

Sriharikota is not just the launchpad of India's ambitious space programme. It is also home to a small army of fishermen's children, who have grown up near the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, and now dream of becoming scientists, reports MN Samdani

# Isro propels spaceport kids' Astronaut Dreams

Satellite launches have been part of their growing up years. Not surprising then that many of the fishermen's children living around the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota (SHAR) dream of becoming scientists.

Murali Diwakar, a class 7 student at a government-managed upper primary school in Bhimuni Vari Palen near Sriharikota, is ecstatic as he talks about his dream of becoming an astronaut someday and his eagerness to know more about all that happens on the moon. "Chandrayaan-2 might have missed its target in the last mile but we are hopeful of its success in future. I am very eager to know more about the moon and such fascinating experiments," said a gleeful Diwakar.

Young Gayathri, living very close to SHAR, is equally elated. She can barely mask her excitement as she speaks about the thrill she experienced while watching a documentary on Sunia Williams going into space. She wants to undertake the same journey one day.

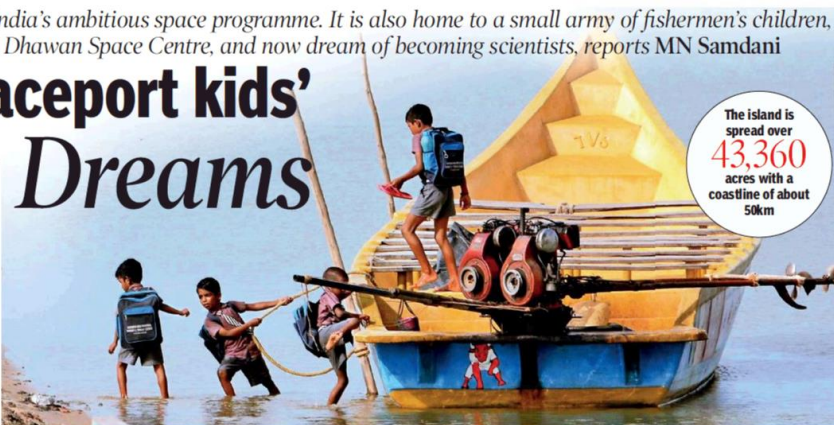
This enthusiasm of working at the space centre is visible among most of these children, all from poor fishermen families. "This is how Isro is influencing young minds living around SHAR," said C Ravindranath, retired scientist and former spokesperson of SHAR. Class 9 student, Ponna

Arasan, from Irakam Island is a good example. The boy who was on the verge of dropping out of school last year, owing to financial constraints at home, decided to continue his studies after being inspired by stories of satellite experiments at the space centre. "When my teacher explained to me the challenges that our scientists have to overcome, it gave me courage to fight my odds," said Arasan, happy to have changed his mind.

To further fuel their interest, SHAR organises competitions across schools and colleges in the surrounding districts and also invites them during exhibitions to get a first-hand feel of a space centre.

The Space Club in Gunur, for instance, takes at least 1,000 students to the centre every year. "Earlier, only students from class 10 and above could visit the space centre. They have relaxed the norm now and allow primary school children too after I made a presentation to the SHAR director," said Dr Santhamurthy of Space Club. "The place is a huge inspiration for everyone."

A science teacher at the government school in Tada village, K Ramesh, couldn't agree more. "I felt as if I was in space for a while when I visited the space centre recently. It was an out-of-the-world experience," he smiled. The visit not just enlightened him but also better equipped him to teach students.



The island is spread over 43,360 acres with a coastline of about 50km

## WHAT MAKES UP SRIHARIKOTA?

### SPINDLE ISLAND

Sriharikota is a small barrier island resembling a spindle in Sullurpet mandal. It's sandwiched between Pulicat Lake and Bay of Bengal. Prior to mid-1960s when it was taken over by the Central government for SHAR, the island with unique flora and fauna was inhabited by Yanadi tribe

### VILLAGES EVICTED

As many as 13 villages were vacated from Sriharikota for the launch of SHAR, subsequently named Satish Dhawan Space Centre. The villagers were rehabilitated on the mainland. Still, some fishermen hamlets are located in the ecologically fragile Pulicat Lake. Fishing is banned during satellite launch period for safety reasons

### ADVANTAGE SRIHARIKOTA

Sriharikota island is unique from the space sciences point of view as it has a good launch angle or azimuth corridor and is near the equator. Also, it has water on all sides and a negligible population

### POPULATION

According to census 2011, SHAR Project has a population of 6097. Its sex ratio of 911 is lower than the state average of 993. Child sex ratio is 858 as against AP's average of 933. However, it has higher literacy rate of 76.51 as against AP's 67.02%

### SPACE MISSION

The first two satellite launch vehicles (SLV3E1 on August 10, 1979, and SLV3E2 on July 18, 1980) were launched when Dr APJ Abdul Kalam was SHAR director. SHAR has two operational launch pads. So far, 73 launch missions and 536 launches have taken off from Sriharikota



## Hope is to reach space, but it's just boats for now

SamdaniMN@timesgroup.com

The Journey to the moon might be much longer but getting to school every day is equally adventurous for the children living around India's spaceport — home to some of the brightest minds in space programme.

With no facilities in their vicinity, children here travel up to two hours every day to get to school, partially by boat across the Pulicat Lake and partially by auto-rickshaws. Yet, their resolve to earn themselves a decent education is unflinching.

For Sriram, the day starts at 7am. After a 45- to 60-minute boat ride from Irakam Island to B V Palen — the nearest mainland — he waits in queue for an auto-rickshaw to get to school, another 30 minutes away. There are 200 children from Irakam who travel the same distance every day. "It is a routine affair for us," said the class 6 student. Even during rainy season, students seldom skip school. The fear of tides is no deterrent, confessed class 5 student Monisha. But elders rue the lack of staff and infrastructure. Better facilities can help students realise their dreams, they said.

## Plea to Isro: Open inlet at Pulicat Lake

Worried over the dwindling marine stocks in Pulicat Lake, the fishermen have now turned to the Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) for help. The inlet to Pulicat, the second biggest brackish water lake in India, was blocked by the space centre at Sriharikota for scientific purposes.

"The closure has stopped migration of fish and flow of water from the sea into the lake," explained fisherman Munivelu of Venadu Island. "We urge

space scientists to come to our rescue," he said. Venadu is one of the 19 fishermen hamlets located near SHAR. About 30,000 fishermen residing in villages around it continue to live sans basic infrastructure.

On the 3,000-strong Irakam Island, for instance, there is no medical centre. People have to travel 10 km to Tada or Sullurpet during emergencies. Though a bridge project was sanctioned, it hasn't taken off yet.

Fisherfolk want their children to study so they can lead a better life. We must make schools accessible to ensure children don't drop out mid-way

**RAMA AYYANGAR**  
TEMPLE PRIEST

About five years ago, we got a school in the island. But it is hard to retain a teacher here. That's why children travel long distances

**B SRIDHAR** | FORMER ZILA PARISHAD MEMBER