

Braille press for Calcutta Blind School

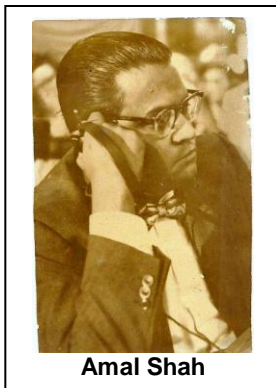


Amit Shah

Amit is a digital entrepreneur and owner of Green Comma, a print and digital educational materials development company. He lives in Somerville, MA, with his wife, Pam, youngest son, Simon, and three cats. His oldest son, Arnav, lives in Washington, DC, and has visited the Calcutta Blind School and the Shah Braille Library.

Editor's note: This article first appeared in "The Oriental Watchman and Herald of Health: A Magazine for Home and Happiness" February 1956, which is available at http://www.adventistarchives.org/docs/OWAHOH/OWAHOH19560201-V33-02_C.pdf. The following commentary is provided by Amit Shah.

The article below says that India's Health Minister, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, wrote to Dr. Merle E. Frampton, the head of the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, the oldest institution for the blind in the western world, and this led to the gift of a Braille press for the Calcutta (now Kolkata) Blind School in 1956. This is the behind-the-scenes story of how the Braille press came to this school.



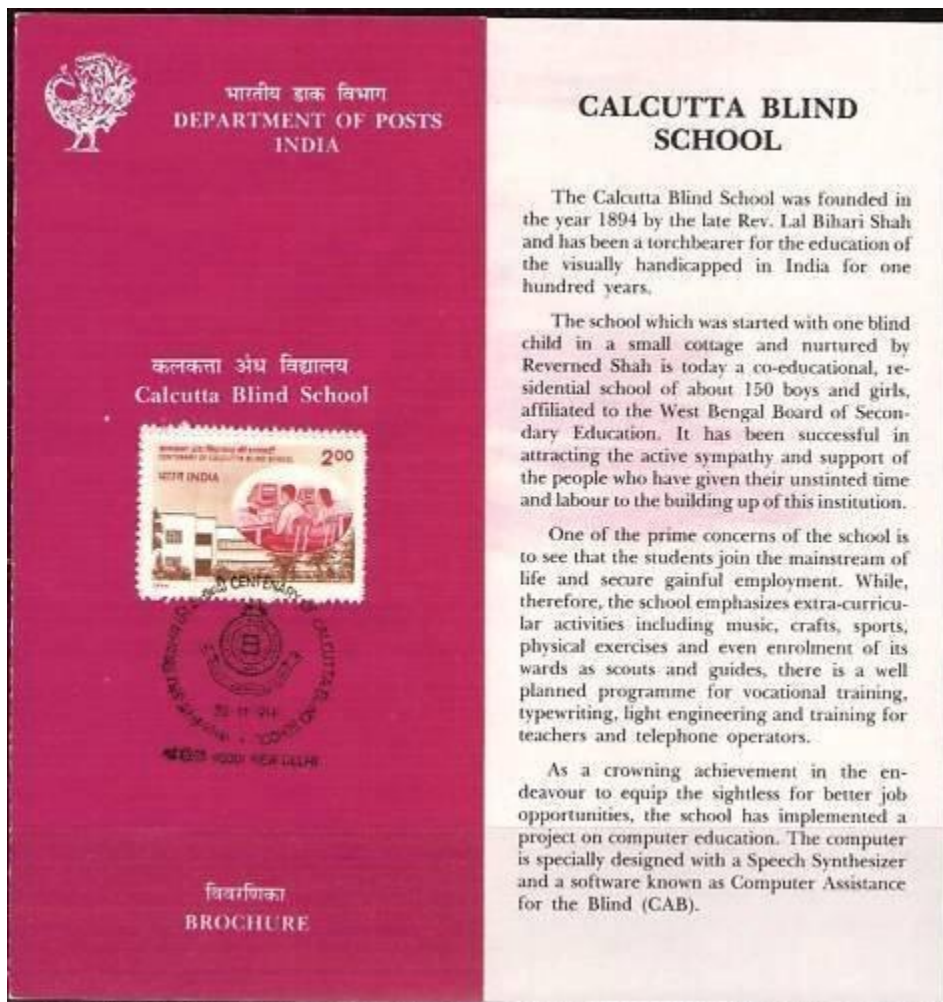
Amal Shah

The Principal of the Calcutta Blind School at that time was my father, Amal Shah. He was the grandson of Lal Behari Shah, my great-grandfather, who started the school in 1894. As it happened, my father was close to Dr. Frampton, who thought of my father as his second "son". The Health Minister had visited the Calcutta Blind School at my father's invitation, and she subsequently agreed to ask Dr. Frampton for a Braille press. The Braille press was purchased with donations from the Indo-American society that my father established in New York, and then sent to India through the New York Institute.

The entry of the press into India was not easy. The press was deemed as "commercial machinery" by the Government of India customs regulations, and hence subject to the heavy import duties prevalent in India at that time. The school could not afford to pay these duties. It took a public relations campaign in the press to get Parliament to change the law to allow for non-taxable Braille printing presses to be sent to India as gifts.

This was the incentive for the creation of the Shah Braille Library, which was established in 1960 and is still in use. It is shown in a postage stamp for the school's centenary celebrations. The Indian Department of Posts also issued the world's first-ever first-day cover brochure in Braille (<http://www.ebharat.in/postal-history-india>).





Both my sons, Arnav and Simon, who never did meet their grandfather, my father, have copies of the first day covers as a tangible link to their own history. ❖

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The orchestra of the Calcutta Blind School has acquired a name for itself. It has given several performances over the A.I.R. Network.

Photo U.S.I.S.

CALCUTTA BLIND SCHOOL GETS BRAILLE PRINTING PRESS

H. N. MUKERJEE

A NEW, modern Braille printing press, a gift of the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, will soon go into production in Calcutta. When this happens, the entire current need of Braille books and printed matter of the eastern region of India will be met.

Fittingly this Braille press is to be housed on the campus of the Calcutta Blind School, only five miles from the heart of Calcutta and one of Asia's pioneer institutions for training blind children to

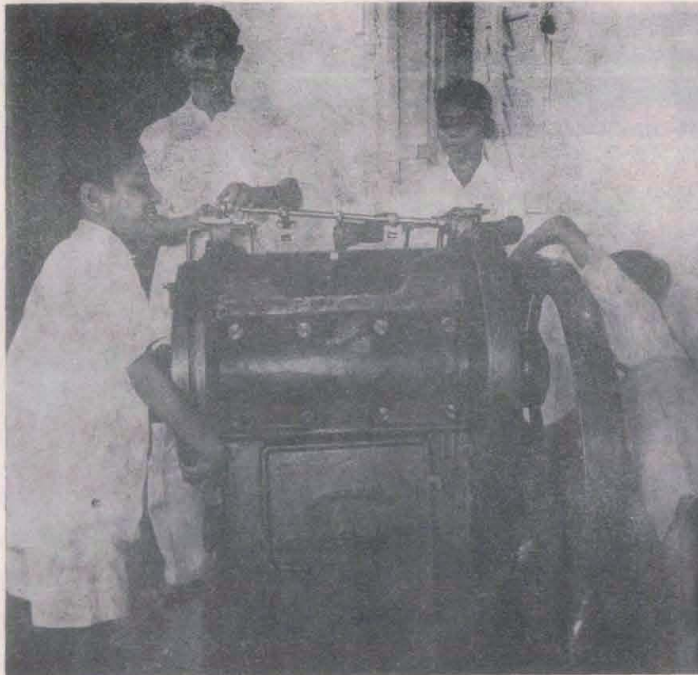
be useful citizens. An appeal for Rs. 100,000 to meet the cost of the buildings to house the press and the library has met with generous response from the public. More than Rs. 22,000 has so far been donated.

The story of this gift goes back many years. Since the school was founded in 1897 by Mr. Lal Behari Shah, the grandfather of the present principal, blind students have been transcribing their books into Braille by hand, page by page,

a tedious and slow process. When this was brought to the attention of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, India's Health Minister, she promptly wrote to Dr. Merle E. Frampton, Principal of the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, knowing that her request would receive sympathetic attention. The response from Dr. Frampton was immediate.

Impressed with the work of the Calcutta Blind School, he donated
(Continued on back page)

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Students of the Calcutta Blind School "examine by touch" the new Braille printing press presented to the institution by friends in America.

Photo U.S.I.S.

the printing press. In addition, some other Braille apparatus and some 1,000 volumes of Braille books were also donated to the school to form the nucleus of a library. The American Foundation for Overseas Blind, New York, is also reportedly considering donation of some Braille apparatus and appliances to the school.

Since its founding, the Calcutta Blind School has trained hundreds of sightless children to be self-reliant and has taught them useful occupations. Many of its former students are today teachers, artisans, music masters and even businessmen. One of them has been elected to the Indian Parliament.

The school, co-educational in character, and with 165 boys and girls on roll, prepares the students for the West Bengal School Final examination. Its curriculum includes not only straight study

courses, important though they are, but also vocational training in various crafts, as a part of its rehabilitation programme.

The industrial section of the school provides a six-year course. The blind children are taught here to develop their latent talents and skills and at the same time to learn a craft. Basket-making, spinning and weaving, and wicker-work are some of the crafts that are taught here. The articles produced by the students find a ready market through a selling point in the shopping centre of Calcutta.

Listening to the school orchestra, one is amazed at the wonderful talent and virtuosity displayed by them. The school orchestra has acquired a name for itself. It has given several performances over the network of All India Radio.

Physical culture, including drill and swimming, is a regular feature

of a day's programme. Extra-curricular activities like scouting, dramatics and musical concerts, help develop the personalities and character of the students.

Perhaps one of the most interesting classes is that for the little children. Stuffed animals, birds, tricycles, wooden blocks, toys and other play-things are kept in a room, where little children learn by playing. They get to know the animals and birds by "feeling" them with their hands. More important is the psychology that they learn not to consider lack of vision as a serious impediment to their having a fuller life.

Besides the important function of providing educational facilities for the blind in Bengal, the Calcutta Blind School has also been the nursery of a large number of teachers who are today manning the numerous blind schools located across the sub-continent of India.

Its high standards have attracted future teachers of the blind from all over India. In addition, it has inspired a number of states to establish blind schools of their own by proving that, under wise and sympathetic guidance, sightless people can become an integral part of the economic structure of society.