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Magazine

The New
Sunday Express

February 17, 2008 ♦ Page 21

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JEEVAN JOSE



(Clockwise from left) Small men posing for the camera, with actress Jyothirmayee; Unda Pakru pointing out his entry in the Guinness book to director Vinayan; in the campus of the Janaseva Sisubhavan



With a height ranging from 2 to 4 feet, small men in Kerala struggle to survive in a largely indifferent society

BY SHEVLIN SEBASTIAN

IT'S A

HEN S Bhuvanachandran, 30, was in school, and it became clear that he was shorter than all his classmates, some of his friends told him that if he hung from a rope, he could become tall. So, Bhuvanachandran, with the help of a friend, tied two ropes to a tree in his house at Thiruvananthapuram and attached rubber rings at the end of it. He gripped the rings and hung from it for several days.

One day, Bhuvanachandran, who is 3 ft tall, decided that he would try a somersault, like they did in the circus.

"When I attempted it, because my arms are short, my head got stuck inside one ring," he says.

When he tried to pull his head out he ended up swinging from side to side. "I was stuck, and there seemed no way to free myself," he says. He says he was lucky the rings were made of rubber, and not iron, otherwise, it would have cut into the neck.

"A neighbour was watching and he assumed I was trying a new style," says Bhuvanachandran. "After a while, he shouted, 'Chandra, isn't it time to stop?'"

Since he was unable to speak, because of the ring around his neck, Bhuvanachandran stuck his tongue out and enlarged his eyes. "My neighbour was puzzled by my behaviour," he says. "It was only when he came close that he realised that I was stuck and freed me."

It is at this point in the tale that a group of small men, who are listening intently to Bhuvanachandran, burst out laughing. They range in height from 3 ft to 4 ft 6 inches, and in age from 19 to 42. Like Bhuvanachandran, they are members of an entertainment troupe, Janaseva Kalavadi.

Bhuvanachandran breaks out into a wide grin as he finishes his story. "I realised there was no point in doing these exercises," he says. "The doctors confirmed that I would be short forever." Bhuvanachandran scolded his friends for suggesting the 'rope' idea, while his brothers told him to be happy with his height.

On a sunny Friday morning, the small men are lounging around on chairs and on beds in a first floor hall at the campus of the Janaseva Sisubhavan, an orphanage run by founder-president Jose Maveli, 56, at Aluva, 30 km from Kochi. When the troupe performed at the Sisubhavan in 2005, they were touched by the children's reaction. "A few begged us to hug them, because nobody had done so," says Ajay Kumar. A relationship

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developed between the small men and the orphans and so, Maveli, allowed them to stay at Sisubhavan. They get free food and accommodation.

The troupe uses Sisubhavan as a base and go for shows all over the state. It is a two-hour performance of comedy, dance, drama and song. "This is the way we earn our living," says S Babish, 24, who is 4 ft tall.

Just like the orphans, the small men have also gone through difficult times. When Ajay Kumar was in Class ten, whenever there were protests by students, they would rush out of the class.

Invariably, Ajay would be the last, because he was afraid he would be trampled upon. "The other students would get angry because they thought I did not want to participate in the demonstration," he says. "They would

grab my collar and drag me out."

When Bhuvanachandran was ten years old, whenever the teacher entered the room, all the students would stand up and wish him 'good morning'.

Because the bench was so high, by the time he reached the floor, to stand up, everybody had sat down. "One day, the teacher told me, in front of the class, 'Chandra, you can greet me sitting down.' It was an embarrassing moment for me," he says.

HIS lack of height has obvious disadvantages, like when they use public transport. "When we travel by buses, after fifteen minutes of standing, we feel tired and we need to sit," says Babish. "Passengers sometimes get up when they see us, but

42, has married a woman, Seena, 32, who is 6'. "My wife is the tallest in the area where we live and I am the shortest," he says. "People laugh when they see us together."

They got together thanks to Ajay's friend, Kumar, who had got married to a girl called Mini. She was a friend of Seena and had told her about Ajay but warned her that he was very short.

"Seena agreed to see me," says Ajay. "I said that her being so tall was not an issue for me. I just wanted somebody who could be my wife." Eventually, Seena accepted the proposal. "There is no problem with sex," he says. "Only my legs and arms are small." Today, he has two girls, Vinida, 12, and Ganga, 10, but they have inherited his genes and are short. Meanwhile, Babish hopes to get married within the next few weeks, while the others are playing for similar luck.

HERE is a gung-ho positive energy among the group members. For each one of them, the turning point in their life was the film, *Alutha Dweep* (Wonder Island), directed by Vinayan, which was released in 2005. The film is based loosely on the famous English story, *Gulliver's Travels*, and is set on a fictitious island, Vamanapuri, where the men are 3 ft tall, while the women, because of a thousand-year-old curse, are of normal size and beautiful. The hero is Unda Pakru, who is Prince Gajendran, the heir-apparent.

Vinayan placed advertisements in newspapers in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in order to get the 300 small men he needed for the film. It took him six months to get all the men and among those selected were the members of the Janaseva Kalavadi troupe.

The 3 ft tall Bhuvanachandran says that when he first went to the set at Malampuzha, near Pallakad, he was astonished to see men who were shorter than him. "When we exchanged our life stories, I realised I was not alone," he says. "Some of them had suffered much more than me."

Sanal Jose, 22, who is 4' 6" tall, says he saw men who could not walk and some had such small hands that they could not scratch their backs and had to use a stick. "I realised I was lucky," he says.

Director Vinayan says that when the 300 men saw each other, there was a tremendous excitement. "They could not believe there were so many short men in India," he says. "One of them told me later that this was the first time he was having a conversation without craning his neck."

Vinayan, who interacted with them over several weeks, has a keen idea of their psyche. "They are like children," he says. "They get emotional very quickly. They cry easily and become violent very fast. Since they have suffered so much, because of their height, they have a keen sense of empathy for people who have gone through a bad time." He says that most of them are tormented by a deep inferiority complex and have spent years cooped up in rooms, afraid to meet the gaze of normal people.

Alutha Dweep became a hit and there were some positive benefits for the small men. "About 20 small men were able to get married," says Vinayan. "Somewhat, the girls, after seeing the film, realised that, except for their height, there was nothing wrong with these men."

Secondly, a powerful 'can do' attitude developed among the men. Soon after the film was released, they decided to form an association: the All Kerala Small Men Association was set up on August 18, 2005, with Jose Maveli, who is of normal height, as president. There are 400 members on the rolls now.

Says Maveli, "We have asked the government to include small men, with a maximum height of 4' 6", in the physically handicapped section."

As Unda Pakru says, "We are not physically handicapped, but at the same time, we are." Maveli says that the small men should not be treated on par with normal people. "When they travel, they run the risk of being killed and they also find it very difficult to get jobs," he says. "So, they need help." So far, the government has not reacted, even though the association had submitted a petition to the Chief Minister V S Achuthanandan a few months ago.

Meanwhile, whether they receive any government benefits or not, and despite the travails and difficulties of their daily life, most have a constant child-like smile on their faces.