

Letting the light shine through

How the visually challenged in Alwar were nudged into independent living

SARITA BRARA

Till he was in his early-30s, visually challenged Manmohan from Bichpuri village, Alwar district, Rajasthan was totally dependent on his family for almost everything. He was confined to his house most of the time, for he could not move out without support.

"Everybody avoided me lest I asked them for some favour. So most of the time I would be sitting idle in a corner, hoping that someone will spare the time to talk to me or do my chores"

All that is now in the past, asserts Satpal, Manmohan's nephew, who joined us as we conversed with Manmohan at his farm.

"Uncle ji moves out on his own now, manages his mustard and wheat fields and is sought after by farmers for his valuable advice."

Manmohan recalls the day life changed for him. "Over a decade ago a field worker of the All India Confederation of the Blind (AICB) came to our house during a survey and chided me for idling away my time. 'But what can a blind man do,' I had retorted angrily. 'You can do everything,' he told me, and how right he was."

Lessons in independence

The field worker spent hours with him every day for several months, teaching him to walk independently to his fields and other places in the village, managing errands on his own instead of depending on his family, and ultimately doing his own farming. He listens to radio programmes on farming to enhance his knowledge, takes part in the activities of a krishak club and



I do everything myself, move around on my own even till 10 pm without anyone escorting me. I know every nook and corner of my village

MANMOHAN
Visually challenged farmer in Bichpuri village, Alwar

manages everything from sowing, irrigating his fields, harvesting and, "doing *hisab kitab* (accounts)".

Proud that he could buy buffalo worth ₹1.5 lakh from his own savings, Manmohan, who is unmarried, wants to ensure that the children in his joint family get the best of education and enjoy a high living standard.

Turning entrepreneur

Not too far from Manmohan's village, in Neemrana lives Ravidutt Soni, who lost his eyes trying to save his father from an acid attack by his uncle over a property dispute.

"I was in Class IX and just 17 years old when I became blind. After all efforts to restore my vision went in vain, my own family, including my father, neglected me. I wanted to take my own life because my family wanted to shift me to a temple. But things changed, thanks to AICB.

"It is not even noon but I have already earned ₹264," he says, even as he attends to a bunch of boys who have come to his shop to buy

snacks, toffees and try their luck at what they refer to as "lottery". What is amazing is that Soni does not struggle to locate items in his shop and can identify all denominations of coins and currency notes. "Nobody can cheat me," he says with utmost confidence.

However, it took several months of training for him to achieve this level of capability – from using the cane for mobility to running a shop. He spent nearly ₹1 lakh from his savings to redo his shop. He also repaid loans provided by AICB.

Livestock rearing

Santosh from Virodh village lost her eyesight due to small-pox at the age of five. She was trained in cattle rearing and given a loan to buy a buffalo. Today she looks after five animals, besides cooking and doing other household chores.

"Santosh is not dependent on us for anything, rather she is an asset to the family. I don't know how I would have brought up my children or constructed this house without her help," says her sister Lalli, with whom Santosh lives.

"It is the visually challenged in the villages who suffer the most in terms of education and livelihood, and that is why our organisation took up this project," says J.L. Kaul, Secretary General AICB. The organisation has so far helped in the rehabilitation and economic empowerment of over 1,560 visually challenged men and women in 10 districts of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. What is unique about this programme is that one-on-one training is provided at the doorstep of the beneficiary.

The writer is a senior journalist based in Delhi



Ravidutt Soni, who lost his eyes in an acid attack over a property dispute, today ably runs his store on his own in Neemrana village