



Preshitharam Srs. Remya Madathigul, left in back, and Teslin Poovathanickal and Josin Pannakoodan, front center, behind girl in wheelchair, pose with the residents of Sanjoe Bhawan, one of the homes at Sanjoepuram Children's Village in Chandpur, a village in the Faridabad district of Haryana state, India. (Jessy Joseph)



by Jessy Joseph

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Sr. Teslin Poovathanickal is proud of the wounds on her face. "Oh, they are my Ruby's gift," the 43-year-old member of the Preshitharam Sisters says as she runs her fingers over the marks.

Ruby, a 26-year-old woman with speech and hearing impairment who gets violent occasionally, scratched Poovathanickal's face in a fit of anger a few months ago. But the sister saw the incident as part of her mission.



Preshitharam Sr. Teslin Poovathanickal (Provided photo)

"She beats and spits on us. But after some time, she would come and say, 'Sister, sorry,' and we forget our pain," says the nun, who works in Sanjoe Bhawan (House of St. Joseph), a rehabilitation center for women age 18 and older with various handicaps.

Sanjoe Bhawan is part of [Sanjoepuram \(City of St. Joseph\) Children's Village](#) in Chandpur, one of the few institutions in India that offer inclusive education. Poovathanickal serves there with 17 other nuns from four congregations, all

members of the Syro-Malabar Church.

The village currently shelters 64 girls and women, ages 10-36, with disabilities, such as speech, vision and hearing impairment, cerebral palsy and developmental disorders. Some residents are orphans or children of prisoners.

The complex includes the Infant Jesus Senior Secondary School, where students from neighboring villages study with the Sanjoepuram children up to the 12th grade.

The school has 522 boys, all day students, and 368 girls, including 39 from Sanjoepuram.

The six houses at Sanjoepuram and the congregations that run their ministries are:



Clarist Sr. Sherly Payappilly Koluva, superior of Sehion House, plays with children inside Sanjoepuram Children's Village, which is managed by the Faridabad Syro-Malabar Eparchy at Chandpur, India. (Jessy Joseph)

- Sacred Heart Home: [Sacred Heart Congregation](#) (Delhi province) sisters care for 13 orphans and daughters of prisoners.

- Sehion House: Sisters of the [Franciscan Clarist Congregation](#) (Ernakulam province) live here and staff the Infant Jesus School and the kindergarten.
- Rani Sadan (queen's abode): Clarist nuns (Bhopal province) nurture 12 physically and mentally challenged girls.
- St. Mary's Home: [Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament](#) (Kothamangalam province) shelter eight girls with visual impairments, two with mental difficulties, three orphans and two children of prisoners.
- Jeevandhara (stream of life): Adoration sisters (Ernakulam province) care for three speech- and hearing-impaired girls, one mentally challenged girl and eight orphans.
- Sanjoe Bhawan: [Congregation of the Preshitharam Sisters](#) manage this house 2 miles from the main complex and assist 12 women over age 18 with various disabilities. The sisters also operate a vocational training center at the annex site.

'Model for collaboration'

Sanjoepuram is registered under the St. Joseph's Service Society, the social service wing of the Syro-Malabar Catholic [Eparchy of Faridabad](#). The main campus is on a 27-acre (11-hectare) plot at Chandpur, a village in the Faridabad district of Haryana state, some 30 miles south of central Delhi.

Archbishop Kuriakose Bharanikulangara of Faridabad describes Sanjoepuram as a model for collaboration between congregations.

"At a time when fewer women opt for religious life, intercongregational collaboration is the future," the archbishop said. "Sanjoepuram brings together congregations with different charisms to work for a common cause. Our experience has been very positive."

The prelate says the nuns serve Sanjoepuram not as employees but as partners, with two priests coordinating their efforts.



Archbishop Kuriakose Bharanikulangara of Faridabad speaks in sign language with Priya, a woman living in Sanjoe Bhawan, one of the six houses attached to Sanjoepuram Children's Village in Chandpur, India. (Provided photo)

Each congregation focuses on a category of disability. "But they all work as a team to give the children a new life and present a common face of Christian charity," Bharanikulangara explains.

He says the nuns accept the children "as their own and try their best to offer them a family." They help them to study, learn a profession and find a job. They even arrange marriages for them, he said, 10 so far.

Government rules stipulate that the houses can keep children only until they turn 18. By then, most children leave Sanjoepuram after completing school. Some go for higher studies while others find jobs.

Ruby's story

However, women such as Ruby require institutional help. So they are shifted to Sanjoe Bhawan, says Fr. Jose Vettickal, who took over as Sanjoepuram director in August. The house currently has 12 women, ages 18-36.

Clarist Sr. Rosebel Mazhuvanchery, principal of the kindergarten, says Ruby had come to Jeevandhara house when she was 4. She completed 10th grade at Infant Jesus and then started working as a school office assistant.

Last year as Ruby turned 25, the nuns arranged her marriage, but her husband brought her back within a month when she showed signs of mental distress. She then started attacking the nuns, other girls and workers at Sanjoepuram, says Preshitharam Sr. Remya Madathigul, Sanjoe Bhawan superior.

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Madathigul says Ruby had shown no sign of mental disorder before marriage. "Now, other sisters, too, help us in taking care of Ruby," she told GSR.

Such collaboration among the nuns is the hallmark of Sanjoepuram, started in 1996 by Msgr. Sebastian Vadakkumpadan, an Ernakulam-Angamaly archdiocesan priest, to bring children with special needs into the mainstream through education.

The priest was in Delhi to serve the spiritual needs of the Syro-Malabar Catholics before the eparchy was created in 2012. Bharanikulangara says Vadakkumpadan was distressed to see families hiding their children with disabilities from the public.

The monsignor founded an organization with the name of his favorite saint. A grotto of St. Joseph at the entrance welcomes visitors to the village, where peacocks, parrots, pigeons and squirrels roam under tall fruit trees. Vadakkumpadan then invited women religious to collaborate with him to help girls with disabilities become part of the mainstream.

After its establishment, the eparchy took over Sanjoepuram, and Vadakkumpadan returned to his native state of Kerala.



The entrance of Sanjoepuram Children's Village at Chandpur, a village in the Faridabad district of Haryana state, displays its name in both English and Hindi. (Jessy Joseph)

Favorable impacts

Over the last 24 years, changes have taken place both inside and outside of Sanjoepuram, the nuns say. While Sanjoepuram helped its residents to study and find jobs, the church institution has helped bring social change in villages around it.

Giving the sisters hope are children such as Kiran. She was 4, immobile and unresponsive to her surroundings when she was brought to St. Mary's Home in 2006.

"But after years of care and training, she now responds and smiles when her name is called. Her improvement gives us hope," says Adoration Sr. Rani Paul, superior of St. Mary's Home where Kiran now lives with 14 other girls, some with disabilities and others without them.

Another success story involves Kavita, a visually impaired woman who teaches in the school and lives at St. Mary's. She is also preparing for a Bachelor of Arts

examination through distance learning.



After taking dictation from the school principal and copying Bible verses in Braille, Kavita (standing), a blind woman who teaches in the Infant Jesus Senior Secondary School and lives at St. Mary's Home, reads them aloud to the sisters at the home. The sisters, from left, are Giovanni Kunnumpurath; Philomina Kuruvathazhe, principal of the school; and Rani Paul, superior of the home. (Jessy Joseph)

Two former Sanjoepuram residents — Reshmi and Cicy — study nursing at St. Francis College of Nursing in Ajmer, a town in Rajasthan, Haryana's western neighbor state.

"The sisters are our mothers," Reshmi told GSR. The nuns' "mercy and compassion has changed our destiny. If they had not opened their home and heart to us, our life would have been in the dark," says the 21-year-old woman, who had come to Sanjoepuram on vacation in April and was stranded there because of the coronavirus lockdown.

Sacred Heart Sr. Ajaya Pallikunnel, in charge of children at Sacred Heart Home, recalls that Reshmi and Cicy were only 7 months old when they came to them as orphans.

The Sanjoepuram nuns have arranged marriages for 10 orphaned women and found jobs for 13 others. They have also sent seven girls for higher studies to places in northern India. The students consider Sanjoepuram their home and return there during vacation.



A double marriage ceremony of Sanjoepuram girls Rinky (with John), at left, and Beena (with Thomas) is officiated by Archbishop Kuriakose Bharanikulangara in 2017. (Jose Kavi)

The Catholic village has also brought changes to 25 predominantly Hindu villages in the neighborhood, says Sacred Heart Sr. Soumya Inchaplackal, the school vice principal.

"Our work has started bearing fruit. Now, the villagers want to send their girl children to the school," Inchaplackal told GSR.

At the time of Sanjoepuram's launch, Haryana villages generally discouraged girl's education. Bharanikulangara says the Sanjoepuram sisters had to go to the villages to bring children to the school in the early years.

The Infant Jesus school principal, Adoration Sr. Philomina Kuruvathazhe, says boys outnumber girls in secondary classes. "But [elementary] classes have more girls than boys as parents now want to educate their daughters," she told GSR.

Vettickal, who is also the vicar general of the eparchy, says the nuns "are the backbone and face of our village."

He says priests have limitations in working with girls and women. "Sisters can easily approach them and understand them," says the priest, who considers it a blessing to have different congregations of women religious working together in the same complex.



The Sanjoepuram Children's Village band leads a parade in the first Communion program at St. Francis Assisi Church at Dilshad Garden in Delhi in 2017. (Jessy Joseph)

How do the nuns find working with members of other congregations?

"Our charism differs but our goal is the same," says Paul, the Adoration sister. Her congregation's charism is devotion to the Eucharist, "but we merge it with social apostolate," she adds.

Adoration Sr. Giovanni Kunnumpurath says Sanjoepuram has no superior or inferior. "Here all are equal and live like children of one family. When we run short of something in one convent, we go to another house and get it. When we cook something special, we share it with others," Kunnumpurath told GSR.

Before the lockdown, visitors used to sponsor common meals and nuns cooked them together. They also take turns playing with the children.

Bharanikulangara says intercongregational collaboration is not always easy. "Change in leadership and membership causes problems sometimes. Another problem is the difficulty of some new members to share Sanjoepuram's vision and commitment," the prelate explains.

In past years, two congregations left the village because of a scarcity of sisters. Sanjoepuram also closed Bethsaida Hospital, which served its children and neighboring villagers.



Children of Sanjoepuram share lunch served after the double wedding of two girls who grew up in the village. (Jose Kavi)

India's changed political scene has also affected Sanjoepuram's mission.

Haryana state is ruled by the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party that views Christian charity with suspicion.

New [laws](#) of its Child Welfare Committee "have made our work difficult," says Vettickal. "The officials visit the homes often and check even the inside of our refrigerators," he explains.

The government has restricted admission. Now, Sanjoepuram can admit children only from Haryana and must go through the Child Welfare Committee. This has reduced the number of children to 64 from more than 100 five years ago.

Despite such hurdles, the eparchy goes ahead with its mission to prepare children with disabilities to be useful citizens of the nation, Bharanikulangara asserts.

[Jessy Joseph is a New Delhi-based freelance journalist who earlier worked with Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN), Asia's largest Church news agency, for nearly 25 years. She is now a correspondent for [Matters India](#), a news portal that collaborates with GSR and focuses on religious and social issues.]

This story appears in the [Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education](#) and [Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender Equality](#) feature series.