

Muskaan-Parents Association for the Empowerment of Persons with Intellectual Disability

Diversity, not disability. Growth, not neglect.

In a leafy quarter of New Delhi lies a large circular building, awash in natural light, with its sounds of busy activity occasionally drowned out by an aircraft flying overhead, on its way to the airport. An energetic game of basketball is in progress in the circle enclosed by the building, while voices and snatches of conversation can be heard all over.

If you take a walk through the building, you will find a group of people in one room absorbed in painting clay lamps. In the next room, another group is busily engaged making and bottling pickles and preserves. A third room has people sizing, cutting, binding and decorating notebooks, files, envelopes and more. And near the entrance is a cheerful shop, where all these products are for sale.

This is Muskaan, an association set up to educate, train and create employment opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. Each worker in each of the rooms has some form of intellectual disability, but with Muskaan's intervention, they are all employed in gainful activity, earning a stipend, doing the sort of work that people with normal intelligence do in other enterprises. Bringing meaning and purpose to their own lives, adding value to society.

Muskaan means 'smile' and you see a lot of smiles all over the campus. Smiles on the faces of the students and workers, smiles from the trainers and supervisors, smiles from the parents.

About Muskaan

Muskaan is well-known for its pioneering work of providing vocational training and creating work opportunities to adults with intellectual disabilities. Our method has been acknowledged as an effective rehabilitation model, both nationally and internationally. Parents and professionals from organizations across the globe (including Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia, Mauritius, China, Japan, Singapore and Afghanistan) have visited Muskaan over the past few years and appreciated the various programmes being conducted at Muskaan.

Our experience of working with adults has encouraged us and demonstrated that when presented with the proper opportunity, students can learn various skills and become much more self-reliant and productive. It is not their disability, but the lack of proper training that forces them to live a life of deprivation and hopelessness.

According to world statistics, approximately 2% of the population all over the world have the condition of intellectual disability. Thus, Delhi alone would have more than two lakh people with this condition. Yet, there is a great dearth of adequate services in this field. It is shocking to know that even in the capital city of Delhi, not more than 3-4% people with intellectual disabilities have access to the needed services. This scarcity adds to the woes of the parents and their intellectually challenged children. It is important to recognise that whatever services are available in the society, have been created by parents, not the authorities. Vigorous advocacy by parents, families and professionals is needed to put pressure on the Government so that more such services come up in the future.

History of Muskaan

Muskaan is a story of collective will, determination and unwavering optimism. It was started in 1982 by parents and professionals, filling a void in the services and facilities required for children and adults with intellectual disability and their families. Initially, it was a loosely knit group of parents and professionals, unsure about the path to carry forward their mission. But with incessant learning, course corrections and building up a bank of experience, the journey of Muskaan slowly but surely, carved its way onwards.

Relentless hard work, honest intentions and clarity of focus steered the growth of Muskaan. The team had one mission, to create growth opportunities and required services to enrich the lives of persons with intellectual disabilities (ID). To live a complete and dignified life, intellectually challenged children and adults need education, vocational skills, employment and other growth opportunities. But finding the right methods to achieve these goals was an immense challenge. Every step that we took in this direction taught us about its utility and value. Every achievement, big or small, kept strengthening our optimism and courage.

In 1989, Muskaan started an adult training and employment programme, widely acclaimed today for its uniqueness and quality, with three students and one teacher in a garage in Kalkaji, New Delhi. Today's Muskaan is the result of a long and adventurous journey of determination and passion, inspired by spirited and committed people and our students who have always remained the focus of our work. New ideas, research and experimentation guided the development of all projects and programmes at Muskaan.

Mission

Muskaan creates and provides opportunities for capacity development of Persons with Intellectual Disability and their families, advocates for their rights and legal capacity, collaborates, facilitates and promotes the creation of an enabling environment and an inclusive society.

Vision

A society which recognises human diversity and respects the rights of all people irrespective of levels of abilities.

Objectives

- Provide comprehensive education and training, including vocational training and employment opportunities to persons with intellectual disability.
- Empower the parents through emotional support and appropriate information by organizing training workshops, lectures and counselling services etc.
- Create a safe and dignified life for intellectually challenged adults through an assisted living facility of a group home, especially when parents become old or pass away.
- Raise awareness in society about the capacities of persons with intellectual disability and to foster recognition and respect for their rights and dignity.
- Advocacy with the Government and other stakeholders to create adequate, appropriate and quality services and facilities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Services Provided

- Adult training
- Employment programmes
- Assisted living facility
- Family support services
- Awareness and advocacy

Training programmes at Muskaan are divided into five major areas with clear objectives, curricula and assessment and evaluation systems. The details of these programmes are given below:



Employment Programmes

Training in work-related vocational skills must culminate in work and employment opportunities, which are extremely meagre for adults with intellectual disabilities. Muskaan recognised the critical role that work opportunities can play in enhancing their quality of life. With endless efforts, we have been able to find work opportunities for adults with varied levels of disability, ranging from severe to mild.

Our experience has shown the possibility of their employment through these avenues:

- Supported employment in mainstream companies and institutions.
- Supported employment within Muskaan and other NGOs.
- Placement in the activity-cum-art centre of Muskaan and other NGOs.
- Work from home.

Supported employment in mainstream companies and institutions

Experience has shown that 20-35% of adults with intellectual disability can be employed by mainstream sectors with requisite support. We share with great pride and satisfaction that since 2014 we have been able to place more than 60 students in mainstream companies and institutions. With a concerted drive to increase advocacy and awareness in the sector, society has gradually begun to recognise the capability of people with ID.

Muskaan is a training and employment partner for hotels namely DLF The Aralias Club, Country Inn & Suites, Four Point Sheraton, Di Ghent Cafe, Red Fox Group of Hotels and Lemon Tree Group of Premier Hotels who have employed our trainees as Guest Service Associates in the Food & Beverage and Housekeeping Departments. Corporates like Hindustan Petroleum, Egon Zehnder and C B Richard Elis are also employing them in various jobs. Trainees of Muskaan have made a place for themselves through their diligence, sense of responsibility, good behaviour and efficiency in their work.

Supported employment within Muskaan or other NGOs

60-70% of people with IDs can find meaningful work opportunities in supported work centres. At Muskaan, we have set up a variety of production facilities, where our students make a vast range of products, which have won the appreciation of the buyers. Presently, the vocations available at Muskaan are: Bakery, Savoury Production, Food Processing, Chocolate Making, Preparing Spices, Paper Craft, Block Printing, Diary and Slip Pad Making, Decorative Candles and clay lamps, Retail Sale Assistance, Café Assistance, Handwash Preparation etc.

Over the years, we have found this to be the most successful model as it provides employment to more people at one point of time. It also allows for the required adaptation of the production processes and support from the trained supervisors.

In the vocational units, 200 different products are made which are sold by our sales and marketing team through a personalised marketing system.

Some of the major buyers of Muskaan products namely cookies, brown bags, candles, tea lights, gift stationery, folders, note pads etc. are:

Lemon Tree Hotels, Fabcafe, Metrological Department of India, Indian Social Studies Trust, Chefs United Foods Pvt. Ltd., Courtyard Marriott, Tripti Foods, Granny & Me, Genesis, Competent Software Pvt. Ltd, Veg Gulati Restaurant, Times Internet, Country Inn & Suites, BlooNimbooVoyages, Sardar Patel Vidyalaya.

Placement in the art and activity centre of Muskaan or other NGOs

The Muskaan team believes that everyone can learn and work meaningfully, including those with high support needs. Thus our art and activity centre evolved as a model parallel to the supported work centre for such adults. It allows much more relaxation and support for individual needs. At the same time, it creates opportunities for the students to work and engage in meaningful, productive activities at their own pace. Vocations available here are: Stringing (making hangings, jewellery, wind chimes etc.), Stencil Painting, Flower Drying, Solar Drying (Vegetables), Waste Bin Liners, Papier Mache etc.

Overall Outcomes: The key issue with intellectually challenged persons is difficulty in learning and that has a cumulative effect in other areas of functioning as well. Appropriate training programs at every stage of their development are the answer to multiple difficulties faced by them and their parents. Past three decades of working with intellectually challenged boys and girls in Muskaan Vocational Training & Work Center has left no doubts in our mind that properly motivated and trained they learn and achieve much more than what is generally thought. Their keenness, enthusiasm and perseverance for learning and working and zest for life have been a source of inspiration to all of us. After training in vocational skills they can either work in a supported work centre or get placed in mainstream jobs. After placement, follow-ups are required in both set-ups for sustained employment. It's a continuing program.

Additional Information: Muskaan is a Guidestar Platinum Certified voluntary organization of parents and professionals working to secure necessary education, training and habilitation services for the persons with intellectual disability. We, at Muskaan, are striving to empower them with comprehensive education, life skills, vocational training and work/employment opportunities. We strive to secure dignity to their basic human rights and empower parents and family members through emotional and knowledge support sensitizing them for understanding the development needs of their children. Muskaan has been able to set up a successful model for the training and habilitation of adults with intellectual disability. Our experience at Muskaan has proved that appropriate schooling, vocational training and work opportunities greatly helps them in overcoming many limitations and be more self-reliant and productive, which enables them to live a life of self-respect and dignity. Adult training & employment program started in 1989 and till date we have provided training and employment to more than 1000 adults directly and 5000 adults and their families indirectly by empowering other organizations, parents and professionals. We can take only limited number of trainees at a given time because it demands individual specific training and habilitation. However, the message of capacity has reached far and wide to various parts of India and also other countries, through quality of products that they make which are highly appreciated

by the community. It has helped in dismantling the myth that people with intellectual disability are incapable of working and earning. Moreover, Muskaan has developed training curriculum and training methodology whereas no such standardized system is there for adult training programs. Overall, we can say that since its inception in 1982 Muskaan has spread its message to several lacs of people. Muskaan is well known in the field for its contribution and quality of services as evidenced by several distinguished awards that it has won:

1. National Award by the Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment in 2006 for its outstanding performance in the field of Welfare of Persons with Disabilities.
2. National & State Award by Godfrey Phillips in 2006 in Recognition of an Exceptional Act of Social Courage.
3. Best Annual Report award given by CSO partners annual award for outstanding annual report 2008
4. Best Parents Association working in the field of Developmental disabilities given by national Trust, a statutory national body of MSJE, Govt. of India in 2011
5. Best Local Level Committee award given by National Trust in 2011
6. Best Organisation working for the employment of persons with Intellectual Disability by NCPEDP & SHELL.