Voices of Sisters
Ministry



Girls who live at Asha Bhavan hostel in the Berhampur Diocese in Southern Odisha, India, join an event for Children's Day, which is celebrated annually in India on Nov. 14. (Courtesy of Shanti Pulickal)



by Sr. Shanti Pulickal

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Physically challenged or differently abled persons were considered a curse in the Old Testament. On seeing a blind person, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." Jesus revealed God's power in him by restoring his eyesight and his self-image and bringing him back to the mainstream of society.

The compassionate love of Jesus has inspired innumerable works of mercy. Caring for the differently abled persons is one such ministry in the church.

In 1995, the Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod started a hostel for physically challenged girls in the Berhampur Diocese in Southern Odisha, Eastern India. Named Asha Bhavan (house of hope), this was a home away from home for poor physically challenged girls who were considered a burden for their families.

Socially and economically poor parents had to work hard to make both ends meet, with the result that children were neglected. Polio was prevalent at that time in the region and medical facilities were scarce. Some of the children became disabled for life due to polio.

Most of our hostel girls have experienced polio. A few became handicapped due to unattended burn cases, fractured limbs and so on. Asha Bhavan is trying to bring a ray of hope into their darkened lives.



Girls from Asha Bhavan hostel participate in a rally at their school, in support of all children's right to an education. (Courtesy of Shanti Pulickal)

Our purpose was to educate these girls by sending them to normal schools. Some of them were crawling on their hands and feet. With multiple corrective surgeries, their limbs were straightened. Great was the day when they stood erect and one of them shouted, "Oh! Now I can see the sky. How beautiful it looks!"

They walked, but with crutches and were excited to join the school. Some were over-aged, so special coaching was done to fit them for the right classes according to their age. A nongovernmental organization helped us for a few years, meeting their medical and other expenses.

I joined Asha Bhavan in 2012. At present, there are 35 girls between ages 6 and 22. I loved these children and was eager to help in their education and accompaniment. There were complaints from the teachers about their academic progress. All six sisters were involved in coaching them according to their classes before sending them to the formal school.

They were given sufficient time and opportunity to study. Still, they were not able to get pass marks in all the subjects. But they enjoyed singing, dancing and other

extracurricular activities.

During one of our visits to the school, the principal said, "Your children are poor in studies, but they are perfect in discipline and other activities."

We tried different methods to make their studies interesting. Once we arranged a science and art exhibition to display their lessons using the materials available in the campus. They were excited and did well. It was creative, original and educative.

Some of the other activities we tried were different types of competitions in general knowledge, Bible quizzes, singing, dancing, flower arrangement, and giving speeches on a particular topic. The girls were divided into groups and there was a competition between the groups. They were happy and relaxed. But they remained weak in their studies. It was a great concern for us and we worked hard to improve their academic competencies and progression.



Asha Bhavan girls are seen on the day of their first Communion. (Courtesy of Shanti Pulickal)

Education is a great factor in restoring their self-image and human dignity.

Vidhya, one of the girls, is good in studies and is doing the second year of her bachelor's in business administration while remaining in the hostel. Her right leg is 4 inches shorter than the left and she wears a special type of shoes. Once, a man made a sarcastic and offensive remark about it. She said with self-confidence, "Sir, I am a handicapped girl. I wear these on medical advice and not for any fancy reasons." The man was ashamed and apologized.

We arrange many input sessions and motivational talks for the girls. Counseling is done to heal them of inner wounds caused by painful childhood experiences and live with real aim, purpose and meaning in life.

They enjoy charismatic and group prayers and share freely their inner experiences. And the school staff and all who come in contact with the girls appreciate their discipline and good behavior.

Everything the Lord has made has its destiny. "What would be the place of these children in society without higher education and a good job?" we pray in earnest. One of the realizations that came to us was that polio has weakened not only their body but their intellect as well. Their academic performances may not be high and most of them may not secure a white-collar job — but there are other alternative ways of living.

We are aware that polio has affected their bones and muscles. They have decreased tolerance for weather change and suffer from fever, headache and other mild ailments. We give them the medical care they need and they recover fast.

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Due to mobility problems, they need physical exercises. We have a physiotherapy center equipped with many appliances and machines and they do regular exercise every day. This keeps them healthy and fit.

Last year, we invited all the former hostellers, around 20, for a get-together. Most of them turned up. What a joy and delight it was to see three of the severely handicapped ones, on crutches, joining the group. They had been with us only for a

year or two and had left us due to mobility problems. But now they drew the attention of everyone as they displayed several jute items they had made, that were selling well. They formed their self-employment group with some help from the government.

"Our life in the hostel was short," they said, "but the sisters gave us self-dignity and now we are confident enough to face the future." It was an inspiration and a good motivational witness for the rest.

There have been a few dropouts from the school. But we did not want them to go home with that label. We registered their names for "open schooling" intended mainly for dropouts, with provision for the choice of subjects. With encouragement and regular coaching, they passed their exams. Their success boosted their self-image, self-worth and self-confidence! Now they are working on bachelor's degrees.

God bandages the wounds he makes with human intervention and divine touch. I together with other nuns and staff feel privileged to be instruments of God in restoring these children and bringing them back into the mainstream of society. There may not be any glamour or great success for these girls. But helping them to live with self-confidence and be self-reliant is the main objective that drives our ministry, love and commitment. May God bless our humble efforts.