

January 21, 2014



EDUCATION - On the quiet main street of Sanjopuram Children's Village in Chandpur, Haryana state, the houses are surrounded by well tended vegetable gardens. Onions and potatoes grow in straight rows. Ripe papayas hang from the trees.

Along the road, a group of young girls sit in the midday sun. But when Sister Annes Paul calls for them, only a few of the girls raise their head; the nun has to touch others to get their attention. When asked their names, some of the girls communicate through sign language. Their fingers fly.

Sanjopuram, or St Joseph's, is a boarding school for both disabled and able bodied girls who live apart from their parents. Some are orphaned, some were given up by their parents due to extreme poverty. The school also educates students from surrounding villages.

The essential aspect of the school is that all activities are integrated.

"Our aim is to bring those with disabilities, including the blind, deaf and physically and mentally challenged, to the mainstream by allowing them to live and study with other children," says Father Sebastian Thekkanath, the director.

In India, this is a fledgling philosophy. During British colonial rule, children were educated in segregated settings. In the 1970s, the government began promoting the integration of students with mild to moderate disabilities into mainstream schools. Several programs followed.

But negative perceptions toward disabilities still dominate India, with many aspects of society remaining exclusionary and discriminatory. In a country with an estimated 1 billion people, and 260 million living in poverty, many families can't afford to raise disabled children due to the lack of available resources.

Estimates vary widely, but between 21 and 90 million people with disabilities live in India, according to government and UN statistics. The national school system lacks the training and infrastructure needed to adequately assist children with special needs in an integrated setting.

Fr Sebastian Vadakkumpadan, St Joseph's founder and vicar general of Faridabad diocese, said he had a vision to create such a school.

"I saw the plight of the poor, disabled, orphans and the marginalized and decided to start a place for them," Fr Vadakkumpadan told ucanews.com.

His experience from serving in several European countries taught him that integrated schools build the self-confidence of children with disabilities, freeing them from any special status, while at the same time promoting proper social behavior among their classmates.

He returned to India, worked hard to raise funding before starting St Joseph's in the late 1990s.

"We are Christians. [We have] to be there for those who have no one else," Fr Vadakkumpadan says. "I had this idea as a young priest and could realize it with the help of others."

The village consists of seven houses where 110 girls reside. Each house has an adult advisor who specializes in teaching Braille or sign language.

“We can't replace the love of parents. Sometimes the children say that they miss their parents. But we are doing everything possible to give them the warmth and care that they need,” says Claretian Sister Merley, who has assisted blind children for the past nine years.

In the neighboring house, Blessed Sacrament Sister Annes Paul assists hearing-impaired children.

“Even in my youth I wanted to work with children with disabilities,” she told ucanews.com. “The fact that now I even can live with them and follow how they evolve is a special gift.”

Many of St Joseph's students were street children or given away by their parents. The village has a primary and high school. The first generation of students are now adults.

“That gives us additional challenges,” says Fr Thekkanath. “We take care of their higher education, some study now in Delhi. And if one wants to marry, this is, of course, also our responsibility -- I get the proposals.”

The village is part of social work of the Faridabad diocese. Archbishop Kuriakose Bharanikulangara of Faridabad also directs the board of St Joseph's Service Society, the legal representative of the village.

Archbishop Bharanikulangara said their commitment also has “motivated rural families from the surrounding villages to send their girls to school and create awareness to end discrimination.”

Some 1,200 students from 30 villages attend the school and study along with the disabled children.

Spread across 11 hectares, the children's village is a home for 110 marginalized, orphaned and disabled girls.

"I've always dreamt to accommodate 500 children. The space is there," Fr Vadakkumpadan says.

Source: UCA News January 15, 2014