

Cricket and more on Kashmir boys' tour

A STAFF REPORTER

Md Shiraz had never seen a train in his 15 years or set foot outside his home district, Rajouri. He did both on Sunday, trooping into Jammu station with 22 other boys from the border district of Jammu and Kashmir to catch the Himgiri Express.

The teenagers on Tuesday reached Calcutta, the first stop on a tour of eastern India organised by the army as part of Operation Sadbhavana, in association with Priyamvada Birla Aravind Eye Hospital and Belle Vue Clinic.

"Operation Sadbhavana focuses on bringing development and dignity to the people in villages close to the PoK border," an army spokesperson said. Another aim of the tour is to show the youngsters their country, he added.

Going by Shiraz's reactions after attending a show at Birla Planetarium on Wednesday, the trip is a success.

"We were shown things we study in geography in school, only in much more detail. The night sky was so beautiful," gushed the Class X student from Pukharmi village.

"I want to grow up and become an engineer. When I make



The Kashmir boys at Birla Planetarium. (Sanat Kr Sinha)

enough money, I will bring my family (parents and six siblings) to see the planetarium. They cannot imagine something like this," he continued.

After their first look at Victoria Memorial, his travel companion Md Younus, exclaimed: "*Bilkul jaise TV mein dikhatein hain* (Just like it appears on TV)!"

The boys also visited the Indian Museum and South City Mall on Wednesday. They would head for Guwahati on Friday. Shillong and Chera-punji are the other two stops before they head back home.

The trip has given the boys the licence to dream. Younus now wants to visit Mumbai and meet his favourite hero, Salman Khan. On this trip, the school team off-spinner will

only get to meet a cricketing hero, former India skipper Sourav Ganguly.

"Sourav must have played school cricket like me. I will ask him how he rose through the ranks," said Tarif Shah, a Class X student from Kalakote in Rajouri.

Cricket features in a big way on the trip. The boys have a t20 match lined up with Sourav Ganguly's Videocon School of Cricket at Salt Lake on Thursday and also plan to catch Ranji Trophy action between Bengal and Tamil Nadu at the Eden Gardens. Their last destination is the botanical garden.

"Operation Sadbhavana has been successful in forestalling militancy in Ladakh," said Lt. General Arun Ray, GOC of HQ 14 Corps.