

Visit by: Melli Annamalai, Asha MIT/Boston, [annam38@yahoo.com](mailto:annam38@yahoo.com)

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### Prof. Jayadev's background

Prof. Jayadev started his social work career with a children's home for boys in Chamarajanagar. He took in boys from very difficult situations: begging on the streets because neither parent was alive, abandoned because a parent was incarcerated and the other had passed away, children jailed for juvenile crimes, and so on. Under his gentle and nurturing care they blossomed, put their past behind them, and grew up to be young men who could successfully navigate the world and take care of themselves, in a range of careers. One became a successful artist, one is a successful journalist, and so on. Each child's potential was identified and allowed to flourish. This is well illustrated in Deenabandhu's motto "help a child reach the sky."

He developed a model where 12 boys live in one "house" (one building on campus) with a house mother. The older boys help care for the younger ones. Everyone ate together. The 40+ boys, staff, Prajna (who joined Deenabandhu seven years ago) and Prof Jayadev all live together like one large family. It is not called an 'orphanage,' but a 'children's home.' Prof. Jayadev's understanding of how young minds work, and his sensitivity to their needs plays a huge role in all this. He has written several books on nurturing young minds, and has had regular columns in popular Kannada newspapers on the topic.

He later started a home for girls in Chamarajanagar following similar principles. It has provided a refuge for girls and the first batch of girls have grown into amazing young women.

I give this background, because it is important to understand who is running Shaktidhama.

### Shaktidhama

#### *Women at Shaktidhama*

Shaktidhama is in Mysore, a larger city about 60 kms from Chamarajanagar. It was started as a home for destitute women in very difficult circumstances. When the Mysore police encountered women in cases that came to their attention: for example, abuse victims, a tribal girl who was in (likely forced) relationship with a hostel warden, women whose families have thrown them out for a variety of reasons, women whose husbands have abandoned them, and so on, the women had no other place to go and the police had to find a place for them. Shaktidhama is one such place. Prof. Jayadev is a founding member of Shaktidhama, and the police have worked closely with him from the beginning. Prof. Jayadev brings his skills as a nurturing mentor who could identify the challenges each individual faced, and his skills in running an organization, to Shaktidhama.

The women who come to Shaktidhama have typically been through a harrowing and traumatic situation. Shaktidhama gives them the time and place to recover and plan what to do next in their life. They mostly come from very poor backgrounds, without other support structures. There is no upper limit on how long they can stay at Shaktidhama, they usually stay 6 months to 1 or 2 years (there are some older

women who have mental health problems and have nowhere to go, they might stay longer). In this time Shaktidhama helps put together a plan for life after they leave Shaktidhama. To that end, many income generation activities have been planned and started.

About 10-15 women live in a room. As with Deenabandhu children's home in Chamarajanagar, I was impressed by the cleanliness and orderliness of the living quarters. This is a testament to the spirit Prof. Jayadev is able to create in an organization. As with the children at the children's home, he is able to create a nurturing and safe environment for the women to recover from traumatic experiences.

The income generation activities span a range. What I liked most is the focus on creating jobs that are relevant locally. There is a lot of wealth in Indian cities now, and the middle class has money to spend. The government has many schemes to help income generation activities, and Prof. Jayadev has been able to successfully use those schemes. Capital costs for most of the income generation activities come from such schemes.

Shaktidhama is right across JSS college, so they have astutely planned for income generation initiatives around businesses that cater to students. Some examples are below.

**Shaktidhama Restaurant:** Stopping by a restaurant for a snack or coffee is a very popular activity for college students. This restaurant has a menu that caters to that, and is open accordingly (morning and afternoon, it is closed in the evenings). Women are trained in tasks they are interested in and have an aptitude for, and became cooks, waiters, etc. Their pay is currently low (for many it is around Rs. 3000 a month), but the entire amount goes to their savings account when they are staying in Shaktidhama (where boarding and lodging is completely paid for). When they leave Shaktidhama it gives them a tremendous sense of courage and confidence to have a small savings account with Rs. 50,000 or so. The restaurant has just begun to break even.

**Tailoring activities:** There are training opportunities for women in tailoring, and a tailoring center. They are trying to get school uniform orders, this would give them a supply of steady orders.

#### **Planned ideas:**

**Bakery:** Again, this is a good idea since the Shaktidhama campus is right across from JSS college. An ice cream parlor is also planned.

**Copy Center:** Very useful for college students.

The cost per year to support a woman at Shaktidhama is Rs. 30,000. They have raised a lot of the capital costs successfully, but are looking for support for running expenses.

#### *Children at Shaktidhama*

Following the model of the Deenabandhu children's home in Chamarajanagar, a home for girls has also been started on the Shaktidhama campus. This is a recent addition to Shaktidhama. There are three buildings dedicated for the girls. Two of the buildings are the living quarters. The third building has a large dining hall, and some rooms for other purposes. Each of the two living quarters can house around a 100 girls. Currently there are 100 girls at Shaktidhama, which means that it can accommodate another 100 girls.

About 12 girls live in a room. There are 6 bunk beds (they got steep discounts from bed and mattress manufacturing companies). There are bathrooms attached to each room. Again, I was struck by the

cleanliness and orderliness. A house mother is responsible for each set of 12 girls. The house mother takes care of the emotional needs of the girls. In many cases they themselves have come from a destitute situation, and start working in this role. It is useful for them also to be in a constructive role. Some of them have their own children, and most of them are part of the Deenabandhu home in Chamarajanagar. In one of the upstairs lobby areas a small reading room has been set up for young children, and the young children gather there every evening to read.

The girls go to the nearby government schools, and for college try to get admission in JSS college.

Some of the girls are from tribal communities. Some have no parents or only one parent who is unable to care for them. On this visit Prof. Jayadev told me that a majority of the girls are daughters of Devadasis all across Karnataka.

*(Note: Devadasi women are those who have been “married to a deity.” In the past this meant they were the concubines of the wealthy patrons of the temple, or the priests. They were trained in music and dance and were dancers at the temple. The Devadasi practice has been outlawed now, but the women from this community have not been able to move on to other professions. Many of the women and their daughters end up in prostitution. The girls continue to be “married to a deity” and end up in prostitution because they have no other option.)*

Prof. Jayadev and others at Shaktidhama feel that they have to bring the girls here, away from their Devadasi mothers, to have a chance at other professions. They feel that when they are with their mothers they often end up following the same profession of prostitution. At Shaktidhama they are in a different environment, are exposed to other options, and have a chance of a different life. They stay here during the school year, and visit their mothers during the school holidays (I don't know whether all of them get to visit). I believe someone from Shaktidhama actively travels in northern Karnataka to identify such girls in vulnerable situations, and then persuades the mothers to let them come to Shaktidhama.

**My thoughts:** *I am a bit troubled by this. I have no doubt that Prof. Jayadev does an excellent job with the children. Working with children and nurturing them is his strength. He also has extensive experience educating young minds. But I am troubled by taking the girls away from their mothers.*

*In practical terms, it makes sense. It is not feasible to have a Shaktidhama in every town in Karnataka. Instead, they have to bring the girls here. But when I think of the children and their mother being separated from each other, I wonder, is this is the best option? I would urge any chapter considering this project to think about this point, perhaps talk to the person who travels to north Karnataka and so on.*

The plan is that the girls will also get involved in the income generation activities. These activities will also train them in various skills, and they might stay and have jobs at the canteen, shops and tailoring activities, or if they move elsewhere they will take their skills with them. All of income generation activities at Shaktidhama will be run by women.

Photos link: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/Sq2cgM3npgwBp3NL7>

