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CHANGING PERCEPTIONS AND EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AMONG VISUALLY CHALLENGED CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Visually impaired persons have always suffered various structural obstacles and difficulties largely due to deeply ingrained prejudices and customs, low level of education and lack of awareness and opportunities. They were deprived of a normal social life and were considered as worthless by family and society. But growth in knowledge and changes in socio-cultural environment has brought about visible changes in the attitude and behavior of people towards them. They are aspiring to move forward from marginalized group to be a part of mainstream. The present study attempts to understand and analyze the nature of changes in the life of visually challenged children studying in National Institute of Visually Handicapped (NIVH), Dehradun. Based on a factual study of 66 respondents, the study concludes that condition of visually challenged children has changed positively as a result of changing social perception and social support available in the form of various opportunities and facilities for their inclusive growth and upliftment.

KEYWORDS: *Visually Impaired Persons, Disability, Hearing Impairment*

INTRODUCTION

Disability carries different meanings for different persons. Persons with disabilities include those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others and make their life hard. (Kacker, 2013). The individual model of disability dominant

in western societies contends that individual's mental and bodily impairments are the main cause of the problems experienced by disabled people. Thus, disabled people are seen as unfortunate victims of chance events. But, recently, the individual model of disability has been challenged by social model of disability. Social model theorists take in account the role of social and cultural barriers faced by disabled people which obstruct their full participation in society. (Giddens, 2006)

In earlier times in India disability was considered as a punishment for acts committed in earlier lives. People considered them as helpless and burden on society. Prejudice regarding disability made their condition pathetic as they often confronted sympathy, rejection and humiliation by the society. However, with growing knowledge and changing social perception it has increasingly been accepted that the major cause for disabilities is deficiencies in the management of the environment in which we live and that if we manage the environment better, then degree or extent of disabilities can be reduced and can be turned into ability of different nature as is evident in availability of governmental and non-governmental support and facilities for them in India.

According to 2011 census 26.8 million persons are disabled in India, who constitutes a large section of our society. Disability Act 1995 classifies disability into seven categories i.e. blindness, low vision, mental retardation, leprosy cured, loco motor disability, hearing impairment, and mental illness.

(<http://www.socialjustice.nic.in/pwdact>). Of these blindness is one of the most traumatic disability. Persons affected by this disability face problems in their personal and social life because of faulty perception, negligent attitude of the society and lack of awareness among the members of society including parents, about the actual potential of visually challenged people. Moreover, there exists a dearth of knowledge with regard to their social life due to inadequate attention paid to issues concerning them by social scientists. Therefore, meaningful researches on visually challenged people are still in its infancy stage.

However, some efforts have been made to study the visually challenged persons. A few empirical studies on visually challenged persons need to be reviewed briefly to understand their concerns and findings. Bhalerao (1983) made a sociological study of the educated blind in major urban centers of Madhya Pradesh. The study showed that their adjustment in the family was satisfactory and their parents felt that money and time spent on their education was useful. They used to participate in various recreational programmes and had hobbies too. Das (1988) conducted a study on psycho-social profile of blind adolescent girls and finds that subjects were favorably oriented towards their family. They felt more comfortable with their blind friends and the relationship with sighted peers was superficial. They sensed the depreciating and condescending attitude of the society and this angered them. They did not consider marriage a necessity, though they were confident that they would be able to successfully cope with the responsibilities which accompanied marriage.

Agarwal (2005) tried to analyze the effect of educational settings on acquisition of academic skills among visually impaired students and found that the visually impaired students in semi-integrated setting were distinctly better in academic skills due to greater exposure. They had more interactions with the mainstream world which had proved to be stimulating. The resource centre and resource teaching supported them to strengthen their development further. The visually impaired students competed with sighted counterparts in mainstream schools and with their visually impaired counterparts in the resource centre. The double exposure helped them to build their confidence and gave them more and more opportunities to excel. Khan, Z.N (2006) studied determinants of academic success of visually challenged children of secondary schools and found positive relation between educational aspirations and academic success among visually challenged children. Socio-economic status was also found to have a significant impact on the level of aspirations. Blind pupils from high socio-economic status displayed maximum magnitude of aspiration, while its minimum magnitude was seen in the pupils of low socio-economic status. Chaudhary and Pandey (2008) tried to elicit the views of students with visual impairment studying in special schools on their academic and co-curricular integration with non disabled students. Interestingly, the majority of the students wanted to meet, interact, study and participate in co-curricular activities with the non-disabled in general schools. Khadka and Ryan (2012) identified the educational, social, and leisure activities of children with visual impairment and a comparison with fully sighted counterparts revealed that visually impaired students and their fully sighted counterparts had similar lifestyle but visually impaired children were more restricted in some specific activities

An analysis of these studies reveal that the studies dealing with various issues related to the life of visually challenged people have tried to highlight their psycho-social profile, their problems and level of their integration in the society. However, the need for further research aimed at understanding their social life cannot be ignored. More and more understanding of their conditions and problems will help the policy makers and society to bring them into mainstream.

In view of this, the present study proposes to understand and analyze the changes in life of visually challenged children studying in National Institute of Visually Handicapped (NIVH), an exclusive educational institution for visually challenged children. The study is concerned with analysis of the nature of changes in their life as a result of societal and governmental support, which

have ultimately led to positive changes in the lives of these visually challenged children.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The specific objectives of the present study were to understand the life of visually challenged children in terms of their socio-economic background, to understand the role of awareness and availability of facilities meant for them in affecting their life, to understand nature of change in their life as a result of their exposure in an educational institution and to understand and analyze the problems of the respondents encountered by them in their life.

The study was conducted in National Institute of Visually Handicapped (NIVH) which is an exclusive educational institution for visually challenged at Dehradun city, capital of Uttarakhand. There are three segments in NIVH i.e. Model School, Training Centre for Adult Blind (TCAB) and Department of Special Education. There are total 337 students in NIVH in the three segments i.e. 220 in Model School, 77 in TCAB and 40 in Department of Special Education. Out of these a sample of 66 respondents was selected. First purposively only IX to XII class students were selected from Model school, as the students from these classes were expected to be mature enough to respond to the questions of the researcher, and then

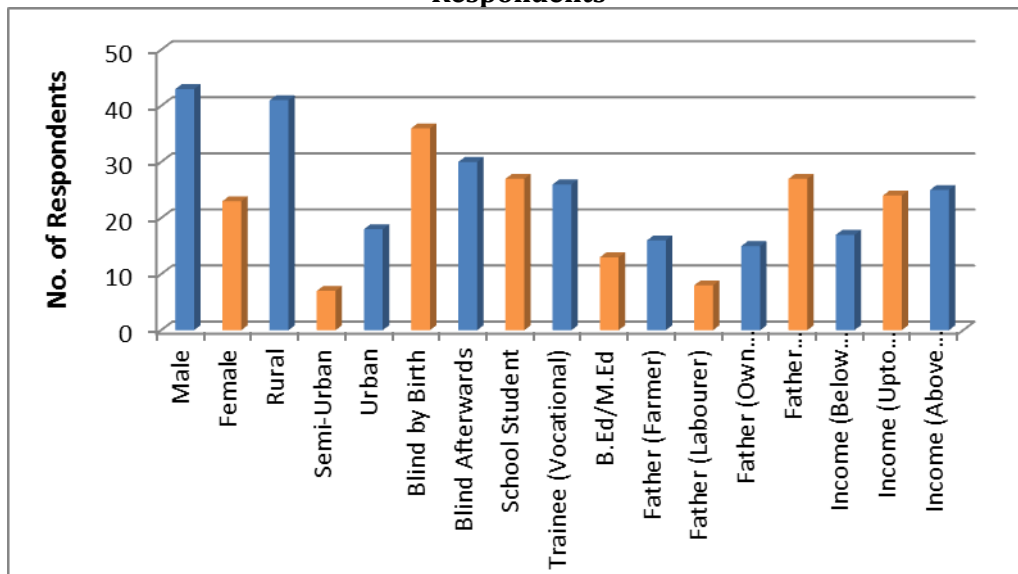
proportionately one-third were selected from each level i.e. IX to XII class of Model School, TCAB and Department of Special Education. Finally 66 respondents were selected randomly from all the categories. Data from the respondents were collected by using Observation and Interview schedule, keeping in view the nature of study and limitation of the respondents.

DATA ANALYSIS

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

An analysis of the socio-economic background of the respondents as depicted in fig. 1 revealed that more than half (65%) of the respondents in NIVH are male. Majority (93%) of the respondents are Hindus. Almost 51% of the respondents belong to general category of caste. Very few respondents are from Dehradun, while majority of them (91%) are outsiders. Most of the respondents (62%) belong to rural area and remaining respondents are from semi-urban or rural areas. Large segments (97%) of the respondents are hostlers in NIVH even some students who are from Dehradun used to reside in hostel due to the inconvenience of travelling from home to NIVH every day. More than half (65%) of the respondents were blind by birth, the remaining (35%) became blind after birth either because of accidents or infectious disease like pox, rubella, typhoid, measles, etc.

Fig.1: Profile of the Respondents



Out of these respondents, 41% are school student, 39% are those students who are getting training in TCAB and remaining 20% are from department of special education i.e. B.Ed and M.Ed students. 39% of the respondents got to know about NIVH from their previous schools and some from other sources like relatives, friends and advertisements. Most of the respondents (65%)

came to NIVH by their own wish while very few (35%) were encouraged by their parents to join NIVH. Fathers of respondents are mostly involved in business while the mothers are engaged in domestic activities. So far as the monthly income of respondent's family is concerned 38% of the respondents' parents earn above rupees 10,000 per month, 36% of the respondents' parents earn up to

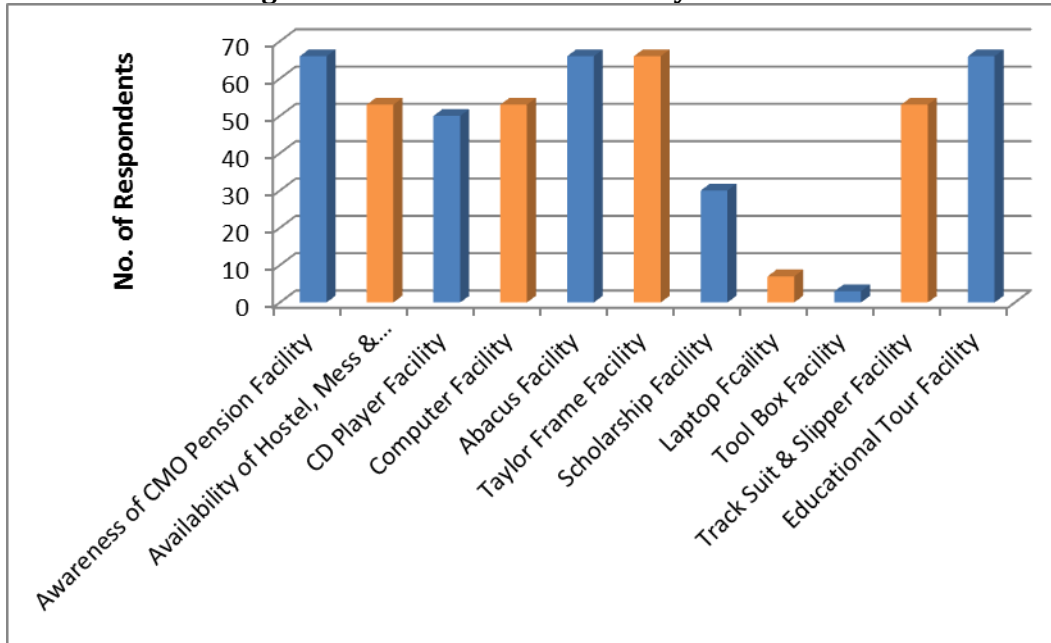
10,000 while remaining 17% respondents' parents' monthly income was below 5,000.

AWARENESS AND AVAILABILITY OF FACILITIES:

It is noteworthy that all the respondents are aware of Chief Medical Officer (C.M.O) pension, travelling concession, training for visually challenged people, equipment for trainees and free schooling. Majority (80%) of the respondents are getting hostel, mess and medical assistance free, while remaining (20%) i.e. B.Ed and M.Ed students respond that they are not getting these facilities

free. As regards learning equipment facilities, 78% are getting the facility of CD player who are in need to record their study material and 80% of the respondents are getting computer facility (with special software of English JAWS and for Hindi SAFA) except those who are in various skill development training courses and do not need computer for their work, like who are engaged in chair canning course and paper products course etc. All the respondents are getting the facility of abacus, Taylor frame, interpoint and stylus.

Fig. 2: Awareness and Availability of Facilities



In the form of aid (45%) of the respondents who are school student and from stenography course got scholarship, (11%) got laptop who are in computer field and (5%) got tool box as they are from engineering field, while remaining are not getting any facility from the above mentioned. From the daily living facilities (80%) of the respondents are getting facility of track suit, lower/T-shirt, slippers, tooth brush, paste and soap. All the respondents are often taken to educational tours.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDE AND PROBLEMS FACED BY VISUALLY CHALLENGED STUDENTS

It is very encouraging to note that majority (89%) of the respondents observed positive changes in their attitudes after joining NIVH. Now they have become self reliant and self dependent in their routine work. They can move easily without escort independently, can do household work like cooking, washing themselves and have been capable of using electronic gazettes, etc. They are working hard for

their better future with new hope and determination, and belief that blind can also live with dignity. 69% of the respondents, now, have developed cordial relation with their family and peer group. With the new found confidence they have begun to realize that they are no longer dependent and burden on their family and society and can actively participate in the development of society. So far as their adjustment in social life is concerned, the study reveals that most of the (78%) respondents are satisfied with their life in NIVH. While some respondents (22%) face problem relating to food, sanitation and adjustment with other follows few students in social life face mobility problem, problem of competition with partially blind. Some of them are worried for their future security, while remaining respondents do not have these problems. 70% of the respondents are home sick and miss the company and care of their family members, while the remaining 30% feel far better in NIVH due to availability of environment suitable to their needs. Some respondents (39%) realize that they are less capable than their sighted counterparts but majority (61%) of them firmly believe that they are in no way less capable than sighted person. Such a confidence

and positive outlook towards themselves has helped them a lot in removing the stigma attached to them as disabled person.

It needs to be highlighted here that all the respondents consider education as a necessity for their life. Most of them want to continue their educational pursuit to the higher level and have definite and clear career plans. Only a few of them are not conscious about future career plans. It is very interesting to note that they are conscious not only for their own education but they want to motivate others especially visually challenged person to get education and to get an independent, meaningful and respectable life. These respondents differ in terms of their views regarding whether they would like to work with visually challenged or normal persons. Half of the respondents want to work with sighted as they feel that sighted person can help them in those situation where they are likely to become helpless due to their visual impairment, while remaining want to work with blind because they have a feeling that blind person can understand their situation in a better way than sighted and they will not feel less capable and inferior to their co-workers. Fellow feeling and similarity in condition will motivate them to work. It will help them come out of insecurity and inferiority complex in a big way.

CONCLUSION

The study observed that with the efforts of family, government, exposure, facilities and educational support in NIVH the condition of visually challenged children in NIVH changing. There are visible changes in their personal and social life. Now they are moving towards higher level of education, getting vocational training, attaining self dependence in routine work, like mobility, use of electronic gazette etc., participation in sports and curricular activities. They have strong desire to do social work for needy peoples and want to prove themselves as active not as dependent and helpless members of society. Their status has started changing from *disabled to differently able*. They are getting familial and governmental support to get educated and strengthened through various types of facilities. The study also noticed some problems being faced by few of them. For example, they encountered problems such as negligent attitude of society, shortage of study material, competition with partially sighted, interaction problem, etc., which need to be taken care of with utmost sincere. So we can say that if these problems are given proper attention then more and more positive change are likely to come in the life of visually challenged people.

Therefore, keeping these problems aside, we can say that visually challenged have witnessed encouraging changes in the pattern of social interaction and socio psychological attributes. However, it needs to pointed out that a concerted effort is required by the state, society and the visually challenged them to make them empowered and fully integrated with the society. Formalities for attaining benefit of scheme, programmes and policies started by government should be minimized so that the time that is wasted on paper work may be utilized for giving the benefits of the programmes meant for them. Active involvement of schools, colleges, community and social activists is likely to facilitate fuller assimilation and participation of visually challenged in socio-economic activities of the larger society because personal and social competence is essential to achieve better integration in the community and society.

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