

## Operation Eyesight

**Blindness is a scourge which can lead to poverty, dependency and despair.**

Avoidable blindness is defined as blindness which could be either treated or prevented by known, cost-effective means.

Causes for avoidable blindness include [Cataract](#) , [Trachoma](#) , [Onchocerciasis](#) , [Childhood Blindness](#) , [Refractive Error](#) , [Low Vision](#) , [Glaucoma](#) , [Diabetic Retinopathy](#) , [Age Related Macular Degeneration](#) .

Of these causes, refractive error is one of the easiest to target. Those of us who live in affluent societies, whether in the western countries or in the global south, change our eyeglasses as and when required and then do not know what to do with the older pair of perfectly useable frames and lenses. Could we not share these old lenses with those cannot afford them and give the gift of sight to the needy? It is with this premise that **Operation Eyesight** was launched decades ago.

Zoroastrians have been involved with this idea for many years. A pioneer in this arena is Phiroze Dastoor of Toronto, Canada who has served as a mentor to those who have followed in his footsteps. The purpose of this article is to share what has been accomplished so far and provide some thoughts on what we can do in the future.

FEZANA's participation in *Operation Eyesight* began in the months leading up to the 7th World Zoroastrian Congress held in Houston, Texas. A suggestion made by the wife of the then deputy ambassador of India to the United States, Mrs. Lekha Sreenivasan, founder of Karuna Charities chapters in Nairobi, Kenya, New York and Washington D.C., at an *Onam* celebration, for us to get involved in giving the gift of sight, was the spark to get us going. A very positive response from the organizers of the 7<sup>th</sup> World Zoroastrian Congress, and specially from Rustom Engineer who as a correspondent with all participants registered for the WZC stood in as an effective communicator, to remind registrants to bring old eyeglasses with them as they packed their bags for Houston, led to a very successful old eyeglasses collection. The largest donations in Houston came from Pakistan, with leadership provided by Toxy Cowasjee. Offers to help with buying packaging materials for shipments came in from non-Zoroastrians who heard about the effort. Delegates who attended the 7<sup>th</sup>WZC chipped in with their elbow grease to get the glasses ready for shipment. A Zoroastrian business contact in Canada who prefers to remain anonymous, arranged for the shipment to be air-lifted to Mombassa and these glasses were used in an eye-camp organized by the Lions Club in Kenya by doctors personally known to the organizers of the collection drive.

Building on the success of this model, FEZANA repeated the eyeglasses collection drive at the 12th, 13th and 14th North American Zoroastrian Congresses, in Chicago in 2002, [Key contact: Porus Dadabhoy]; in San Jose, California in 2004 [Key contact: Ehler Spliedt]; and in Toronto in 2007 [Key contact: Diana Vania]. The months leading up to these North American congresses served as effective windows in time for children in Zoroastrian religious classes at the local association level to get involved; some painted posters, others reached out to their neighbors and to friends in school. It served to become an event where families and communities could get together around a project that they all subscribed to, and values they all believed in.

Local public libraries willingly made space available for eyeglass collection boxes to be left in their hallway. One memorable eye-glasses packaging event was held at a local association picnic.

Zoroastrians from different parts of the globe in partnership with colleagues in their communities have taken this idea and run with it. A notably successful drive was carried out by Mrs. Mani Vaccha in Hong Kong, who got wind of it on (the old) *creatingawareness.com*, and was able to get the word out on radio. Generous donors in Hong Kong of all faiths contributed not only used, but new eye-glasses. The response was so overwhelming that the glasses were stored at the old Hong Kong airport, which the government made available to charitable organizations. The eyeglasses shipments from Mani Vaccha's efforts went to Mongolia and to different countries in Africa. Optometrists from Canada volunteered their time to work for the project in Mongolia.

In more recent memory, Khush Bodhan, one of the directors of the Lions Club of California and Nevada took a delegation to Mexico {see *FEZANA Journal*.....} to provide hands on service to personally give the gift of sight. He then followed it up with a very ambitious program. First he organized a successful wine-tasting event as a fund raiser in Northern California, to buy new eyeglasses. Then, in November of 2007 he led two teams of doctors, optometrists and volunteers from California, Missouri, Washington State, Oregon, over the Thanksgiving holidays to India. They were joined by local Lions Club representatives in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand state [Key Contact: Behram Bodhanwalla] and in Mumbai, Maharashtra [Key contacts: Daara and Katy Patel] in getting the word out through posters, flyers and media coverage in the local language newspapers [Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati], and making local arrangements to hold the camps. Beneficiaries were first examined by qualified personnel from the USA and then given the appropriate eyeglasses which had been shipped in from abroad. Parsis who were members of local Lions Clubs in Mumbai and Jamshedpur joined colleagues from other faith traditions, Jains, Hindus, Muslims and Christians in providing volunteer support at registration desks, to provide local transport to villages and to serve as translators. A total of 4000 Indians benefited from this effort over a period of one week in November 2007 {photos at left}.

The participants from the United States, headed by Bill Iannacone, made it a point to remind us that this kind of charity is what America stands for, and this was one of the most rewarding Thanksgiving holidays many of the volunteers had spent. Seeing a smile on the face of a woman whose skills are in embroidery and her only source of family income is at stake due to failing eyesight and no resources to get appropriate eye glasses, was reward enough for those who traveled across the oceans to participate in this operation.

#### **Looking to the Future:**

As this project comes toward the end of the first decade of a coordinated organized effort by Zarathushtis world wide, we have defined its **purpose**, and that is to create an awareness of the scope of the problem and find practical solutions to meet the need. The *modus operandi* so far has been to use International gatherings of Zoroastrians to serve as focal points to continue with this humanitarian effort. The 9<sup>th</sup> World Zoroastrian Congress in Dubai scheduled for December 2009 [Key Contact: Mrs. Shahnaz Tarapore], shall serve as our next stop on this journey together. Along the way we have found potential partners, including members of the World Zarathushti Chamber of Commerce, which goes to show that the business of business is not all about making money, but also of keeping it in trust and sharing it with the less fortunate in the true spirit of our forebearers. Willing to work with us now is *The Blind People's Association*, in Vastrapur, Ahmedabad, India. The executive director, Dr Bhushan Punani has offered to house and transport volunteers willing to work, to give the gift of sight to the needy in the villages of Gujarat.

Do consider volunteering and share your ideas, as to how we can build on what has been accomplished so far. Take ownership of a project in your local town or district or city. Individuals can connect through the wonders of cyberspace to find support. *Operation Eyesight* opens doors, not only for those who have had difficulty in seeing, but also for those who give of their time and talents.

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