

From Germany with lots of love

Raghava M. talks to a doctor-turned-teacher who has been doing a lot for underprivileged children.

A JOURNEY that encompasses continents. This is the story of a doctor from Germany who made India her second home. It is in this city (Bangalore) where she turned into a teacher for the underprivileged



MEET...

Hella Mundhra

children. Hella Mundhra has been solely managing Shishu Mandir, a home for children from slums. "This is what I like to do and continue to do," she says.

This 66-year-old doctor-turned-teacher has been attending to the needs of underprivileged children for their all-round development. Apart for providing education in a novel way, this two-decade-old school also looks after the children's health and boosts their talent through vocational training. "All these are focussed to make the children become self-reliant," Ms. Mundhra says.

"It was my childhood dream to become a teacher, but I became a doctor," says Ms. Mundhra, who came to India in 1973 after marrying an Indian doctor, Dwarka Das.

It was only incidental that marriage brought her to India, she says. "It was Vinoba

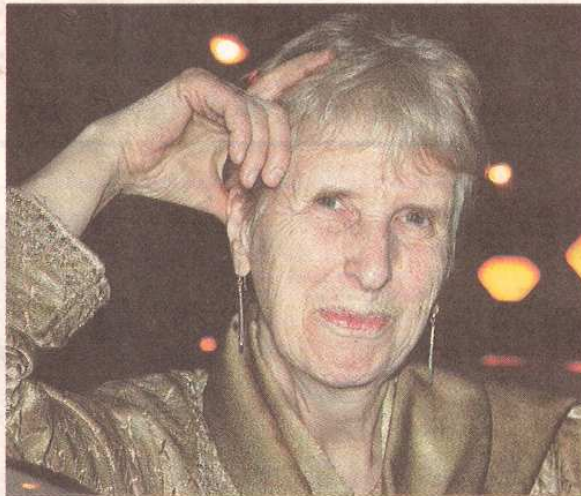


Photo: Sampath Kumar G.P.

'It was Vinoba Bhave's literature that inspired me to work here.'

Bhave's literature, which I have read a lot, that inspired me to work here."

Ms. Mundhra started a nursing home at Ulsoor. "Every Sunday I went to nearby slums and conducted health camps. Nearly 500 people were turning up at the camps. "Some people came with their children who had health disorders related to malnourishment." These children, she says, were made to stay in the nursing home.

Attachment

"But after staying for a while these children started developing an attachment towards us. They were not willing to go their homes. Parents, whose family income was low, did not find anything amiss with their children staying in the nursing home," she says. The increase in the number of children staying in the nursing home led

Ms. Mundhra to set up the Shishu Mandir in 1983.

"The children's home began with just four children." It slowly started to grow and the number became 16. These children were provided clothes, food, and study material. They were sent to the affordable private schools nearby.

But in these schools, Ms. Mundhra says, she found the textbook-oriented teaching to be uninspiring. "Teachers were more authoritative in their teaching methods. The clever ones could grasp quickly, but others, without much attention, dropped out."

This made her start her own school "which employed means to make teaching inspiring," Ms. Mundhra says. The school, which uses child-oriented system of education, started in 1993 with 12 children. The school, 'Shishu Man-

dir Education Centre,' now has 116 students and is located in Krishnarajapuram. The re-established school, set up in 2000, has classes from LKG to X.

Training

The school, she says, also gives training in dance and music. Vocational courses such as tailoring for girls and carpentry for boys are taught. Training in computers is also imparted. "This enables the students to become self-reliant," Ms. Mundhra says.

Ms. Mundhra also conducts orientation programme for teachers. She has set up a teachers training institute at the education centre "to train teachers for the future," she says.

Funds

For all the welfare activities, Ms. Mundhra spends her own money. She also gets donations from Germany and Switzerland. She spends nearly Rs. 3 lakhs every month. "This is apart from the medical expenses of about Rs. 5,000 a month on every child," she says.

Ms. Mundhra is very attached to the students of the mandir. She comes to India twice a year and stays for a month. "When I am in Germany I keep in constant touch with the mandir staff through telephone and Internet." Ms. Mundhra has two children and a grand child, who live in Germany.

The children of the school are found of Ms. Mundhra. "While I am in the city they occupy my time and various topics are discussed," she says.

The children celebrate Ms. Mundhra's birthday on January 11 as 'Sports Day.'

"Such celebrations touch my heart," says Ms. Mundhra.