

Snehalaya, a child friendly society moves a step ahead



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Snehalaya, a social service programme of Don Bosco Society for the care, protection and ultimate social reintegration of children in distress completed thirteen years of its existence. To mark the completion of thirteen years of relentless Services to children in need of special care and protection 'Snehalaya Day' was observed on January 4, 2014, at Don Bosco Higher Secondary School auditorium in Guwahati, where a number of dignitary participated in the function. Assam Chief Minister, Tarun Gogoi inaugurated the function.

Snehalaya became operational on January 1, 2001. it was a millennium gift for the homeless and destitute children. On that day Fr Lukose Cheruvalel, the founder director of Snehalaya started staying at Dhirenpara area of the city in a small hut. Missionaries of Charity of Mother Teresa of Kolkata joined Snehalaya and the very next day a group of eight children were picked up from Guwahati railway station. However, out of the first batch of eight children, three left early preferring their free life of the streets to the disciplined life of Snehalaya. The parents of one of the five remaining boys was traced out and he was reunited with his parents. They were very grateful to Almighty and the Snehalaya for bringing back their missing son after three years. This was the first of the many reunions that Snehalaya would arrange. Fr Lukose informed the audience that the remaining four boys are still in Snehalaya studying in the High school. Two mal-nourished children were brought by the Bethany sisters from Fatasil slums of the city and two others came from near Guwahati railway station. The Childline service in Shillong, run by Bosco Reachout began sending homeless children to Snehalaya, Guwahati. Snehalaya also began sheltering the children brought by Guwahati Childline. Shortly the Snehalaya had to accommodate about twenty children in a small room. On February 14,2001 a literacy centre was opened under a tin shed for the poor children of the neighborhood. Later on it became a Jyoti Kendra under the Sarva Siksha Abhiyan. After the increase in the number of children, a concrete building for Snehalaya was constructed.

At present there are five Snehalaya Homes located in Guwahati city at Pan Bazar, Dhirenpara, Betkuchi, Beltola and Noonmati, forming a 'Garland of love' around the city so that any child in distress can find a place for short or long-term stay. A total of 200 children in these homes are looked after by a team of nearly 50 staff members. Besides providing for basic needs like food, shelter, cloths counseling and opportunities for developing their hidden talents for singing and dancing. The older children are introduces to vocational training and the world of work. The strategy is to build up the capacity of the children through education and skills training so that as young adults they will be able to stand on their own feet. There is a characteristically cheerful and friendly atmosphere in all the Snehalaya Homes. The residential staff try to maintain a family spirit of loving relationship in each of these five homes.

Snehalaya has non-residential programmes as well. These include primary education centers, day-care, children's Assistance Booth at the railway station and advocacy programmes for child rights. It is growing quantitatively and qualitatively to meet the challenges of marginalization of a section of youth while another section enjoys the benefits of development. Over the years the bond between Snehalaya and the state governments' social department and UNICEF and the respectability and credibility of Snehalaya in the civil society and among the NGOs have grown.

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