<u>**Project XRCVC (Xavier's Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged),**</u>

<u>**St. Xavier's College, Mumbai**</u>

Background

Our college has always pursued a policy of helping the less privileged. As part of this philosophy we encourage the visually challenged to take an active part in their academic life. Over the last many decades scores of visually challenged students have enriched their lives through studying in our institution.

Currently, not only do we have some visually challenged students at different levels of our college, but what is more, ours is one of the few colleges of the university that has employed a visually challenged person who has been on the staff for the last 16 years.

The need to keep step with technology

Times are changing fast and the computer revolution has made it possible to enter, process, retrieve and access information merely by the click of a button. In this digital revolution there is a distinct possibility that the visually challenged, if not given the right encouragement, would face distinct deprivation. This would be on account of the fact that the digital divide would create an additional barrier between them and the sighted. This need not happen, as the necessary software and hardware is available.

Given the deprived socio-economic background of many of our visually challenged students, they also need special guidance and remedial help. We would want to therefore provide holistic education to such students involving technical training, academic assistance, personality development, vocational guidance, etc.

The first step

Thanks to the support extended by The Sir Dorabji Tata Trust and a few other donors we were able to set up two dedicated computers for the visually challenged. These PCs draw upon specialized software which enables the user to do the following:

a. JAWS (Job Access with speech) software: This is a screen reading software. It speaks out aloud everything on the computer monitor. With its help the visually challenged user can access the internet, work in documents, and prepare presentations and so on.

b. Kurzweil 1000 OCR (optical character recognition) reading software: This enables the user to scan printed material (books, articles, etc) and hear it read out through the computer. The individual can also have this material edited so that required portions of the same may be embossed in Braille.

The resource room for the visually challenged has also acquired a talking electronic Brailler (Mountbatten MB Pro). In addition to the visually challenged using it, it can also be used by a

sighted person who can type and generate a Braille output. This will be useful for creating notes in Braille.

We have also acquired specialized software which can:
   a) emboss Braille diagrams
   b) teach keyboard skills

The XRCVC also offers an internet connection. This has enabled our students to learn how to explore the World Wide Web and retrieve relevant information.

Other services offered at the XRCVC

   a) Students equipped with basic computing skills, acquired elsewhere, have been able to polish and upgrade their skills. Furthermore, students who had started learning computers elsewhere used the facilities for additional practice.
   b) Our full time attendant in the resource centre responds to their queries thereby providing basic assistance.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED AND THEIR RESOLUTION
Demand for the PC
On occasions, a number of students have wanted to work on the computers at the same time. In the short term we resolved this problem by identifying priorities. In the long term we hope to add more dedicated PCs so that people can all work at their time.

Language skills
Given the fact that many of our target students have had their basic schooling in Marathi, they encounter a major difficulty with developing fluency in English. We are trying to resolve this problem through special training. This programme however needs to be further refined.

Personal insecurities

Adolescence being a period of transition, most teenagers experience internal conflicts. We have on an informal level worked with our students in strengthening their determination and guiding and motivating them. Such an activity needs however to be conducted on a more structured basis.

Increase in number of students

This academic year has witnessed a doubling in the total number of visually challenged students to twelve. This is because word has spread that our college offers facilities for the visually challenged. These numbers have put a strain on the limited physical facilities available. We anticipate that in future years many more students would opt for this college**.**

Sporting activities

With the help of the sports department, we organised a friendly cricket match between the visually challenged of Ruia College and our students. This friendly match was won by the visually challenged of our college. Another first this year was a special race run by the visually challenged students during the annual sports meet.