

‘Yeh Dosti’

A document on a friendship intervention started by
Prabhat Education Foundation



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On Sunday, 19th February 2012, Jeeja Ghosh, director of advocacy and disability studies at the Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy, boarded a SpiceJet flight at Kolkata airport. Miss Ghosh, whose condition causes a slight twitch of her head and has speech problems, was traveling to Goa to attend a conference hosted by NGO Able Disable All People Together. Shortly after boarding the aircraft a flight attendant asked Jeeja to get off the flight. She was put in a car and brought back to the terminal building.

"I was hysterical as the flight officials did not bother to explain why they had stopped me from taking the flight," Jeeja told The Times of India. Jeeja is a frequent flyer. Cerebral palsy never prevented her from traveling by air unaccompanied. "I am a regular flier. All I need is a little bit of assistance," she said. Jeeja Ghosh said that the captain of the SpiceJet flight had refused to travel with her on board because she did not carry the "fit to fly certificate".

Medical clearance, "Fit to Fly" certification, may be required when the airline has received information that the passenger suffers from any contagious disease, the physical condition may affect the flight safety and emergency evacuation procedures may need medical attention, or condition may worsen during the flight.

None of the above applies to Jeeja Ghosh. Quite the opposite; while SpiceJet's captain was taking his decision based on visual judgement, others were vouching for the woman fitness to fly. At the time of the incident, the executive director of the Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy, called SpiceJet to tell the flight staff Ghosh is fully capable of travelling on her own. Nevertheless, the captain decided to throw the disabled woman off the flight.

"I was seething. I have never felt so insulted. The sheer insensitivity made me cry," Ghosh told the media ([1 Woman & the Supreme Court Make Travel for Differently Abled Easier \(thebetterindia.com\)](#)).

The above incident was all over the news and eventually the Supreme Court slammed a Rs. 10 Lac fine on the airline. Organisations and NGO's all across the country stood strong in support of Jeeja Ghosh. For Prabhat it became an eye opener and an opportunity to reimagine the idea of inclusion. We realized that it is not enough to just advocate the idea of inclusion but to activate it.

Prabhat is an organisation for differently abled people. The journey started in 2003, to help children with special needs. Starting with just one child, it now touches more than 3,000 lives in disadvantaged areas like Danilimda, Vatva, Lambha and

parts of Behrampura in east Ahmedabad – places where there is a lack of alternative approaches for those who do not benefit from conventional education.

One of the programs that Prabhat had initiated in its early years is called **Buddy Interaction** – with the idea of pairing up a special needs child with another ‘normal’ child to build a mutual learning atmosphere. Children of Prabhat are different in the physical and mental abilities from the other children, and therefore it becomes only natural for anyone to believe that their interaction should be limited to their caretakers, parents, adults or children with similar abilities. Almost every time, it is observed that these children rarely interact with the so called ‘normal’ or mainstream children. As a result, a wide gap exists between these two ‘societies’ of children. Children are raised and educated in silos, away from the real world, where their connection to the real world is mainly through books and the internet. Any interaction with the community is from a feeling of sympathy or pity and the act is that of donating in cash or kind.

We realised that it was important to change this story and bring a sense of equity in this relationship. The very first attempt to bridge this gap was initiated in 2009 by organising an experimental **summer workshop**. The one-month long workshops invited special children, their siblings and neighbours to play and learn from each other. Programs and games were designed to include all the children. On the last day of the workshop, parents, community leaders and members were invited to join the others for fun, games and activities that engaged both the groups. The camp was concluded with the celebration of children and childhood. The impact of the month-long summer workshop were so great that siblings of our children started bringing their neighbourhood friends to Prabhat in the holidays in their schools. They planned and executed interesting activities such as Mehndi making, rangoli, storytelling and sometimes just playing with Prabhat children, surprisingly Prabhat also received a lot of love from other people who wanted to join in as volunteers for this intervention.

This idea of bringing together was well received by children and parents. What started as an experimental workshop to bring children together was slowly becoming a fine example of inclusion. Without the intrusion of parents or other adults from the community children with special needs were accepted by the other children and were able to establish their identity instead of being called by their nicknames given to their disability. This was a wonderful experience for Prabhat, and encouraged the organization to continue hosting similar workshops every year over the course of the following years.

After the success of summer workshop, Prabhat became more ambitious with the idea of inclusion and also realized that inclusion has to be a continuous process at various levels and should not only be limited to events designed for it.

This thought inspired the conceptualisation of '*Dehlu*' (an open courtyard in a residential setting, where people of a community come together). Prabhat redefined the idea of '*Dehlu*' as a place for the children of the community to come together to play and have fun, irrespective of their gender, ability, caste, or economic background, taking the concept of Buddy interaction to a more community level. This space could be under the shade of a tree, backyard of a house, parking area of cinema theatre or in the courtyard of a temple or a mosque, school or any open space donated by the community. '*Dehlu*' became a permanent idea not limited to any space, an idea to bring children together and serve the purpose of making visible the children with special needs. This visibility brought a sense of comfort, belonging, tolerance and acceptance in the community for those with special needs.



Considered as one of the major transformative ideas of Prabhat, *Dehlu* provided carefully planned and joyful learning experiences designed and conducted by experienced teachers and volunteers of Prabhat. For e.g the game of Hide and Seek was designed keeping in mind the children with visual impairment, whereas in a game of *langdi*, a physically impaired child would easily be able to participate. Each child's strength was identified, and activities were designed accordingly by the teachers. In addition to this, Prabhat started arranging outings/exposure visits to parks, the zoo, movies, restaurants, museums, art and craft exhibitions and arranging cultural programmes and other events. All these gained the wholehearted support and involvement of parents and community members. They started volunteering for different activities. *Dehlu* also became a space for fun with learning. Teaching of simple concepts was introduced as one of the ideas and

simple home assignments were given to children to extend their learning at home. Teachers monitored and recorded each child's progress. The services at each Dehlu was extending beyond the child with special needs and was reaching out other children in the community who had never been to any institutional facilities for learning and also for early drop-outs.

As more and more members started participating in this idea, training was conducted by the Prabhat team for the volunteers, and it evolved as a fun and learning experience for the community by the community and in most cases off the community, building a sense of ownership. **Prabhat had generated another beautiful concept for inclusion that over the years became self-sustained and systematic.**



Having had the experience of working in the affluent part of the city and now moving into the community, Prabhat realized they were functioning within the comfort zone. The organization realized that it needed to step out of the community and into the society where the widest gap existed between children of affluent families and children from the weaker sections. Interaction with children with special needs from lower income groups, was not even a consideration. This was a mammoth they aspired to tame.

But where there is a will there certainly is a way. Riverside School was an upcoming international school in 2009 which introduced and believed in the idea of Global Citizens. It believed that the world is our community and children should be aware, informed and act on the differences that exist in the world. Under one of their initiatives called 'Citizenship', wherein children partner with one community initiative for a year and mutually learn from each other, Prabhat introduced the idea of Buddy Interaction. Not only was the idea welcomed but was also taken up with great fervour by the entire team, its community and other network organisations of Riverside. Students and teachers of Grade 6 came to visit the Prabhat Centres and were humbled by the different abilities and interests of the children and work of the talented teachers.

Together with the Riverside children and teachers, an inclusive plan was designed, that would benefit both the groups of children. The plan required them to visit the Centres, interact and play together, design resources and materials that could be used by the teachers in the class, organise events or visits where both the groups could learn and express themselves freely. This idea immediately became a hit for both the organisations. Parents of students from the Riverside School shared that their children cribbed less about what they want as they see their buddies happy with what little they have and also felt grateful for all they had. Over the years, the experiences with the students have only become richer. The teachers also now started volunteering their time at Prabhat and offer whatever services they could in their capacity. Parents also accompanied their children as volunteers during visits. The students from Riverside walked the narrow gullies of the neighbourhood to reach the homes of Prabhat's children. Attached are some sample outcomes of various interactions:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcxPRnq5WCM&t=28s>

<https://prabhateducationfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Prabhat-Book-Final-2-1.pdf>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EotXXRO3R64&t=18s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhUBEA2Q6ZQ>

Over the course of the years, Prabhat has become synonymous to Citizenship at the Riverside School. As more groups of Riverside children started partnering with Prabhat, they became humbled yet confident in their belief that each child deserves the right to play, learn and enjoy the same rights as other children of the society.

What started in 2009 still continues, everyone in the fraternity echoed that this model needs to travel to build a more emphatic generation. This model was then showcased through the movie, through demonstration of the interaction between a Riverside student and Prabhat child. Prabhat was then welcomed and asked to experiment this model in various other schools, some of them include Rachna School, Zydus school of excellence, Redbricks School, Divine Child International School, etc. There were challenges which came up with other institutions as the working culture the academic demand and everything varies in each. Thus a need to devise customised approach came to fore. The organization collaborated and co-created the 'Buddy Interaction' model as per mutual convenience, so that each partner could maximise the benefits of the intervention.

The uniqueness with each School partner remained. Activities included

- Puppet show,
- Conducting sports activities for Prabhat's children
- Craft sessions,
- Teaching life skills
- Outdoor visits
- Painting sessions
- Cooking sessions and many more



Thus, with such iterations and the spread of this intervention

Prabhat decided to rename it as '**Yeh Dosti**' (this friendship) and reserve the name 'Buddy Interaction' for the Riverside School partnership.

Prabhat was being transformed into a '**learning lab**' and '**learning hub**' for many schools and colleges not just from Ahmedabad but across the county. Those institutions that could not partner with Prabhat due to the geographical distance, but were keen on this idea were provided with references of other organizations. It was important to not let the child be deprived of this mutually benefitting intervention and earning opportunity. that the children were not deprived of this learning opportunity.

The impact of these partnerships for both the groups of children are very rich and long lasting. The children from the mainstream schools learned to appreciate and value what they have, for e.g. when a group of children came to visit the Prabhat children's homes, they realised that these children live in houses that are the size of their bathrooms. Prabhat's children on the other hand, learned to step out of their comfort zone, interact with others and behave in an unknown setting.

Over and above this, Prabhat organises monthly exposure visits and an annual two-day environment camp for children with special needs with. Buddy-dosti schools are asked to join in the visits. Children with special needs can be amazing teachers! Children learn **resilience, acceptance and tolerance** from these visits. Those who have interacted with them or spend time with them share how these experiences are something they would have otherwise never learnt in their lives. Some also have shared that how this experience is helping them in the choices they are making in their lives now.

Fortunately, every experience (whether good or bad) ends up teaching you something you can use going forward. The beauty of life is in the opportunities that appear just when you need them (not necessarily when you want them). The pandemic and the associated lockdown was such a time! Prabhat and its 'Yeh Dosti' partners never stopped collaborating, no matter how difficult or challenging it was. The team at Prabhat and the schools worked hard to bring the students together on an online platform to talk, share stories and conduct some fun game sessions. The students realized the learning gap which may occur for their buddies/dost so they started recording videos which had curriculum-based lessons, animated stories, nursery rhymes, etc. Prabhat team started sharing this with the children, who were overjoyed to receive it and also show it to their siblings and family members saying this is my 'dost'!

This friendship made enduring the lockdown a little easy!

