

The Year That Was

**Annual Report
2008-2009**



**Xavier's Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged (XRCVC),
St.Xavier's College, 5, Mahapalika Marg, Mumbai 400001. www.xrcvc.org**

**The Year That Was
Xavier's Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged (XRCVC)'s Report
for 2008-2009**

We are five and half years old this summer. As we put together our thoughts of the year gone by we can see how the past year has transformed the tentativeness of the initial years to setting up of a strong foundation for the XRCVC. After the range of explorations in the initial two years, the XRCVC has established itself as a specialized resource unit for the visually challenged. Today the XRCVC not only provides direct services but has also become a key resource unit for consultative services to other institutes and organizations. It has also become a key participant at the national level in efforts for creating equal opportunity environments for the visually impaired.

This year has seen our vision beginning to turn into reality through our work. The XRCVC, from its inception, envisaged itself to be the unique link between the micro and the macro by creating access and equal opportunities for persons with vision impairment. In our micro-level interventions that started with students at St. Xavier's College, we saw the potential of working with the macro challenges and issues facing the visually impaired in the country. Learning with our student experiences we saw the potential of XRCVC being able to reach out to the larger community, creating sustained changes in systems, environments and attitudes by taking one step at a time towards creating open and inclusive spaces.

It gives everyone at the XRCVC great pleasure to share this journey with you and some of our breakthroughs and developments through the last year with the humble hope that the coming year will be as fulfilling and enriching (or perhaps more) as the year gone by.

XRCVC's work over the last year can be shared through our key areas of work. The narrative below charts out our experiences of the varied programs and activities.

**I. The year when our efforts started showing results!
Advocacy started taking off.**

Since the time of our inception, two key advocacy areas that XRCVC has been working on are that of Print Access and Financial Access. Our initial work in the area had been marred by the usual evils of advocacy processes in the country – the ever-changing bureaucrats, the difficulty in opening up systems *etc.*

XRCVC has always believed in being able to achieve deliverables. And hence over the years we have tried to tackle the obstacles we faced with practical solutions. Our efforts have finally begun to pay off! 2008-2009 has seen us achieve major breakthroughs in each of our areas of advocacy work. Some of these breakthroughs have been legislative changes whilst others are innovative solutions to tackle the hindrances faced due to slow bureaucratic processes.

Financial Access: No longer a legislative nightmare.

One of the biggest hurdles for the visually impaired in accessing banking services had been the inequitable rules that existed that prevented them from opening and operating bank accounts independently. Through constant advocacy efforts with two of the leading financial institutions in India- the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Indian Bank's Association (IBA) - the XRCVC has been able to impact the rules and guidelines in this area.

The RBI, based on the lobbying work of the XRCVC on 4th June 2008, issued new guidelines: ***"Banking Facilities to the visually challenged"***. These clearly state that all banking services are to be made available on an equal basis to the visually impaired customers as the sighted.

This legal change has been followed up by the change needed at the operational level guidelines issued by the IBA which works as the industry standard of best practices. Once again based on a representation submitted by the XRCVC, the IBA on 18th November 2008 issued a new set of procedural guidelines keeping in mind the new RBI circular: ***"Providing Banking Facilities to the Visually Impaired Persons"***.

Hence, through this year, the XRCVC has been able to clear the major legislative hurdles that stood in the way of equal banking access for the visually impaired.

In addition to further ease the banking process, the XRCVC has developed the finger print recognition software for banking transactions in partnership with CMC Ltd: **E-Signs**. This year XRCVC completed the in-house testing process for E-Signs, and has entered into consultation with three leading banks – Standard Chartered, Canara Bank and SBI to begin pilot-testing the same.

XRCVC through this year has also begun interfacing with SBI on installation of accessible ATM's for persons with disabilities. This partnership has already started work on the same and looks to be very promising for the coming year.

Reading the printed word: New partnerships bridging the gap.

For the sightless, reading the printed word has been a constraint. This has been overcome through various non-sighted methods of reading, whether through touch in the form of Braille or through sound via DAISY (Digitally Accessible Information System), MP3, audio and other formats.

Over the last decade technology has made alternative formats accessible, however the hurdle remained in copyright concerns; permission from copyright holders to permit these conversions.

XRCVC has already submitted a representation to the Copyright Office, Government of India seeking for an appropriate amendment to the law. Due to the parliament level amendment needed to effect this change (unlike those involved in the financial services), we have not been able to get the legislative success for the same as yet. The XRCVC

through last year has continued to maintain regular contact with the Copyright Office to ensure that the amendments suggested have been recognized and accepted when the law is tabled in the parliament.

In the meantime however the XRCVC has worked to create practical models that will begin the process of bridging the gap of accessible material. It has done this through initiating a partnership with the **world largest online library for the print disabled – Bookshare.org**. Through this partnership the XRCVC has become Western India Region's representative for Bookshare.org allowing Indian print- disabled persons to become members of Bookshare.org and access content from the same.

Further Dr Sam Taraporevala, Director; XRCVC has been made the Chairperson of the Committee on Copyrights and Publisher Relations of the DAISY Forum of India (DFI). This committee in partnership with Bookshare.org has begun approaching the publishing community in India for getting permissions for converting material into accessible formats. This year has been extremely successful for this new venture. The XRCVC has been able to initiate and have breakthroughs with some of the leading publishing houses in the country.

Some of the key publishers who are in various stages of partnerships with us include, Oxford University Press, S Chand Publishers, Sheth Publications, Pearson Education and Sage Publications.

The XRCVC also released a publication of its own this year available in all three accessible formats of DAISY, Braille and Large Font. The publication is a book on Homonyms, an area that is of special relevance to the visually impaired given their increased reliance on sound to read. The publication is titled **“Write-Right: Understanding Homonyms Better”**. In addition to this the XRCVC through the year has also worked on creating DAISY books as part of the DFI network.

Thus through the multiple processes of publisher partnerships as well as creating accessible content and effective delivery models (either through the DFI network or through Bookshare.org) the XRCVC has taken a significant step forward in print access this year.

Education systems opening up to new realities: New science education guidelines issued.

Science has fascinated the visually impaired in the same way as it has the sighted. The world over, science education has been pursued at varied levels by the visually impaired; at school, university, and advanced research and Ph.D. levels as well.

In India and specifically Mumbai, efforts have been made in the past by students to pursue science education despite the reticent systems. One of the key concerns in the area had been that one of the main boards of higher education in the state of Maharashtra – The M.S. Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education for all these years had been silent on any official guidelines relating to testing and examination within the science stream for visually impaired students at higher education levels. This prevented colleges from permitting students admissions as they lacked any official stance on the subject.

XRCVC has been a strong advocate of inclusive education. Based on a series of engagements with officials of the M.S. Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, and a representation submitted to them on 18th November 2008, the Board has issued a circular stating clear guidelines for visually impaired students being permitted admission, and methods of examination for the same within the science stream.

This step taken by the Board will go a long way in encouraging more students to pursue science education as well as resolve the long standing debate which had to take place on a case by case basis. The education system has finally come to acknowledge the reality of visually impaired students wanting to and actually seeking science education. It surely has opened up a new arena of explorations for the years to come.

Examination bodies made to acknowledge appropriate rules.

Visually impaired persons have always used writers/scribes for examinations. One of the constant debates in this area has been who would 'qualify' to be a scribe. Over the years guidelines have been attempted to be set which will work as benchmarks and standards for majority of examination bodies and institutions. One such guideline is that issued by the Honorable High Court of Mumbai in 2006.

Despite guidelines, many examination bodies either because of their ignorance or being tied down by their own bureaucratic systems do not follow the same. The XRCVC has provided support for visually challenged candidates for negotiating with examination authorities. This year in helping one such candidate with his National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) exams the XRCVC faced a road block. In order that NABARD followed the rules laid down by High Court the XRCVC filled a writ petition through the candidate concerned. The writ petition heard at the High Court, lead to and Interim Judgment passed on 26th March 2009 in favor of the candidate.

Hence one more system has been made to come to acknowledge the due rights of persons with disabilities.

II. Taking the technology frontier to a new horizon.

Technology without doubt has been one of the greatest boons to the world of the visually impaired. The speed, accuracy and variety of ways in which technology has been able to convert 'sight' into 'touch' and 'sound' have opened up the sighted world to the sightless in ways not possible a decade ago.

The XRCVC has been a strong proponent of riding the technology wave for the maximum benefit to the visually impaired community. The challenge here has been at two levels; to ensure that the range of technology available is accessible to the visually impaired, and to follow it up with training of visually impaired persons so that they can make the maximum use of the same.

In order to meet this gap the XRCVC over the last year has engaged in a range of awareness and training programmes in the field of Assistive Technology (AT).

Towards awareness efforts, the XRCVC has released an Audio-Visual: **Accessibility 2.0** highlighting the range of AT available today. The AV serves the purpose of introducing assistive technologies to any novice in the area, and orienting users to the wide range of products available today.

In addition to this the centre has conducted a range of AT orientation programmes as well as training for trainers' programmes for special educators, paraprofessionals and others working in the field to equip them with the right knowledge and skills.

In addition to these programs the XRCVC in November 2008 conducted a specialized Print Access workshop aiming at orienting and training participants especially in technologies that will enable them to access the printed word.

Through last year the XRCVC has reached out to 202 people through these sessions.

The XRCVC also runs training courses for visually impaired persons at various levels of computer proficiency. These range from basic, advanced, specialized training, and MS-CIT coaching. In 2008-2009 a total of 34 persons have been trained at the XRCVC through its various courses.

Hence in 2008-2009 the XRCVC has reached out to a total of 236 people directly through the various technology training and orientation programmes. In addition to this, constant technology guidance and support is provided to users.

To ensure that XRCVC is updated with the latest and most useful technologies available around the world this year, the organization has made new additions to its existing technologies available at the centre.

These include:

- KNFB Mobile Reader: Hand held camera based Optical Character Recognition (OCR) system loaded on a Mobile handset. Allows instant audio and large font output of the printed text to the visually impaired.
- Talking Scientific Calculators: Audio based scientific calculator system which aids visually impaired students studying higher level statistics and science.
- J Say: Special software that helps a visually challenged person dictate to a computer through the software Dragon Naturally Speaking.
- Multiple licenses for Job Access with Speech (JAWS) – Screen Reading Software and Magic- Screen Magnifiers. These enable visually impaired persons to access the computer. This year the XRCVC also installed these softwares on computer systems in the Language Laboratory and Knowledge Centre (computer centre) of the College. This has expanded accessibility at St.Xavier's college.
- Open Book: New OCR software that enables access of hard copy print.
- TALKS: Talking software for accessing the mobile phone.
- Way Finder Access: Accessible Global Positioning System (GPS) based navigation system for the visually challenged which helps them plot routes and gives destination alerts
- Additional scanners have been added to the XRCVC to enhance the speed of OCR work as also the centre this year has got a new look with TFT monitors replacing the old systems. The TFT screens would be especially beneficial to low vision users.

Hence the XRCVC through this year has kept up with the technology boom, and has got more people to join the same to further expand the limits of independent living and access for the visually impaired.

III. Expanding networks and partnerships: Garnering the value of collective force.

Through 2008-2009 the XRCVC has initiated new partnerships, and joined new networks expanding its reach across the country and its work.

Dr Sam Taraporevala, Director, XRCVC, has been nominated on the General Council of the National Institute of the Visually Handicapped (NIVH), Dehradun, the apex body in the country working on various welfare and development programmes for the visually impaired. In addition Dr Taraporevala has also been nominated on Braille Council of India's (BCI) board. Memberships to both these bodies will enable the XRCVC to be a part of the national-level processes and governmental efforts for the visually impaired in India.

In addition to these the XRCVC has also entered into a working partnership with Enable India, Bangalore to further leverage the mutual strengths of the two organisations. The partnership will jointly work towards training programmes for the visually impaired.

The XRCVC has continued its collaborative work with National Association of the Blind, India (NAB) and NAB- Department of Rehabilitation (NAB-DOR) through the year. The two organizations have worked together on diverse training and orientation programmes that the XRCVC has offered to the NAB staff. The organization has also helped in

running the Rehabilitation Council of India's (RCI) – Continued Rehabilitation Education (CRE) course. The two organizations have also worked on the diverse advocacy initiatives by providing the necessary support to one another.

The XRCVC this year also completed the work initiated last year in partnership with Kingfisher Airlines in creating an accessible air safety manual for visually impaired guests on board. The XRCVC has created a complete Braille, large-font and tactile version of the in-flight safety manual for Kingfisher Airline for all their current aircrafts.

Through these diverse networks and partnerships, the XRCVC has expanded its reach and has harnessed the value of collective strength by sharing of expertise for maximum benefit to the visually impaired community at large.

IV. Creating support environments for individuals and families.

XRCVC through 2008-2009 has expanded its reach of direct support to visually impaired persons in Mumbai. The annual membership base of for the year 2008-2009 has been of 76 members. Of the total members, 30 are St. Xavier's current and ex-students.

Members access a host of support services including: alternative format creation, counseling and guidance, advocacy support, English language training, volunteer services, and other training and workshop programmes.

In addition, this year the XRCVC launched the XRCVC-Tech Mahindra Scholarship programme to support deserving visually challenged students pursuing higher education. The scholarship programme in its first year has supported 5 candidates pursuing a range of master's programmes. The programme hopes to bridge the much needed financial hurdle for candidates who through academic excellence and merit wish to pursue higher education but economic conditions prevent them from doing so. Further the XRCVC continued with the XRCVC- Lion's Club of East Bombay's annual scholarship for the most deserving graduating visually impaired students at St. Xavier's college. This year's recipient was Mr. Manik Sahai.

2008-2009 has also seen the start of a very important support programme at the XRCVC. In January 2009 the XRCVC has started a Support group for Parents and Care Givers of visually impaired persons. The group '**XRCVC-Connect**' meets on a monthly basis and has been initiated to provide much needed support and guidance to care givers at the crucial stage of development for children, and to also become a source of sharing of resources and experiences.

V. 'Differences is Abilities: Decoding 'D-is-Abilities': Building awareness, Challenging myths.

The crux to opening up systems and environments lies in the ability to open up individual mindsets. It is not until the CEO of a company recognizes that a visually impaired employee can contribute as much as his sighted counterpart, will we have open work environments. Or for that matter, it is not until the Principal of a school recognizes that a visually impaired child can and should learn in the same environment as his sighted counterpart would inclusive education have become a reality. And not until all of us as members of society get comfortable with having persons with disabilities sharing the same environment as us do we create inclusive spaces. Hence working with individuals in the various roles they play or simply as members of communities have been a key area of work for the XRCVC.

The awareness programmes run by the centre are customized for the diverse groups it caters to. The underlying methodology and the message remains the same. The experience-based interactive learning environment seeks for its participants to reflect and learn on the diversity that disability conditions create. It also helps them to question the meaning of disability, and equips them with real life examples of individuals, organizations and systems that provide new insights of looking at disability groups. The message being that persons with disabilities are equipped and are doing everything as their non-disabled counterparts, they are simply doing them differently.

Through 2008-2009 the XRCVC has reached out to a total of 900 individuals across diverse organizations and set ups. Some of the groups with whom the awareness programmes have been conducted include: Staff of Taj Lands End, Mumbai, Taj Blue Diamond, Pune, ITC- Grand Central, Mumbai, Confederation of Indian Industries (CII), Indian Bank's Association (IBA) and management interns at Johnson & Johnson Ltd from the cream of management schools across the country. Students of Bombay International School and Cathedral and John Canon School, students of the Masters' in Management Studies (MMS) Course at the Xavier's Institute of Management and Research (XIMR), St.Xavier's College Students as well as M. Ed student of K.J. Somaiya College and B.Ed students and Special Educators have also been reached out to.

In addition to this the XRCVC successfully ran its annual awareness programme – Antarchakshu at Malhaar 2008 - St. Xavier's College's annual intercollegiate festival. Antarchakshu this year expanded its scope to include other disabilities and was extremely well-received.

The XRCVC in the month of January 2009 conducted its annual innovative XRCVC Challenger Trophy – The cricket tournament of visually impaired and sighted players. The Tournament through the mixed teams provides a unique opportunity of creating awareness. The Triangular series had three colleges participating – Ramnarain Ruia College, S.I.E.S College and St.Xavier's College. The finals were played between S.I.E.S College and St. Xavier's College and won by the latter.

Reaching Out

Through the year the XRCVC has been acknowledged for its work in the media as well as through various awards. XRCVC's case study of NGO-Corporate partnership has been published in CII's publication "Partnership case studies between: Business and Voluntary Organisations" as also in CII's Western Region's newsletter for November – December 2008 'Pascheem'. Dr Sam Taraporevala has been awarded CNN-IBN's citizen journalist award.

Further Dr Taraporevala has presented papers on 'Social Advocacy' at the NAB State Branches meet in February 2009. Dr Sam Taraporevala also presented a paper at National Conference 'Disability and Disenchantment: New Challenges and Evolving Directions' at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi on 'Copyright & Print Access - Response & Challenge: A Higher Education Case Study' in March 2009

And We Start a New Year...

With a whole New Year waiting ahead of us we look forward to building and sustaining the initiatives started in the past year. We hope to continue to reach out to all those who can benefit from our assistance. And we will definitely venture into newer areas of accessibility and take them forward.

None of what we have done in the last year or what we wish to accomplish in the coming years would be possible without the well wishes, support and constant encouragement of all those who have been the backbone of our work. We thank each and every one of you for your generous contributions and support. Without you the XRCVC would have certainly not achieved what it has been able to.

Our gratitude to Sight Savers International, Johnson & Johnson Ltd, Dhun Pestonji Parakh Discretionary Trust , HDFC Ltd, Bank of America, Tech Mahindra Foundation for being our continued supporters.

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Lastly, we can never end without expressing our deepest gratitude to Dr. (Fr.) Frazer Mascarenhas. S.J, Principal, St. Xavier's College, and the entire family at St. Xavier's College who with their constant support and encouragement have lead us to come this far. As also the constant support and backing of all our volunteers without whom we would never be able to accomplish our goals.

We thank all of you once again for having supported us through the last year. The work accomplished by us is dedicated to each and every one of you to have made it possible.