

For 40 years, Kochi's at-risk street kids have been given a new shot at life by Don Bosco Snehabhavan

The Executive Director of the Don Bosco Snehabhavan Project about saving the lives of children and spreading the light of positivity



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For these children, Snehabhavan is a home of their own

It is not every day that a story lends you the kind of positivity that makes all the negativity of a boring Friday evening seem trivial. I guarantee anyone who doubts it that one hour at Don Bosco's Snehabhavan will lift your jaded spirits up with the same magic that helps them transform the lives of children. It was on August 6, 1973, that the Corporation of Kochi decided to entrust the care and protection of street children

into the hands of this institution. The rest is more than history with a thousand children having been saved from the exploitation of the streets through sheer conviction.

"We now use the word 'children in difficult situations' when we speak about the children we help," says Father Varghese Pynadath, Executive Director of the Don Bosco Snehabhavan Project. "These can be their financial difficulties, emotional difficulties, learning disabilities, behavioural issues or problems with integrating into society. Currently, we find children who are found begging on the road or without a place to go and integrate them into our establishment."

Snehabhavan houses their children in buildings arranged by the corporation. "This itself is a corporation building," says the Father, gesturing to the spacious grounds on which children were lounging around on. All the children are brought in by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC) through a well-planned out judicial process. He explains, "By principle, it is the government's job to look after children. It is their duty to provide social security. On the basis of that, the children have to be identified by a government body. Even if you were to find a child on the street, you have to wait for the government to organise and the CWC to give them protection. Sometimes, there isn't a steady enough infrastructure in place to enable this. However, at Snehabhavan we have a set number of children we can admit and support."

"At the beginning, were taking in only children who were completely abandoned," explains the Father. "Later, we decided that it was not a good idea to club children of various ages together. We started to spread them into various buildings based on their age and later, gender." The building we were speaking at had the capacity for over 50 children, the main building for high school students can house up to 60 students. In addition to this, the organisation has two separate centres for girls in Vaduthala and Thammanam which has the capacity for about 30 people. They also have a shelter for migrant youth who come from other states in search of labour and shelter near the Ernakulam bus stand.

The children are beaming as they walk into the executive director's office. Anil (name changed) has been with Snehabhavan for almost 12 years. "I come from a Tamil family so the fathers had to teach me basic Malayalam for over two years. The next year, I joined a school in the third standard." Having come into the institution not knowing a word of the local language, Anil is now in 12th standard having passed with flying colours at a Malayalam medium school.

"Life has changed beyond what I can explain," says Anil. "I play a lot of basketball. I was selected from my school to play for the district team. My greatest hope now is to make it into the state team and get into a good college with a sports scholarship. He goes on, "I don't have a particular plan for the future or have a favourite subject but I dream of playing ball and making it big." Ram (name changed) is also a 12th standard student. He says, "I do not have any big dreams but I know that this opportunity I have received has changed my life. I want to make everyone proud and prove to myself that I am capable of doing anything."

"Our aim is to get these children back into society," explains Father Varghese. "Firstly, we are trying to find their roots and find out if we can put them back into their own families. There are some who do not have parents, we attempt to put them back into society through education and any such resources we can find. And the goal is for them to have families of their own someday which they are able to support."

Currently, the procedure is for the organisation to take in all the children who are allotted to them. Each centre under their name has been registered in 2015 under the Juvenile Justice Board, each one with a specific capacity. What is the process once a child is admitted? "Education," says Father Varghese with unwavering surety, adding, "Whatever age the child is, the primary next step is compulsory education. There is no other option. This is at least up to the tenth standard. Then we may direct them into a technical or job-oriented course. But up to the 10th, there is no other way to go."

"Since the children are not from traditional families, their education will already be extremely backward," says the Father. "They may have enrolled for namesake into some school but without actually attending it. We often get students who are in the 6th or 7th standard who they do not even know how to read or write. In addition to all this, they have a lot of emotional problems because they come from broken families where they may have experienced abuse of all sorts. To overcome this, we have professional counselling. We also ensure how many ever extracurricular activities as are possible. This is to boost up their self-confidence and to somehow help in developing their personalities."

"They deserve a normal education," affirms the Father. "The students' responses have always been mostly positive. We've never seen a child respond to what we have to offer in a malicious way. They have not really received the best odds from the world, it would be natural for them to be jaded. But they take everything we have to offer with open arms. In comparison with other students, their motivation level is slightly low. This is because they have barely seen the world. From their early childhood, they have been seeing a world which is very dark. They are children who watch their parents suffer through jobs that barely pay a minimum wage and they watch the elderly people

in their house give in to the urges of alcohol and drug abuse. It is not unnatural for them to want to go down the same route because that is what they grew up witnessing. But we do everything in our power to try and get them out of this mindset. We try to get them motivated."

The Father admits that the going is not always easy. When a child fails to see how the institution could support them or stray from the path they have been given, even the guardians of positivity at Snehabhavan cannot help but feel disappointed. "But there are so many success stories that we have witnessed," says the Father. "There have been at least 70-80 per cent who have been able to succeed and pass out of their schools and colleges. When we evaluate those against the small setbacks that we have, we are able to reassure ourselves that it is all worth it. If they were not given an education and a safe place to live, they would not have been where they are now."

"The changes come in generations," says the Father. "This generation of students that we are teaching will want something even better for their children. And when we look at the picture a few decades from now, we will be able to see this difference in their children and their children's children." I'm sure he must have noticed the reassurance that took hold of me with these words when he smiled briefly at one of the students waiting to shake his hands and added, "Of course it takes time. But when change comes, it will spread far and wide."