arithmetic and Science as well as Braille and Management Skills were held. Leadership training and women empowerment were some of the focus areas.

General assemblies of the Asian Blind Union were held in Damascus in 2004 and in New Delhi in 2008 and 2012. A significant number of Asian countries participated in these events. International personalities including WBU officers were often present and strengthened our deliberations with their expertise. Also, the work of

the ABU was much appreciated in the General Assemblies of the WBU.

Another opportunity to contribute to the international work came my way when in the year 2009, I was appointed as the Chair of the World Braille Council. I was totally unaware of this honour coming my way. In fact, my consent was taken only after the decision was reached. The term of this Office was up to 2012. It was a task of immense responsibility in which Mr. A.K. Mittal rendered invaluable support.

The World Braille Council had 15 members chosen from across the globe. Three meetings of the Council were held in Spain, India and Germany in which important decisions impacting the research in Braille were taken. The Council also took significant decisions regarding collecting available research on Braille, standardizing computer and mathematical Braille symbols and holding of the first World Braille Congress. The high point of my work as the Chair of the World Braille Council was the holding of the first World Braille Congress.

Conducting such high profile meetings was not easy for me. So I followed the principle of broad participation. For each item of the agenda, I would assign an expert who would conduct discussion on that particular item. This way I could escape difficult questions being thrown at me and also, the task would be performed more efficiently. An added advantage was that through this strategy, I acquired the image of someone who believed in participatory approach, team work and taking everyone along.

The World Braille Congress, regarding which I spoke earlier, was held in Leipzig, Germany in September, 2011. More than 300 representatives from various countries of the world participated. An exhibition of various Braille and other technologies was also held. I consider it an honour to be given the opportunity to address the

August Gathering in the inaugural session of the Congress. Considering the solemnity of the occasion, I think I did a good job.

Thus, my nearly twenty years of engagement with the international work for the blind received an all-round appreciation. This can be seen in the fact that in the 2008 General Assembly of the World Blind Union held at Switzerland, I was granted the life membership of the World Blind Union and that too in absentia. Only very few persons have been conferred this honour. But my luck wished to favour me more.

The General Assembly of the World Blind Union, held in Bangkok in 2012, once again appreciated my contribution to the visual impairment sector at the international level and went so far as to bestow on me the coveted and prestigious Louis Braille Medal, the highest honour given by any international blindness organization. So far, only five persons have received this honour. I was the first to be conferred the Louis Braille medal as far as countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America are concerned. I consider this honour even greater than Padam Shri which I was conferred by the President of India in 2014—higher because it was given away by the global nodal organization of the sector in which I have worked for nearly fifty years now.

Sometimes I wonder how I received such sought after recognition? I am neither an expert in the field nor can charm the audience with fiery speeches. As I look for reasons for this unfathomable praise all round, I am reminded of a personality I hold in very high esteem, Late Arne J. Husveg, former International Director, NABP and a former Vice President of the World Blind Union. He had once shared with me that after his experiences in Bangladesh, particularly with the NFB there, he had decided never to provide any financial support to any organization in this region. He once told a friend of his, “If someone from NFB shook hands with you, please count your fingers to see how many of them are left”. But he said that he was struck and impressed by my commitment,

dedication and honesty. Perhaps this is what was also noticed by those who decided to confer this important award on me.

When Arne J. Husveg was on his death-bed, he told his ex-wife Anne to send ten thousand dollars to me for AICB. Even on his death-bed, Husveg thought of Kaul and AICB; Remarkable! Isn't it? Of course, sister Anne promptly sent me ten thousand dollars as desired by him along with ten thousand dollars of her own.

This is the reward of selfless work, honesty and efficiency. If you don't believe me, try living life my way, the outcomes will be there for all to see.

About the Book

In an era when legislations, technology and sensitization are the buzz-words in the context of persons with disabilities, it is difficult to imagine a time when it could not even be conceived of by the society that a visually impaired person could study or work. This book foregrounds the ethos and challenges of such a time during the 1960s and 1970s when the author had to overcome untold social barriers and prejudices to not just find a place for himself in this world but also through his dedicated work for the visually impaired, create social and legislative spaces for thousands of others. Apart from being a touching tale of struggles and successes of one determined individual, the book also highlights many significant aspects of the history of the visual impairment movement in India as well as some important international initiatives. In a sense, the personal life of the author Padam Shri Jawahar Lal Kaul is so intricately woven with this history that it is virtually impossible to separate the two.

About the Author

Born in Kashmir on 28th July, 1942, Padam Shri Jawahar Lal Kaul is a renowned social activist, one of the pioneers of the rights-based disability movement in India and an acclaimed leader of the visual impairment sector nationally as well as globally. He is one of the founders of the National Federation of the blind and that of All India Confederation of the Blind. Mr. Kaul has also served on significant positions of international NGOs including as the Secretary General of the Asian Blind Union and as the Chair of the World Braille Council.

For his cutting-edge work in the disability sector, Mr. Kaul has been conferred with many national and international honours including the FICCI Award, The Marga Schulze Award by the Marga Schulze Foundation, Germany, The Louis Braille Medal from the World Blind Union and in 2014, the Padam Shri by the President of India.

About the Translator

A writer and a social worker, Ms. Mukta Aneja is deeply committed to disability and inclusion issues.



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Cover Page Photo
The Author, being conferred the prestigious Padam Shri by
His Excellency Shri Pranav Mukherjee, President of India on
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