

# XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai: Stepping Stones to Inclusive Education

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**Abstract**

The XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai has grown in the past 20 years since its inception from an Assistive Technology resource centre for students with visual impairment in higher education to a national-level pan-disability direct support centre, Assistive Technology hub and an awareness and advocacy program. One of its key area of impact has been creating access for persons with disabilities in various spheres of life through its advocacy program which has led to changes such as the Copyright (Amendment) Act (2012), standardization of scribe rules for examinations across boards and universities, creation of access for students with visual impairment in STEM education from high school level to university level, mainstream physiotherapy courses, undergraduate psychology courses etc. This paper reflects on this journey and the key learnings that have made it possible for it to have a real impact on the lives of persons with disabilities. These include keeping an ear to the ground for understanding areas of intervention, harnessing the power of the multiplier effect through strategic collaborations, designing of interventions that ensure the impact of change reaches the relevant stakeholders – persons with disabilities and adopting a 360-degree approach to intervention to ensure a holistic solution. These insights serve as guidance for stakeholders committed to championing inclusive education and fostering an equitable society for persons with disabilities.

**Key words**

Inclusive Education, Advocacy, Disability Inclusion, Accessibility, Disability Rights, Grassroots Intervention, 360-degree Approach, Collaborative Advocacy.

## **About the XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai**

The Xavier's Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged (XRCVC), a department of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, was set up in 2003 as an Assistive Technology support centre for students with visual impairment in higher education.

In keeping with the ethos of the St. Xavier's College, Mumbai and with the unstinting support of the college management, it began to serve the larger society and soon became a support centre for students with visual impairment in higher education at the city and later national-level. While the centre provided technological and skill development support to students with visual impairment, it increasingly became apparent that there was a greater need to address legal, social and attitudinal barriers that prevented persons with disabilities from fully participating in society and thus it began its awareness and advocacy program to address these challenges of the larger system.

In the last two decades since its inception, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, has grown into a national-level pan-disability direct support and training centre and an advocacy and awareness program for persons with disabilities with a vision of creating "a diverse and inclusive world where all, irrespective of disability, can thrive". (Xavier's Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged (XRCVC), St. Xavier's College, Mumbai 2023, 5)

XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai's primary area of focus remains inclusive education, specifically in the Indian context. Global thought, led by the human-rights based approach of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is moving from special education and integrated education to inclusive education. Inclusive education means "all children in the same classrooms, in the same school" (unicef n.d.). Inclusive education brings groups that have traditionally been excluded (such as persons with disabilities) into mainstream education and provides them with equal opportunities to learn and develop.

Through its Inclusive Education program, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai aims at providing access to quality education for persons with disabilities,

particularly in higher education. This is achieved through various initiatives such as:

- training in special skills and assistive technology for persons with disabilities to enable independent functioning;
- training for educators and special educators through collaborations with Maharashtra State Faculty Development Academy and Rehabilitation Council of India on inclusive education
- providing consultancy services to educational institutes like IIT Madras, IIT Delhi, Ashoka University, IIM- Bangalore etc to enable inclusion of students with disabilities
- creation of accessible content and teaching-learning aids, particularly for STEM education, and
- research into the fields of accessibility of educational content and educational aids.

## **History of XRCVC's Advocacy Programs for Inclusive Education**

In 2006, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, recognized an important pressing need. Despite having the most cutting-edge technology setup for students with visual impairment – there was still a great barrier for independent access to knowledge – the Copyright Act (1956). The Copyright Act (1956) made it illegal for persons with print disabilities to convert books into accessible formats compatible with assistive technology.

To address this barrier, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, began its advocacy program with the first goal being to get the then Copyright Act (1957) amended to overcome this disadvantage. A lot of people thought it was too ambitious and would be unachievable, but after a rigorous 6-year national-level collaborative effort with multiple-levels of non-confrontational dialogue, consultation and appeals, the Copyright (Amendment) Act (2012) was enacted by the Parliament that enabled persons with print disabilities that made it legal to convert books into accessible formats. Following the enactment of this Act, India played a significant role in the negotiations around an international treaty at the World

Intellectual Property Organisation ('WIPO') in Geneva – the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled adopted in June 2013.

Another important issue addressed by the XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai was an absence of comprehensive policy for scribes for various examinations for students with disabilities. As XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai grew from a department of the college to a nodal agency for advocacy and support for persons with visual impairment at the city and national-level, while providing writer support to various higher education institutions for their students with visual impairment, it noticed the practical problems faced due to an absence of comprehensive guidelines that applied to various boards and institutes. XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai worked closely with law experts, educators and policy makers to draft writer guidelines which were presented to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment that led to their standardisation.

XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, has also worked on many advocacy projects for creating access, primarily for persons with visual impairments, in various fields of education.

- Bachelors in Psychology, University of Mumbai– An absence of accommodation guidelines for conducting practical examinations for students with visual impairment in the third year of Psychology inadvertently meant that they were excluded from pursuing Psychology at the undergraduate level. The XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai approached the University of Mumbai and on working closely with the Board of Studies a plan was proposed to the Academic Council who passed it leading to the relevant guidelines creating access for students with visual impairment to graduate with Psychology majors.
- Science and Mathematics at High School Level, Maharashtra State Board and Central Board of Secondary Education – XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai was approached by students with visual impairment who wanted to pursue science and mathematics at high school level but were prevented from doing so because of absence of appropriate rules and guidelines. XRCVC,

St. Xavier's College, Mumbai pursued this with relevant boards and was able to ensure that appropriate guidelines were set up by the Maharashtra State Board for Senior Secondary and Higher Secondary Education and the Central Board of Secondary Education that created access for students with visual impairment to science and mathematics courses at the high school level. This also subsequently opened up several fields of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education at university level for them.

- Bachelors in Physiotherapy, Maharashtra State – XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai was approached by Kritika Purohit, a student with 100% visual impairment, on a school visit, stating she wanted to become a physiotherapist. XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai worked at multiple fronts to create access for Kritika. The first step was to create access for her to pursue science and mathematics at high school level with the Maharashtra State Board. Then a case was fought in the Bombay High Court for her to be allowed to take the Maharashtra State Common Entrance Test – Medical followed by allowing her to take admission into the degree course for physiotherapy. In the historic order passed by the Honourable Bombay High Court in 2010, for the first time a student with visual impairment was granted admission to pursue Bachelors in Physiotherapy course based on her score on the MH-CET- Medical.

Apart from the above, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai has worked towards creating access for persons with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairment, in other spheres of life such as financial access by getting rules and regulations implemented by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and National Securities Depository Limited for independent operation of bank accounts and demat accounts by persons with visual impairment, implementation of accessible ATMs across India through their work with the Indian Banker's Association, and supporting the development of low-cost Assistive Technology and accessible products and services to address barriers to enable independent living for persons with disabilities. This is to enable their full participation in society after having attained access to quality education.

## **Important Learnings from XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai's Advocacy Work**

### **Ear to the Ground**

The advocacy program of XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai has grown organically. A major factor contributing to the success of XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai's advocacy work and its impact has been its close connection to the community of persons with disabilities, especially students. This has immensely helped the centre to address needs that arise as they do and work on creating access in various fields of education for persons with disabilities.

In practice, this is implemented by the XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, by serving as a dedicated resource centre for students with disabilities. There are formal systems in place such as a formal coherent Inclusive Education policy which has buy-in from relevant stakeholders of the St. Xavier's College, Mumbai including the educators and the college management, monitoring mechanisms such as the Enabling Committee that gathers feedback from relevant stakeholders and dedicated staff with professional expertise to address the felt needs.

### **Collaborative Effort**

XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai's success in advocacy work would not have been possible if not for the power of collaborations. The centre has always actively pursued connections with various stakeholders to ensure that the multiplier effect leads to success. During the advocacy work to create print access for persons with print disabilities, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai along with Alternate Law Forum convened the Publication Access Co-ordination Committee (PACC) which then worked with publishers, authors and other not-for-profits to ensure all-round support for the cause. Parallely the XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai along with like-minded organisations set up a national-level consortium – the DAISY Forum of India, to bring together not-for-profits across India who are “involved in production of books and reading materials in accessible formats for persons who cannot read normal print” (DAISY Forum of India 2016). The Sugamya

library – a library of books in accessible formats for persons with print disabilities was the product of this collaborative effort. A collaboration was also made with Bookshare.org to bring accessible materials to India. These collaborations ended the book famine for the print disabled and led to the enactment of the Copyright (Amendment) Act, 2012.

## **Invest in Research**

A key strength of XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai has been its research orientation. XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai scaffolds its advocacy program with extensive research on cutting-edge Assistive Technologies, best practices from across the globe, innovations to teaching-learning aids (particularly for STEM education) to create access to various fields of education and the impact of the changes on the lives of persons with disabilities. XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai's research orientation has helped it published numerous policy papers, manuals for educators and reports for in the areas of advocacy work it has undertaken. This has led to the centre being invited as an expert by policy makers to consult on drafting of guidelines or schemes for persons with disabilities, especially in the field of education.

## **Grassroots-Level Interventions**

Any change in policy at the macro-level is only meaningful if it reaches the lives it's meant to have an impact on. XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, has not only advocated for policy changes to create access, but also has actively worked at ensuring the benefits of these reach relevant stakeholders through various awareness and training programs. After the enactment of the Copyright (Amendment) Act (2012), XRCVC, Xavier's College, Mumbai started its "Reading without Seeing" awareness program on how to use Assistive Technologies for accessing books for persons with print disabilities. XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai also conducts 'I for Inclusion' training programs for educators (school level to higher education level) to enable them to make their classrooms more inclusive. The Antarchakshu® 2.0, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai's flagship disability sensitisation and awareness program was also designed to challenge ableist attitudes and lack of awareness among individuals about the lives



of persons with disabilities, thus addressing barriers to access at the micro-level. Over the years, these programs have reached thousands of persons with disabilities, their families, educators and special educators and people in society – translating the access created into real ground-level impact.

### **360-degree Approach**

XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai adopts a 360-degree approach when advocating for access for persons with disabilities. In the case of Kritika Purohit, it made a representation to the Maharashtra State Secondary and Higher Secondary Board to create access for higher secondary school-level Science and Mathematics followed by a court case in the Bombay High Court to be able to take the entrance exam and then get admission into the Bachelors of Physiotherapy course. To support Kritika Purohit's access to physiotherapy education, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai worked closely Maharashtra University of Health Sciences to support the drafting of guidelines for reasonable accommodations for written and practical examinations for Kritika Purohit and two leading manufacturers of electro-physiotherapy equipment in Maharashtra and Gujarat for the development of a talking Inter-Ferential Therapy (IFT) machine that can be used by practitioners with visual impairment. Thus, XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai worked to provide end-to-end support through collaborating with various stakeholders to ensure that all kinds of barriers are address and true access is achieved.

### **Conclusion**

The successes of XRCVC, St. Xavier's College, Mumbai journey in creating access for persons with disabilities in various spheres of life, particularly in education and higher education has key learning's that can serve as principles that guide any intervention designed to create access for persons with disabilities. In keeping with the principle of "nothing for us, without us" it is critical that those impacted are at the center of these interventions while designing them and also when implementing them to ensure that a real impact is created. Moreover, impact at macro-level cannot happen in silos and the compounded power of collaborative effort must be harvested to ensure that barriers are addressed holistically. At

the core of any successful intervention lies research on best practices that ensures creation of sound policies and interventions. These learning from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai's journey offer invaluable insights for advocates and stakeholders committed to fostering inclusive education.

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