

STATESCAN

Dream factory

Kerala: An institute helps Dalit youth find hot jobs

By Vinu Abraham



Action speaks louder: A campus workshop in progress at CREST

Big dreams were out of bounds for him. So thought K.R. Dilraj, 30. Clerk at the High Court of Kerala, he believed he couldn't aspire for more with his degree in economics. But that was until he came across the Centre for Research and Education for Social Transformation.

An autonomous institution run by the Kerala government in Kozhikode, CREST imparts skills to youth of scheduled castes and tribes and minority communities to help them find coveted jobs in the corporate world. Dilraj, member of a scheduled tribe, applied to CREST on a whim. Today, armed with an MBA, he is a portfolio manager at Standard Chartered Bank in Chennai. Married to an ENT surgeon and with a kid, he is a far cry from the timid clerk that he was.

Dilraj is one of the many who have benefited from the institute, which not just encourages youth to dream big, but also instils confidence in them to pursue higher education. "Our goal is to equip students from marginalised sections for high-end jobs, which can be obtained only through merit and not reservation," says D.D. Nampoothiri, executive director of CREST.

Started in 2002, the institute "makes them fit for the kind of jobs only the upper class, urban crowd is believed to be good at," says Nampoothiri. J. Vinod Kumar was not confident of facing an interview panel despite having cleared his B. Tech. But after his course at CREST, his personality underwent a sea change. He got an administrative job at a reputed hospital in the city and also taught at CREST for a few years. Today he is senior support engineer at EMC Corporation in Bangalore.

The five-month course at CREST covers the essentials of communication, etiquette, IT and personality development. Each batch has about 40 students—eight seats are reserved for members of ST, four for those from minority communities and the rest for SC students.



ASEEM KUMACHI

Success story: J. Vinod Kumar, a former student of CREST, is a senior support engineer at EMC Corporation, Bangalore

Though the minimum qualification is a bachelor's degree, many of the students are postgraduates. Students are selected on the basis of a test and interview. There is no course fee, and students get free accommodation and a fellowship of Rs 3,000 a month. In addition to the regular faculty, experts from outside coach the students.

Innovative methods of pedagogy are experimented with. For instance, Floating Space, a theatre group from Sri Lanka, specialising in the theatre of the oppressed, conducted a workshop at the institute. Says Remya Krishnan, a student from Kasaragod, "The workshop was an eye-opener. It taught us a thing or two about postures and movements, which are essential factors for success in the corporate world." The training covers the finer aspects of personality development. For instance, enjoying a good meal in a high-end restaurant is as important as performing well at an interview, says K. Sreelekha, a student from a tribal village in Wayanad. "People like me who have never set foot in an up-market restaurant get an opportunity to learn how to conduct themselves at

a corporate lunch or dinner," she says. Explains T.Y. Vinod Krishnan, associate programme coordinator of CREST, "Such experiences give students the right kind of exposure, especially for those who come from very backward places." The institute has a dedicated alumni, who are helping out in their own way. Says Vinod Kumar, president of the alumni association, "Apart from making ourselves available for consultation and giving classes for students, we are planning to institute scholarships for a few in each batch."

CREST also conducts a special course for SC/ST students who have got admission to engineering colleges to help them study well. Says Nampoothiri, "Only 10 per cent of 5,000 students from SC/ST communities in engineering colleges pass out in their first attempt. Many drop out, too. Our programme aims at making them fit for the course and completing it successfully."

At CREST, students are encouraged to respect their community. Instead of developing a contemptuous attitude towards their own people, they are advised to focus on their strengths. "We are asked to collect the oral history of our communities," says M.G. Prasad, a student from Wayanad. "It makes us proud of our roots. And confident enough to reach for the stars." ■

Route change

AP: Restarting odarpu yatra, Jagan seems to have charted out his own course

By Lalita Iyer

It is that time again when people begin to wonder if Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy is a mourning son or a pragmatic politician. Against the will of the Congress high command, the Kadapa MP is continuing his 'odarpu yatra' to console the families of those who died of shock after the death of his father, former chief minister Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, in a chopper accident last September. He resumed the yatra from Ichchapuram in Srikakulam on July 8, YSR's birth anniversary.

Odarpu yatra had taken a political turn in its first leg itself, when Jagan travelled to West Godavari and Khammam districts and made political observers sit up and think about his actual goals. The high command, though concerned, did not stop him, considering that K. Rosaiah had just taken over as chief minister and was having initial hiccups.

But in the second leg, all hell broke loose when the yatra was marred by violent protests by Telangana supporters in Warangal. The high command ordered Jagan to stop it and he obliged. But knowing that it would be political suicide if he sat quietly, Jagan asked his mother and Pulivendula MLA Vijayalakshmi to write to Congress president Sonia Gandhi.

"She was kind enough to give an audience to my mother, sister and me. But I don't know why she is not in favour of the yatra," Jagan said in an open letter to the public. "Sonijji asked us to call all the bereaved fami-