



# India, Families, and a Special School

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## Abstract

Families in India face many challenges in caring for and educating their children with disabilities. India has enacted a landmark special education law, Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995, which provides schooling and services to all children. For some students with disabilities, however, integrated and special schools are providing schooling. This paper highlights one school, the Bethshan Special School, a private day-school for students with intellectual disabilities. At Bethshan, teachers provide quality academic instruction and job readiness skills for a range of children and young adults, as well as support programs for parents. Concluding this brief examination, several challenges and positive directions for Indian special education and teacher preparation are highlighted.

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## Keywords

Special education, India, special schools, families

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In India, for some families who have children with disabilities, special schools are making a positive difference. They are providing valuable educational services and supports for children and their parents. While these schools are not always available or affordable for all families, they can offer safe and focused learning environments in which children can succeed. They may also provide a new community for parents to build friendships with other parents who face similar challenges.

I want to begin by providing a brief summary about the educational environment in India specifically focusing on families, special education, and special schools. In the second half of the paper, I will focus on a particular special school describing how it provides quality schooling for children and adolescents with special needs, as well as support to parents. Finally, I conclude by offering several challenges and positive directions for Indian special education with a personal note. It is my hope that this review will provide new information about how special education is conducted in a different cultural context, as well as highlight an exemplary special school.

India is rich in history and in culture. It has the second largest population in the world and is the second largest democracy (Singal, 2006). Interestingly, only 25% of its population lives in urban areas (Thomas & Thomas, 2002) which translates into a majority of the nation living in rural settings where resources can be limited and educational opportunities are less available. In the last 15 years, however, India has become an increasingly developed nation as she has pursued technology ventures and global business opportunities.

India gained independence from Great Britain in 1947. This meant that the Indian people were no longer dependent on an out-

side power for governmental control and services. What also resulted was a return to the traditions of the Indian culture from British colonialism. With new freedom, the people were called upon to act for their own good rather than relying on the government to help them. To this end, Gandhi championed a new type of service for the people and society. He believed in reforms through social action that would lead to political changes (Alur, 2001).

### *Family*

Historically, the people of India have not looked to government programs for support. Families take care of themselves without depending on the state for assistance. Family responsibility also includes care of the elderly, sick, or the disabled (Alur, 2001). In Indian culture, the family is seen not only as mother and father and children, but also as grandparents, aunts and uncles and other relatives. Within this framework, Indian families have unique challenges as they make decisions about the schooling and care of their children particularly those with disabilities.

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One challenge for parents is the increased job opportunities along with their associated stress and their associated stresses resulting demands as India develops as a nation and work becomes more plentiful. With more available opportunities, many mothers are

now working outside the home to help provide more for the family (Misra, 2000). As these mothers work outside of the home, the question becomes—who will care for the children? This question is especially difficult for parents in urban areas who may not have extended family supports for their children because grandparents and relatives live back in the rural areas. For these families, they must depart from custom and look outside their collective support structures for help (Jaya & Malar, 2002/2003; Vakil, Welton, & Khanna, 2002). Other families face challenges related to illiteracy especially in rural areas, where most of the population lives (Thomas & Thomas, 2002).

### *Special Education*

When examining the context for educational services for children with disabilities, it is important to keep in mind the issue of schooling in general. Public education is compulsory for children ages 6-14 in India (Singal, 2006). Present estimates place the number of school age children at around 200 million. Nevertheless, perhaps as many as 40 million of these children are not being schooled or schooled very little (IDRM, 2005). This reality is due to the lack of infrastructure and necessary resources. The challenge to provide education for children with disabilities is then part of the larger difficulty of providing schooling for all students. Thus, India is working to implement a special education system with the same limitations that also hinder universal education.

It is difficult to find a clear estimate of the number of school age children who have disabilities. Some place the number around 12 million students (Singal, 2006). Most agencies and non-government organizations have taken a moderate percentage of 5-6% of the

school age population for developing policies, budgets, etc. (IDRM, 2005).

One major effort to serve these students has been India's landmark special education law, Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA). It was passed in 1995 and enacted in 1997. This legislation marked a beginning of India's commitment to help people with disabilities. Misra (2000) states that PDA encompasses the following areas: "education, employment and vocational training, research and manpower development, creation of barrier-free environments, unemployment allowances, special insurance schemes, and establishment of institutions for persons with several disabilities" (p. 7). Each of India's 29 states with their respective cities and localities finds themselves at different stages of implementation of PDA (World Bank, 2007). As the law is worked out into practice, more families with children with special needs are able to receive services.

In general, PDA provides guidelines for those who will receive support under the law, as well as who will be responsible for diagnosis. Of particular note, is that PDA limits its services to those individuals whose conditions are more severe--that is those students who need educational support for more than 40% of the school day. It also speaks to who will be responsible for diagnosis; usually "...a medical board that consists of at least three members appointed by the central/state government, at least one of whom should be a specialist of the relevant disability" (IDRM, 2005, p. 40). Note that there are no services provided in the law for those who need less than 40% services during a day (Kalyanpur, 2008). PDA also outlines the categories of disability that will be served. These include blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, mental illness, locomotor disability, and intellectual disability.

### *Schooling for Children with Disabilities*

Available schooling for students with disabilities in India is conducted either by integrated schools or special schools. Integrated or inclusive schools are public schools that allow students with disabilities to attend, but these schools provide limited support for these students. At present, those schools that are integrated or are inclusive have small numbers of students with disabilities. In addition, these schools tend to serve only students with visual or hearing issues (Misra, 2000).

Special schools are private schools that work with special populations and are often located in urban areas (Misra, 2000). Special schools date back to the 1800's -- the first were founded by missionaries. These early schools often served the blind and deaf, orphans, or outcasts. Currently, the number of special schools in India is around 2500. These schools are registered with the Rehabilitation Council of India, and are allowed to apply for government support (World Bank, 2007). Nevertheless, the small number of special

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schools does not begin to serve the population of students with disabilities (IRDM, 2005; Misra, 2000; World Bank, 2007).

#### *Bethshan Special School – A Special School for Children and Young Adults.*

With this brief background on India and special education, the focus for the remainder of this paper will be on one particular school, Bethshan Special School for Men-

tal Retardation. Bethshan Special School is located in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu in Madurai; a city which traces its history back 2500 years. The main language of this state is Tamil, although many people can read and speak English. The main attraction in the city is the Hindu temple, Meenakshi-Sundareswar Temple, rebuilt and expanded in the early 1600's. In terms of industry, there are several software companies and rubber making factories.

Bethshan Special School was founded in 1996. It is situated in the village of Koodal Nagar outside the city of Madurai. It is one of 11 registered special schools for children and young adults in the Madurai area. It is a non-residential, special school recognized by the Rehabilitation Council of India to educate students with disabilities. The school originated with the vision of two men which began while they were taking a special education course as part of their teacher training. Through this course, these men became convinced that they should start a school that would give children with intellectual disabilities a sound education and would also provide counseling to their parents.

To accomplish this goal of starting a school, these men conducted a survey of families in and around Madurai. They found that there were more than 320 children diagnosed with mental retardation. They were shocked at the living conditions of some of these children, not to mention the lack of schooling. They believed that they must respond. “The founders took the malady as a challenge and intended to start a school for them” (Bethshan Special School, 2006, n.p.). The leaders choose a random number of the surveyed students and approached these families about their willingness to participate in a new school. Parents were favorable and will-

ing to work with the school leaders; and in 1996, the school was begun.

The founders chose the word “Bethshan” from the Hebrew language meaning “house of security” because this phrase summarizes the central purpose for the school. They also decided that the tenets of the school would be benevolence, service, and sacrifice. Over the years, Bethshan has been supported through donations by business and charities (Bethshan Special School, 2006). In addition, parents also pay tuition based on a socio-economic scale.

### *Teachers*

At present, twelve teachers staff Bethshan School. Eight of these are teachers and three are care workers (like para-educators), and one is a bus driver who also helps around the school. Two of the eight teachers are the founders of the school. They balance their time between working with students and overseeing the administrative and financial aspects of the school. The remaining six teachers teach classes that are arranged based on the academic and behavioral functioning of the students.

All of the Bethshan faculty have been trained in special education. The teachers have been trained through the local university’s program, which is a year-long special education course. Both leaders of the school have received graduate instruction in special education. These training programs are regulated through the Rehabilitation Council of India (IDRM, 2005). The Bethshan teachers have from one year to 13 years of experience working in special education. In addition, there are many volunteers that give their time to help with various school related needs, (R. Bala, personal communication, October 31, 2007).

### *School*

Bethshan provides a variety of services for students and young adults, as well as parents (Bethshan, 2006). In the following section, I would like to discuss some of the dimensions of the school including academic and job readiness and parent support.

### *Academic and Job readiness*

One important role of Bethshan School is to train students in academics, as well as functional job training for older higher functioning students. Currently, the enrollment is 51 students, which fill the building to capacity. There are 42 boys and 9 girls from ages 6 – 26. In addition, there have been four students that have graduated that are now in the workforce. These students are working in local businesses, at the CSI Nursing School in the city, or as an assistant at a nursing home. Speaking to the reputation of the school, there is a waiting list of almost 300 parents who want their children enrolled at Bethshan School.

For the most part, the students at Bethshan have been diagnosed with mental retardation along with a few students with other co-morbid disabilities. Diagnosis is conducted through a private psychologist at a local hospital along with input from school-staff and parents. These procedures are in line with PDA.

Bethshan School provides a full day of instruction and activities for each of the students. Parents bring their students either by car or motorcycle; some students ride the school bus. The students at Bethshan School wear uniforms and sit at tables for instruction. There are six classrooms, a small outside play area, and also an inside room for playing and physical therapy activities. Bethshan also has a small snack shop for selling simple food items.

The school day generally lasts from 9:30 am – 4:00 pm including Saturday. In addition, some of the older students stay until 5:00 pm for work training. The day is divided up into blocks of time based on the students’ ability, class, and age level (See Table 1). Af-

ter lunch and games, the students watch instructional TV; participate in play activities, and pre-vocational training. Technology access, however, is extremely limited.

Table 1  
*Typical School Day for Higher Functioning and Lower Functioning Children*

Time	Class, Program or Activity
9:30 – 9:45	Class Prayer
9:45 – 10:00	Student Prayer
10:00 – 10:45	Functional Mathematics
10:45 – 11:30	Money Transactions
11:30 – 11:45	Learning Time
11:45 – 12:30	Functional Reading and Writing
12:30 – 1:00	Lunch
1:00 – 1:30	Indoor Games
1:30 – 2:45	News, Listening to TV and Other Learning Activities
2:45 – 3:45	Play Therapy
3:00 – 5:15	Pre-Vocational Training
4:00 – 5:15	Pre-Vocational Training for older students

To accomplish academic instruction more successfully, students are divided into six classes (see Table 2). Each class has one teacher and the younger classes also have assistants for parts of the day. The majority of the students are in the secondary, pre-vocational, and adult living classes. All students work on functional mathematics and reading and writing. They learn how to use these skills to gain independence for daily life and work. Each student whether in the younger or older classes has an education plan on file that is based on his or her needs.

Bethshan has as its ultimate goal for students to take on positive community, family, religious involvement, and particularly job placement. Staff work directly with adult students in job related skills. Usually, this intensive training begins when the students are over 18 years of age and includes supervision in job related skills, such as catering and office work. In addition, Bethshan staff have contacts with local businesses for students to provide internship and job opportunities. Their present goal is to move two students to job placements this year.

Table 2  
*Bethshan Special School Demographics*

Class	Boys	Girls	Total
Pre-Primary	6	-	6
Primary	5	4	9
Secondary I	7	-	7
Secondary II	7	2	9
Pre-Vocational	10	-	10
Adult Independent Living	5	3	8
Lift (Job Placement)	2	-	2
Total	42	9	51

*Parent support*

Bethshan School leaders and faculty believe that their role is more than just working with the students each day. Supporting parents is also a crucial part of the work of the school. School leaders and faculty realize that parents come from a variety of castes and socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, Bethshan parents represent a variety of cultural and religious perspectives on disability. Furthermore, many parents have challenging work schedules which makes child care difficult. Parents also have a variety of views related to treatments, and some parents may still be in denial of the long-term nature of their child's disability.

To try to meet this variety of needs, Bethshan leaders have implemented several programs to help parents. One program involves scheduling periodic workshops and meetings for them. Meeting topics range from religious perspectives on disability to basic health issues. In addition, Bethshan also provides a training course for parents on mental retardation each year. This course is planned in coordination with the Madurai Kamaraj

University and DATA (a local business). This venue provides an opportunity for parents and families to learn current information relative to disability issues. It also gives a public forum for community members to be involved. Somewhat related has been Bethshan's participation in the Special Olympics. This has been an exciting opportunity for the students, but has also proved to be a positive way to raise the community's awareness of the school.

The Bethshan School has picnics and other social events which are periodically planned to give rest and fellowship for parents and families. These events encourage school spirit, provide opportunities for families to talk together about common struggles, and help to build relationships between newer and older parents involved with the school. The school has built a relationship with a local private hospital for medical checkups. This relationship allows parents, particularly those from low incomes, to receive good medical care for their children. This is especially helpful if children have unique medical complications.



Table 3  
*Information on India and Disability \*\**

Estimated number of children attending school.	192 million
Disabled population (including adults)	21.9 million (2001 census)
Literacy Rate	65.38% (45% for disabled)
Disabled Children	@ 12million
Children with Disabilities Attending School	46%
Special Education Law	Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995
Other important legislation	Rehabilitation of India Act of 1992; National Trust for Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act of 1999.
Types of Education Provided	Integrated and Special Schools
Name of Major Categories	Blindness, low-vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, mental illness, loco-motor disability, intellectual disability
Number of Teacher Education Programs for Special Education	37

\*\* Source: International Disability Rights Monitor, 2005

### Conclusion

#### *Real challenges and positive directions*

Education and special education in India face many unique and daunting challenges. One difficulty for the Indian educational system is how to bring special education and even regular education to the poor, the lower castes, and the rural regions. The shortage of special education teachers is yet another challenge (Misra, 2000). For the population of school age children with disabilities, India does not have enough degree programs in place for the number of teachers

needed. Along with this issue comes the need for teacher education programs in special education that communicate research-based strategies and treatments to teacher candidates (Byrd, 2008)

Another challenge for Indian special education is the need for parents and families to have better information and services. Many parents do not have access to quality information (Dailey, 2004). Some have to travel long distances to a hospital that can diagnose their children. In addition, certain cultural perspectives make understanding disability issues hard for parents, especially those who are

poor or come from underprivileged classes. Nevertheless, developments through special schools and legislation over the last decade provide a promising picture for growth. There are special schools that are meeting the academic, functional, and behavioral needs of students, such as Bethshan. These schools are making a difference in their communities and towns. In addition, integrated education is earning a place in local schools, although its progress is slow. India also has legislation in place that is a significant starting point to bring services to those who are disabled. Over time legislation such as the PDA can bring societal changes that could have lasting effect.

*Personal note*

For me, witnessing special education services in India was an amazing experience. It has made me to stop and think more carefully about the differences between the resources and services available in the West versus those available at present in India. The result has been that I have come away more appreciative of what we has happened in the US over the last four decades in the field of special education. Progress has been made in services for students and special education teacher programs. Furthermore, there are laws, initiatives, and funding in place to support children and adults with disabilities. Though there are still challenges, significant accomplishments for families and their children with disabilities have been made.

Families in countries all over the world are faced with the challenges and complexities of educating their children who have disabilities. In the case of some Indian families, a special school, such as Bethshan Special School is meeting the unique needs of their children. Perhaps, this look at India and at the Bethshan Special School will encour-

age thinking about special education in other countries. It may also prompt a desire to visit another country to learn firsthand.

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