

Success Story : An inspiring tale of fortitude

"I wanted to achieve something high to inspire my thousands of friends out there in orphanages."

For Mohammed Ali Shihab, who has emerged successful in the Civil Services Examination this year and was placed 226th in the rank-list, going to a reputed campus still remains an unfulfilled experience. The 31-year-old winner from a remote village of Malappuram district in Kerala, who grew up in an orphanage, has a story of grit and perseverance to tell.

Born in penury in a village known as Edavannappara near Kondotty, Mr. Shihab spent his childhood helping his father Ali to sell betel leaves and bamboo baskets. Primary schooling was almost an optional affair for Mr. Shihab as he used to carry his chronically asthmatic father between their tiny home and ramshackle shop.

He was sent to Mukkam Muslim Orphanage in Kozhikode district the next day after his father died in 1991, as his family had no wherewithal to support his education. He was even made to fail in Class V in order to get an admission to the orphanage.

Becoming a teacher in an orphanage primary school was his dream. His parents were illiterate and poor but they had high ambitions about their three daughters and two sons. Mr. Shihab's brother Abdul Gafoor, who is 10 years elder, is an Ayurveda doctor. And all his sisters have had teacher training.

During his orphanage days, Mr. Shihab was inspired by some of his teachers who loved him and cared for him. The discipline maintained by the orphanage authorities had its influence in his life. It taught him what systematic life is.

He passed SSLC with good marks, and joined a pre-degree course at Mohammed Abdurahman Memorial Orphanage College, Manassery. He stopped the pre-degree (equivalent of higher secondary) course half-way and joined for a teacher-training course.

The orphanage authorities readmitted him for pre-degree course in the second year, and he did well in the last batch of the course. "I was lucky to be part of the last pre-degree batch in Kerala," he chuckled.

Despite the limited facilities and lack of privacy, he studied hard. He maintained a unique time-table for studies. He used to sleep soon after taking dinner from the orphanage mess around 8 p.m. and wake up around midnight for studies.

"I used to read in scant light under the cover of bed sheet and pillows in order not to disturb my friends sleeping in the neighbouring beds of the dormitory. In fact, I was violating the orphanage rules," he said.

After pre-degree, Mr. Shihab shifted to Bafakhi Orphanage at Valavannur and joined its school as a primary teacher. There the quizzier in Mr. Shihab began to flower, and he started preparing competitive examinations. He had little money to buy books but he read and assimilated whatever books that came his way. One by one, he started writing PSC exams.

He passed all the 21 PSC tests he took. In the meantime, he tried his hand at many jobs. He worked as an unskilled labourer for different organizations, pump operator for Kerala Water Authority, helper in a hotel, clerk in a panchayat office, and assistant in a government school. He cracked the exams for the selection of forester, railway ticket collector, jail warden, and peons and clerks. He got BA degree in history by writing the exams privately.

Aspiration

It was his brother, Dr. Gafoor, who took his mind to Civil Services. "I wanted to achieve something high to inspire my thousands of friends out there in orphanages," he said. Although luck was on his side, Mr. Shihab's life was not smooth at all.

He got married to Aysha Femina in 2006, and his daughter Liya Nawal was born two years later with Erb's palsy (paralysis of the arm). During his studies and exams, he used to shuttle between hospitals and home. The child is still undergoing physiotherapy. "She has recovered 90 per cent. I am hopeful," he said.

He was selected by New Delhi-based Zakat Foundation for free Civil Services coaching in 2009. That was the only time Zakat Foundation came to Kerala and took 12 students for coaching after conducting a screening test at P.S.M.O. College, Tirurangadi. "But for that coaching, I would not have made it to the Civil Services," Mr. Shihab said.

He got coaching in history and geography in New Delhi. But the chilling cold of Delhi made him sick and so he returned home.

He studied intensively for three months, getting out of his home only for the weekly Juma prayers. Subject pressures forced him to dump geography, and opt for Malayalam language and literature as a topic for the main examination.

He joined the Civil Services Institute at Pala for coaching in Malayalam. "I realised that I had a flair in Malayalam writing. I decided to write the mains in Malayalam, though it was a bit late," he said.

He was encouraged by the PM Foundation, Farook College. But none could instil in him so much of confidence as Aboobacker Siddique, an IAS topper from Malappuram who is now the District Collector of Simdega in Jharkhand.

"He boosted my confidence level by giving me training for 10 days. And I scored 201 out of 300 marks in interview, which was quite good." Mr. Shihab is hopeful of making it to IAS in backward community reservation. He advises the students to read widely, particularly the news and views columns of newspapers and journals.

An ardent fan of The Hindu, Mr. Shihab never got the paper at home. He always depended on reading rooms and libraries for the paper.

He tells the students: Set your goals firm. Never deviate from the route. Realise the demands of the tests you take. Read extensively at the initial phase. Perseverance should be the motto. Never give up hopes. Be committed to whatever you do. Success is assured. He believes that the future belongs to the children of rural areas. "They have great strengths. We should explore their potential. And they can certainly make it to the top."

BY ABDUL LATHEEF NAHA

Courtesy: The Hindu