

National Project for the Blind, India

The blind children of India have friends in the men, women and children associated with the Amway India Enterprises. Starting in the year 1998, when it began operations in India, the company's non-profit Amway Opportunity Foundation has given increasing financial support to two major social service organizations for the blind.



What's even more interesting is the self-help approach taken to raising the money. Each year AOF sponsors an art contest among children of employees, Independent Business Owners and suppliers from 27 cities across India. The top 10 paintings from thousands submitted are printed as holiday greeting cards – and then sold by IBOs for charitable purposes. This unique fund-raising method generated over Rs 70,00,000 in two years, or about \$145,850 USD. More than half of the company's donations to the All-India Confederation of the Blind (AICB) and the National Association for the Blind, (NAB) India come from here.

The money is used primarily to expand Braille textbook printing programs and the distribution of "learning kits" that help visually impaired children begin to learn mathematics and geometry, as well as to read and write in Braille. Dubbed the National Project for the Blind, it has covered ten of the larger states in India. "It costs 20 to 30 times as much to print a book in Braille as in regular type, so Amway's involvement is welcome indeed. It will have a tremendous impact," said Dr. R.T. Vyas, Honorary Secretary and co-founder of NAB, which publishes textbooks and magazines for children on a Braille printer.

The cost of Braille books makes them difficult to afford for even middle-class parents in India, let alone the country's many poor. "I think it's a very good thing to see the corporate sector coming into the social sector. I hope more will follow. After all, they're spending money for the development of a better society," said Dr. Vyas.

In its first year the Amway Opportunity Foundation support for blind education reached one state, Rajasthan. Delhi was added in 1999 and subsequently the program expanded to the states of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. While AICB accounts for Braille textbooks in six states, NAB accounts for the remaining three.

While the AICB is a newer organization, NAB has been doing its work for 50 years. But both face growing challenges in the struggle to help educate the estimated 2 million school-age blind children in India.

With its two partners AOF hopes to extend the project throughout the country. "The biggest challenge for visually impaired students is availability of textbooks in Braille,"

says Mr J.L Kaul, Secretary General of AICB. "As the government presses do not make the Braille textbooks available, Amway's intervention is vital."

"We are fully aware that this is a mere drop in the ocean," writes Ketan Kothari, manager of the NAB's Braille press, of his organization's efforts. "... But our mission remains that there should be a flood of Braille literature."

William Pinckney, general manager of Amway India Enterprises, said the company is extremely gratified at the results of its efforts. "AOF was launched to identify social issues in which support from AOF could bring benefit to people in need," he said. "Our research clearly indicated that education for the visually impaired remained a neglected area. While preventing blindness had received significant grants from institutions such as the World Bank, education seemed to be relegated to the background."

"The results of supporting Braille textbooks in the first state, Rajasthan, encouraged us to support this project on a large scale. Our partner there, AICB, told us that, because of our intervention, some visually impaired students had textbooks for the first time in their lives! There was no doubt Amway India would throw its might behind this issue."

Visitors to NAB's oceanfront headquarters office in Mumbai (Bombay) encounter a wide range of activities. Besides the printing press there are 'talking book' recording studios, offices, classrooms and vocational education sessions. Both adults and children are being taught the fundamentals of self-reliance, such as cooking, outdoor mobility and various forms of vocational education. Children of all ages can be found in Braille classes, but they don't take other courses there. Similar sights greet the visitor at the AICB premises in Delhi.

Both NAB and AICB are firmly committed to a philosophy of mainstreaming blind students into regular schools, a policy which has as a critical requirement the learning of Braille -- and having Braille textbooks and topical booklets for students in all grades.

"If you don't give a blind person training in Braille, he'll be in total darkness," said Vyas. "Recorded books are not enough, especially for children. When you just listen, you don't acquire the fundamentals of language, such as spelling and phonetics. Braille offers distinctive advantages for children who want to master languages. It opens the imagination in the same way the printed page does for sighted children. Helen Keller wrote 12 books, despite being blind and deaf."

Siddhi Desai, 13, of Thane City near Mumbai, is a Braille reader and first-ranking student in her 8th grade class. The NAB program supported by Amway has made sure Siddhi has all the books she needs, without charge, said her mother, Susmith Desai. "This program provides exactly the kind of encouragement these children need to graduate, on time, and to get ready for the next stage of their lives," she said.

Over 80,000 such students are spread across India -- beneficiaries of the partnership between AOF and AICB/NAB.

