



SCHOOL OF ANGELS

Shanti Bhavan, a free school for dalit children, is a spectacular role model to promote diversity.

Sriram Srinivasan

IT HAS B-SCHOOL LOOKS. THICK FOLIAGE, natural landscape and smartly designed buildings help give that appearance to this 30-acre campus on the Tamil Nadu-Karnataka border. Once inside, two tenth-graders, Praveen and Jhansi, guide us and answer queries with the fluency of one trained in these matters. Any student you meet here can speak English well. The libraries are stocked with books, including foreign publications.

Also in view are a few tutors from overseas; they are temporary volunteers.

Every class is a teacher's dream, with not more than 24 students on the rolls; senior classes have fewer. There's a prayer room, whose centrepiece is an ornamental tree made by Madhya Pradesh tribals, with books of all major religions. The classrooms and dorms are simple and clean.

It's a residential school alright. But nothing about Shanti Bhavan gives away the fact that it caters to disadvantaged dalit children from below-poverty-line families. Here's where over 200 students, 180 of them dalits,

live, get educated and dream of a future unthinkable to their folks back home. Shanti Bhavan's aim is to give world-class education to its students so that these children of sewer cleaners, bonded labourers and masons can become society leaders as lawyers, environmentalists and astronauts.

Students are only taken in at the age of four and they spend the best part of the next 13 years at Shanti Bhavan. They are charged no fees. Its first batch (begun in 1997) will pass out next year. Shanti Bhavan was in the news this year and the last because all its tenth-graders achieved first



At school, these dalit students get world-class education. At home, there is still poverty and hardship. Could more such schools dedicated to dalits change that equation?



division in the Indian Certificate of Secondary Education (ICSE) exams. As Praveen and Jhansi prepare to make it three-in-a-row for the school, there's an air of expectancy around its first batch of twelfth-graders. Nobody knows the significance of a standout performance better than Abraham M George.

Question of Opportunity

The 63-year-old founder of Shanti Bhavan also runs a journalism school and a medical centre through his non-profit organisation, The George Foundation. It was while in the US in the 1970s that the idea of social justice struck George. By then, this National Defence Academy product had completed a stint in the Indian Army, serving on the Indo-Pak and Indo-China borders, before being discharged for medical reasons. After moving to the US, George completed his MBA, MS and PhD in business administration at the Stern School of Business.

He started putting his idea to action only in 1995, when he came back to India. Shortly afterwards, he gave up his business interests in the US—he sold his Multinational Computer Models to SunGard Data Systems and quit as a Managing Director at investment bank Credit Suisse First Boston.

The key to social justice, George believed, was opportunity. "We need to break the cycle of poverty, and the way to do it is through education," he says, sitting in his modest but tastefully done meeting room. "They (Shanti Bhavan students) can eventually be role models for others," he adds.

Over the next 14 years, George spent \$20 million of his own money and almost half the time at Baliganapalli (near Tamil Nadu's Hosur) in pursuit of this idea. "What we do is take 'children (predominantly) from dalit homes, extremely poor ones, and offer them education and an upbringing that only the rich can get."

Dalits, constituting about a fifth of India's population, have for centuries been socially oppressed and have had the tag of 'untouchables' in society. Activists believe government intervention has, at best, re-

sulted in marginal improvements in the lives of dalits, and there's a long way to go before discrimination against them ends. Reservations for dalits in schools, colleges and jobs has been argued for as a way to better their lives. In that context, Shanti Bhavan is a different idea. George's belief is that he can create students who can walk into any top university, and eventually into top jobs, just on merit. What can be a better advertisement for his idea than the marks of Shanti Bhavan's twelfth-graders, he's betting



READ MY LIPS: Founder Abraham George feels he can create top-class students.

on them to be on target next year.

Dreaming Big

Also looking forward to those exams is 17-year-old Vijay Kumar Veerappan, who comes from a village of 70 families in Tamil Nadu's Vellore district. On the day of our visit, Vijay was in the class of Principal and English teacher Lalita Law who, on the way to introducing her wards to report-writing, opened the floor to discussion on the meaning of the phrase 'matter of fact.' Vijay wouldn't be involved in a discussion on semantics, or in anything remotely academic, if he hadn't joined Shanti Bhavan

as a four-year-old. He would have been struggling for a living back home.

"Almost all of them (the males) are masons," Vijay says. "As soon as children are physically fit, they are sent to work." They go in search of jobs to cities like Bangalore and Chennai. A day's work, not a certainty, fetches them Rs 250. All other family members do subsistence farming on small land holdings.

Vijay's family lives in a two-room house. One with a thatched roof and the other

sister is doing her eleventh grade and wants to study more. "My father is proud of me," Vijay says. "If he meets anyone, he talks about me," he adds.

His classmate Sindhu Subramani, whose father died recently and mother is looking for a job, is grateful for being at Shanti Bhavan. If not, she would have been married off already. This Bangalore girl, who scored an excellent 80% in her tenth grade, wants to be an environmentalist and work for the United Nations. Vijay and Sindhu, as also their 200 mates in the school, could easily have missed out on this life.

Initial Hurdles

How? Check out what their top teacher has to say. Handing over the rest of the report-writing class to a volunteer, Principal Law gets talking about how the school has let go of poor performers over the years. "We have been criticised for that," she says. The point is: "We want them to aim high." She says, "This isn't a programme where you become a tailor or a cobbler or a carpenter. There's nothing wrong with that, but why can't these children do what our children do?"

Law and her team, with the help of a clinical psychologist, follow a rigorous process of selecting students for the school. They choose only those who can cope emotionally and academically in a setting away from the family. But it hasn't been easy, thanks to the social setting.

George says some rich landlords, who control the lives of labourers, don't want the latter to send their children to such a school. "They don't want to lose control over the poor."

The families of the children too have been far from welcoming. Law says: "Some just fled at the sight of us. Some were indifferent, while some were totally against us."

She says people started floating rumours that Shanti Bhavan wants to convert students to Christianity and later that it is engaged in organ trading. Law recalls an incident two years back when people from a beggars' colony in Bangalore told her team that they want to train their children to beg, not educate them.

Even today, 12 years after the first set of Shanti Bhavan students were chosen, the process hasn't become any easier.

Such issues may not vanish soon. George's model itself seems designed for the long haul. Rishab R Shyam, a volunteer who taught math and science to Vijay's class, believes so. Now a grad student at the John Hopkins University, Shyam reckons the students will do better than when they started. "They have the tools," he says. But, Shyam continues: "You will see the result of George's work in 30-40 years." That's when he believes the current crop of Shanti Bhavan's students will be in top organisations across the world.

In order to achieve that, the students of Shanti Bhavan have to do better than handling the ICSE syllabus. They face a

Reservations for dalits has been the conventional approach. George's belief is that Shanti Bhavan students can compete on merit.

strong emotional challenge too. They have to make sense of two different worlds. One, the refined, English-speaking and seemingly safe life at boarding school. The other, often the squalor, poverty and instability back home. "The disconnect is hard," says Law. "We explain to the children that their home environment is different because of certain factors, so they shouldn't look down upon their parents. It's part of their education," she says.

Ranjini Pushpa Rayappa, a twelfth-grader, knows how to deal with her alcoholic father. "Here, they have taught us why people drink and its effects," she says. She tends to stay away from her father in the evenings and talk to him only in the mornings. Ranjini wants to do her MBA and become an entrepreneur. More immediately, she wants to earn enough to keep her mother out of the garment factory "where she works long hours, but gets little in return."

UK-based Harry Fletcher-Wood, a volunteer who taught English at Shanti Bha-

van in 2007 and 2008, points out: "The children need a huge amount of love and attention to make up for the lack of care at home, and it is hard to do this perfectly." He reckons with more financial support, the school could build professional support to the levels of, say, countries such as Britain, where he comes from.

Challenges Galore

More financial support is something George has started seeking of late, for the first time since Shanti Bhavan started. And the reason is the economic meltdown. "Unfortunately, the market collapse affected me badly," he says. "Realty and stocks collapsed. And suddenly, I found myself with less funds."

It takes a total of about \$300,000 each year to educate and care for Shanti Bhavan's children. The figure doesn't include capital costs. George says the school spends \$4 a day on each child (which is twice the World Bank's broader definition of poverty—\$2). "People find that to be high," he says. "I don't think so. But the world is used to the concept of feeding them something and sending them to a vocational school. If you really believe in fairness, you should offer them an opportunity to succeed."

Shanti Bhavan offers children a home-like setting, food, clothing, medical care, recreation and excellent education.

But with his financial difficulties now, George is "struggling to keep everything going without compromising on quality." Last year, organised fund-raising helped Shanti Bhavan meet 40% of its operating expenses. Recent months seem to indicate that this figure will go up to 60% this year. What George is now trying to do is get this up to 100% by the end of 2010.

To ensure easy and generous flow of funds, George is in the process of spinning off Shanti Bhavan under a separate trust. It has until now been part of The George Foundation, which runs more than a handful of projects. "People wonder whether the money goes to education or some of the other projects. It also gives the impression it's a rich organisation," he says.

Initially, George thought the success of Shanti Bhavan could easily spawn hundreds of others. He was mistaken. Now, "I am struggling to run one." But his optimism seems to be intact. "At least two or three such schools should be set up in each state. In no time, the whole business of caste will disappear," he says. ■