

A loving second home

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Young boys pick drumstick at the garden they look after at the AIM for Seva student home in Anaikatti

Computer lab at the girls' home. - Deepa venkatraman

Chhatralayas for tribal children across the country aim to give them a better chance in life.

Eight-year-old Krishnadas no longer needs to travel 14 km through dense jungle to get to school every day.

Savithri, who used to study by the light of dim oil lamps, now has access to electricity from solar power.

Nandakumar, the son of a railway porter, dreams of becoming an IAS officer.

It is late evening. Several girls are busy studying in a typical South Indian style courtyard surrounded by rooms. The walls are decorated with colourful paintings done by them, and their mattresses and personal effects are neatly stacked inside the rooms. There is a sense of cleanliness and discipline.

This is the scene in a chhatralaya, or student's home, for tribal children in Anaikatti near Coimbatore, run by AIM for Seva, an initiative of Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam. The first chhatralaya was started in 2000. Today, there are 90 chhatralayas in 14

States across the country, from Karnapriya to Kanyakumari. They are supervised by well-trained people with a passion for serving the needy.

With a twinkle in his eye, Swami Dayananda Saraswati recalls the incident that sparked off the project: "We were constructing a water pipeline from the forests to the plains for the local people when a tribal woman mentioned that it was impossible for their children to come to school as they had to travel a long distance through the jungle, which swarmed with elephants. This was the trigger which made us start the All India Movement for Seva."

The very first chhatralaya was, in fact, set up in Anaikatti. It was a single-storeyed student's home, accommodating 100 boys studying from second to twelfth standard. Another one was soon built for girls.

"Most of our young ones are first-generation school goers," says Velumani, the warden of the boy's home, "and required some guidance. In spite of my NGO background, it took me a while to learn how to work with them. Now I am enjoying the work."

Typically, the children's day starts at 5 a.m., and in an hour they are ready for prayer, followed by breakfast and study time. They are off to school by 9 a.m., and return around 5 p.m. After evening prayers, they sit for studies and go to bed

at 9 after a healthy and sumptuous dinner.

Who takes care of the daily maintenance of these chhatralayas? The children themselves. As Bhagyam, the warden of the girl's home, explains, "They do the cleaning, wash their own clothes and vessels, and help in the kitchen to cut vegetables. This helps them become more responsible and independent. There is a group leader for every standard who helps the other students."

"All the akkas take good care of me," says little Sindhu Bharati, 8, the youngest in the Anaikatti girl's home. "They help me in washing my clothes, and doing my hair. I am learning a lot from them." She has been here for three years.

Clarifying this arrangement, one parent explained, "My daughter seldom falls sick and likes engaging herself in all the activities."

Surrounded by hills, both the chhatralayas offer a scenic view, and have enough open space to grow vegetables. As all the children are trained in gardening as a part of vocational training, the garden is a busy place. Fourteen-year-old Nandakumar proudly points out, "We have grown and maintained jackfruit trees, gooseberry trees and onions." The girls grow tomato and lady's finger in their garden. The girls get tailoring lessons as well.

Equipped with 14 computers, the home ensures that the children also acquire a basic knowledge of computers. "Twelfth standard students who have taken computer science in school teach the others about its use in our computer lab," says Velumani. "A few volunteers from

outside also come and help them," adds Bhagyam.

There are plenty of other activities on offer. While there are classical dance, music and sloka classes, the air also reverberates with the sound of foot-thumping tribal dances accompanied by tabla, drums and harmonium, all played by the children. "Every year we have a cultural programme where the girls and boys showcase their talent in music and dance," says Bhagyam.

The AIM for Seva movement receives financial support from the NRI community, and some individuals within India, but more aid will make it possible to implement the larger vision they have. Swami Dayananda Saraswati says he would like to establish chhatralayas in every district of the country, as children in many parts of the country do not have access to education. The need is very high, he says and is hopeful of making it a reality.

"We have approached government departments, private entities and corporate sectors for funds," says Sheela Balaji, secretary of the AIM for Seva movement. "We hope they will come forward and support us."

With dedicated members and more likeminded individuals contributing to the cause, the long-term vision of the programme appears promising.

Your contributions to AIM for Seva helps to address issues that promote the overall development of the child from education, clean drinking water, health benefits to creating better living conditions for their future. Donate now for a noble cause