

MEET THREE FIRST-GENERATION LEARNERS FROM ACROSS COUNTRY AT ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

'I come from a conservative family... no one has ever sent a girl so far away...'

VIDHEESHA KUNTAMALLA

NEW DELHI, AUGUST 30

COMING ALL the way from Warangal, Telangana, 17-year-old Velpula Shiva Raju was apprehensive that he would not be able to make friends at Ashoka University. "I thought I would be judged for the kind of background I come from. Plus, there was the language barrier," says Raju, son of a carpenter, who had not set foot in Delhi-NCR before.

A few weeks later, though, much of his doubts were put to rest. "I can't speak much Hindi. But everyone has been kind here so far," he says.

Raju is among the 48 first-generation college goers from

their families to have secured admission at the Ashoka University as part of its Academic Bridge Programme under which the entire fees of the students is waived off. The programme commenced in 2018; this year, as many as 29 women have been admitted under it — highest in three years as per data provided by the varsity.

One of these women is Monisha P, an 18-year-old from Bengaluru. The daughter of a house help mother and a construction worker father, she is experiencing many firsts on campus. "I have never been to a gym before. I have only looked at it from outside," she shares with *The Indian Express*. "Now, I work out regularly."

Monisha is studying Biology and Computer Science at the uni-



(From left) Monisha P, Velpula Shiva Raju and Alsiya Tabrez Sheikh. *Express*

versity. Reaching the portals of the prestigious university, situated in Sonapat, was fraught with challenges for Monisha. "I had to convince my mother for six months. There were safety concerns about sending me so far. Plus, we did not have enough funds for me to even afford the trip to Delhi. But somehow, arrangements were made

and I managed to get to the campus to start a new journey," says Monisha, who has three siblings.

Safety was one issue that Alsiya Tabrez Sheikh, a 19-year-old from Pune, could also relate with. "I come from a conservative family. No one has ever sent a girl child so far away in my extended family. When I first came

to Delhi and then entered this campus, I felt like I had come to a different country," says Sheikh.

"Going to college is truly a dream come true."

Sheikh's mother is a housewife while her father works at a private company. Oldest among four siblings, she credits her school. "If it wasn't for this op-

portunity, I would have been married off by now," she tells *The Indian Express*. A student of Computer Science and Entrepreneurship, Sheikh wants to become a "changemaker" by starting her own business.

The three students are among those from the Academic Bridge Programme who recently underwent a three-week session aimed at bridging the gap between their academic experience and college curriculum, and allowing them time to settle into campus before the commencement of their undergraduate course.

"Initially, I thought I would not be able to fit in here. But now that I am here, I am grateful for this opportunity," says Raju as he sits in his dormitory. He says the world here is a far cry from home where

he has seen his father work hard to provide for the family.

"My seniors from school have also helped me come this far," says Raju who studied at a government school. He is now pursuing his Bachelors in Computer Science and Entrepreneurship. Like Sheikh, he wants to become a businessman.

Monisha, on the other hand, wanted to become a doctor — a dream that she had to give up on due to financial constraints. "We never had the money for me to pursue MBBS. Besides, it takes so long to finish your MBBS and find a job," she says.

Coming from modest backgrounds, these students are not one to take the opportunity to attend college for granted. "My parents had no access to any type of

education, which is why they always felt I should get what they couldn't achieve," says Raju as he remembers the time when his household had no income due to the Covid pandemic.

With little time to be found between landing in Delhi and attending their classes, the three have not had much of a chance to explore the Capital — something they wish to change in the days to come. "We had no money to even travel to Delhi," says Monisha.

Amid the excitement of new beginnings, homesickness lingers. While Sheikh misses Pune's famous *misal pav*, Raju yearns for that comforting bowl of *semiya payasam*, a type of *kheer*. For Monisha, it is her mother's biryani. "Mummy ki biryani kiyaa aati hai..."

epaper.indianexpress.com

