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School for Underprivileged Children Makes Academic History

The Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (ISCE), New Delhi, marked a significant milestone when it announced the results of this year's tenth standard public examination. Shanti Bhavan, a not-for-profit school that provides free education, room and board to the most socially and economically disadvantaged children in our country, saw its entire batch of students pass the March 2008 exam in First Classes.

"We are overjoyed by the success that our students achieved in this year's ISCE," said Lalita Law, principal of Shanti Bhavan. "Our goal is to provide children who otherwise would have no chance for formal education of any kind with the highest quality of education available regardless of economic or social constraints. We believe that given the opportunity, these children will excel just as their more privileged counterparts. Their achievements on the ISCE offer great inspiration to me, my staff and all of the other children at Shanti Bhavan."

Mahatma Gandhi often summed up the plight of the families of these children as "The lowest and the least, the last and the lost." The school which finds a mention in Tom Friedman's book 'The World Is Flat' is the result of one man's relentless dream to give the children from some 40 villages in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka a chance to compete on merit with the brightest and the best. The selection process is simple yet competitive, to ensure that poverty and other social handicaps do not deter or inhibit the native intelligence to imbibe the nurturing it needs. Shanti Bhavan can take pride in excellent facilities on par with good schools anywhere.

The school has prudently invested in sound facilities that enhance the students' yearnings for the best, be it books and teachers, the pollution-free sylvan surroundings, an excellent library, computers, stringent hygienic kitchen and medical facilities, a wholesome diet that is simple yet nutritious, and a good playground. It is headed by an exemplary principal, Mrs. Lalita Law, who inspires her group of teachers, caregivers and volunteers who come from all over the world to give and share.

When in September of last year a trunk-load of past question papers of the ISCE board exams was handed over to the school authorities, little did one realize that these young aspirants would burn the midnight oil and shine as they did.

According to Veerappan, a proud father who works as a labourer, Shanti Bhavan has transformed his child's life and that of his family. He says he now dreams of the day when his family can live a life with dignity and economic stability.

Yet another father who works as a mason observed, "We may build such campuses for the big companies, but it's heartening to now hope that our children can get a chance to work inside those buildings."

The ISCE results have proved that children from even the most deprived backgrounds can excel academically with hard work provided they are

offered the opportunity to have a quality education. According to the founder, Abraham George, the Shanti Bhavan model is one of the best ways to break the vicious cycle of poverty. "I would hope others partner with us or support our work," he admits, if only industries and financial institutions would extend a helping hand.

If the order of the day is 'first deserve then desire,' then who are better than Shanti Bhavan's promising students illuminating their lives from the abject darkness of poverty to bright prospects through a deserving charitable education.