

SECOND CHANCES

Veerni, a residential institute in the desert of Rajasthan, is giving child brides a chance to finish school, graduate, pick and pursue a career

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In a region where child marriage is still common and few girls make it to high school, an institute called Veerni (Hindi for woman of great bravery) is changing lives.

The residential facility in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, houses 85 girls from nearby villages — including several child brides. It was set up in 1993 by a Swiss woman named Jacqueline de Chollet, now 80.

In these arid, underprivileged villages, female literacy is still at a measly 52%, against a national average of 65%, but now girls are graduating here and even pursuing careers, with help from the institute.

"Many former students are now teachers. One has set up a yoga centre," says Mahendra Sharma, director of Veerni Institute.

It was Sharma who did the rounds, door to door, convincing parents that their daughters would have a better life if they moved to the facility, focused on school and college and got an education.

Radha (name changed), a child bride, says she wants to become an IPS officer "so that I can stop child marriages from occurring and ensure that girls study further".

Suman, 16, who is now in Class 11, wants to be a teacher or police officer.

"I put my girl in this institute because their management, their security and safety, their choice of school to enrol the girls in, were really good," says her father, Ranu Singh.

"Suman has improved in her studies, and also in her confidence after meeting other girls from different villages and schools." Now, in-laws of child brides are also seeking slots at the institute.

"One man asked if we could enrol his daughter-in-law and his daughter, who was also married as a child," says Sharma. "Over the years, because the girls are studying further, the boys in the nearby villages have also become more motivated to finish their education."

Life is disciplined and structured around the school day, at the single-storey institute—which also has a computer lab, sewing room and a playground with see-saw and roundabout. Students from Classes 6 through 12 are housed in its dorms.

The day begins for the girls at 5 am. Each has an allotted time for a bath. They take turns to clean their dorm. Seniors help juniors with homework.

There's a prayer session at 6.30 am, then breakfast and school. Upon their return, it's lunch at 3 pm, then study time and after-school tutorial sessions. At 5 pm on weekdays they all slip into trousers and T-shirts to head out for an hour of play. They return for dinner, another study hour and sleep by 10 pm.

Weekends are lighter, with more time for recreation and rest, and an hour for TV.

There are no cellphones allowed, no make-up on school days. They can speak to their parents on Sundays on the matron's phone. "Our aim," says Sharma, "is to equip the girls with skills and see to it that they can get a job."



Girls run up a sand dune near the Veerni Institute during the evening play hour. The girls are from diverse economic and social backgrounds and the institute offers a largely gender-neutral lifestyle very different from what they would have at home.

Varsha and Tanisha (both 11) exchange a friendly hug outside their dorm. Seen with them are two seniors. The older girls usually mentor the younger ones and help them with school work.



Two child brides amid the sand dunes. Rajasthan has among the highest cases of child marriage in India. Married girls usually live with their parents until puberty, but as a rule, score lower on health indices and higher on teen and early pregnancies. The Veerni Institute helps them head to their marital homes in their late teens if not later, offsetting at least some of the negative impact of what is now an illegal practice.



Shobha (centre) inflates a balloon ahead of the farewell party for students of Class 12. All three are dressed in traditional Rajasthani outfits for a dance competition that is part of the celebration. Sponsorship schemes help pay for further education.

VARRIETY

RADIORANI MEET SHIKHA MANDI, THE FIRST RJ TO HOST A SHOW IN HER TRIBAL TONGUE

SHE PLAYS MUSIC, CHATS WITH FANS, IN SANTHALI

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"I was terribly nervous. But as soon as the show began, off I went with the name of God on my lips, welcoming everyone to my show, Johar Jhargram (Greetings Jhargram)," says Shikha Mandi, remembering her first broadcast as an RJ, in November.

Mandi had reason to be nervous. She is the first radio jockey to host a show in Santali, the language spoken by the Santal tribals of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha and Tripura.

That's over 58 lakh people, but it's not often that you hear Santali on TV or radio, even in these regions.

Mandi, for instance, grew up listening to the daily show on All India Radio Kolkata that featured Santal songs and music. But she loved her mother tongue, and would sing the songs she heard on that show, and write poetry in Santali in her free time.

It needed that effort to stay in touch with the language, because Mandi—the daughter of small farmers from West Midnapore—grew up in her uncle's home in Kolkata,

where she had been sent at the age of three so she could get a good education.

She graduated from an Industrial Training Institute and was set to take an apprenticeship exam at a shipbuilding and engineering company on the same day as her interview for the position of RJ.

"My parents were hoping I would get the apprenticeship," says the 24-year-old, laughing. "I too was very tense about trying something new but I wanted to give it a shot. I had a feeling I could do it."

"That feeling was based on years of pretend news anchoring when no one was watching. "Since childhood I had always fancied speaking on the mic," Mandi says. "After the interview I realised just how much I love doing what I am doing now. Most of all, it was hard to believe I was speaking in Santali on the radio!"

Mandi's show is beamed by Radio Milan 90.4, in the Jhargram and West Midnapore districts of West Bengal—which also broadcasts in Bengali, Hindi and English. The Santali show has become so popular that its duration was extended from one hour to two in February.

"We wanted to hire a fresher and Shikha was just right. She is fluent in the lan-



Shikha Mandi, 24, grew up in Kolkata but retained a love for her mother tongue, Santali, that she says is fading among others of her generation. Her radio show, however, is so popular its duration has been extended from one hour a day to two.

This is a very positive development. There have been some community radio efforts, but our community is not just in need of perennial support. We also want to be entertained. We too come home tired from work. A radio channel like this is a good sign of the community becoming mainstream.

HANSDA SOWWENDRA SHEKHAR, Santali and author of The Adivasi Will Not Dance

guage, a good speaker and has an interest in Santali culture," says Milan Chakrabarty, editor, Radio Milan.

"We guessed there was an audience for the language but the response has been much greater than we expected. We are now looking at devoting three hours to Santali daily," he adds.

What are the broadcasts about? There's always a theme, Mandi says, but the theme could be anything.

"A lot of our discussions are about our culture," says Mandi. "Sometimes, the audience informs me of cultural mores that I was unaware of."

One show discussed Baha, the community's spring festival. "This was to make

people aware of the distinctions between our spring festival and Holi or Dol Jatra in West Bengal, as they often get confused even within the community," she says.

Three broadcasts that got the most responses were discussions on the theme of waiting, on the year-end festival of Poush Sankranti, and on the joys of spring.

"I thought waiting was an interesting and universal theme. From childhood you wait to grow up and when you grow up you wait for other things to happen," says Mandi.

One call she remembers fondly from that day was from a man who waited many years for his lover but could not get married. He told her how they met recently and discussed their now married life.

Her father Dayal, 50, is also now a fan. "I am really proud that she does a radio show in her mother tongue. The radio at our home is not working right now so we listen to her show at our neighbour's house. On most days, many of our neighbours gather to listen too," he says.

Mandi is hoping the show will make Santals proud of their language and culture. "In Kolkata, some young Santals don't even want to admit they know the language," she says.

She also wants to perfect her Santali pronunciation. "Living in Kolkata and speaking in Bengali most of the time has influenced my diction a bit," Mandi says. "I am determined to make it pitch perfect with practice."



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For more snapshots of life at the Veerni Institute, go to hindustantimes.com/lifestyle