News
Ministry



Children practice yoga at Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre, a laity-initiated school for children with intellectual disabilities in Pamboor, near Udupi, Karnataka state in India. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

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For most of his life, 13-year-old Lohith Sreedhar was kept hidden from society.

"We were ashamed of his hyperactivity and attention-seeking behavior," said his mother, Chandrakala Sreedhar, who sought a place to send him as her son grew unmanageable.

After Lohith's father died of cancer, in 2021 his grandmother brought him to Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre, a residential school that caters to children with intellectual disabilities. In collaboration with laypeople, Holy Spirit sisters manage this center in Pamboor, a coastal village near Udupi, Karnataka state in southwestern India.

At the silver jubilee celebration of Manasa ("mind") in November, Chandrakala was amazed to watch her son sing, dance and win prizes in a fancy-dress competition alongside 120 other children performing for their parents, teachers and guests.

"Today, he made me proud," said the woman in her late 30s, holding her son and kissing him. Tears ran down her cheeks as she thanked the center for her son's transformation.



Sr. Ancilla Fernandes, a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, poses with Lohith Sreedhar, center, and Yatheesh Kumar, left, students of the Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre in Pamboor. (Thomas Scaria)

Manasa principal Sr. Ancilla Fernandes said the transformation also takes place in parents.

"Like Chandrakala, parents of such children suffer social stigma and isolation, and many remain ignorant about their children's special gifts and potentials," the member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit told Global Sisters Report.

The Catholic Sabha (council), a laity movement in Mangalore Diocese, founded the rehabilitation and training center in 1997 with 15 children and invited the Holy Spirit nuns to manage it.

"Initially we planned to start an orphanage, but our community survey noticed several families had children with mental disabilities and not enough facilities

existed in the area to train them," said Henry Menezes, the center's managing trustee. "So, we decided to start this school."

And while laypeople are "good at setting up things," he said, "sisters are better managers with their tender loving care."

In pooling together their resources for the center, "we have helped more than 800 such children in the past 25 years," said Menezes, an administrative official at the school.

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  Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre is a laity-initiated school for children with intellectual disabilities, managed by Catholic Sabha, a laity organization, in collaboration with Holy Spirit sisters since 1997. (Thomas Scaria)

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Students of Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre perform during their silver jubilee celebrations in Pamboor Nov. 14, 2022. (Courtesy of Ancilla Fernandes)

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Bishop Gerald Isaac Lobo of Udupi inaugurates the silver jubilee celebrations of the Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre in Pamboor on Nov 14, 2022. The center's managing trustees, principal and lay leaders join him on the dais. (Courtesy of Ancilla Fernandes)

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Henri Menezes, a managing trustee of the Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre, stands in front of the newly inaugurated Manasa Autism Centre in Pamboor. (Thomas Scaria)

Edward Lobo, a founding member of Manasa, described the project as a perfect example of how laity and religious could work together on humanitarian projects.

The special school has won several awards at the national and state level, also excelling in sports and games: Some children won gold medals in the 2013 Special Olympics held in South Korea.

Addressing the Manasa silver jubilee celebrations, Bishop Gerald Isaac Lobo of Udupi congratulated the Catholic council for founding Manasa and the Holy Spirit nuns for managing it efficiently.

"I am happy this laity-nuns collaboration has set a new trend in church ministries and traditions," the prelate said.

Later, speaking to GSR, Bishop Lobo observed that sisters normally work with either the clergy or manage their own institutions. "In Manasa, they have set a unique model of working with the laity. I hope more such collaborations happen in the future," he added.

Fr. Jephrin Monis, a native of Pamboor Parish currently serving a German diocese, helped raise funds for the project from overseas benefactors. He described the children with intellectual disabilities as "butterflies with broken wings" and that the laity-nun collaboration's "utmost love and care" has "helped them fly."

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Menezes said they have opened an exclusive autism center in the campus to separately care for children with autism, a project that was part of the silver jubilee celebration. "We started working for this dream project from our 20th anniversary and completed the building with modern facilities before the silver jubilee celebrations."

Though initially hesitant, Lohith opened up to GSR by doing an action song. "I like sisterakka very much and also my teachers," he said of Fernandes (as akka means "elder sister" in the local language of Kannada). "They do not scold me or beat me," he said, as he showed pictures of his performance on the nun's phone.

Fernandes said they cater to children of all religions and that all of their 18 teachers are Hindus.

Rolene Stuthi Kunder, an autistic girl in the center, showed GSR her unique paintings. "She speaks less but is very determined; she is a talented painter and a mathematician," said Shailaja Poojari, a teacher, as Rolene smiled.



Rolene Stuthi Kunder, a student of the autism center, poses with her teacher Shailaja Poojari as she showed her paintings. (Thomas Scaria)

The girl's father, Rohit Kunder, a Protestant Christian, said his daughter is a special gift to them from God, and Manasa has brought out her inner talents.

Kunder said his family was living in the United Kingdom, where Rolene was a student of a special school for about five years. "But she never showed her talents in paintings or capacity in mathematical calculations there."

They admitted her to Manasa after moving to India in 2020.

Kundar said a child's transformation eventually helps the community realize that the children are not a burden to society and can still function creatively.

Fernandes said Rolene is fortunate to have "very understanding parents," unlike others who consider their children cursed if they have developmental disorders or intellectual disabilities.

Manasa also helps its former students find jobs.



Holy Spirit Sr. Mary Beck, serving as vocational trainer at Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre (Thomas Scaria)

Holy Spirit Sr. Mary Beck, a vocational trainer in Manasa, told GSR that their aim is to train the students in appropriate jobs, teaching them skills that will help children earn their living.

One of them is Yatheesh Kumar, who earns a living doing data entry for a firm in Bengaluru, Karnataka, some 250 miles east of Udupi. The young man in his late 20s said Manasa helped him pass the 12th-grade exam last year and develop computer skills.

Kumar, who has lost both his parents, now considers Manasa his second home.

Manasa also employs its students in candle making, book binding, data entry, carrying bags, tailoring, and handicrafts, as well as a few students who make and

distribute Communion hosts throughout dioceses. Manasa also manages a few units where inmates are employed.

Menezes said several former students now work in various trades under different companies, including one who now works as a fashion designer in the U.K.



Former students serve the data entry unit of the Manasa Rehabilitation and Training Centre. (Thomas Scaria)

Holy Spirit Sr. Mary Antony, the warden of the boarding house, said caring for the students in the hostel is challenging. "Some have violent behavior and tend to harm themselves or others."

Lohith, Antony told GSR, keeps everyone active and knows all his teachers' names. "I was so touched when he fretted about me when I had a small accident on my way to school," she recalled.

Prabha Kervase, another teacher with nearly two decades of experience in Manasa, said their most gratifying moment comes when the children perform beyond their parents' expectations.

"We work here for several years, not just for the salary. We have great job satisfaction as well as the good company of the Catholic nuns," she said, holding hands with Fernandes.

She said the teachers are happy that they have "a great opportunity to work so closely with the Catholic nuns."



Sr. Ancilla Fernandes, a member of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit and Manasa's principal (in center with blue sari) during the center's silver jubilee celebrations Nov. 14. (Courtesy of Ancilla Fernandes)

Meanwhile, Poojari said the students also give the teachers "a lot of positive energy and satisfaction."

In an article for the special jubilee edition of Manasa's magazine, she wrote about Lohith as someone who has influenced and inspired her:

"I wonder what would have been his future if he had not joined Manasa."