

## Heroic nun beats bullies to save children in India

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As the sari-clad nun sat on the floor of the rail station platform teaching abandoned children, some men approached offering help. Soon, from their gestures and words, Sister Clara Animuttill realized they took her for a sex worker.

The 53-year-old laughed as she recalled the event 18 years ago at Itarsi Railway Station in central India. It was when she first began her work with destitute children living there.

The nun, from the St. Joseph of Chembery congregation, convinced the men that she was on a different mission. "It was difficult but successful," she said. The incident taught her that as a single woman on an unconventional mission her path would be littered with hurdles.

The latest was a court case that she won recently. It was filed against her because "some [officials] were angry when I refused to pay them [bribes]," the nun said. The government had schemes to help poor people but the "unofficial norm" was to pay back 20 percent of the sanctioned amount to officials who approved the funds.

Sister Animuttill's center that works for destitute children was awarded 1.1 million rupees (US\$16,500)

but she demanded a receipt for the 20 percent bribe. "They were angry and implicated me in a false case to cause me mental torture," she said.

Her legal counsel Sanjay Gupta said that Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate Arun Shrivastav "found that the charges against her were false and without any merit or base."

Sister Animuttil began caring for runaways in 1998 in Itarsi, a major railway junction, and set up a center for them in 1999. She keeps visiting the railway platform to contact destitute children begging and doing menial jobs.

She takes them to her center, Jeevodaya (dawn of hope) center, just outside the railway station to provide them with accommodation, food, clothes and education. Children are re-united with their parents if she can trace them, while others stay with her.

In the past two decades, her work has helped more than 21,000 children who often use drugs or suffer sexual exploitation, she said.

When the work began everyone, including the children "looked at me with suspicion." The railway officials did not take her seriously and some of them said it was the madness of a jobless women. "Some said I should put my time and energy to doing something useful," Sister Clara said.

It is worse for girls because they are sexually exploited by older boys. "The situation was so pathetic that each girl was forced to stay with one boy or the other boys would exploit her. Being afraid of such abuse, each girl accepted one boy as her "husband" and stayed with him. Even then, multiple partners exploited them in many cases," said the nun.

Once, when she rescued a 10-year-old girl from being the "wife" of a boy; he "threatened to kill me with a knife" and demanded her back. "I was shocked to find that the police supported him. Eventually, under pressure, they put him behind the bars."

"The boy defecated in the cell and the police made me clean it although it was not my job. They wanted me to do it as revenge for getting him booked. I did it for the sake of Christ and to continue with the mission of saving railway kids," Sister Animuttil said.

Children end up on railway platforms when they run away from villages to escape domestic violence or they are lured by the luxury of city life. They end up on railway platforms with nowhere to go.

Dinesh Richaria, manager at Habibganj Railway Station, remembered meeting Sister Animuttil when he worked at Itarsi station.

She visited the railway station every day and started to teach the children songs and the alphabet among other things. "There wasn't a chair so she sat on the floor with them. We later offered her a room in the labor union office," he said.

Gradually, Sister Animuttil took the children to a rented shelter. But most were habitual drug users and they ran back to the platform seeking drugs. She went after them and motivated them to give up drugs,

Richaria said.

The nun also faced opposition from gang leaders aged 18 or more. They used to keep small kids of five to 12 years old to clean the trains, platforms and beg for food and money. The seniors collected the money and acted as their local guardians as it was not possible for the little children to survive without their support, Richaria said.

The railway administration including the Railway Protection Force and Government Railway Police protected Sister Animuttil from gang leaders, Richaria said.

Archbishop Leo Cornelio of Bhopal, based in the capital of Madhya Pradesh, considers the nun a "rare person who put her own life at risk for others. [She is] a great example of both the struggles of women and what women can do with conviction and faith," he said.

For people like Richaria, "Sister Animuttil is a saint. She is such an amazing personality and I pray that God gives her more strength," he added.

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