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**Building a brighter future for the forsaken.**

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**BANGALORE:** If there were more schools like this, fewer children would complain of a toothache when its time to go to school in the morning. No heavy satchels to carry, no getting up early for commuting. Instead, acres of greenery, swimming pools, bright and airy dorms, warm teachers who teach you maths through computers and plenty of fun and games.

Utopia? No, Shanti Bhavan, a boarding school for orphaned and destitute children, is not a figment of imagination. It is a 30-acre edifice of brick and mortar, of trees and plants at Baliganapalli, near Bagalur in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu, nearly two hours from Bangalore.

The children are drawn from orphanages, ragpickers colonies, quarries, brothels and those from a poor socio-economic background. Preference is given to children of single parents, especially abandoned mothers, with the rule that only one child is chosen from a family. There are presently about 100 children from slums, villages, quarries and halfway homes studying and living at Shanti Bhavan.

Dr Abraham George, whose brainchild the school is, happens to be vice-president of the New-York based software firm Sunguard Treasury Systems. Indian-born Dr George, an expert in international finance, founded The George Foundation (TGF) in 1995 and dedicated it to the welfare of children especially those who are victims of poverty and those who suffer from adverse environmental conditions.

The former financial consultant to various Fortune-500 companies wryly smiles, "I have an arrangement with our firm for taking 12 weeks leave when I visit India. We believe in a life-long commitment to our children. In later life, if they want to go abroad for higher studies we will fund them. If they want emotional succour in times of stress, we will always be there for them."

The plush and sylvan location of the school has prompted many a political and local heavyweight to try and push his ward for admissions. But the day that happens, George declares, "I am going to drop my involvement in this project. We don't want any funds from the government because then it will open the route to all obligations."

"A team of a clinical psychologist, paediatrician, social worker and the principal of the school screen 24 students for every class because we want to focus on only a few

deserving children," says Lalitha Law, principal of Shanti Bhavan. Individual attention is made possible with a 'housemother' or nanny looking after only 4-6 children.

Even a good cause faces obstacles as the school authorities discovered. For most of the parents are sceptical and look for a catch in what seems to be too good an offer. "But once they see for themselves how their child is kept, they want to offer more kids to us. In fact, some of them laughingly complain that the kid starts demanding toast and egg - a rarity in an impoverished household," says Ms Law.

While the school has classes up to the second grade, the "building is ready for classrooms up to the 12th grade," says Jude Devdas, operating officer of the non-profit George Foundation.

The school, which runs on solar power, has a skating rink and soccer field coming up. There is already a volley ball field in existence. This is for the teaching staff of about 25, the kids being too small. A museum for fine arts to encourage emerging artists and poor artisans is ready to be built at Shanti Bhavan.

"Besides the investment of about Rs 10 crore in the school, our operational expenses are rather high at Rs 72 lakh a year," says George wistfully. So corporate sponsorships, he says, would go a long way.

In fact, ICICI has lent Rs 4 crore for the school project at a very low rate of interest against equivalent amount of dollar deposits guaranteed with the bank.

Inside a kindergarten class, the kids are impatiently waiting for lessons to be over for there will be a birthday bash in the afternoon. Bright curtains, huge stuffed toys and colourful wardrobes make a pleasant picture in the kids dormitories. Lunchtime sees the tiny tots cheerfully laying the tables to the accompaniment of piped music. The kitchen itself is a huge affair with open spaces and its own bakery.

The school does not propagate any single religion and the prayer room bears testimony to this with a Bhagvad Gita, Bible, Koran and even the Zend Avesta nudging each other for space.

Finally, it is time to go. A chubby little girl holds on to your hand and asks, "Will you come tomorrow, Aunty?" It becomes difficult to tear oneself away.

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