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A unique eatery

**At first,
people
were
sceptical,
but the
food won
them over.**

NEETA LAL

Ashodaya Hotel in Mysore, a southern Indian city 139km from India's IT capital of Bangalore, is hardly a Michelin-starred eatery dishing out gourmet fare. But the 50-seat outlet is unique because it is staffed by sex workers, transsexuals and HIV-positive people.

Launched last year on World AIDS Day (Dec 1), as a part of the World Bank's entrepreneurial initiatives, the eatery (better known by its misnomer "hotel") has been set up by Ashodaya Samiti.

The Samiti is a pan-Indian community-based organisation that works for the empowerment of sex workers and helps integrate them into mainstream society.

"When we set up the restaurant last year," chuckles Bhagyalakshmi, 35, a sex worker employed at the eatery, "it was avoided by the locals like the plague. But now, the same people are flocking to eat here every day."

The outfit is packed through the day even though it serves only breakfast, snacks and beverages.

Perhaps its reasonably priced and tasty, all-veggie fare — served piping hot on gleaming steel plates — has something to do with it. Or perhaps it's the spectacular location — smack

dab opposite the stunning Mysore Palace, one of the country's richest cultural landmarks.

The cherry on the cake is provided by the eatery's 20-odd affable staff who have helped transform it into a popular *adda* (a colloquialism for joint) for workers, students, tourists and activists.

The menu includes a smorgasbord of healthy items like juices (beetroot, gooseberry, mint, aloe vera) and light, steamed or stir-fried snacks, sweetmeats and beverages.

Given the outlet's unexpected success, the Ashodaya committee is now planning to scale up the seating to 80 this year.

Vishnu, a regular visitor, says he keeps coming back to the bistro as its food is "reasonably priced and tasty".

Gautam, another regular, says it's the eatery's scrumptious saffron sweetmeat that he finds irresistible.

In fact, the eatery's offerings have become so popular that the management is now catering for private parties and public events. The restaurant itself is often booked for private events.

Shanthamma, a former sex worker, who multitasks as the cashier and host, revels in her new role as restaurant manager and admits she is meticulous about the quality of food served at the restaurant.

Prakash, another sex worker who is the head cook for the catering division, says he's proud of his culinary skills and likes to be "inventive" with each bulk order.

"Catering works well as an alternative source of income for sex workers," says Prakash.

Ashodaya Hotel operates from 6am to 6pm after which the sex workers shut shop and go about entertaining their nightly customers. The staff informs that the "hotel" was built through an 18-month World Bank grant to the Ashodaya Samiti. In fact, the Samiti now was one among 26 civil society organisations from across South Asia to win the competitive grant funded by the South Asia Region Development Marketplace (DM), a World Bank project.

What impressed the bank most was the Samiti's ingenuity in addressing the issue of the sex workers' social stigma and discrimi-

nation through entrepreneurship.

"We're not about reformation or rehabilitation," elaborates Dr Sushma Reza Paul, advisor to the Samiti and a University of Manitoba alumnus.

"We're about organisational development and entrepreneurship. And with a keen focus on these twin themes, we've been able to make a success of the eatery with the help of a highly competitive grant."

Perhaps what has also helped in this social entrepreneurship project is the Samiti members' earlier experience in running a community kitchen.

Ashodaya's drop-in-centres (DICs) — a rest and recreation space — are located in the same building as the hotel. They are a safe haven for the sex workers who are often mistreated or stigmatised in other public spaces. The DICs also feature clinical facilities in case of emergencies.

Encouraged by Ashodaya Hotel's success, the Samiti plans to start other service ventures like a launderette. Though the establishment does a daily turnover of US\$100 (RM360) per day, says Bhagyalakshmi, they're looking at projections of about US\$200 (RM725) in a few months.

The eatery's profits are channelled into the Ashodaya Samiti's social welfare activities like a community kitchen where sex workers can have free food since they suffer discrimination at most dining establishments.

The organisation also runs an orphanage and also has counsellors to educate sex workers about how to prevent the HIV infection. Sex education and condom distribution are a major part of the organisation's work.

As its moniker suggests, Ashodaya (the dawn of hope) symbolises hope for India's ostracised sex workers who are living a peripheral existence due to fixed social mindsets. The social welfare project will thus go a long way in empowering this marginalised community.

With 2.4 million people infected with the deadly disease, India has the dubious distinction of hosting the world's largest HIV/AIDS population for a single country in the world. Sex workers and their clients and partners especially are among the groups with the highest rates of infection.

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