



Dignity DialogueSM

THE MAGAZINE FOR PRODUCTIVE AGEING

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A Visionary for the Visionless

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A Visionary for the Visionless

Dr. Bhushan Punani could have opted for a brilliant career in the corporate sector after graduating from IIM, Ahmedabad. Instead, he chose to join the Blind People's Association, an NGO that he has steered from strength to strength to not only help the visually challenged but also those with other disabilities. In this inspiring interaction with **Aruna Raghuram**, he narrates his life's journey so far.

DR. Bhushan Punani is a much organised person. The general secretary of Blind People's Association (BPA) in Ahmedabad, the largest NGO in the country in the disability sector, has prepared a Power Point presentation for our interview. Unassuming and completely grounded, Dr. Punani's face lights up when he talks about the achievements and impact of BPA, an NGO he has been with for 44 years. It is interesting how BPA was born. A group of people with visual impairment got together in 1954 and decided to start a recreation club for the blind. This club is a huge NGO today. Dr. Punani (68) joined BPA in 1979, a fresh postgraduate from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

This was such an unprecedented occurrence at that time that the then director of IIM, Ahmedabad, Dr. V S Vyas, called him to his room and asked him if anything was wrong with him! Rejecting several prestigious offers, he has stood steadfast with BPA, steering it from strength to strength. While working with BPA, he picked up a degree in law, a PhD from Gujarat University in the management of special education and a course in vocation rehabilitation from Haifa University, Israel. Dr. Punani is currently Vice President of the International Council for the Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), Global.

He was a member of the Steering Committee on Social Sector as well as a member of the Working Group on Disability Development for the 12th Five Year Plan. He has worked on a number of committees at the national level and been an examiner for

several doctoral programmes of different universities. He has published eight books on the subject of inclusive education, community-based rehabilitation (CBR) and a handbook on visual impairment. He is a member of the Central Advisory Board under the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities as per provisions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and also a member of the National Advisory Committee on Accessible Elections under the Election Commission of India.

He is a recipient of the 'Helen Keller Award'. He was honoured with the 'IIM, Ahmedabad Distinguished Alumnus Award' at the institute's golden jubilee function in 2011. He was conferred the LakshmiPat Singhanian-IIM Lucknow National Leadership Award by the former President Ram Nath Kovind in 2019. The honour was given to him as a leader in community service and social upliftment. In 2021, he was honoured with the NAB Delhi Sarojini Triloknath National Award. In an exhaustive and thought-provoking interview, he speaks of his difficult childhood, golden days studying in Karnal and at IIM, Ahmedabad, his journey with BPA, and how supportive his family is:

Could you share a couple of anecdotes from your childhood that have shaped your life?

My parents migrated from Pakistan during the Partition. Their lives were in disarray. We were refugees. When I was born, they were just trying to settle down in Hansi, Haryana. It is a historic beautiful town, but we were struggling to survive. I attended a Hindi medium government school and learnt

English only in Class 8. The school had few teachers, no library and poor laboratory facilities. I was a good student and from Class 5 I got a scholarship. I was also state runner-up in table tennis. I topped the school in the higher secondary exam. I missed admission to medical college by three marks as there were no chemicals in the school lab to do the experiments.

How were your college days?

I joined the National Dairy Research Institute (NDRI) in Karnal to do BSc in dairying. That's when the glorious days of my career started. It is a prestigious institution and I received a merit scholarship. I was active in extracurricular activities as well. Since I was good in painting, I was made the hobby secretary in the student's council. I would also edit the college magazine (Hindi). I am happy to share that I topped in all 12 exams and won two gold medals, one for standing first in my batch and the second for getting the highest marks in all the batches till then. When I got admission into IIM, Ahmedabad, it was like a dream come true. I was the first student from NDRI to get admitted to IIMA. I got a merit cum means scholarship. I performed moderately well. Engineers dominated the academic scene. Interestingly, I did all my projects in tribal development, rural development, social change and social marketing. I did not do any mainstream projects.

What motivated you to join an NGO after passing out of IIMA?

My father was my inspiration. He was a social reformer and a preacher of values known as



'Bhagat'. He would always tell me to think of others and live for a cause. My life journey took a U-turn during placement. I wanted to use my education in the development or social sector. So, I suggested the option of 'unconventional job' in the placement brochure. BPA invited me to join as administrator to manage the organisation and I accepted. This became a topic of debate in the B-school. The IIMA faculty were not happy with my decision. In fact, the then director, Dr. V S Vyas, summoned me to his room and asked me: "Anything wrong with you? How come you are joining a small (at that time) school for the blind?"

I explained to him that it was not a leap in the dark but a very considered choice. I had seen abject poverty, illiteracy, social exclusion and exploitation of people. I had also seen people work for human development. And that is what I wanted to do. The plan was to work for two years with BPA. If things did not go as planned, I would go back to dairying. Dr. Vyas gave me a cup of tea and his blessings. Some years down the line, Prof. P Khandwalla, when he was director of IIMA, was very appreciative of my choice of joining the social sector and the work I was doing. If I had not joined

the social sector, I would have pursued a doctorate in management and taught about social change.

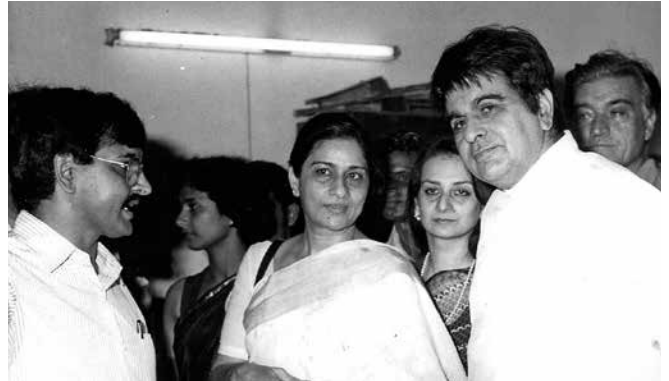
What are the major activities of BPA?

BPA operates on four pillars:

- Equal rights and opportunities for people with all categories of disabilities
- Imparting appropriate education, skills and vocational training
- Offering employment and placement services and self-employment opportunities
- Empowerment and independence by promoting financial independence and self-sufficiency.

We aim for seamless social integration to bring PwDs (persons with disabilities) into mainstream society. We provide support services, special need intervention centres and community-based rehabilitation (CBR) services. We also work on accessibility. In Ahmedabad, I am happy to say, the BRTS and Kankaria Lake (through the efforts of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation) are accessible. CBR forms a major part of BPA activities where PwDs are enabled and empowered to access rehabilitation services in their own communities.

Here are two inspiring stories of people we have supported: Rajesh, who is deaf-blind, makes snacks and sweets and manages a shop on his own. Shruti is the first deaf-blind person in the world to become a physiotherapist. We are very involved in sports. We initiated table tennis for wheelchair-bound people. Bhavina Patel



Actors Dilip Kumar and Saira Banu visited the BPA

won a world silver in the Tokyo Paralympics. Sonal Patel was a bronze medallist in the 2022 Commonwealth Games held at Birmingham. We have supported Vishnu Waghela in his endeavour to play football for the blind.

On the academic front, Amit Jain was the first visually impaired person to be selected by IIMA. We had to go to court to secure admission for him. We have supported Gaganbir Singh, who is wheelchair-bound, since childhood. He joined IIM, Bangalore. Abhishek is a PRO with SEBI. A few years ago, the Supreme Court directed that a person with low vision could be admitted to a medical college. In the sphere of education, BPA has free primary, secondary and higher secondary residential schools, recognised and supported by the Gujarat government. The NGO has also succeeded in integrating special children in mainstream schools.

There is a school for physiotherapy offering a three-year diploma course for visually impaired people. It was recognised by the Ahmedabad University in 2013. BPA also runs B.Ed (special) courses in different disabilities recognised by various



An interaction with Narendra Modi

universities. There is a music school for the blind affiliated to Gandharva School of Music in Miraj, Maharashtra. The school helps the students to blossom into professional musicians. As regards vocational training, BPA's ITI runs seven one-year, job-oriented courses approved and supported by the Government of Gujarat.

They include computer course, hair and skin care (beautician course), offset printing, cutting and tailoring, telephone operator training, stenography and desktop publishing. In collaboration with GCERT, we have designed and conducted two-week training programmes for visually challenged school teachers to use assistive technology in classroom conditions. Further, BPA manufactures and distributes wheelchairs, tricycles, walkers, crutches, white canes, artificial limbs and many other devices. It also manages an eye hospital which performs 15,000 surgeries every year.

What have been the significant impacts of BPA?

Our vision is: 'All persons with all types of disabilities will get access to individual need-based services as a matter of right, will have good quality of life and will be an indivisible element of their communities and the

nation.' BPA's services include prevention, education, counselling, rehabilitation, self-reliance training and providing employment. When I joined BPA in 1979, the investment stood at Rs 10 lakhs. Now, our total investment is Rs 160 crore. Initially, we had one campus, now we have 16. In addition, we have 13 vision centres and 16 special needs centres that cater to people with multiple disabilities, both children and adults. They are given medical and psychiatric care, speech therapy, hearing aids, training on activity of daily livings (ADLs) and orientation and mobility support.

A MICA study has found that BPA has attained a growth rate of 19% per annum. for the last 40 years. Our ability to attract CSR funds is also an indication of our impact. Last year, we garnered Rs 9 crore in CSR funds. One donor just walked in and donated a 22-acre campus to BPA. That is the extent of the trust and goodwill we enjoy. However, we have other indicators of success. We rejoice over the number of people whose eyesight we have restored, how we have increased the mobility of PwDs and provided them employment and increased the number of differently-abled children going to school. We have helped treat homeless people with mental illness, encouraged the use of technology by visually impaired people, improved communication and most of all brought smiles to the faces of so many people. This is our true impact.

How has the journey with BPA been like?

The journey has been rewarding, exciting and fulfilling. BPA was a very small



With extended family after an award function

organisation but the people involved were of high calibre and dedicated. Apart from the remarkable growth of BPA, I continued learning and growing as an individual. I completed a degree in law, a PhD and a course in Israel when I was with the NGO. Attracting well-qualified motivated people to join the organisation has been the key to our success. Internationally trained people have joined BPA and remained with us. Initially, we were depending only on individual donations. We learnt to shift to CSR and global resource mobilisation. We are transparent and follow statutory compliance scrupulously. We believe in maintaining honesty and integrity.

What is a typical day like for you?

I wake up early. I start my day with an hour-long walk to a garden near my house where I enjoy natural beauty and listening to birds. The walk is followed by exercises and yoga. The next hour is spent understanding equity market trends and the latest news. Work

starts at 10 am sharp. I have meetings in the morning. The lunch hour is spent deciding how to invest trust funds. In the evening I meet walk-in donors and get involved in updating social media sites. I am home by 8.30 pm for dinner and then relax with my family. We watch television news and serials together. On Sundays and holidays, I work from 10 am to 3 pm. My wife is fond of old Hindi film music. I join her in listening to it. We watch movies on OTT platforms as well. Turkish movies are very interesting and well-made.

Could you tell us something about your family?

My family should be credited with understanding my long working hours. My wife Hansa is a lawyer. She has been a pillar of strength to me by managing the home and other responsibilities, allowing me to focus on my work. My daughter Shachi is also a lawyer working in the corporate sector. We are good friends as a family.

We support each other and work as a good team. Our daughter is based in Hyderabad. We speak to her daily and she visits us once or twice a month.

What have been the most cherished moments of your life?

I was offered many prestigious positions which made me very happy, but I chose to stay with BPA. Two of my cherished memories are when Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, then scientific advisor, inaugurated our disaster relief centre in Bhuj after the earthquake. His 'Z' security did not permit him to come to a border district like Kutch but he still came. Another moment etched in my memory is when Prime Minister Narendra Modi, then the chief minister of Gujarat, laid the foundation stone of our rehabilitation centre at Bhuj. He was extremely busy but made time for us during his lunch break! Other cherished moments are when we are given grants even without applying for them. Or, when people donated land and gave us their time and effort – we valued that greatly.

Who are the people who have inspired you?

Apart from my father, I would like to mention Jagdish Patel, the founder of BPA, who was my mentor and boss. He received a Padma Shri. Dr. N R Sheth, former IIM, Ahmedabad director, was a big inspiration and support to me. I did my doctorate under his guidance. I also remember with gratitude Robert Jaekle, a US mobility expert who trained me in Israel. I appreciate Mahatma Gandhi's concept of trusteeship. I work with

the belief that nothing belongs to you. You are not the owner. You are just managing an organisation.

What are your future plans for BPA?

BPA is a high-growth organization. We want it to be a sustainable and self-supporting NGO. We want BPA to be a model of good governance, transparency and total accountability. We are trying to get it listed on the Social Stock Exchange. We want donors to come looking for us. Our aim is to cover each and every person with disability in Gujarat. We want to become a role model in the human development sector. At BPA, we strive for the implementation of laws and policies for PwDs. Though we are predominantly based in Gujarat, we do a lot of consultancy and development work out of Gujarat. We help local NGOs in capacity-building and mobilising resources.

Do you have a message for senior citizens?

There are many senior citizens working for BPA. I would like to tell senior citizens that you have lived for yourself. You have achieved what you wanted to in life. It is time to live for others. There is no age when you cannot start a new innings. As an example, the late Dr. G Venkataswamy started Aravind Eye Hospital in Madurai after retirement, as a senior citizen. The hospital is a landmark in eye health management in the world. Enjoy the taste of giving. Dedicate your time, energy, skills and resources for the benefit of others, especially marginalised communities. Share your wealth of experience with others. The power is within you!