A tryst with the young girls of Jananidham

JOY OF LIVING

Smelling and feeling the first rain of the season, last week, I was led into Jananidham with Kumkum Tilak and a Pulsi plant, by little girls, Sneha and Jasmine. They were dressed in white, frilly frocks with sequins and welcomed us with a song and dance. The innocent happiness on their faces touched me, just as the gentle rain fell all around this little haven, nestled on the banks of the Tapi River. Specially run by a Community Based Organisation, Jananidham is home for orphan and destitute children with HIV.

We then interacted with the fifty girls, from age 6 to 22, staying there. I was moved by their dreams and aspirations, as they lived as one beautiful family. Attending regular school, vocational classes, creating handicrafts ranging from cards, bead jewels, stuffed toys and paintings, these girls were amazing in their creativity too.

Starting the day at 4.30 AM, their daily schedule includes prayers, Yoga, recreation and play, in addition to a full day at school. Since these are HIV positive children, their adherence to the Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) needs strict adherence. Their day is punctuated by two alarms, one in the morning and evening, for taking their medicines. The medicines are all neatly organized in medicine boxes labeled for every child. The caretaker, Sudhaben, an HIV positive person, is serving these girls meticulously taking care of every detail.

The lady who runs this centre, is also the President of the National Coalition of People Living with HIV in India (NCP+). She takes great pride in sharing how the girls are given good nutrition to ensure that their CD 4 counts are maintained. A special room in the first floor is where they celebrate every birthday, festival or event. Filled with toys, paintings, and decorations of various kinds, this room is where they huddle together to draw their inner strength to cope with all the injustices that life has meted out to them.

In addition to the infection, many have also suffered by becoming orphaned and disowned by their families and relatives. Ideally, for such conditions, the best solution would be for the children to be rehabilitated in their own families, or with their close relatives. However, given the taboo and stigma that is still associated with this disease, many such children are abandoned or disowned. If not identified and nurtured in such a facility or shelter, such children become very vulnerable, and may also pose a risk to others.

The relentless efforts with care and concern at Jananidham have also played a great role in changing the attitude of society towards such children. Some years ago, people of Surat would be worried about the infection and avoid touching these children or visiting the centre.

I learnt with happiness that local citizens now come to the centre every Saturday, with their families, offering a kinds of help, in cash and kind for the sustenance and welfare of the girls. The help ranges from clothes, blankets, food, games, and toiletries to almost everything that the centre needs.

Following the welcome song, as I got up to light the lamp, I invited little Jasmine to join me in lighting the lamp. He little hand continued to hold my hand all through the visit, and I can still feel her touch as I type this on my keyboard. We walked through the naturally well-lit and well-ventilated happy spaces an cheerful rooms, with smiles all around. As soon as Maheshbhai Savani, who addressed as Pappa by all these children entered the room, Jasmine jumped on his lap! He is the donor who has give this building by the river and his farm house to Jananidham, to house these kids. As I returned back, the picture of Jananidham, the girls and the benevolence of people like Maheshbhai, stirred me and made me affirm my faith in the goodness of community and humanity.

Names changed to protect identity.