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INCLUSIVENESS

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APEEJAY GROUP

Spotlight on inclusive education

In 2018 Manju Baruah, who had worked for 18 years at Apeejay's tea gardens in Assam, broke the glass ceiling to become the first woman tea garden manager in the industry's nearly 200-year-old history. A year later, two young women joined as trainee marine engineers in Apeejay Shipping. They will work under a lady technical manager, who after 25 years at Apeejay has risen to become head of the technical team.

The Apeejay group aims to make inclusiveness a 'way of life' not just in its offices, but also at Apeejay Schools because of its belief that teaching inclusivity in a child's formative years

ensures that the youth will evolve with inclusive mindsets.

This can be easier said than done. The greatest risk involved with these initiatives is the lack of awareness and the attitudinal barriers which might lead to undesired social repercussions. How else can we explain the emotions unleashed by the presence of a tiny child in a wheelchair or the presence of a teenager with Down syndrome! It was observed that even 'normal' adults would lose composure at the mention of including an excluded child. The target, therefore, was to make everyone see inclusion as an opportunity and a catalyst to build a more humane

and democratic school system. And several initiatives were undertaken to convert this target to reality.

Welcoming 'all' children instantly created the climate for change. The group hired professionals under the Rehabilitation Council of India and gave them freedom and creative space to make the school inclusive. Legal committees were set up to involve all the stakeholders, including parent and student representatives and passionate professionals working in the area of child rights, advocates, doctors, special educators and counsellors. There is now regular in-house training of staff members – "from the head of the institution to the man at the main gate" – to make them receptive, engaged and welcoming towards the idea of inclusiveness.

The group has set up the Anand

Children's Library, an independent free educational centre for the underprivileged. This was topped up by a '100 for 100 Centenary Celebrations plan,' where employees submitted ideas on possible community initiatives, and 100 of them were funded in the group's 100th year in business.

Everyone is included Educational institutions under the group's umbrella

education is for life.

Individual Social Responsibility It is the Group's Employee Volunteering Programme created for employees to donate professional skills to needy NGOs during a working week during working hours. Thus, some employees take maths classes over Skype for underprivileged children thousands of kilometres away in a village in cen-

It witnesses a large turnout of special and economically-challenged children from different organisations to participate in a sit and paint a T-shirt or an umbrella fiesta. For its innovative approach, the school received the West Bengal State Award on 3 December, 2017 in the category of Outstanding Academic Institution for Inclusive Education from the Government of West Bengal.



Learning through fun-filled activities

include facilities for differently-abled as well as children from marginalised sections of society. Constant upgradation of infrastructure is underway to reduce physical barriers and to provide better accessibility to differently-abled individuals. There is also screening and identification of children with special needs at early stages for need-based therapeutic intervention, followed by profiling of the individual cases for planning and implementation of an individualised intervention programme. This includes providing relevant accommodations and modifications in pedagogical developments by all teachers, and relaxations and exemptions in the evaluation procedures in consonance with the framework of CBSE bye-laws.

A Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) programme requires everyone present in the school premises – students, teachers, office and support staff to read and to manifest the idea that learning knows no barriers of age and social standing and that

tral India. Others assist blind or autistic children to learn a craft, or are trained to get accustomed to day-to-day office operations by the admin staff so they can be gainfully employed. Tax experts teach senior citizens how to manage their income and legacy. Senior citizens come to learn photography or internet banking skills and spend hours of companionship in musical evenings, movie nights and quizzing days.

The Apeejay School, Park Street, Kolkata has also adopted a village in Shantiniketan, named Purandil. The Apeejay School management and children raised funds to build a deep tube well for the school, and raised awareness about health and hygiene through workshops apart from donating school and story books.

The students of the school's art club, along with the village children, beautified their village homes by painting on the walls. An art workshop has been held annually in Apeejay Surrendra Group headquarters, Apeejay House on 26th February for 25-odd years.

Teachers painstakingly train the kids to excel, but, they do not do so choosing talent only and they do not do so by excluding differently-abled children. Each of the 28 clubs in Apeejay Schools starting from the Drama club to the Language clubs synergises the differently-abled children, and under-privileged children who show the talent they possess in their own right. The clubs that the differently-abled individuals enjoy immensely are Mime, Drama, Pipe Band, Bratachari, Dance, Yoga and sporting activities. They practice alongside the regular students facilitating a healthy relationship. The mutual give and take between the differently-abled and the regular kids have, as experience shows, resulted in a healthy inter-personal relationship between them and a tacit understanding that belies all definition. The plethora of cultural activities in Apeejay Schools, are a manifestation of the talents that all children possess.