THE last two decades have been a growing awareness, both on the part of the Government and the public, of the problem of blindness in India. Many more schools and institutions for the education and training of the blind have been established both by the Government and voluntary agencies and a beginning has also been made in the employment of the blind. Today over 3,000 blind persons are under the care of institutions and approximately 500 have been found gainful employment alongside the sighted in factories, mills and at a variety of other occupations. In spite of these efforts, however, only the fringe of the problem seems to have been touched and much still remains to be done.

What is most surprising is that hardly any attention appears to have been paid to the all-important problem of preventing blindness. In the more progressive countries blindness is now regarded mainly as a disease of old age. In India, however, a large number of children and adults of working age still lose their sight as a result of diseases which have been eradicated in the West, such as smallpox, ophthalmia neonatorum etc.

There are no reliable statistics relating to the blind in India. The last attempt at estimating the blind population of India was made in 1944. According to the Government of India “Report on Blindness” published in that year the incidence of blindness in India was estimated at 250 totally blind persons per 100,000 of the population. For every totally blind person it was believed that there was at least one person “whose sight was so dimmed as to make it impossible for him to earn a living without the special assistance of blind welfare services”. Thus the incidence of blindness in India correctly would be 500 per 100,000 of the population. In comparison the incidence of blindness in Britain is 205 per 100,000 and in the U.S.A. 198. Except for Egypt and a few areas in Africa, the incidence of blindness in India is the highest in the world.

The provisional returns of the 1961 Census estimate the total population of India at 438 million. On this basis the blind population of India amounts to over two million. The figures published by the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind in 1956 estimate the world blind population at approximately 942 millions. India therefore has more than 1/5th of the world blind population. It is also believed that 90% of blindness in India is preventable. These figures, although displaying a somewhat gloomy and dismal picture, should, I think, help to shock us out of our complacency and to urge upon the authorities concerned the need to devote greater attention to the vast task of preventing blindness. It is also worth remembering that 80%
of India's population is to be found in the rural areas. Hence it is only to be expected that 80% of the blind population would also be found in the rural areas. Any attempt at a reduction in the incidence of blindness must include measures for prevention of blindness among the rural population.

The main causes of blindness in India are (a) trachoma and allied inflammatory conditions of the conjunctiva and cornea, (b) cataract and glaucoma, (c) smallpox, (d) keratomalacia and other results of malnutrition, (e) venereal diseases etc. To these causes may be added the effects of ignorance and poverty of the masses with the resultant insanitary conditions of personal hygiene and daily living and most important of all the inadequate medical services available in the rural areas.

Most of the causes of blindness are today preventable. Trachoma and conjunctivitis if treated in the early stages, would not result in blindness. In the rural areas a large proportion of blindness results from the use of irritants and 'surmas' offered to the simple-minded villagers by quacks. Wide-spread publicity as to their injurious effects and the availability of adequate medical facilities would in time put an end to this. Vaccination and revaccination would almost certainly take smallpox off the list of main causes of blindness in India.

Under proper conditions almost 90% of cataract operations are successful in restoring useful vision. Unfortunately, many persons have lost their sight as a result of 'couching'. The itinerant 'couch' offers immediate restoration of sight by means of needling. In 90% of these cases sight is lost either immediately or soon after. Glaucoma is often mistaken for cataract and treatment is sought only when it is too late and sight is completely lost.

It is tragic that so much of blind-