

RAIN-MAN BEHIND THE CHILDREN OF VEILPUR AND THEIR AZADI KA AMRUTH MAHOTSAV!



Thanks to G. Asok Kumar, the young Collector of Nizamabad district of Telangana 20 years back, whose efforts brought the diverse community together in their fight against child labor, many 5-14 year old children who were working as child labor are now enjoying Azadi from the shackles of the bonded child labor.

The surprising fact is that Veilpur mandal, which was a highly child labor prone mandal, retains its child labor free status even 20 years after it was declared as Child-labor free on 2nd October 2001! To honour the community leaders who took upon themselves to ensure it, V V Giri National Labour Institute, Noida organised a program on 8 October, 2021 at Nizamabad district, Telangana as part of the Azadi ka Amruth Mahotsav program of Ministry of Labor and Employment. (After all, in the last 20 years, the session Veilpur model was a popular and must-have session in all of the trainings run by the institute.) Smiles on the faces of some of those children who attended the program radiated confidence when they narrated the transformation education has brought to their lives, spoke volumes about the role of community in making sustainable transformations on social issues. Many said "but for the Collector, we would still have been filling air in cycles in cycle shops or working as bonded labours in beedi factories. See now we are educated, many of us have passed intermediate or engineering, a few of us have gone to USA! . The movement started by the Collector to enrol and retain all children in schools, was taken over and driven by the community for the last 20 years. They in-fact put up boards in all villages, proclaiming that "there are NO Child Labor in the village". They collectively wrote off almost Rs 35 lakh due as loan and interest from the parents who kept their children as guarantee for the loan repayment. The well attended hybrid function, with Arvind Dharmapuri, the local MP , Baji Reddy

Govardhan, MLA and chairman TRIC and Srinivas K., Director, LBSNAA joining virtually through video link, was a testimony to the axiom that social evils are best addressed by community engagement. Inspired by the success of Veilpur model, Prof Mahavir Jain, Sr faculty at VVGIL, who also served as Amicus Curiae for Supreme Court in many child labour cases, published a book "Elimination of Child Labour – A Possibility" in March 2006. The film "Maa Orulo Blakarmikalu Leru," based on the Veilpur model, won the Golden Nandi Award 2002 for the Best TV documentary of Andhra Pradesh.

This community participation has been the hall mark of all major initiatives taken up by G. Asok Kumar, the 1991 batch IAS officer from Telangana cadre. He also succeeded in making 1.40 lakh pucca Individual Sanitary Latrines built in Nizamabad in a short time as a peoples' movement in 2002, much before the start of similar drives elsewhere under Swachh Bharat Mission in 2014. Since they were built with the participation of people and not contractor driven, the usage of these toilets were found to be as high as 87% by some survey later on! After the program of honouring

the community elders for their role in making and retaining the "Child labor free status" of Veilpur was over, in trooped 50 of Jogins and Pothurajus who were given dignity and fresh lease of life by an out of box solution by the Collector 20 years back. All of them had brought flowers and shawls to thank him for the Azadi they got from a very shameful and barbaric life they were forced to live then. Some of them presented their kids who were studying for nursing or graduation and looked really empowered. It was a memorable home-coming for the Collector, after 17 years! No wonder that Nizamabad has a 200 acre lake named "Asok Sagar", named after the then Collector. Today, an attractive and imposing 18ft statue of Goddess Saraswati stands majestically in the centre of the lake and on its banks is a restaurant, making it a local tourist attraction.

Presently working as Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Asok Kumar is in charge of yet another movement based on peoples' participation launched on 22nd March 2021 by PM Modi himself by addressing virtually 2 lakhs of Sarpanchs – the "Jal Shakti Abhiyan- Catch the Rain" (JSA:CTR) campaign. The campaign to nudge the stake holders to create appropriate Rain Water Harvesting Structures(RWHS), suitable to the soil and climatic conditions, with active participation of the people, is to make Jal Andolan a Jan Andolan. Despite the loss of focus some time due to Covid second wave mitigation and intensive vaccination drives, since the launch on 22 March 2021, till 24.10.2021, both urban and rural areas put together, a total of 35,41,361 water related works completed/on-going (20,67,147 works completed and 14,74,214 works are in progress); in addition to 35 Cr+ afforestation activities done. The expenditure under MNREGS alone is Rs 51664 crores. He is trying to live upto the moniker of "Rain man" given to him by none other than Rajendra Singh, the "Water man" of India in one of the 200+ webinars organised on the campaign.

