Kalpana Bezboruah & Sahayika

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One of the things in which Guwahati has been fortunate is the services rendered by voluntary organizations to the physically and mentally challenged persons. All these organizations deal with children and their education. Two organizations which come to one’s mind immediately are Sishu Sarothi and Sahayika. We have already carried an article on Sishu Sarothi in our earlier series. We are now presenting in this issue the story of Sahayika, an institution which deals with training and orientation and normal education of mentally retarded and physically handicapped children. The spirit behind this institution is Shrimati Kalpana Bezboruah. She is also the founder of Sahayika.

We are also carrying in this issue the highly inspiring story of Kalpana Bezboruah, her husband Shri D.N. Bezboruah and their family. This article carries the title, “Live and Let the Handicapped Live.” It is suggested to our readers that the present article on Sahayika and the other article on the family of the founder of Sahayika are read together. Reading both the articles not only helps in getting the full story of Sahayika but also the family of the founder of Sahayika also. The article dealing with family tells of the story of each member of the family in brief, and the present article on Sahayika deals mainly with the activities conducted and different services rendered at Sahayika.

As we have stated in the other article, Shrimati Kalpana Bezboruah is convalescing after her treatment for a serious ailment. We are taking this opportunity to once again wish her a speedy recovery.

This article has been created by its author Jolly Saikia after a visit to Sahayika and a long chat with Shrimati Kalpana Bezboruah and a study of the available brochures and materials about Sahayika. This interview took place a long time ago, but the article remained unpublished because of the difficulties faced by Ishani. We are happy that we are able to carry it in this issue along with another article on the Bezboruah family.

For those familiar with Sahayika, the very name brings to the mind images of children unable to perform their day-to-day activities in a normal way and along with it comes the image of a dignified and dedicated elderly lady Mrs Kalpana Bezboruah.

For the uninitiated, Sahayika Guwahati – Child Guidance Centre, is an institution that has been imparting training and education to children with learning disorders since 1986. These children commonly face difficulties in performing routine personal hygiene and household activities, in developing their faculties of speech and language, in learning to read and write and in socializing with people. Since 1986 to 2006, a total of 503 children have been treated at the centre. Each year only 61 regular or full-time children are admitted, but many many more visit the Sahayika OPD on Mondays and Wednesdays.

The person behind Sahayika is Mrs Kalpana Bezboruah, daughter of late Kumud Chandra Sharma of Tezpur. She is the Director of both the Sahayika Child Guidance Centre, Guwahati-781 021 and the Sahayika Integrated Vocational Training Centre, Lankeshwar, Guwahati-781 014.

Mrs Bezboruah has had a brilliant academic career, having cleared all her exams right from matriculation to the Degree level with distinction before going on to take her Masters degree in Psychology from the BHU in 1956, with specialization in Child Psychology. She got a certificate in Psycholinguistics in 1957 from the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore.

Before setting up the Sahayika Child Guidance Centre, Mrs Bezboruah had worked as a lecturer in Darrang College from 1956 to 1958. She also worked as a Project Officer at the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore. She has also produced a variety of
programmes for All India Radio since 1958. Mrs Bezboruah also held a number of prestigious offices like President of the Ladies Study Circle, Guwahati, Vice-president, Rotary Club of Guwahati, Convenor, Assam State Chapter, Action Against Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation of Women (ASTEC) India, and Member, Women’s Studies Research Centre (of Gauhati University), etc., and has also attended a number of national and international seminars in India and abroad. A recipient of the RG Baruah Memorial Award for humanitarian service for 2002, Mrs Bezboruah is married to Mr D.N. Bezboruah, founder editor of The Sentinel, a leading English news daily of the North-east.

At Sahayika, the children are at first thoroughly examined by specialists, and then special education and guidance provided. The children requiring special attention may broadly be classified as the slow learners, the mentally retarded, the learning disabled, the hearing impaired, educable spastics and autistic children, and also the emotionally disturbed children from normal schools who show behavioural problems. The centre follows the curriculum of normal schools, though it has a different teaching approach. This entails specialized guidance and individual attention for each child. So far, eighteen children have been integrated to normal schools and six have also got jobs. One student even passed the Matriculation examination in the 1st division. Those incapable of going to normal schools are imparted skill training at Sahayika Integrated Rehabilitation Centre situated at Lankeshwar (Jalukbari).

Sahayika aims at the following:

- Helping the developmentally disabled children to stand on their own feet so that they can perform their basic personal activities by themselves.
- Integrating the handicapped children with the mainstream of the society.
- Providing special guidance and speech therapy for children with hearing problems.
- Creating public awareness regarding the cause, nature and management of developmental disabilities.
- Helping willing persons to initiate service for the developmentally disabled.
- Imparting teaching in both non-academic and academic subjects depending on the IQ level of the students.
- Imparting training in music, painting, dance, handicrafts and other artistic activities for the flowering of expression, inner harmony and creativity.
- Providing yoga training for the children.
- Preparing each child for rehabilitation and total integration.
According to a student’s age and level of functioning, he or she is taught various tasks, like:

During infancy and early childhood, a student is taught gross motor and fine motor skills (movement), self-help skills (such as dressing, grooming, eating, toilet training), language and social interaction.

During childhood and early adolescence, functional activities, i.e., practically useful activities like reading, writing, arithmetic, concept of time, money and dimensions are taught. Recognition of colour and shapes, observation of nature, birds and animals, care of plants, distinction between day and night and different types of weather, are also taught. Love for animals is encouraged.

During the adolescence period pre-vocational and vocational skills, recreation and leisure time activities, domestic behaviour, community orientation, etc., are taught. Girls are taught to manage themselves when they have their monthly periods.

All activities at the centre are taught and managed by experienced and trained teachers who have undergone specialized training for the purpose. This specialized training qualifies them to handle the developmentally disabled dynamically. Psychologists, special educators, speech-therapists, neurologists, endocrinologists, pediatricians and social workers offer help and guidance to the children as well as to the parents. Counselling is a regular feature for the needy parents.

Music therapy and the classical Manipuri dance are also part of the daily programme. Besides, Sahayika offers psychological counselling to the emotionally disturbed children of normal schools between 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. daily.

It may be mentioned here that Sahayika functions as a literacy centre for minor domestic maidservants and as a counselling centre for adolescent girls. An oral school for the hearing impaired children has also been functioning in Sahayika since 1995. Sahayika has also been serving as a research centre for students of Home Science, Psychology and education. Besides, Sahayika offers orientation course for pre-primary teachers and parents.

A vocational training centre for the children of Sahayika has also been functioning since 2001. Training is imparted by special teachers after the students are assessed with regard to their abilities and aptitudes.

The vocational training imparted to the above-14 age group include machine embroidery, carpentry, weaving, block printing, silk screen printing, instrumental and vocal music, signboard writing, gardening, cooking, book binding, card making, basket making, tailoring, plumbing, flower making and soft toys making.

In the near future, once permanent transport arrangements are made, there is a plan to take the children at Sahayika for periodic check-ups at hospitals, clinics and special centers and also to set up a mobile service unit to provide community-based rehabilitation.

The Centre depends for 90 per cent of its funds on the grants received from the Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry, New Delhi and for the rest, on donations and sponsorships. But the grants, according to the Director of Sahayika, Mrs Kalpana Bezboruah, are not regular, and need constant reminders. The role of the State Social Welfare Board in the whole process is also not satisfactory, and Mrs Bezboruah thinks that the whole process would be faster if the grants come directly from New Delhi and not via the State Social Welfare Board. Another problem faced by the centre is the lack of awareness on the part of parents who fail to follow up on the training imparted to their wards at Sahayika.

The saga of Sahayika is truly a noble and inspiring one. It is the story of a lady with a mission who has selflessly served others. Thanks to her noble and untiring efforts, Sahayika has
brought a ray of hope to many children with deformities and handicaps, and it has been instrumental in bringing out happy smiles on their faces and also on the faces of their parents. As this piece of writing is being readied to send to press, we have got the good news that the founder of Sahayika, Kalpana Bezboruah, who suffered from a stroke sometime back, is responding to treatment and is on the way to recovery. Let us all offer our heart-felt prayers for her early and rapid recovery, and enable her to again be at the helm of affairs of Sahayika.

Campaign against Sexual Abuse of Children and Youth

Children knocked the door of Parliamentarians during Global Action Week
Parliamentarians assured prompt action to convert the rhetoric into law in Parliament

(Source: Indian Committee of Youth Organizations (ICYO) e-newsletter dated April 30, 2008)

New Delhi, 25th April, 2008: The representatives of Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA) and National Coalition for Education (NCE) along with more than 100 former child laborers knocked the doors of more than 50 Parliamentarian well before they could move to Parliament. The children knocked their door to remind the parliamentarians about government’s promises made at Dakar regarding education for all. Children submitted their charter of demand addressed to Prime Minister of India demanding 6% of GDP spending on education.

Children further demanded provision of law for enforcing the right to education with redressal system, for those children who are being excluded from the mainstream of education. Common school system, making the law child friendly, regulation of private school system, compliance of Millennium Development Goals Dakar goals were main issues of charter of demands.

When children in organized groups of 10-15 started knocking the door of Parliamentarians early in the morning it was a great surprise for them. Some of the parliamentarians welcomed the children whole heartedly and offered money for their breakfast. However some were also trying to shirk from talking and facing the children. But almost all the parliamentarians who met the children welcomed the more and assured of their fullest cooperation. M.P. Mr. Abdullah Kutti from Kannor constituency became emotional talking to children and assured his full support in raising questions for bring out law for making education fundamental right. He also opined that education will bring out many positive changes in the country like land reform and decentralization of power etc.

Former Parliamentarian Mr. Karnendu Bhattacharya assured the children to take this agenda forward with the help of his colleagues and party fellows. Mr. Beerbhadra Paswan (Nawadah, Bihar), Mr Vishnudeo Sai (Raipur, Chhattisgarh) gave their full support and assured that they would like to remain supporter of children’s move and right to education in future.

However Parliamentarian from Vardhman Mr. Nikhilanand Sir clarified his position and showed his disagreement from right to education act. He said, “I don’t support this idea and it is not the duty of Government. The country is too big it will take time.”

Mr. Rama Kant Rai, Convener of National Coalition for Education expressed that some of the parliamentarians are still thinking within the coterie of party, caste, region and religion. However most of the parliamentarians are in support of our movement. Mr. Rai further added, “NCE, with the help of Bachpan Bachao Andolan, teachers Union and Parliamentary forum on education will keep this movement on top priority in the forthcoming general election. Mr. Rai was optimistic about the bill on right to education will be tabled in the current session. The Global Action week was supported and participated by International organizations like Care India, Save the Children Fund, Mukti Ashram, Global March Against child Labour, Bal Ashram, Bal Vikas Dhara, Save the Childhood Foundation, etc. The Global Action week is also being observed in 12 states and Union Territories of India.