News
Religious Life



Members of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Garden convent are pictured with boys of Navjeevan, a care home for children rescued from railway platforms in Khandwa, central India. Sr. Ambika Pillai is third from the right in the back row. (GSR photo/Saji Thomas)



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Sr. Ambika Pillai is seated at a table while answering the children’s questions around the table, all busily creating decorations out of colored paper.

Pillai, a member of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Garden, is the secretary of Navjeevan (New Life) Children's Home in Khandwa, a town in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.

The children at the center mostly come from broken families — typically abandoned or orphaned — who end up loitering around train stations; oftentimes, their fathers were addicted to drugs and their mothers were unable to make enough money to support their families, Pillai said.

"In some cases, children run away after being scolded or questioned by parents for something," Pillai told GSR, adding that in such cases, "we do our best to reunite them with their families."



Sr. Ambika Pillai signs documents while preparing decorations for Christmas and New Year with boys under her care in Navjeevan. (GSR photo/Saji Thomas)

Wearing a loose black skirt and a shawl swung around her neck, the nun gets up from the table and walks with the help of a stick and a prosthetic leg.

Six years ago, she lost her left leg in a train accident.

Pillai's "dedication to serve the runaway children even after losing a leg is amazing," said Pranay Barve, one of the nun's friends who is tasked by the railways to identify such children.

The nun and team teach the children art, craft, basic computers and etiquette in addition to helping them with their daily school lessons.

"It is a round-the-clock job, as we have to monitor them every moment," Pillai said, adding that the children often come to the center with psychological issues.

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'God wanted me to live'

Pillai, a founding member of Navjeevan, had played a key role in developing the children's home since its inception in 2003, helping rebuild the shattered lives of runaway children until that fateful day, Jan 4, 2017.

"I used to move around in trains looking for abandoned children," the 45-year-old nun said, recalling the day of the accident. "On that day when I was about to get down at Lonavala station, the train suddenly accelerated and I could not put my feet on the platform."

She came under the train wheels that cut her left leg instantly. "I was in full consciousness and could see my dismembered leg was moving with a wheel."

"I cried for help and people after the initial shock pulled me up from the track and put me on the platform," Pillai said.

Her helpers bribed a railway porter to retrieve her leg and place it on the ambulance that took her to a hospital two hours away.

The surgeon told her 80% of her leg would be amputated, prompting her tears at the realization that she would be disabled for life. She smiled as she welcomed visitors, she recalled, "despite crying within."

"I realized on the hospital bed that I had to decide whether to be happy or unhappy for the rest of my life," Pillai said. "God wanted me to live and that's why he took only my leg," she paused before adding, "God could have avoided it."



Sr. Ambika Pillai, of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Garden, inside Navjeevan (GSR photo/Saji Thomas)

She recovered from the trauma with long counseling and confidence-building therapies.

Pillai thanks her superiors and sisters in the congregation for standing with her throughout her recuperation. "I could not have been here now if they had not supported me and believed in me."

In August 2022, she resumed her work as the secretary of the children's home and with additional responsibility of the superior of the local six-member community.

Pillai said it was love for children that prompted her to work for the future of children on the streets and railways who she said often become victims of exploitation and abuse.

Her only regret now is that she cannot drive vehicles like she did before the accident, as she now relies on a walking stick and prosthetic leg. Standing even for five minutes is painful, she said.

"But I can help them and their families through counseling," she said, which mainly focuses on reuniting broken families, drug addiction among men, and women's various issues, as well as spouses who have had illicit relations.

For this, Pillai has enrolled in a master of science course in applied psychology with specialization in counseling and psychotherapy.



Our Lady of the Garden Sr. Indu Toppo (second from left) with team members in front of the office of Railway Childline at Khandwa railway station (GSR photo/Saji Thomas)

Pillai already has a master's degree in social work, diplomas in counseling, psychology and family counseling from different universities. She completed the diplomas from her sickbed.

Our Lady of the Garden Sr. Indu Toppo, who assists Pillai's outdoor engagements and coordinates work in the children's care home, said she is proof that a disability is no hindrance when it comes to work.

"She never gives us the feeling that she has some problem, but does everything together with us and encourages us," Toppo, 43, told GSR. "She is always ready to help us in need."

Pillai and her team have so far supported more than 600 boys until they turned 18, the legal age limit to stay in a care home. They send the girls to a government center in the city.

The center now has 24 boys, who study in government and private schools.

The nuns also teach them computers and give special tuition to those weak in studies. The center has a gym and other facilities for the boys' physical fitness.



Sr. Indu Toppo of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Garden monitors children at a gym inside Navjeevan. (GSR photo/Saji Thomas)

Durgesh Sanjay, a 12th grader in the center, said he was surprised that Pillai is still working for them after the accident. The nun had found him on a railway platform in Khandwa.

The 16-year-old boy, who had lost his father as a child and mother during the COVID-19 pandemic, now wants to become a police officer.

If Pillai "had not brought me to this center, I do not know what would have happened to me," he told GSR.

Govinda Jugunu, a former resident of Navjeevan, recalled how the nun brought him to the center from a railway platform as a child. He said she still does not know how he landed at the station: either his parents abandoned him there or he ran away from home.

"I am still in search of my parents and family, but unable to trace them," said Jugunu, who is now 24 and working in a nongovernmental organization as a child project coordinator in Indore, the commercial capital of Madhya Pradesh.

He calls Pillai his mother who had helped him complete 10th grade even after leaving the center. "She keeps supporting me," he told GSR.



Students have breakfast at Navjeevan, a care home in Khandwa, a town in Madhya Pradesh state in central India. (GSR photo/Saji Thomas)

Hindu turned Catholic sister

Pillai, who was born in a Hindu family in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, said even her vocation to Catholic religious life had come with great difficulties.

"Ours was a traditional Hindu family that offered special prayers for deities," she said. "But whenever we performed those prayers, my mother would behave as if possessed."

Someone told her parents to meet a Catholic priest in the nearby church. The priest prayed over her mother, and the association led her family to become Catholics.

However, their relatives pressed them to return to Hinduism; everyone except Pillai stopped going to church.



Pillai with children inside Navjeevan campus (GSR photo/Saji Thomas)

Her brother and sister married Hindu partners, and though her parents asked her to marry a Hindu, she refused.

After completing 12th grade, she told her parents that she wanted to become a nun, but they asked her to continue her studies.

"I left home saying I was going for studies and later everyone came to know that I was in a convent."

Following the accident, one of her aunts remarked it was a punishment for her becoming a nun, Pillai said.

"Now I realize all that had happened in my life is as per God's plan and therefore, I accept them without any complaint."