News



Sr. Angel Kureekkattil, a member of the Sisters of the Destitute, assists Sr. Rajita Menachery, an accident survivor, during a physiotherapy session at Pratheeksha (Hope) Rehabilitation Centre in Nellimattam, Kerala's Ernakulam district, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)



by George Kommattam

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Anoop Thankachan was devastated when doctors told him that he might remain bedridden after a major spinal cord surgery in 2025.

The 36-year-old Catholic dreaded becoming a burden on his father and brothers.

"They brought me here bedridden four months ago. Now, I can move around in a wheelchair," Thankachan told Global Sisters Report at Pratheeksha (Hope) Rehabilitation Centre in Nellimattam, a village in Kerala, a southwestern Indian state.

At the center, Sr. Angel Kureekkattil, a member of the Sisters of the Destitute, helps people like Thankachan improve their mobility and gain independence through intensive physiotherapy, personal care and prayer.

Thankachan, a woodcutter, suffered a severe spinal cord injury after falling from a tree in October 2025.

He was treated at two hospitals but remained bedridden.

"Nothing happened except my mind became weaker," he said.

Pratheeksha was founded in 1979 by Destitute Sr. Marylal Kaniamattam, an occupational therapist, as a residential rehabilitation center for children with disabilities.

"In 2022, we had to close the center for children due to changes in juvenile justice regulations, which made it compulsory to have four staff members for every 10 children. Because we offered free treatment, we couldn't afford the salary costs this requirement entailed. The rules also did not allow guardians to stay with children with disabilities during treatment. These challenges forced us to shut down the center," Kureekkattil told GSR.

"In 2023, I restarted the center with a focus on rehabilitating accident survivors," she said.

The center now welcomes patients from across India.

Kureekkattil said they also support children with developmental challenges through physiotherapy, occupational and speech therapy, rehabilitation and family counseling, early intervention, and autism and learning disability management.

The 41-year-old nun, who serves as rehabilitation therapist, holds a master's degree in rehabilitation science.

She said she started her rehabilitation ministry at Alphonsa Hospital in Pulloorampara, in Kerala's Kozhikode district, before moving to Pratheeksha.

Over the past 13 years, she has cared for more than 2,000 people with disabilities, among them nearly 1,000 accident survivors, she said.

Pratheeksha provides physiotherapy daily, tailored to patients' needs.



Sr. Angel Kureekkattil, a member of the Sisters of the Destitute, works with a patient during a physiotherapy session at Pratheeksha (Hope) Rehabilitation Centre in Nellimattam, a village in Kerala's Ernakulam district, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)

Thankachan found the physiotherapy at the center rigorous, but motivating. He has made considerable progress after four months.

"Earlier, I needed four bystanders to support me. Now, I do my daily exercises on my own. I need the help of others only to wash my clothes," he said.

The center accommodates 24 residents and treats 35-40 patients daily. Kureekkattil said they charge 500 rupees (US$5.25) for physiotherapy and 100 rupees (US$1.05) for accommodation to cover staff and equipment costs. They waive these fees for those unable to afford treatment.

"Profit-making is not our aim because the congregation was founded for the destitute of society," Kureekkattil said.

Lijo Bijo, a 41-year-old Catholic woman who coordinates the center, said residents follow a schedule that includes eight hours of physiotherapy.

The shared routine encourages patients to support one another as they work toward their recovery goals, Bijo told GSR.

Kureekkattil wants patients to feel accepted and supported as they work to regain mobility and independence.

"We have people from different religions — Hindu, Muslim and Christian. No one feels isolated here. Everyone enjoys each other's company," she said.

She also helps families access government welfare programs, educational provisions and employment reservations for people with disabilities.

"We don't promise complete recovery. But everybody can improve their condition and reduce dependency on others for their own personal care activities. Recovery is step by step, not all of a sudden," she said.

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Kureekkattil said prayer helps her decide the next steps in each patient's rehabilitation.

One example is Sr. Rajita Menachery, a member of her congregation.

Kureekkattil said during prayer she felt the need to move Menachery from her bed to a wheelchair. The transition marked an important milestone in Menachery's rehabilitation.

Menachery had been involved in a road accident a year ago in Manipur, northeastern India, where she served as a teacher and social worker. A spinal cord injury made her immobile.

She was airlifted to Kerala and underwent a surgery at a church-managed hospital. Doctors there told her she might remain confined to bed forever.

Her superiors brought her to Pratheeksha, where rehabilitation helped her progress to a wheelchair. She hopes one day to return to her missionary life in Manipur.

"From bed I have moved to a wheelchair. My aim is to walk with a sticker (walking stick)," Menachery said.



Sr. Angel Kureekkattil, a member of the Sisters of the Destitute, during a physiotherapy session at Pratheeksha (Hope) Rehabilitation Centre in Nellimattam, a village in Kerala's Ernakulam district, southwestern India. (George Kommattam)

For other patients, progress means standing with support or managing daily activities with less help.

Jaleel H. Naser, a driver and camera operator for a local news channel, sustained a spinal injury in an accident in May 2025. He underwent surgery but remained bedridden.

The 34-year old Muslim came to Pratheeksha three months ago and his condition has improved considerably. He says other patients have helped him stay motivated to exercise.

He also credits Kureekkattil and her team for his progress.

"She is the backbone of this center. She knows everyone by name and each one's condition," he said.

Sreeja Sujith, a Hindu mother, brings her 2-year-old son, Vihan, for treatment.

Born prematurely, the child was unable to walk. After about a month of treatment, Sujith noticed improvement and continues to bring him for daily physiotherapy.

Another patient who has made a remarkable recovery was Sherin Shahana, who became paraplegic after falling from a terrace when she was 21.

The Muslim woman could not move even a finger when she was brought to Alphonsa Hospital in Pulloorampara in 2018. Her condition improved considerably after a three-month stay there.

Shahana cleared the Civil Services Examination in 2023 and now serves as assistant divisional finance manager with the Indian Railways, Kureekkattil said.

Shahana told GSR that Kureekkattil helped her through depression and trauma.

"When I felt depressed, she motivated me and helped me overcome my trauma. She is full of kindness and truly an angel sent by God," she said.

The center also stresses spiritual support.

"Exercise, prayer and sleep are the three pillars of my rehabilitation process," Kureekkattil said.

The center's spiritual life includes daily Mass, evening prayer and weekly confessions. "Everyone shows much enthusiasm to partake in rosary," she said.