



THE MIDTOWNER

BULLETIN OF THE ROTARY CLUB OF CALCUTTA MIDTOWN

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From Editor's Desk:

Did we ever ponder what happens to kids of prisoners.

Bengaluru couple V Mani and Saroji sacrificed many luxuries to build a home for children of convicts, whose futures would otherwise look uncertain.

In the early 1990s, while working at the Reserve Bank of India in Bengaluru, V Mani would pass through the Central Jail on his commute.

Here, he'd notice several children hanging around the premises. Curiosity made him enquire about them and he learnt that they were children of convicts, with nowhere to go.

"The children of life convicts are rendered orphans for all practical purposes, and to see them crying outside the jail is very sad," he noted in an interview with rediff.

For women prisoners especially, losing links with their children once behind bars is a common reality. Mother losing custody of the child while in prison, is so common that it is often accepted as "part of the punishment". These children often end up as child laborers.

To give the innocent children a brighter future, Mani decided to do something. After retirement, when his three children had settled abroad, Mani brought four children, he had found outside the jail, to his home. Using the Rs 7 lakh that he and his wife Saroji had saved over the years, they sheltered, fed, and educated the children.

This would sow the seeds of his NGO Society's Care for the Indigent (SOCARE IND), formed in 1999. Today, the organization works with children of long term prison inmates, in different Karnataka jails, offering them a place to live, access to food and education, and ensuring a brighter future for them.

"They brought those kids up with a lot of struggle," recalls Venkatanathan Raghavachari, SOCARE's secretary since 2010 and a family friend of the couple. While his wife had died in 2008, V Mani passed away in.



Over the past 23 years, the NGO has worked hard to help these children stand on their own feet and wade through the stigma around them.

Sadly, society looks at the convict's whole family as criminals, even the children. "But now these children look at SOCARE as a source of strength," notes Raghavachari.

In the early days, Mani's initiative received immediate support from the jail superintendents. They also started giving him references of other homeless children who needed help. Mani would visit each child personally, investigate their situation, and then take them in.

Within a few years, the house was full, and he needed to look for more space. The officials at the Sri Sharada Peetham Sringeri Math helped and the NGO is now a unit of the temple. For other funds, he sold his wife's jewellery and set up donation drives, and soon, the building was up and running.

The Math officials also procured another building and named both to SOCARE. "We demolished the old building and constructed a state of the art building there," says Raghavachari. The two hostels, one for girls and other for boys, have facilities like a library, computer lab, kitchen, prayer lab, and more.

The children in these hostels are sent to different nearby schools, depending on their flair for studies and ability to cope with the workload. Some go to English medium schools and others to Kannada.



SOCARE children going to school. (Photo Source: SOCARE Facebook)

They are also taken on regular prison visits to see their parents.

The younger children are brought to Bengaluru and enrolled in school, between kindergarten and Class 1. But older kids, the NGO noticed, are unable to cope with studies because of a weak education background.

For such cases, a skill center was set up in Gulbarga.

SOCARE is supported by CSR wings of companies like Bosch and Citrix India, and a few regulars who donate money every year. They've also recently restored midday meals from ISKCON's Akshaya Patra Foundation.

Running such an initiative has come with a host of challenges. Working closely with these families has shown Raghavachari the irregularities of the justice system.

An Indian Express report claims that 76 per cent of India's prisoners are under trials. Moreover, says Raghavachari, he has personally come across several cases where innocent victims are wrongfully jailed. "The children are the victims of this social injustice. A lot of reform needs to happen," he says.

The NGO's goal was to keep the children sheltered till they graduated. But as they found more kids, they soon ran out of space and came to the decision that while they would continue supporting the child financially, they would send them back to their hometowns after Class 10.



SOCARE children being brought up at the hostel.

SOCARE lost many girls to marriage. "Girls would go home for their vacation but then they would get married off, and they wouldn't come back," he says.

It was then decided that while most children would be sent back home after Class 10, in special cases, they would retain the student at the SOCARE hostel and support them to continue education.



SOCARE children studying.

Through all the challenges, SOCARE continues focusing on its core mission of changing lives.

Sangeeta Nagraj, 30, joined SOCARE when she was 16. Her younger brother had been with them from LKG to Class 10, while she was at another orphanage before.

With SOCARE, she completed her Class 12 and got support as she pursued her CA. “When I was five years old, my father went to jail on a murder case. He was sentenced for 18 years,” she recalls.

“Before we went to SOCARE, people identified us by the name of our father and what he did. Once SOCARE gave us a good, private school education, we got good respect in society. Besides education, they also helped us grow up spiritually and culturally,” she says.

The hostel life has also been a fulfilling experience for her. “While normal kids grow up with a single brother or sister, we grew up with other kids and there was a unity and bond within us.”

Today, she works as an analyst at Accenture, is happily married, and blessed with a baby girl. “Without SOCARE, so many of us would not be in these positions where we’re living settled lives,” she adds.

Mani and Saroji do not live any more, but are alive in the hearts of the likes of Sangeeta.

**Minutes of the 17th regular and 2163th continuous meeting
of Rotary Club of Calcutta Midtown was held on 23rd March,
Sunday at 12noon at WABI SABI.**

Meeting called to order: President Rtn.Preeti Agarwal called the meeting to order.

National Anthem was sung by all.

Confirmation of previous Meeting minutes: The previous meeting minutes were circulated on WhatsApp and were proposed by Rtn. S.Ravi and seconded by Rtn Dr. Surinder Kapoor.

Rtn. President Preeti Agarwal acknowledged the effort put in by Rtn. Sahil Desai and Rtn.Shalini Agarwal for this Holi fellowship.

Rtn. President Preeti Agarwal announced that there was no agenda but it's a important meeting as the joy of fellowship and the spirit of togetherness defines our club.

Secretary report: Rtn.,Ruchira Bhuwalka announced the birthdays & anniversary's. Total 27 members were present making it 55%

Meeting closed: Rtn.President Preeti Agarwal closed the meeting.

Minuted by:

Rtn. Ruchira Bhuwalka

Secretary 2024-25 RCCM

Rotary Meeting held on 23rd March followed by Holi get together.



Rotary Meeting held on 23rd March followed by
Holi get together.



Birthday's

"Cheers to another wonderful year"



Rtn. S. Ravi (14th April)

Anniversary



Poonam & Aniruddh Tikmany
16th April



Sulbha & Yogesh Ajitsarria
19th April

**Sunflowers follow the sun
But did you know . . .**



**When it's cloudy and gray they
face each other and share their
ENERGY.**

Imagine if we did this too.