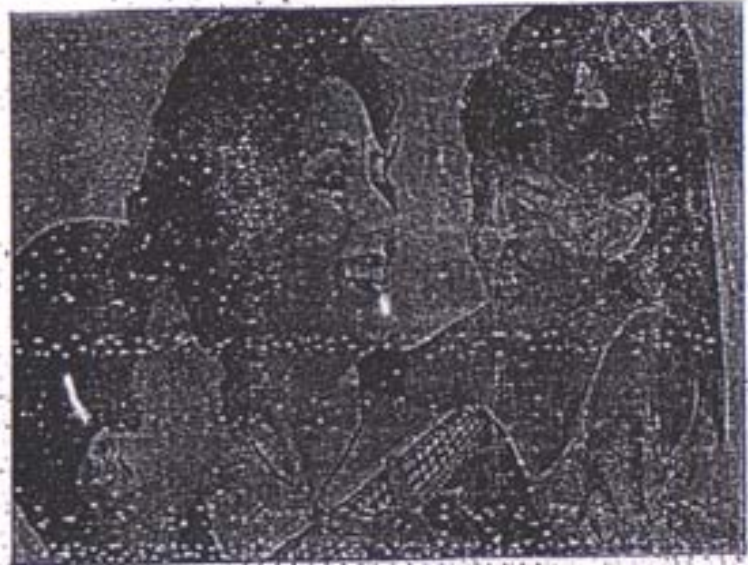


A helping hand for the learning disabled

With the firm belief that genius on occasion needs time to surface, a woman educationist has made the search for hidden talent in learning disabled children her life's mission. Manjula Pooja Shroff, the chairperson of Delhi Public School (DPS), set up the Nalanda centre in this Gujarat city after a visit to the Nalanda Institute for Learning Disabled in Mumbai two years ago.

There are 30 students at the centre here who are trying to overcome various forms of learning disability. "All learning disabled children are low achievers, but all low achievers may not be learning disabled," Shroff told IANS. She pointed out that Albert Einstein, who gave us the theory of relativity, was a dull child. His genius was discovered much later in life. Just as Einstein suffered from learning disability, so did Hollywood superstars Tom Cruise and Sylvester Stallone. No wonder then that Tushna Jirwala, who scored poorly in Class 10, writes verses on life, death, god and humanity. "She loves writing poems and is mad about fiction. She finishes a thick John Grisham novel in a single sitting," boasts Shroff. Tushna, now aiming to score distinction in her Class 12 board examination, says: "There is no problem with my aptitude for learning. My teachers did not give me proper attention in my previous school. My individuality was reduced to a number, and I was just known as roll number 40. "But here (at Nalanda) I am Tushna Jirwala. There are seven teachers to guide me in my personal as well as academic life," she says. Explains Shroff: "The method of teaching for the learning disabled varies from person to person. We teach them in a way that they can learn." So if their handwriting is poor, the children are advised to play with clay and excel in clay modelling and

pottery. Students also do gardening or play games that help in improving their personality. "It's the right communication between your brain and hand that makes your handwriting better. Our teaching is all about making that communication more effective," says Shroff. But society poses a bigger problem than academics for the learning disabled. "Indian society does not approve of any form of disability and there is stigma attached to the word disability. When we started Nalanda, many parents objected to their children being termed disabled. Now we call them suffering from learning difficulty," says student counsellor Nutan Kasliwal. "Niyati was one such victim of learning disability. Her parents could not cope with her as she failed repeatedly in Class 6. I had to counsel her parents to build a bridge between them and Niyati. Now she is in Class 8 and doing well in her studies," says Kasliwal. Adds Shroff: "We have made only a small contribution to society. There are millions of children all over Gujarat who are grappling with this syndrome." Agrees veteran



teacher, personality and documentary filmmaker Kiran Joshi, who has made a film on learning disability. "During my research, I found that of 200 students suffering from learning disability, 70 belong to the villages of Gujarat."

Sukrat Desai