

## **Inclusion on Campus: Neither Heroes Nor Zeroes**

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Much of the glory of St. Xavier's College lies in its architecture. The campus is widely regarded to be one of the most exquisite in India. However, the campus' beauty does not lie in its aesthetics alone. The tiles in the hallways have borne, for ages, the weight of staff and students moving across with their sneakers, chappals, crutches, sandals, boots, canes or wheels. The walls of the arches have overheard saucy gossip, over the years, in several languages. The canteen and its sundry counters offer something to everyone, and the freedom and candour of the Woods, along with its decent cell network, lets us all breathe. All of these are testaments to our campus' beauty arising from its diversity.

Despite its undeniable importance, this diversity also gives birth to debates regarding inclusion. Fortunately, we do not seem to be lacking in this area, especially with respect to students with visual, physical or learning disabilities, as on-campus institutions such as the Xavier's Resource Centre for the Visually Challenged (XRCVC) and the Student Inclusion Cell (SIC) are working extensively to enhance this inclusion.

Led by Ms. Neha Trivedi and Dr. Sam Taraporevala, the XRCVC is a dynamic institution that constantly reinvents itself to maximize benefits for those who avail of its services. This refers not only to the visually challenged individuals on campus, but also to all students with disabilities, both within and outside Xavier's. Equipment such as video magnifiers and laptops are freely available. In addition, services such as formatting notes for students with visual and learning disabilities, and printing Braille textbooks for students of other schools are also provided here. In a unique initiative, the XRCVC organizes regular sensitization workshops for educational and industrial institutions under the name “Antarchakshu”. This aims at promoting an understanding of what it means to have a disability.

“At the end of the workshop, you have a debriefing session where you understand what the disability is in technical terms, after you've gone through the experience of what it would look and feel like,” says Aakanksha Tated, Head of the SIC. Moreover, the XRCVC also offers valuable user-feedback to organizations building technologies for individuals with disabilities.

Under the guidance of the XRCVC, the SIC works in close association with the students. It undertakes projects such as creating Accessible Notice Boards, and has recently achieved its goal of building a pool of 150 writers to aid students with disabilities during the exams. It also hosts an orientation for these students at the beginning of the academic year, and asks them for ideas for on-campus inclusion. Their festival, Mosaic, will include a sensitization session similar to

Antarchakshu.

The consensus among those who avail of the services of the XRCVC and SIC is that their work is more than satisfactory. Nevertheless, there is always scope for improvement, both within the college administration, as well as by the student population at large. One suggestion that the management can implement is that they reintroduce Braille labels in fixed spots outside each classroom, which were rendered inaccessible after the repainting of the college. As Nagaraj, a visually challenged FYBA student says, "...all students are helpful, it is easy to get around; but if we want to become more independent, then this (braille labels outside classrooms) should be added."

As for us students, in order to make the campus more accessible to the visually challenged, the best thing we can do is spread awareness, while simultaneously being aware of our own actions and how they impact those around us. For example, sitting in the center of the corridor, or sitting with legs outstretched in corridors can seriously impede the freedom of movement of the visually challenged, and can also result in their getting injured.

Taking care to monitor such actions propels us a step further towards building a better environment. Further, as most of the facilities and services provided by the college are unknown to the student body at large, there is a dire need for the students to put in an effort to know the various organizations that add depth to the concept of inclusion and create a space that welcomes all in College.

Speaking of student-run committees in particular, however, there is a lot of scope for improvement, especially when it comes to the selection criteria for various festivals that take place on campus. It is vital for the student body to realize that not all disabilities are visible. By following an interview or a GD set-up, it often becomes impossible to notice these hidden disabilities. For instance, a student with a learning disability or anxiety might come across as incompetent, while actually being extremely capable of performing all required duties. Moreover, there is an underlying presumption that differently-abled students fall short in contributing to the workforce due to the level of work that certain departments require. While there is more fear than ill intent behind this presumption, it is imperative for the committees to acknowledge and respect the choice made by each applicant when they consider volunteering for a student-run festival. Adding to this, Nagaraj says, "Before joining any fest, we also think what work we can do, then only we apply. First, they have to give us a chance. If we don't work, then they have the right to remove, but before giving us a chance, how can they say? It is a kind of discrimination."

Although tackling such hurdles does pose a challenge before the student committee, there are several ways to ascertain a fairer system of selection. One of the first steps towards achieving this should be asking differently abled students how best to ensure a selection criterion that is

just and inclusive. Rather than assuming such a task to be difficult to carry out, student committees should focus on making each individual's college experience equally wholesome and enjoyable. More often than not, this is a two-way process, where both ends make a determined effort to single out the problem and discuss the most viable solution together.

Owing to student-friendly institutions like the XRCVC and the SIC, differently-abled students are encouraged to become a part of various social circles on campus. This has been seen over the years, in the growing unity among students who respect the diverse and different nature of their population. As Dr. Sam says, "Persons with disabilities are neither heroes, nor zeroes. They are as human as anybody else. And if that message is understood, then a lot of things are overcome." It is essential to understand that inclusion does not equate to having unique "safe-spaces" for various communities, but instead, it is the creation of an equal space within the human community at large, and within the walls of the college in particular. A splendid way to embark on that journey is acknowledging that inclusion goes beyond helping others. Inclusion is a conversation, a bridge of mutual understanding.

As Saiee from SYBA says, "I think everybody is in a position to help themselves. You just have to ensure that you are not ending up being a barrier to someone else. So, you have to enable." It is this enabling that will bring forth a collective sense of responsibility – one that strives to make the campus inclusive, in every sense of the word.