

VINIMAY TO THE RESCUE

By A Staff Reporter

MOST people at 18 go raring into the future. Others however, are unwittingly pushed into it, to face the big, bad world flat on their faces.

The Juvenile Justice Act (1986) stipulates that destitute children are to be given institutional care only up to the age of 18 for girls and 16 for boys.

Voluntary organisations like Vinimay come in at this 'post-institutional' stage. Having worked in the field of child welfare for 10 years, they are now planning to construct a 'transition hostel' for children who are simply asked to leave welfare institutions when the time comes. Although not the first of its kind in the country, "for us it is a dream", says D Krishnan, a trustee.

With Rs 13 lakh needed for the hostel, the collection so far has been around Rs 3 lakh. The 'residential-cum-counselling' centre will consist of dormitories for at least 50 boys, a kitchen, a visitors-commonroom, toilet blocks and counsellors' quarters. For all this, of course, they have first to be allotted land by the City and Industrial Development Corporation at Vashi and Nerul.

The stay in the hostel, says Krishnan, will serve to give the child sufficient time to overcome his inhibitions and stand on his own feet, mentally and financially. His transition into society will be made smoother. In fact, an attempt will be to make him reach a higher position. The period to be spent in the hostel will vary from person to person, he added.

Interestingly, Vinimay also intervenes at the 'institutional' stage. About 150 volunteers make regular trips to the Children's Aid Society-run Chembur children's home and the nearby Bal Kalyan Nagari. The attempt, as volunteer Mukta Mahapatra sees it, is to provide a 'healthy' interaction in a cloistered, impersonal institutionalised atmosphere.

"Most people think that by providing material benefits like food, they can bridge the gap," says Suresh Rao, who has conducted an 'integrated' cultural programme with the home children and the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre colony children. "What they don't realise is that material goods make the children all the more dependent," he adds.

"They are our children," says Mahapatra. It is with this attitude

that the children at the CC home are provided education, in the form of personal tuitions, clothes, nutrition, picnics and treks. There is also the Vidya Bhavan or the study hall, and the Vikas Kendra, the recreation centre.

Experiences at the CC home have left volunteers wiser. "There is always the aspect of give-and-take in a relationship. By giving them our time, we have earned their affection." The children, she adds, have undergone a transformation. While two or three years ago, there were cases of the children running away, eating leftovers of five-star hotels, even attempting suicide, today, they are more willing to open up.

"They know that there is someone behind them," she says, citing cases of children who have excelled in academics, sport and music alike. She attributes this to the personal interest taken in individual children, by the volunteers, some of who even house the children from time-to-time.

Events that are organised by the Vinimay volunteers include celebrating birthdays, making the children script and act out plays, celebrating New Year or even Teachers' Day.

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