News
Ministry



The students of the Sree Jeevan Jyothi Vocational Junior College attend the morning assembly in Polur, a village in the southeastern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)



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Kavitha was 14 and Navyashree 16 (names changed) when they were married off, but their marriages did not last long: their in-laws threw out the two village girls from their homes in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh.

"Today, both are under our care and getting trained as home nurses," said Sr. Ignatius Suman, the director of Sree Jeevan Jyothi Vocational Junior College in Polur, a village in Nandyal district.

The two young women are among some 150 students of the institute — several of them victims of failed child marriages — who have been picked up by sisters of the Society of St. Anne Phirangipuram, an indigenous congregation started in 1874. In the junior college, students train as nurses who tend to the elderly, pregnant women, and those with handicaps in both homes and hospitals.

Kavitha, who is now 18, told GSR that her dreams died young when her parents forced her to marry a stranger against her will shortly after completing eighth grade.

At her husband's place, she was forced to do all household chores. "All they wanted was a maid," she said with tears rolling down her cheeks, adding how she had to get up at 2 a.m. to cook for the family of six, all before going to the farm to work the whole day in the hot sun.



Kavitha, a village young woman who studies at the Sree Jeevan Jyothi Vocational Junior College, talks about her early marriage and separation as Sr. Ignatius Suman, the director, consoles her. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Kavitha told GSR that her husband and his parents often beat her for lapses in the work. "One day, I tried to commit suicide, and they threw me out from their home," she said as Suman consoled her, holding her tightly.

Sr. Balajyothi Ramisetti, another member of the congregation who works with tribal communities, discovered Kavitha and admitted her in the nursing school. "We have several such cases among our students, and they gradually come out of their trauma and do well in their studies," Ramisetti told GSR.

The other young woman, Navyashree, said she was married to a close relative and lived with her husband seven years before getting separated.

"During that time, I had four pregnancies, including two abortions. Two children, born with mental retardation, could not survive either," said the woman, who is now 26 and a first-year student.

"My husband's family blamed me [for] my failure to give birth to healthy children and sent me to my home," said Navyashree, who originally left school as a 10th grader and is happy to continue her studies in the junior college.



Society of St. Anne Phirangipuram Sr. Ignatius Suman with her two colleagues, Sr. Srujana Maria, center, and Sr. Balajyothi Ramisetti, right, in Suman's office in Sree Jeevan Jyothi Vocational Junior College. (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Suman said consanguineous marriages like Navyashree's are common in Andhra Pradesh villages, resulting in the birth of unhealthy children who often die young.

The Sree Jeevan Jyothi Vocational Junior College was started in 2010 as the congregation's centenary project to save teens from early marriages and make them self-reliant, Suman said.

The nuns opened the college in Polur where they had started working 113 years ago. In the past 13 years, the college trained 650 women as nursing aids and found them jobs in hospitals or in city households as home nurses.

Initially, they ran some paramedical courses, but in 2012 they started the nursing course funded by the Functional Vocational Training and Research Centre, a church-based agency. They conduct a two-year diploma course in nursing aid under the Indian Medical Education Society, Suman explained.

The Board of Intermediate Education of the Indian government has recognized the college that teaches the diploma program, making it an accredited school, Suman explained.

The institute also teaches courses for lab technicians, home nursing, and bedside care for those who could not pass the 10th grade.



Second-year students of the Sree Jeevan Jyothi Vocational Junior College at Polur, a village in the southeastern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Suman said their mission is a continuation of the work of Thatipatri Gnanamma, their founder, an illiterate village widow and now a servant of God. The congregation was started to educate and empower rural women. Pope John Paul II in 1999 raised it as

a pontifical congregation, and it now has more than 1,000 members in 90 convents of two provinces, serving five continents.

Fr. Boreddy Marreddy, a parish priest of Polur who helped the sisters develop the project, said the nuns follow their founder's footsteps.

"They are simple, dedicated, hardworking and well qualified nurses," the 74-year-old social worker priest told GSR.

Suman, a two-time provincial, said her congregation's motto is to empower vulnerable village girls and victims of unjust systems and traditions.

"A major problem in our villages is child marriages, even though the law prohibits it," she pointed out.

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Sr. Srujana Maria, who serves as the warden, said the girls undergo training while staying at the hostel attached to the college. "This is to prevent dropouts and to work on their overall personality development," Maria told GSR.

She said they keep the students occupied throughout their stay in the campus with various activities, such as tailoring classes, cookery practice, counseling sessions, cultural and sports events.

The institute's counseling sessions help students overcome their traumatic past, said Madhumala, a second-year student who shared how the nuns have helped her cope with her mental stress. (She requested that her last name remain anonymous.)

"I had an alcoholic father who beat my mother almost daily. One day, she poured kerosene on her body and killed herself," she recalled, holding Suman's hand tightly. Madhumala was in first grade at the time, though the memory still haunts her.

Suman said Madhumala has not recovered from the trauma completely, even after several sessions of counseling.

Madhumala said she and other students forget "our worries when we nurse old people and the sick in their homes," when they visit nearby villages and hospitals for practical work.



Madhumala, a student of the Sree Jeevan Jyothi Vocational Junior College at Polur, a village in the southeastern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

In June, GSR accompanied the students and nuns on one such visit.

In one house, Madhumala and other students gave physiotherapy to an 80-year-old bedridden man, who folded his hands and smiled seeing the visitors.

In another house in Polur, the students washed and dressed the wounds of a diabetic patient who also suffers from hypertension. The nurses regularly visit such patients in villages and supply medicines.

Innayya Reddy, brother of the Catholic diabetic patient, told GSR that he survives only because "of the loving treatments by the sisters and the nurses."

The patient's wife, Selvaramma, said the nuns are like God's angels who help her husband live.

The on-the-job training helps students find jobs immediately in private hospitals or government health centers. Monthly salaries start at 10,000 rupees ($120), sufficient for the young women's survival. With annual increments, most trainees have settled well in life, Suman said.



The nursing students and nuns during their community nursing services in villages attending to a patient at his home in the southeastern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Maria accompanied GSR to some hospitals in Nandyal city where their former students now work.

"A lot of them work as home nurses in the city with handsome salaries," the nun said.

Surya Prakash Reddy, the managing director of the Jeevan Jyothi diagnostic center in Nandyal city who employed two former students as lab technicians, said their performance is excellent.

"What I appreciate in them most is their commitment and dedication, which is far beyond other students from posh backgrounds," he told GSR.



Suman with two former students, Nakshatra, right, and Vasanthi, left (GSR photo/Thomas Scaria)

Several former students told GSR that the college has transformed them from bewildered teenagers to bold women who can face challenges in life.

Nakshatra, who requested only her first name be used, said attending the college was like a rebirth. The 22-year-old unmarried nurse hugged Suman and said, "I want to become a nun like you."

Vasanthi Akhil Babu, a 10-grade dropout, earns 20,000 rupees a month and is married to an electrical engineer with two children.

"I had no confidence at all when I joined the course, but the sisters helped me not only pass the 10th grade, but [also] trained me as a nurse, taught me cooking, tailoring, above all gave me self-confidence," she said.

Society of St. Anne Phirangipuram Sr. Shimi Joseph, a trainer, said Babu's leadership qualities led to her promotion as a nursing supervisor in her hospital. "Our students, who are in high demand, are our inspiration to continue training new nursing students," she said.

Padmavati Balaswamy, another alumna, takes motivation classes for new students.

"When we are educated and have a job, we can not only stand on our feet, but play positive roles in the family and society," she told GSR.