

Shunned by society

The plight of HIV-positive children in India

by Poonam Sharma

With much excitement and dreams of making new friends, a four-year-old boy enrolled in a government run preschool in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. For the teacher who manages the school of 30 students, this was cause for joy – especially since attendance rates at schools in this area are very low. However, just two days after the young boy started school, the teacher asked him to leave and not come back. Officially, the teacher stated that the “child was mischievous and beat up other children.” In actuality, she had learned from other local residents that the boy and his mother were HIV-positive. Parents of the other children were threatening to withdraw their kids from the school if the child continued to study there.

This is not an isolated occurrence.

In the southern Indian state of Kerala, the HIV status of five children between the ages of five and 11 became public after they were photographed at a World AIDS Day program in December 2006. When parents of other children attending Mar Dionysius Primary School found out, the children were expelled from school. After the government intervened, the children were re-admitted to the school, only to be turned back the next day. The school claims that they are facing opposition from parents of the other schoolchildren. For now, these five children are being looked after at an orphanage called Asha Kiran (ray of hope).

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In the western Indian state of Gujarat, two brothers aged six and nine, who had been brought to an orphanage by an uncle, were asked to leave after they tested positive for HIV. The uncle refused to accept responsibility for the kids. With nowhere to go, they were taken in by a non-profit organization, the Kutch Network of Positive People (KNPP). They are living with a volunteer while KNPP makes efforts to arrange for care for them.

These are just some of the incidents that have been reported in different parts of India, but they all stress the appalling lack of awareness about HIV and AIDS, and a high level of stigma towards people affected by it. Although the AIDS Prevention

and Control Policy of India states that “HIV-positive persons should be granted equal rights for education and employment as other members of society” and that “HIV status of a person should be kept confidential and should not come in the way of right to employment,” there is still a lot to be achieved in terms of education and awareness.



Children living at the DURGA Project, a first initiative in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Photograph by Sarah McGowan

Among the many misconceptions is the belief that HIV/AIDS is only prevalent in sex workers, drug users, foreigners, and homosexuals. A Prevention Indicator Study undertaken by the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) shows that awareness levels have increased from 68 percent to 94 percent in urban areas, and from 9 percent to 35 percent in rural areas.

Indian filmmakers have recently joined hands in an effort to educate people on the impact of AIDS. Funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the AIDS Jaago project plans to use the popularity of Bollywood films to increase awareness. Leading Indian filmmakers will produce short films to be screened before Bollywood movies, and one of the films focuses on the true story of a boy who was denied admission in school because his parents were HIV-positive.

Shunned by family and society, caught in the tussle between parents, schools, and the government, these innocent children are being denied the very basic of all rights: the right to a childhood and education. ☉

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