

## In India, disability and charity go hand in hand; let's put an end to this, pleads social entrepreneur Dhruv Lakra

**H**e runs a commercial courier service that employs those who are hard of hearing and insists on calling them "deaf" because he believes that it's an insult to label them as "hearing impaired".

Political correctness does not impress him as he continues his battle to tell the world that those who are deaf or suffer from other so-called "impairments" are also good at work (in fact, they are as good as "normal" people) and should be considered for employment as a matter of routine.

If anyone thinks that this starry-eyed youngster, an alumnus of H.R. College who also has an MBA from Oxford, is just another upstart, here is some food for thought – he received the National Award for Empowerment of People with Disabilities from the President of India in 2010; the Helen Keller Award in 2009; and recently, the highest civilian award from the Jammu & Kashmir government.

Mr. Dhruv Lakra, who is the founder and CEO of Mirakle Couriers, made an interesting presentation

at the last meeting on "The challenges we faced" (vis-a-vis the courier service that employs deaf boys and girls from families with low incomes).

He was introduced by Programme Chairperson Dolly Thakore who said that the Jammu-born Mr. Lakra started his career in investment banking at Merrill Lynch but shifted to the social sector after the devastating tsunami of 2004.

After spending two years in this sector, he won a full scholarship to do his MBA at the University of Oxford. On returning to Bombay he founded Mirakle Couriers, a **for-profit courier service** that employed low-income deaf youth. All deliveries were made by deaf men and the office was run by deaf women.

Its clients included the Aditya Birla Group, Godrej and Boyce, Birla Sunlife, Jindal Steel, IDFC, Under the Mango Tree (Honey), Infomedia 18, the Business India group, the Indus International Trust, Tehelka magazine, Vodafone, Dasra, Edelgive and Bain Capital.

Dolly said she was using the word deaf deliberately because Mr. Lakra had insisted that "hearing impaired" was not the politically correct expression to use. "He will tell you more about it," she added.



*I have an issue with the media which insists on 'political correctness' even when it upsets the disabled, says Mr. Dhruv Lakra at the last meeting*

Mr. Lakra first screened a three-minute clip giving a brief introduction to Mirakle Couriers, its objectives, its achievements and its staff. Once this was out of the way, he immediately waded into troubled waters, as it were, debunking the popular misconception about political correctness which entailed calling a blind person "visually impaired" and a deaf person "hearing impaired".

The expression "hearing impaired" was not the correct term, he said.

**"I don't know why we fail to understand this in India. I have a**

**huge issue with journalists and people in the media who try to patronise you by saying, 'Oh, we can't call someone who is blind, blind, we call them visually impaired; we don't call people with deafness deaf, because they'll feel bad, we call them hearing impaired'.**

"But when we call someone hearing impaired or visually impaired, we are doing much more damage, because it means we are telling them that they have an impairment.

*(Continued on Page 2)*

### Forthcoming meetings

May 31, 2011

Mr. Suresh Prabhu, former Union Minister, to speak on "Rural lighting – How much growth can India's maximum city sustain?"

June 7, 2011

A talk on the "Power of positive thinking" by Mr. Girish Gogia, an interior designer with a handicap.

June 14, 2011

A debate on "Genetically modified food and BT brinjal" between Dr. Bharat Char (Lead, Biotechnology) and Dr. Ritesh Mishra (Lead, Regulatory Affairs) of MAHYCO on the one side and representatives of the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture (which represents over 200 farmers' organisations) and the Coalition for GM-Free India on the other.

## ERADICATING POLIO WILL TAKE RENEWED RESOLVE, SAYS BILL GATES

**B**ill Gates, co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has praised Rotary for its continued success in the effort to eradicate polio, but cautioned that Rotarians will need to redouble their efforts to keep the disease from spreading and threatening hundreds of thousands of children. Mr. Gates, the keynote speaker at the third plenary session of the 2011 R.I. Convention on May 24 in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA,

said that because of Rotary there were many places in the world where polio was no longer considered a threat.

**"That's a blessing and a curse," he said. "The blessing is that in many places polio is a disease of the past. The curse is that it is now harder for us to raise awareness that, in some places, polio is also a disease of the present. If we fail to help leaders around the world under-**

**stand this, polio is certain to be a disease of the future."**

Praising Rotary for reducing the incidence of polio by more than 99% worldwide since 1988, Mr. Gates said, "Your work has brought us so far. I'm so proud to be a partner in the work that Rotary has been doing to eradicate polio".

He pointed out that only one case of polio had been reported in India as of March this year.

*(Continued on Page 4)*

# *It's simple: A good pair of hearing aids costs Rs. 80,000, hence hardly anyone wears one; but most people wear spectacles*

(Continued from Page 1)

"There is nothing wrong in being blind, please call them blind, don't call them visually impaired. If they are deaf, please call them deaf, don't call them hearing impaired."

(According to the dictionary of the English language, the word "impairment" also means a state of being unfit or inferior – Editor.)

Mr. Lakra recalled a long, acrimonious conversation with a journalist from a leading daily who insisted on calling the deaf "hearing impaired". He pleaded with her and requested her not to employ the term. But all his pleas fell on deaf ears (pun intended!) and she used the term "hearing impaired".

When deaf people all over India read the report, they bombarded him with SMS messages, castigating him for using that expression.

"I appeal to Rotarians here, please don't use the term 'hearing impaired'; a deaf person feels really bad when you use it. You are telling him that he has an impairment, that there is something wrong with him. They may be deaf, but they have a lot of pride in being deaf; just as the blind have a lot of pride in being blind. They have a separate psyche, they have a separate culture. Deaf culture is very big... and deaf is the correct term to be used."

As Mr. Lakra was about to turn to the challenges that his venture had faced (and continued to face), Dr. Anand Shah, a senior ENT surgeon, stood up to make a comment. (The guest speaker had said at the outset that he would welcome audience interactions.)

Dr. Anand pointed out that it was necessary to distinguish between (a) those who were deaf, and (b) those that had hearing impairment but were using hearing aids and so were no longer deaf.

He pointed out that in Singapore today not a single child was born deaf. Every deaf child would be able to hear, thanks to modern technology.

"But you are dealing with people who are deaf and will always be deaf. They will never be able to hear, they will never be able to use meaningful speech; that's why we are dealing with two different (sets of) people. I think you should clarify that part."

Welcoming the observation, Mr. Lakra said the key words were "meaningful speech". While speech was for May 31 to June 6, 2011



*In India the segregation of people with disabilities from mainstream or normal society is 'a bit too strong', points out Mr. Dhruv Lakra*

conversation and communication, deaf people used sign language which was an equally good way of conversing. It was just that it was not a verbal way of conversing.

**He said some of the deaf boys and girls in his office refused to wear hearing aids (even though they would be able to hear) because they believed that by using hearing aids they would be telling the world that they had some kind of impairment. Instead, they were happy using sign language. "They are happy being deaf."**

Mr. Lakra then turned to what he called the segregation of people in society. He emphasised that in India the segregation of people with disabilities from so-called mainstream or normal society was "a bit too strong".

He asked those in his audience who wore spectacles to raise their hands. Almost all hands went up. But when he asked how many people were wearing hearing aids, only one hand went up. This showed that most people gave a lot of importance to their eyesight but not to their hearing, he said.

If, while studying or reading in a room, it was felt that the light was insufficient, the person concerned was immediately requested to turn on more lights, lest one's eyesight was impaired. But when someone failed to hear something, he or she never said, "Let's go to an audiologist and check our hearing".

This was another reason why the community of the deaf was further segregated – "because we don't give too much importance to hearing; but

lots of importance is given to spectacles."

Next, Mr. Lakra asked why spectacles had become the norm but not hearing aids.

Several members suggested the possible reasons for this, ranging from lower incidence of hearing problems to the discomfort felt while using hearing aids; the use of spectacles as a fashion accessory and so on.

One member came up with the correct answer, viz., demand and supply, or the economics of hearing aids. While a good pair of spectacles was affordable, a good hearing aid was not. Few people were aware that a good hearing aid set cost about Rs. 80,000. Cheaper sets were available for Rs. 6,000 but were of dubious quality.

Turning to his venture, Mirakle Couriers, Mr. Lakra said many people asked him why he had started a courier service that employed only the deaf and wondered about his long-term vision.

He told them that in India people with disabilities found it very difficult to get jobs. There was a social stigma attached to those with disabilities; often, they were not even properly educated. Further, there was so much segregation in society that many people thought that they were inferior human beings and that God had deprived them of something.

On any special "occasion" such as a child's birthday, a marriage in the family or on the receipt of a bonus, there was a tendency to go to a school for the blind to distribute sweets. With the onset of winter in Delhi, the trend was to distribute blankets

to the children at a school for the deaf. In Bombay, on the other hand, if someone's son had been admitted in, say, H.R. College, parents would visit the Happy Home for the Blind in Worli to distribute chocolates.

Most people did such things out of pity or because they believed that those who were blind were not really equal to them in all respects. Similarly, any collection of old clothes was promptly earmarked for the residents of the nearest orphanage.

"Do you think you are doing a good deed? I'm sorry to say, you're not! What happens when the chocolates are over? What happens after the 30 or 40 children have had their fair share of laddoos and you go away? Will another man turn up with laddoos? Really... Laddoos don't help anybody."

"I would like somebody to go to a blind school and say, 'I will pay for two blind girls' education and I will hire them once they graduate'. But nobody does that – because we want instant gratification. We want blind smiling kids and deaf smiling kids saying thank you to us."

**"Sadly, in India, disability and charity go hand in hand. Disabled people are differently abled people (to be politically correct) but they are never given a fair share (although) they are equally good at work."**

When Mr. Lakra asked whether anyone had a blind friend, no hands were raised. And when he wanted to know whether anyone had a deaf friend, only one or two hands went up. This was a clear pointer to the kind of segregation that had occurred.

India had the highest blind population in the world, but no one at the Rotary meeting had a blind friend. India had the second highest deaf population in the world, but only one member had a deaf friend.

This, once again, was on account of the segregation that happened quite early in the life of those with disabilities. They went to different schools from the very beginning. The blind hung around with the blind, not with "normal" people. They found jobs that were boring and mundane. They had no social interactions with "normal" people; they had no professional networks, no social networks and no school networks.

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## Pick up your copies of the Yoga Directory

Joint Hon. Secretary Sitaram Shah has reminded members to pick their copies of the "Directory of Yoga Organisations of Mumbai and Greater Mumbai" by making a token donation of Rs. 150 per copy (or Rs. 500 for five copies).

He has pointed out that the material for the directory was assembled after a year-long effort by a team led by him in his capacity as District 3140 Project Coordinator for Yoga and Health during the last Rotary year. The Rotary Club of Bombay was a key sponsor of the same.

This was the first such compilation of its kind for the city – and it would probably be the last because it was unlikely to be replicated or updated, he said.

He urged members to use the directory as a handy reference book and to distribute it among family, friends, colleagues, clients and associates.

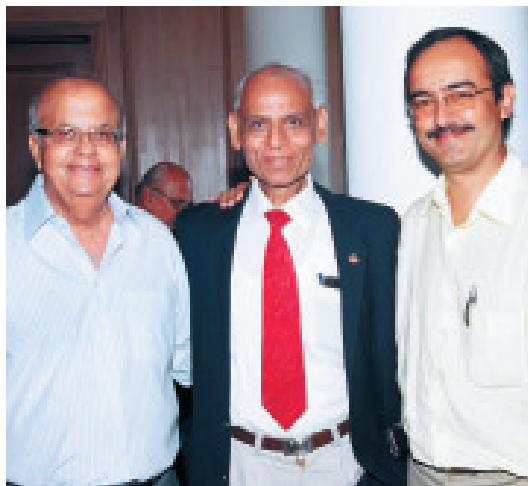
Copies of the sleek, slim book are available at the weekly Rotary meetings.

## Birthday donations

Vice-President Nowroze Vazifdar, who conducted the last meeting, announced that birthday donations had been received from several members.

He said that while Mahendra Mehta and Burjor Poonawala had contributed Rs. 5,001 each, Hans Khimji and Bimal Mehta had given Rs. 5,000 each on the occasion of their respective birthdays.

Nowroze thanked the above members for their generous donations.



Two threesomes snapped at the last meeting. In the first picture are, from left to right, Dr. Sharukh Golwalla, Dr. Hoshung Mobedji and Farouk Chinoy. And in the second are Harkin Chatlani, Hon. Joint Secretary Sitaram Shah and Jagdish Malkani

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THE GATEWAY, The Bulletin of the Rotary Club of Bombay

## At the last meeting

(Held on May 24, 2011)

VICE-PRESIDENT Nowroze Vazifdar called the meeting to order and welcomed the guest speaker, the Visiting Rotarians, Rotaryans, guests and others.

### BIRTHDAYS

Members and spouses celebrating their birthday during the week were felicitated.

### ATTENDANCE

Members	87
Visiting Rotarians	1
Spouses/Rotaryans	5
Total	93
Svc. box collection	Rs. 3,750

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# Eradicating polio will require renewed resolve, says Bill Gates



(Continued from Page 1)

“India is approaching zero cases. None of this would have been remotely achievable had it not been for Rotary. We would not be where we are without you. Nor can we get to where we’re going without you.”

Mr. Gates said that he and his wife Melinda had made eradicating polio their Foundation’s top priority. With the world on the threshold of eradication, the hard work really began now, he said.

“Polio eradication has been our single biggest investment in recent years, as far as innovation and creativity is concerned. The last 1% will be the longest and the hardest 1%. It will require more work and more commitment than ever before. Without the redoubled effort of everyone in this room and your fellow Rotarians around the world, we will not succeed. Redoubling is crucial to ending polio,” he added.

The Gates Foundation has awarded two grants totalling \$355 million to Rotary in support of its work in eradicating the disease. Rotary has responded with its own “\$200 Million Challenge” and to date Rotarians have raised \$173.2 million to meet this challenge.

Mr. Gates said he planned to work with Rotary leadership to keep polio front and centre in the public eye. “You have helped so many people understand that we are ‘This Close’. I challenge you to make your voices louder.”

Countries including Canada, the United Arab Emirates, the UK and the USA had increased their investment in the eradication effort, thanks to the pressure that Rotarians had put on the leaders of those countries.

But he noted that with a funding gap of \$400 million next year for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, it was no time to let up.

“If we fail, the disease will not stay at its current low level,” he said. “It will spread back into countries where it has been eliminated and will kill and paralyse hundreds of thousands of children who used to be safe.”

Pointing out that the monuments that Rotarians had illuminated with the “End Polio Now” message were powerful images, Mr. Gates added that “ultimately, the most important monument won’t be the one we illuminate... It will be the one we create”.

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# A new initiative by H.R. Rotaractors help put people on the

One small step for man, a giant leap for mankind. These were the words used by Neil Armstrong when he became the first person to step on the surface of the moon. But there are many people who cannot take even a single step without help and support.

The Rotaractors of H.R. College believe that disability is not a weakness; it’s not even a handicap. It’s just a different way to live, an ingenious way to live.

And their new initiative, christened “Junoon”, is designed in such a way that it would help to remove the letters “dis” from “disability” and

ensure that every person has “ability”. In other words, to convert disability into ability.

The Rotaractors recently collaborated with the Bhagwan Mahaveer Viklang Sahayata Samiti (BMVSS), an organisation that has been doing yeoman’s service in the cause of the physically challenged.

Under “Junoon”, they joined BMVSS as it provided artificial limbs free of cost to 30 physically challenged persons.

Of the 30 who received artificial limbs, twelve were leprosy patients chosen from their organisation, the Lok Seva Sangam; ten were suggested by



## TURKISH ROTARACTORS HELP DISABILITIES FIND JOBS

Turkish Rotaractors received top recognition at the Rotaract Pre-Convention meeting for helping people with disabilities bolster their job skills and find employment.

The Rotaract Club of Istanbul-Galatasaray’s “Integration Through Employment” project aimed to provide skills training for those with disabilities, increase their interaction with employers and raise awareness of the career difficulties they face.

As this effort was recognised as the winner of Rotary International’s “Outstanding Rotaract Project” on May 20. It was one of eight projects singled out for honours at the Pre-Convention meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA.

**Assisted by their sponsor, the Rotary Club of Istanbul-Galatasaray, the Turkish Rotaractors connected with agencies that provide training for those with disabilities, including an industry leader in call-centre and communication skills courses.**

**All 15 attendees at one training series were hired within three months of completing the programme.**

The Rotaractors and their sponsor Club also hosted the country’s first career fair for people with disabilities. More than 30 employers and 150 job-seekers attended the 2009 event in the

Besiktas district of Istanbul. A second successful fair was held in November, 2010.

In addition, the Rotaractors delivered a presentation on disabilities to ten Rotary Clubs in the Istanbul area.

“The project resulted in a great collaboration between our Rotaract Club and our sponsor Rotary Club,” says Rotaractor Tugba Ozdinc. “The most original part was the career fair. There are career days for college students or college graduates, but there has never been a career fair in Turkey for the disabled community.”

The other outstanding Rotaract projects recognised at the awards ceremony were:

**Africa Districts:** Rotaract Club of Adentan, Ghana (District 9100), for “1,000 Gifts of Life”, to recruit blood donors, collect blood, create a blood donation registry and raise awareness about the need for voluntary blood donations in the Accra area;

**Asia Pacific Districts:** Rotaract Club of San Pedro East, Laguna, Philippines (District 3820), for “Greenenvironment” which raised environmental awareness and organised clean-up projects that involved 4,000 young people in the San Pedro area;

**Europe Districts:** Rotaract Clubs of Districts 1730, 1740, 1750 and 1760 (France and Monaco), for “Musi’SEPTour”, which organised concerts that

# ors: A 'Junoon' to ir feet

BMVSS; and eight underprivileged persons came from the Community Outreach Programme (COP) at Colaba.

Thirty five members of the Rotaract Club of H.R. College went to K.E.M. Hospital, where the BMVSS centre is located, on May 20. They watched (and also assisted) the technicians as they took precise measurements and then carved out artificial limbs for the amputees – and finally fit them on the respective recipients. Crutches were provided to those who asked for them.

The Rotaractors also interacted with the patients who were present at the centre.



*Lending a helping hand. Two Rotaractors from H.R. College assist the technicians at the artificial limb centre of the Bhagwan Mahaveer Viklang Sahayata Samiti (BMVSS) at KEM Hospital*



## PEOPLE WITH OBS

raised \$14,000 for the fight against multiple sclerosis and increased awareness of the disease in six cities in central and southern France;

**Latin America Districts:** A tie between two: (1) Rotaract Club of La Villa Ciudad de México, Distrito Federal, Mexico (District 4170), for “Segunda Jornada Medica, Social y Cultural” (Second Medical, Social and Cultural Event), a day-long project that provided free medical and social services along with cultural activities for more than 600 disadvantaged residents of Huehuetoca; and (2) Rotaract Club of Metropolitano, Distrito Federal, Mexico (District 4170), for “Únete al Reto: 80 Toneladas” (Join the 80-Ton Challenge), to provide food and drinking water to victims of Hurricane Alex in the state of Nuevo León;

**South Asia Districts:** Rotaract Club of the University of Moratuwa, Western Province, Sri Lanka (District 3220), for “Handz”, to renovate school facilities for rural secondary school students in the north-central province and to provide tutoring and educational materials; and

**United States, Canada and Caribbean Districts:** Rotaract Club of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada (District 7080), for the “Pakistan Flood Relief Drive” which provided \$9,700 in relief supplies and financial assistance to flood victims in the Muzaffargarh district of Pakistan.



*Under their programme ‘Junoon’, the Rotaractors plan to help put people on their feet. They joined BMVSS which has been doing yeoman’s service in the cause of the physically challenged*



*These two pictures tell their own story. Thirty five Rotaractors attended the project. Later, they joined the technicians and smiled for the cameras (pictures above, centre)*

# *India has about 100 million differently-abled people – but although they are in the labour force, they just don't get jobs*

*(Continued from Page 2)*

It was this startling observation that had made him decide to start a “for-profit” company and not a charity, a trust, a society or an NGO. He strongly believed that people with disabilities were equal and that all they needed was an opportunity to prove themselves.

**“We are trying to disengage disability from charity which, as I said, is hand in glove in India.”**

But what was his ultimate vision, the basic change that he wanted to bring about?

Mr. Lakra said he wanted to break down the social stigma between the hearing and the deaf communities and to encourage others to employ people with disabilities without prejudice. Mirakle wanted to take the lead in the employment of people with disabilities and wished that other companies followed the same path; in other words, it wanted to trigger a snowball effect, a tough task that could take several years.

**“If a for-profit service employing low-income deaf adults is scalable, it will lead to more people with disabilities being employed in the labour force. We want to set the benchmark for other companies... We want to be the face of the entire movement of employability.”**

Unofficial statistics showed that India had about 100 million differently-abled people, although the census figures were lower. And that was a huge number.

India had about 18 million blind people (the highest blind population in the world) and 6 to 8 million with hearing disabilities. These people were in the labour force but unable to get jobs. They had just no opportunity to work.

At this stage, Mr. Lakra took up four essential themes related to Mirakle Couriers, viz., the idea, the story, the impact and the skills.

**The idea.** Deafness was physical and not a mental disability. Actually, it was an *overlooked disability*. No one could say whether a person was deaf unless he or she started using sign language. This was clearly distinct from the case of a blind person who invariably carried a cane

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and hence was easily recognised as one with a disability.

But few people knew that a person who was blind could also be deaf (like Helen Keller) and dumb (unable to speak), too.

When shipments were delivered there was no need to speak. It was a silent operation. The boy knew the address and usually required no verbal communication to carry out the task given to him. As far as the client was concerned, he or she just signed the receipt, took delivery of the package and (sometimes) thanked the courier boy who was immediately off to the next address. No one invited courier boys into their homes.

It was this that sparked off the idea of employing the deaf in a courier service.

**The story.** After returning from Oxford, Mr. Lakra said, one day he was travelling by bus in Bombay when he was seated next to a deaf boy. He realised that the boy was deaf only when he wrote the name of his destination in Marathi on a chit of paper and gave it to the conductor.

He got talking, rather, conversing through writing, with the boy and learned that he couldn't hear, couldn't speak, had no job, came from a poor family and was in a bad shape.

On returning home he sought information on Google about the deaf and the blind in India, the jobs they

did and the vocations they sought. He was surprised to note that “since 1947” they were mainly employed in candle-making, book-binding or envelope-making. These were jobs that further isolated them and kept them away from the limelight. They lived “sheltered” lives.

He asked counsellors and talked to institutions that hired them but noted that very few of them were offering jobs on computers which could have helped them move up as the economy grew.

“So I thought, why can't we hire them as a courier service? I was sitting at home that day and got a courier package. And, as I said, there was no communication. I saw my name, looked at the boy, signed the papers, gave him a thumbs' up sign and thanked him. There was no need to speak, there was no need to engage in a verbal conversation. That was the genesis of the idea... I have never again met that boy (whom I had met in the bus). I am still looking for him.”

**The impact.** Mr. Lakra said he started with two staffers (he and a boy called Ganesh) and with a capital of Rs. 8,000 (the equivalent of 200 pounds left over from his Oxford scholarship). Their first client was the eminent choreographer, Mr. Shiamak Davar, who gave them ten shipments. Ganesh delivered five and he delivered the rest.

He used to carry a register while walking the lanes in Bandra to note

the possible challenges that the boys could face while making deliveries. Now the firm had 20 boys and 10 girls who did data entry and sorting.

**As Mirakle grew, he realised that there were many challenges in hiring girls. Parents of deaf girls and girls with disabilities were extremely wary. It was difficult to convince families to allow these girls to step out or to work at an office. They were simply not open to the idea. Therefore, it was suggested that the girls would reach office early and leave in the afternoon so that they reached home in daylight.**

Interestingly, it was discovered that the boys and girls working at Mirakle were earning about 300% more than they did earlier while employed in “seasonal” work such as book-binding, candle-making and so on. All of them had regular jobs, enjoyed provident fund and ESIS benefits and also had savings accounts in banks.

Digressing for a moment, Mr. Lakra recalled that he had had a difficult time opening bank accounts for his staffers. He had had innumerable quarrels with bank managers who said that they were unable to confirm the addresses and phone numbers of the boys and girls.

**The fact was that when they called on the landline or mobile numbers of the deaf, the latter did not pick their phones because they couldn't hear them ring.**

“I remember fighting with bank managers. They thought that I was an idiot wasting my life doing all this. I am used to people saying such things to my face... But even after convincing them they still didn't understand and asked, **but why do you want to open their bank accounts?** As if deaf people don't have the need to save money. Are they not human beings?”

“They were shocked (at what I was doing)... As an employer I was giving them a certain guarantee, yet they were reluctant. Then they said they would open bank accounts but not give them ATM cards. They came up with all sorts of trivial and stupid things.



*Mr. Lakra and Mirakle Couriers handle my mail for me, exclaimed a delighted Roda Billimoria at the last meeting. With them at left is new member Bernd Schneider*

# 'THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS THE INSENSITIVE BEHAVIOUR OF SECURITY GUARDS AND OF SOCIETY IN GENERAL'

(Continued from Page 6)

"But now all of them have bank accounts, PF, ESIC and ATM cards, all the boys save a good amount of money and one of the boys is the highest earner in his family; you cannot imagine the kind of confidence it has given to that boy. He used to be told that he was deaf, that he was a curse on the family and that he had been doing nothing. And suddenly Rinku has become the highest earner in his family!"

**The skills.** The boys started picking up and learning English through reading addresses, making deliveries and so on. Many of them had become extremely fluent in English even though they had had very poor education at school. They had to find addresses, hence they had also learned to look at Google maps.

Some of them had started handling data entry and other work on computers. Interestingly, 90% of them had never before worked on computers.

They had also learned to behave more professionally. They were told to reach office at 9 am (and that 9 am meant 9 am); besides, they had to come clean-shaven and after taking a bath. After all, they were the point of contact for the customers. Nobody had ever told them anything like that before.

It was a sad commentary, said Mr. Lakra that most parents rarely talked to their deaf children because they (the parents) had not bothered to learn sign language. As a result, most deaf children communicated just three things by sign to their parents – that they wanted to eat, to drink water or to go to sleep. The signs for these were such that anybody could understand them.

"I was shocked when one day the father of one of our boys came in and said, 'Oh! Is this where my son is working?' He had no idea what his son was doing and he had never bothered to ask because he couldn't understand his son or what he was saying.

"Therefore, at Mirakle we have started engaging with the parents regularly, every six months. Just imagine for a second, your daughter or son is deaf and is trying to tell you something; but you don't know  
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*My deaf boys and girls earn three times what they earned in 'seasonal' jobs such as candle and envelope-making or book-binding, claims Mr. Dhruv Lakra*

sign language. You can't do anything about it."

Mr. Lakra shared a few personal stories of his boys and girls. First, he talked of Bhupesh, whom the office called "Sachin Tendulkar" because, like a superstar, he could deliver about 100 shipments a day. He came from a very poor (and disturbed) family and travelled two and a half hours every morning from a distant suburb to reach the office at Churchgate. But he earned the most at Mirakle, thanks to the incentive system for those who completed more deliveries.

Neelam, on the other hand, was a deaf woman married to a good-for-nothing deaf man. She had a son who could hear but she carried the (mental) scars of an attempt by her mother-in-law to burn her. She handled the entire data room and used her earnings to pay off her husband's loans. However, she was always smiling and never betrayed even a trace of her pain on her face.

Ganesh, the first employee at Mirakle (along with Mr. Lakra himself), was now a married man and the proud father of a baby girl. He was now the leader of the company.

As for Deepali, who managed the data along with Neelam, she wore a hearing aid but it was of poor quality. She had an alcoholic father who insisted on marrying her off – although she had just turned 19. But she was a very diligent young woman.

Returning to some of the challenges that Mirakle faced, Mr. Lakra pointed out that in India the deaf were not allowed to drive; they were allowed to do so in other countries. He was planning to give bicycles to the boys, but was worried about their safety.

After all, Indians liked to honk – and his boys were deaf. At present they used public transport which was slow; and sometimes the customers complained about deliveries being delayed.

Another big challenge was the insensitive behaviour of security guards and of society in general.

**Mr. Lakra recalled a rather nasty run-in with a gentleman living on Pedder Road who was upset that one of the delivery boys had used the building's main lift and not the separate lift meant for servants and courier boys. He had apologised for his boy's mistake and assured the man that he would instruct the lad to mend his ways.**

But that was not to be. Although the delivery boy was told to avoid the main lift, he was in such a hurry a few days later that he committed the same "folly" (of using the main lift rather than the second one).

Livid at this contretemps, the man called again and threatened to tell the company that used the services of Mirakle Couriers to stop doing so. He also dropped a lot of names and hinted that "I know many people"

(suggesting, perhaps, that he could cause harm to Mr. Lakra and Mirakle Couriers).

To cut a long story short, the irate man asked Mr. Lakra why he was wasting his time.

**"You're wasting your life on such boys. What are you doing? Why are you after these deaf-mutes? Why don't you leave them alone? This was from someone who lives on Pedder Road! I think something is wrong with our education if he was saying such things. I can't understand it... what he was saying was, let them be. But the whole idea is not to let them be!"**

Finally, Mr. Lakra touched on what he called "the other side of the challenges".

He said that people with disabilities got used to free lunches (certain facilities) and became dependent on family support. Family members didn't want them to venture out on their own or to get jobs. They were usually quite scared and worried about their welfare.

Besides, there were some government schemes that also made them complacent. They felt that since they were deaf or otherwise handicapped, they could "use" the services meant for them. For example, local trains in Bombay had a coach for the handicapped. Although he kept telling them not to use such coaches, force of habit made them continue to do so.

"Delinking that is very hard for us. To tell them that there is nothing wrong with them is also very hard.

"One very big challenge is convincing clients to give us business. Many clients don't even want to try our service; they get hassled when we tell them that there are deaf people working for us. They think we are lying. Some clients have sent their administration managers to our office to check whether we have actually got deaf people.

"They can't believe that this can happen. That belief stems from the fact that the idea is too radical – and all this because of the segregation that takes place right from the beginning," Mr. Lakra concluded.

The vote of thanks was proposed by Poonam Kumar.

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Just before the meeting is called to order. From left in this photograph are PP Dr. Zerxes Umrigar, Deepak Kapadia and Aliakbar Merchant

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**THE FOUR-WAY TEST**

*Of the things we think, say or do*

1. Is it the **TRUTH**?
2. Is it **FAIR** to all concerned?
3. Will it build **GOOD-WILL** and **BETTER FRIENDSHIPS**?
4. Will it be **BENEFICIAL** to all concerned?

*Happy Birthday*



Vineet Bhatnagar  
May 31



Suresh Mehta  
June 6



Premnath  
June 6



Haso Thadani  
June 6

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