CHAPTER IV

THE BLIND

Historically, blind and visually impaired people have either been treated as if their lack of sight were an outward manifestation of some internal lack of reasons, or as if they possessed extrasensory abilities. Another view which is much more common is that the blind people are ignorant of their surroundings and can be easily deceived. Generally, it is said that 'disability means useless' and disability comes from sin of the parents in previous lives or the disabled individual's previous life and it needs to be hidden. Therefore, people are not necessarily interested in educating visually disabled persons to be independent and prevent them from enhancing their potential.

In India, lack of adequate number of institutions for the blind is making the scenario still grimmer. At present, there are around 200 schools in the country exclusively meant for the visually impaired persons. These 200 odd schools are catering to approximately 1500 students, which is just a negligible percentage of the total number of blind children in India. Most
of these institutions impart primary education coupled with training in a few simple handicrafts. Music forms an integral part of the curriculum. The majority of the existing institutions are run by voluntary agencies, but are assisted by state governments. The central government has set up a comprehensive National Centre for the Blind at Dehradun. This center includes a central Braille press which publishes text books and other reading material in Braille. It also has a workshop for the manufacture of Braille appliances and other basic equipments needed for the education of the blind. There are only three centers for the training of teachers for the blind and these centers can train between 30 to 40 teachers annually. In addition to these, the Governments of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh conduct courses to train the teachers when needed. In Assam, there are about 65,000 persons with visual disability; only 3 government sponsored institute along with 11 institutes run by various non-government agencies, imparting education and vocational training, exclusively to the visually impaired students.

The district of Kamrup in Assam, of which Guwahati is the headquarter has a considerable number of person with visual disability. According to Census of India: 2001 there are 23871 blind persons in the district. It is a matter of great concern that, in spite of having such a big blind population, the Guwahati city has merely two schools for providing institutional education to the blind children. The most prominent one is the Guwahati
Blind High School, Basistha, which is a government institution and the second one is the Gyan Jyoti, a non governmental institution with a very few students. The Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, was established in 1976 and it provides education to the blind children from class I to High School Leaving Certificate Examination, conducted under the Board of Secondary Education, Assam. The medium of instruction in this school is Assamese. The present enrolment in the school is 74 (as on January, 2009) with 42 boys and 32 girls, and of these students 52 are totally blind whereas 22 children have some residual vision which enable them to have some perception of light and shadow. The total intake capacity of the school is 75 and as informed by the school authority, every seat gets filled up by the month of February. The table 4.1 below shows the distribution of students in each class.

Table 4.1: Number of students according to the academic classes of Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASS</th>
<th>MATE</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.52</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.91</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.38</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.52</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.25</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.52</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is evident from the table that the total number of boys is more than the number of girls. The percentage being 56.76 for the boys and 43.24 for the girls. If we observe the break of students into boys and girls of the last 10 years, it gives a clear picture that the trend of having less number of female students has been maintained. The following table 4.2 shows the number of male and female students of Guwahati Blind High School during the last 10 years.

Table 4.2: Number of male and female students of Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, during the period 2000-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEARS</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This school is purely a residential institution and the students apart from Guwahati and its adjoining areas, come from districts like Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Goalpara, Sonitpur etc. It has been observed that almost all the students belong to economically weaker families and which is perhaps highlighted by the fact that the cause of blindness among 41.89 per cent of the students is due to malnutrition. While studying the background of the students enrolled here, it appeared that the primary causes of blindness among these children are malnutrition, pox, typhoid, cataract, and accidents while plying. The table 4.3 below shows the causes of blindness and number of students affected by each factor.

Table 4.3: Causes of blindness among the students of Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSES</th>
<th>MALE</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>FEMALE</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malnutrition</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40.63</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pox</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typhoid</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15.63</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cataract</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19.04</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21.87</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

86
The teaching staff of the school consists of 14 teachers and out of these, 6 teachers are visually disabled. The school has 1 clerical staff and 9 grade four employees. The school curriculum consists of three main courses, literacy, music and handicraft. The pre-vocational training which includes cane and bamboo work and training in plastic bag making is part of the regular programme. But as of now, it is no longer continued due to want of raw materials required to carry on with the training programme and thus depriving the blind students from acquiring a few skills which would have definitely made some difference as far as giving them self-confidence as well as some avenues for earning a livelihood, when out of school, is concerned. As these pre-vocational training were discontinued, some 9 trainer were laid off. The only training which is provided to the students apart from the regular academics is dance and music. Both vocal and instrumental music along with ‘Satriya’ dance (an Assamese classical dance form) are taught to the children.

Like all the government sponsored blind schools, the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, depends on two government departments for its smooth functioning, the Education Department and the Social Welfare Department. The former provides the salaries to the teachers while the later is responsible for the welfare of the student along with the proper functioning of the hostel and it includes the food provided to the boarders. Though, the entire responsibility of running the school is with the
government, it was learnt that most of the requirement, basically the day to
day needs are provided to the students from donations given by local
businessmen, NGOs and Organizations like Lions Club of Guwahati etc.
The furniture and most importantly the Braille appliances have been
acquired with the money provided by local NGOs. Even the school
building which was extended in 2008 was sponsored by a well known
cement brand of the country.

The teachers and the students of this school are encountering
numerous hurdles over the years due to apathy on the part of the
government. The basic requirement of a special school is to have trained
teachers, which is conspicuously missing in this institution, secondly the
trainers who were appointed for the pre-vocational programmes are no
longer there as most of the courses have been stopped. The existing
services rendered by this institution are traditional in character. The regular
curriculum stresses more on literacy education and training in dance and
music. The training which was provided earlier on cane and bamboo work
and bag making seems to be a stereotype for all such schools. It is high
time that the authorities include some new trade in the school curriculum
including computer education to give the blind persons a better chance for
survival and to enable him or her to lead an independent and dignified life.
Unless some innovative approaches are made and some novel patter be
introduced in the pre-vocational training and educational programmes, it would hold no meaning for this already struggling section of our society.

It is to be appreciated that in spite of meager resources available with the school authority, they are carrying on with the endeavour of providing education and in the process generating self respect and confidence in the minds of the blind students studying here. The school authority has been able to carry out the duties, may be in a limited way but on a regular basis only because of some generous support of few voluntary agencies and individuals who have extended their helping hands in the form of financial assistance towards the school. The difficulties which are being faced by the school could be better understood from the comments made by the headmaster and an assistant teacher regarding the present state of affairs of the institution.

Mr. Bhaben Barman, aged 51 years, is a permanent resident of Guwahati. He has been serving as the headmaster of Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, for the last 3 years. He opined that, it was not possible to maintain the school with the amount of fund provided by the government. Government of Assam gives Rs.175 per student per month, but with this money even the meal for the students could not be given properly. In this regard some voluntary organizations have come forward to help the school to meet the challenges posed by financial shortage by providing monetary
support form time to time. The school building which was extended to accommodate few more classrooms and offices was sponsored by Star Cement, a well known cement brand of the country. This year with the fall of winter, the students were struggling to keep themselves warm due to the dearth of blankets. The problem was solved when a local businessman donated around 100 blankets for the students of this school. Similarly another person has made a promise to provide some very urgently needed utensils for the hostel kitchen. Mr. Barman also informed that only recently he went to Dehradun to put an order for some Braille appliances worth Rs.15,000, the amount which was donated by a local NGO. Regarding walking stick for the students, he commented that, few years back the Composite Regional Centre (CRC), Guwahati provided some sticks but since then no further supply of walking sticks have been made by any organizations including the government. Along with this comment, he also made it clear that the students require no walking sticks at least within the school premises since it has becomes almost mandatory for the school authority to walk the students around to make them familiar with the place and this is done when a student come here for the first time, since everyone around him is a stranger and every step unexplored. The joy on Mr. Barman’s face was quite evident when he mentioned that around 35 students who passed out from this school in the last five years have been absorbed in various government departments of the state. Most of the
persons who were able to get a job are employed as teachers, clerks and grade four employees, basically as peons. It was however very surprising when Mr. Barman commented that he is not very upset with the government for not providing enough funds for the overall development of the school, since the school authority has never asked for any help from the government. What ever is required for the day to day affairs of the institution is procured with the donations made in the form of cash and kind by various organizations along with some generous and kind hearted people of Assam in general and Guwahati in particular.

Mrs. Dipali Thakuria, aged 49 years, an assistant teacher of the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, is a permanent resident of Guwahati city, and she has been working in this school for the last 18 years. According to her, the overall condition of the school has not improved much as far as providing some basic requirements of the students is concerned. She informed that even after having a Braille press, the government has been able to provide only the books which are in English and the books supposed to be printed in Assamese are yet to be done. In such a situation it is quite difficult on the part of the teachers and more so for the students who need to copy down the entire book while the teachers dictate. Mrs. Thakuria lamented the fact that substantial amount of time is spent in writing down the chapters and the best the student can do is to
copy four to five pages a day and this is definitely not doing the cause any good. She also commented on the lack of recreational facilities in the school, and opined that recreation plays a vital role in moulding the character of any children. After the day’s strenuous efforts in the classroom the blind children need relaxation, which can be best provided through recreational activities. Playing with others also helps the children in acquiring social skills. Mrs. Thakuria said that, in this school no regular programme of recreation is followed, nor is there any organized training in sports, and therefore the students spend their leisure time playing card or singing songs; and hence in such a situation efforts need to be put to have regular sports programme and along with that appointments of adequately trained sports supervisors in all such special schools.

The views provided by the teachers regarding the present state as well as functioning of the school can be corroborated with the statements made by the students. The following case studies give an idea of the student’s perspective of the state of affairs of the school and the kind of relationship they share with the teachers.

Mr. Anupam Deka, aged 17 years, is student of class X in Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, and a permanent resident of Sonapur in Kamrup district. His family consists of his parents and two brothers. Anupam lost his eyesight when he was a year old due to pox. He came to
this school when he was 8 year old. According to him this is a very good school and the teachers are sincere and work extremely hard towards providing education to the students. But there are some problems as well, which the students and the teachers face everyday. Lack of Braille books and other Braille materials are some of the many problems faced by this school. Inadequate recreational facility is another matter which needs a bit of attention from the authority. Inspite of having a playground, there is no programme in the school curriculum for any outdoor games. Anupam expressed his interest in playing cricket and said that he has heard about blind people playing cricket in other parts of the country and they are good at it as well. He also pointed out that during spare time the students here engaged themselves in playing card and listening to the radio and therefore, there is hardly any physical activities for the children living here. He opined that, if there is some initiatives taken by the school to introduce some games which need a bit more physical activities, the student would be much more physically fit. He also pointed out that the food provided in the hostel is not good enough and want the government to do something about it. According to him, the students wants the government to introduce computer education along with other vocational courses, so that after passing out from school, there would be a good chance for them to get a job. Anupam said that he has a strong desire to study in a good college and pursue his bachelor degree in commerce and find a respectable job. □
Mr. Sanjay Das, aged 16 years, is a student of Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, and he hails from Baihata Chariali of Kamrup district. He has been blind since his birth. He said that everyone in his family loves him very much but his parents had no option but to send him here for his education. Sanjay was only 7 year old when he came to this school. He said that, initially it was difficult for him to live without his parents but after spending some time he started to like the place. The hostel mates and the teachers have been very good to him all these years and he seldom misses his home. Sanjay said that whenever he goes home during vacations, he could not wait for the school to reopen. He was full of praise for his teachers and said that they not only care for their education but also try to help them in every possible way. Sanjay is so close to his teachers that whenever he has any personal problem, he finds it much more comfortable to discuss it with them rather than talking about it with his parents. He expressed his sadness that after passing the H.S.L.C Examination he would have to leave the school, but at the same time said that he would not stop coming here and meeting his teachers whom he considers as his family.

Several age old prejudices and superstitions prevailing in the society have made the problems of the blind much more acute. Blindness makes a person look much different from others and in case of children this factor
plays a crucial role as the normal sighted children avoid their blind counterparts. So, from the early childhood, the blind children are compelled to live a segregated life, severed off from his peer-group. When a blind child enters a special school, there are less chances of him being in the company of his normal peers. Here segregation becomes complete. Such social segregation brings about undesirable consequences because the whole personality of the child gets affected. Some blind children become extremely hateful towards society and most of them develop a feeling of inferiority complex in their minds. These types of situations can be changed with a little help from each one of us. The process of social inclusion and providing the blind a conducive environment to live a meaningful life with opportunities to grow, can be achieved by not having any negative attitude towards them and by taking initiatives, no matter how small it may be, on the part of the society, in order to highlight the fact that the visually disabled people are an integral part of it and are not to be left behind. It is an established fact that changing a set of age old perception has never been an easy task. But the process can be hastened; if the government takes the responsibility and makes things happen for the benefit of not only the blind but also other people with special needs. However, it is a matter of great concern that the priority accorded by the government for the welfare of the blind can not be considered as very high. There are not many special schools in Assam and particularly in Guwahati for the education of the
blind. In Guwahati, as mentioned in the foregoing pages, there are only a couple of schools exclusively for blind and only one of them is a government institution. According to the information acquired from the Social Welfare Department, there are two schools, one in Jorhat and other is the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, which have been provincialized under the Education Department. The rest of the schools for the blind face a difficult future because of poor infrastructure and inadequate funding. However, a very few schools run by NGOs for the sightless students receive recurring grant in aid from the Social Welfare Department. There is also a provision for scholarship to the physically disabled students including the blind, studying in government institutions, institutions run by NGOs and general schools and colleges. A positive development for the blind students of Guwahati and of the entire state is the establishment of the Braille press at Basistha in Guwahati. This Braille press produces books which are in English, but till date it has not been able to bring out Braille text books in Assamese language, which is generally the medium of instruction in almost all the blind schools of the state. In Assam there are close to 65000 visually disabled persons of whom 23871 are in Kamrup district alone. The need for specialized skill training centers in Guwahati as well as in other parts of the state is beyond any doubt. It is worth mentioning that the Government of Assam has already established the Sheltered Workshop for the Blind, Nagaon. This center offers training
facilities to the blind persons in different trades so as to make them skillfully capable of making an independent living. There have been some measures taken by the government for the welfare of the blind but those are very few and far between and definitely not enough. There are still lots more to be done in order to provide them the basic support, which would be instrumental in realizing the desired status for the blind in the so called mainstream society.

There is a growing realization among the members of the blind population, specially the educated section of the step motherly attitude of the government towards them. There have been a lot of promises but no real deeds on the part of the government to do something substantial for the blind. The All Assam Blind Student Union (AABSU) alleged that they are always treated as second class citizens by the government. According to Mr. Uddhav Kalita, the spokesperson of the AABSU, the authorities always seem to ignore their demands regarding jobs and other facilities. On July 24, 2008, the members of the AABSU continuing their ten day long fast gathered in Guwahati and tried to block the road leading to the capital and gheraoed the secretariat. The members demanded that the government should stop depriving the blind youths from the jobs that have been allotted exclusively to the visually disabled. During the protest the members became so aggressive that the police had no option but to arrest them.
Miss Anima, aged 18 years, a resident of Noonmati in Guwahati, said that she was also present in the 2008 protest at Dispur. She commented that, when she was in school, all the blind students including her faced a lot of problems for the lack of Braille books. Inspite of such hurdles Anima shined in the High School Leaving Certificate Examination. She is of the opinion that in Assam the academic structure for the blind is not well planned, let alone its proper implementation. She also added that apart from the unavailability of Braille text books there is a conspicuous lack of higher education facilities. Anima was visibly angry when she said that government is not providing the backlog jobs allotted to them under special quotas. Regarding the last year’s fast unto death by the members of All Assam Blind Student Union (AABSU) protesting against the apathy of the government towards them, she said, ‘our fast unto death was a symbolic demonstration of the situation that we are going through; we still urge the authorities to carryout their duties towards us in a proper way’.

Blindness is as old as life itself. For centuries, blindness has had and still has both negative and positive connotations, with negative feeling predominating. The most important reason for the difficulties faced by the blind people lies in the negative attitude towards them. Attitude towards blind people have varied from culture to culture with religious beliefs and mythology playing a predominant role. Blindness was thought to be
mysterious and blind people were often feared and shunned. This fear of blindness may have been due to a fear of losing one’s own sight (Fernandez, et al 1999). The mystery surrounding blindness has had some people to believe that those without sight are endowed with exceptional qualities.

In the genesis of the services for the blind individuals, the community’s attitude plays an important role. In most developing countries like India, the predominantly negative perceptions about blindness result in visually impaired persons being socially rejected left out of decision making processes, academic achievements, and access to medical facilities. As human beings, the needs of the blind persons should be met in order to make them active members in society. The general attitude of the people towards the blind persons been one characterized at one end by pity, tolerance, and at the other by ignorance. Even the family members of the blind ignore them or consider them as being different from others. They give them special treatment, care and attention or at times ignore their presence at home. It is natural and almost inevitable that when parents discover that they have a blind child, they are not only sorrowed but shocked. They react in different ways as some accept it as fait and some show signs of frustration and fear of bringing up a child who they think has no future. It is a tendency with most people faced with misfortune to rebel and to wonder why it had to happen to them. Often parents refuse to accept
readily. If finances permit, they will go from one specialist to the other hoping that some one may have that special something which will cure their child. The results of such actions are tragic, both financially and emotionally. If the child is older, it will be psychologically unwholesome even for him. Then, parents begin to have visions of an isolated, unhappy child. They may picture the child as a social stigma, forcing them to curtail; perhaps even moving to a new part of the town in order to escape the pity of those who know them before the catastrophe occurred. These are some of the typical initial reactions of parents whilst they are still trying to adjust themselves to their child’s handicap. Gradually, the despondence gives place to a kind of acceptance and in some cases, even to hope. The parents try to overcome their diffidence and embarrassment and gradually tend to realize that nothing more can be done for the child. They bear great anxiety and tension over the child’s development. To watch a child grope round patiently and endlessly for a toy which is just few feet away from him or to watch him bump into objects around the house, taking for granted that everybody else does the same, to watch other children play fearlessly in the neighbourhood, and to know that their child is forever barred from such carefree play, are some of the tense and unhappy moments which parents experience a thousand times. For as strong is the initial fear, just so strong is the desire of sensible parents to give to their child the best they can in order to build up in the child a sense security and happiness, for if the child
is happy and contented, that child will surely get the most out of life. It has been observed that the parents realize vary soon that they have a tremendous but challenging task ahead of them if their child is eventually to develop into a normal happy adult.

In the process of trying to make a blind child a worthwhile member of the family, the parents tend to develop a sort of attitude which makes them over indulgent towards the child. They permit the blind child extra favours and excuse him from duties. It is hard not to pamper and spoil a disabled child, but life will be more pleasant for the whole family and for the child, if the parents can be made to treat him as a perfectly normal youngster, as indeed he is capable of being. Thoughtful care given to these special or for that matter any children is important in building for the years to come. Such children will grow up to be persons who will derive considerable satisfaction from life and who can, at the same time, make a genuine and useful contribution to society.

In this study it has been found that blindness is equated with irrationality, inaction, incapacity, and above all a burden on the family, economically as well as emotionally. It is a matter of great mental anxiety and embarrassment. When there is a blind child in the family, the parents go through tremendous mental agony. They face numerous enquiries from the people about what they are planning to do with the blind child. These enquiries generally have a sort of overtone which means to suggest about
the uselessness of the child who can not see. In such cases, specially when the parent are economically weak, they are left with three options, firstly, try and receive medical help to restore eyesight in the child, provided it is affordable. Secondly to send the child to a residential blind school, not because the parents are sensible enough to understand the importance of giving him education but primarily to shrug off the burden of looking after the blind child and to escape embarrassment in the society. Thirdly, the most common phenomenon which the parents are found to adopt is to totally ignore the presence of the blind child in the family. This is not only true for the families with a blind member but of the society as a whole. It was observed in a couple of cases that, when asked about the number of family members, the concerned families tend to give the number excluding the blind member. On enquiring about the reason for leaving out the blind member, answer that came through on a number of occasions was that they did not think it was needed to include him among the legitimate members of the family as he was blind. Though, the comments of the people suggest a discriminating attitude towards the blind but at the same time it is equally noticeable that the root cause of all negative attitude is ignorance and not malice.

☐ Mr. Narayan Bora, aged 29 years, is a permanent resident of Nalbari district Assam. He has his parents', two elder brothers and one younger
sister. At the age of 7 years, Mr. Bora suffered from typhoid which took away his eyesight. The economic condition of the family was so bad that his parents decided to send him to an orphanage. The authority of the orphanage had no option but to admit him in the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha. Here he received his education and passed High School Leaving Certificate Examination in 1995. Besides literacy education he got training in singing and playing the *vina*. Immediately after passing H.S.L.C examination he was appointed as a teacher in this school. Later on when his brothers came to know about his job, they tried a lot to contact him. But now Mr. Bora is not interested in giving any importance to those who deserted him when he needed them most.

Mrs. Pompi Bora is a girl of 10 years, studying in the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha. She is a permanent resident of Garchuk of Kamrup district. Pompi lost her eyesight at the age of 5 years due to cataract in her both eyes. She has a family of orientation composed of her parents and two elder brothers. When her parents came to know that she is no longer able to see, they began to ignore her presence and admitted her in this school. Pompi informs that when she goes home during vacations her parents would not allow her to go out and play with other children of the neighbourhood and also stops her from participating in community festivals. Such treatment on the part of her parents has made Pompi hateful.
toward her family and the society as a whole. She says that the society around her is cruel and she hates everyone who says that blind people cannot do anything. Even though Pompi holds lot of hatred towards the so-called normal people but she was more than enthusiastic when asked about her life in this school. She commented that her teachers and school mates are very good and caring and she does not miss her family much when she is with her friends. Pompi talked about her ambition and said that if she is not taken away from the school she would continue her studies and appear for the High School Leaving Certificate Examination and then join a college and read up to B.A. and become a teacher. Along with her studies, Pompi wishes to continue her training in “Satriya” dance, which she is very good at and had won several prizes in inter school competitions.

There are lots of problems faced by the blind persons in our society. Their social inclusion is often framed in terms of accessibility to services, human rights and justice. However less attention is given to the role of the family and community in ensuring the blind people to access these services. In our society we need to encourage every member to get involved in promoting participation of blind persons in community life to achieve social inclusion in all arenas in real sense. Many people in our society look at blindness as a curse or punishment inflicted upon blind people for sins committed by them in this life or in their previous life. Such mentality of
the society demoralizes blind people but also denies them the opportunity to participate in various socio-economic activities. Blind people need all the support of the community in order for them to accept their situation. They can perform many activities as efficiently as most sighted do. Though exercising their rights as individuals, and through accessing forms of social support from the sighted people, their participation in community life can be achieved. However, in order to achieve social inclusion for the blind, it is of paramount importance that the family gives opportunities to the person with visual disability to interact with all the members of the family as well as of the community in a way which is very normal and this will help the blind person to identify himself with the community. There are many steps in achieving this interaction. One major component is the involvement of family members in training of daily basic skills. These are routing skills performed on a daily basis by the blind like personal hygiene and good grooming, i.e. bathing, brushing of teeth, washing, care of hair, care for nails, oral hygiene etc. Another way in which to achieve this interaction would be for the blind to get involved in social interactive skills like communication which involves their mannerisms, proper head and facial postures, gestures etc. Also, other community involvement skills like making and keeping friend, etiquette and manners are important. In performing these activities, it helps restore their self confidence and self esteem. Activities such as walking around one’s home, preparing food are
also important aspects in daily basic skills. Working around in the house, which is also known as mobility and orientation, is of vital importance to the blind person. This helps him to be aware of his situation especially in his immediate environment. The role of the family members in serving as guide to the blind person and their involvement in the training process is of utmost important. It should be understood by each and everyone in our society that when a person gets blind his/her perception and actions changes automatically and that is why they act differently. It is often observed that young people with blindness face a lot of problems especially when their situation is new. Yet some do overcome the significant challenges and live a successful life. Here involvement of the family and relatives create a great impact in the lives of the blind members, especially in building self confidence and boosting their morale to take head-on all hurdles in life. Following are some examples which explain exactly the role of the family in bringing about social inclusions of blind persons.

Mr. Bichitra Sharma, aged 30 years, a permanent resident of Lokhra in Guwahati, is a grade four employee in the Department of Industry of the Government of Assam. Mr. Sharma said that he had met with an accident when he was 9 year old. It happened when his father was trying to repair a car battery and he was sitting next to him, suddenly the battery burst and the acid inside it came out and fell in his eyes. Since that day he could no
Mr. Sharma said that, he went through a lot of trauma and also depression as he could not move around on his own and was treated just like a baby by the family members. But it was Mr. Sharma’s mother and his elder sister who encouraged him and made him realize that although he could not see, he might be able to do everything like anyone else. It was their support that made it possible for him to come to the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha and continue his education. During vacations when he used to come home his mother would take him to visit friends and relatives and when people used to show their concern about the boy not being able to see; Mr. Sharma’s mother would simply tell them, not to be unduly worried about her son as he is totally capable of looking after himself and one day he would look after her too, when she is old.

Mr. Ratan Deka, aged 65 years, is a permanent resident of Basistha area of Guwahati. He has a family consisting of his wife and two sons. The family has a grocery cum pan shop in the locality run by Deka’s eldest son. Mr. Deka lost his eyesight as a result of glaucoma about 15 years ago and since then has never been empowered, and at this age his children thought that he could not do anything in the house and they should do everything for him. The family knows almost all the teachers of the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha, as they visit their shop on a regular basis. During casual conversations the teachers and trainers used to give some tips to the
family to improve the condition of Mr. Deka. Accordingly the sons tried those with their father. Mr. Deka commented that after about six months of trying and practicing the activities he was able to move around the house independently. Now he does not need anyone to help him taking his bath and going to the toilet. Mr. Deka now even operates a mobile phone without any difficulty and also helps his son in running the shop. He admits that his wife and children are his real strength and only because of them that he is now able to consider himself as someone who is not a worthless member of the family.

It is perceivable from the above case studies that family and community can contribute a great deal towards helping the blind persons in gaining active life at any stage. But this is generally not always the case, as it is natural for the people to develop a negative mindset towards anything which is conceived as not normal, and it is quite understandable. When people realize that a disability, their own or that of a loved one is going to be permanent, they may express a variety of reactions from shock to fear to grief to anger. People generally react according to what this disability means to them and just how much it is going to affect or change their lives.

Interview with the blind people in Guwahati provided an insight into the issues which are very often ignored or overlooked by the people in general. The most difficult thing the blind community as a whole deals with
is the ignorance of the sighted people and lack of tolerance. These lead to discrimination on a larger scale and it hurts not only the blind community but the society as a whole. A blind teacher of the Guwahati Blind High School, Basistha pointed out that the agencies that are supposed to help the blind do not do so either because they don’t care or don’t have the funds. So, he commented that the last thing they want is enablement of disablement. When enquired about the kind of difficulties the blind people face in trying to lead a normal life the comments that came through have been quoted below.

‘I am blind and I accept that, I don’t have any difficulty in anything as I am strong physically and mentally therefore I am not worried even if I can not see’.

‘So far in my life I really haven’t found things hard to do other than, at times find it troublesome to go to unfamiliar places all by myself. Therefore, have to ask a family member to accompany me’.

‘The most difficult part of being blind is dealing with the ignorance and weird attitude of others. Often people will come up to me and ask question regarding my blindness and them show pity on me. And sometimes I hear people whispering behind when they notice that I am blind’.
'The most difficult thing for me is dealing with the ignorance of some people in society. Many people believe that because we are blind we can not do anything in life. Just last month while in a city bus, the person sitting beside me was shocked to know that I go to a normal college. So it is very hard on us to deal with some of the stereotypes that people place on us just because we have a disability'.

It is high time that people realize the fact that keeping millions of visually disabled persons as outcast, the society itself will lose on the labour power and intellectual capacity of a vast number of people. Helen Keller, the deaf-blind lady of world repute, Abraham Memeth, the totally blind professor of Mathematics (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and M. Pontryagin, the blind inventor of topological algebra (USSR) are few names in the galaxy of illustrious sightless men and women. The fact which needs to be kept in mind that not only the blind but also many physically and mentally sound people can not do many things. A sighted person can not see in the dark, while a totally blind person can do with it. Our human society is a grand co-operative organization of individuals with deficiencies and limitations. Here the deficiency and efficiency of one are compensated by the efficiency ability of others. Considered from this angle of vision, there should have been no problem in the process of total integration of the
visually disabled persons with the general society. The visually disabled people also have an important role to play on their part. Social acceptance can not be gained by begging or slogan shouting. It has got to be gained through a long and painstaking process of persuasion, and setting examples. Visually disabled individuals can achieve social acceptance by identifying themselves with all that is best, noblest, and finest in the society. At the same time members are required to be alive to the fact that all blind persons can hardly be expected to have great achievements; but if only a few can do so and make themselves noticed, it will send an electric shock of appreciation through the whole gamut of our society, which will then be roused to sympathy and action for the cause of the long neglected section of humanity.