

## Breaking the shackles

**A** "VELPUR" happens when the administration assumes an activist role and with active co-operation of the community puts an end to an evil giving hope to scores of children. Velpur's is a success story of how the government and the people forged a partnership to end child labour. This involved not only "releasing" the children but also making sure they don't return to being workers by ensuring they study in special classes in "bridge courses" and gradually join the mainstream.

In June 2001, the Nizamabad district administration decided to implement their plan to get all child labourers into school under District Primary Education Programme which is supported by the World Bank. A survey in the Velpur mandal chosen for the pilot project found that there were 539 children in 5-14 years in the 20 villages who were not in schools. Out of them 297 were girls and 252

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boys. A massive, highly intensive and carefully planned effort was launched to achieve 100 per cent enrolment of 5-14 years old children in Velpur mandal. With sustained efforts and close monitoring, Velpur Mandal achieved the unique distinction of becoming the first Mandal in Andhra Pradesh to be declared a child labour-free Mandal. Villagers have proudly put up boards that there are no children in their village who do not attend school. All the 6057 children in the mandal are in school. Another first was the signing of a MoU between the district administration represented by the Collector, G Ashok Kumar and the gram panchayats under which the local people guaranteed to send all children to school, guaranteed cent percent retention and total absence of child labour. In its turn the government guaranteed infrastructure facilities and teachers.

The success of Velpur encouraged the administration to move to Yedpally mandal this year where the enrollment of child



TOP: Little girls learning the alphabet. BELOW: Sudhakar Roa and his adopted daughter Monica

be successful unless the people participate actively...the government can only get the children to school by using all kinds of methods. But retaining them in school can be done only by the community," he said.

labourers in school is completed. The next "targets" are Nandipet and Renjal mandals. The people's response to the success story has been tremendous. The Collector regularly gets calls during the weekly "Dial-your-Collector" programme from people urging him to begin the programme in their village. Local politicians too have "invited" the administration to their constituencies. Egged on by such response and confident of repeating the success on a larger scale, the district administration has come out with a programme called "Balya Raksha" to eliminate child labour from the district and launched it in urban centres. It is a long haul undoubtedly there are 51,703 children out of school. The administration has targeted to bring 21,702 kids into school which works out to an average of 30-40 in each habitation.

Collector Ashok Kumar who is also the DPEP chairman for the district said Nizamabad has become synonymous for people's participation in eradication of child labour. "No programme will

There was tremendous resistance from the community to giving up their earning children in the case of parents, and labourers whose wages had already been paid in advance, in the case of employers. The project team members held marathon sessions, faced abuse, staged dharnas in front of houses of unwilling parents, "adopted" children to reassure the parents and held awareness sessions in Masjids after the Friday prayers. Child-to-child motivation was used; jataras and weddings came in handy to spread the message of the evil of child labour. One of the effective methods was to use the tradition of women applying "bottu" to a child labourer's mother and requesting that the child be sent to school. At times threats had to be used such as cutting off the monthly rations and of taking legal action against recalcitrant employers. Twenty employers were given notices of action under the Child Labour Act of 1986. In other cases, a police team was taken along to bring around people in villages identified as "stubborn". While some employers voluntarily gave up their child workers, others, espe-



cially in the construction sector, ganged up to beat up the officials as they had caused them "loss". Official estimates put the overall "loss" to employers in one mandal alone at Rs. 35 lakh.

The team members were totally engrossed in their work which they said was like a "yagnam". B R Jagadishwar Goud, Additional Project Coordinator, said they worked more like activists rather than officials. P Sudhakar Rao, Community Mobilisation Officer lived in the villages for about 70 days in the initial days, so involved he was in the programme. "I forgot that I had a wife and a daughter," he said. The inspiration came from the community most of

whom were convinced by their efforts as a "punya karyam" or a good deed. "The hero in this instance is really the community," said Sudhakar. In one village, he came across an orphaned pre-teen girl who was forced by her brother and sister-in-law to beg. When an angry sister-in-law demanded Sudhakar if he would take the responsibility of getting Gangulaxmi married since she would be living away from home, he said yes, and gave the undertaking in writing witnessed by the community. Gangulaxmi, who prefers to be called Monica now to avoid unpleasant memories of abuse of her earlier life, wants to become a doctor and Sudhakar says he will bear all expenses to see she achieves her goal. Sudhakar has similarly adopted three other children all of whom go to his home during festivals.

While 135 girls are in the hostel cum training centre for women run by the AP Women Cooperative Finance Corporation in Perkit town, 7 km from Velpur boys are lodged in a building in Tanakalan village in Yedpally mandal that has been vacant for several years due to a dispute.

Radha, another teenager, had come to Nizamabad town from Jagtial in Karimnagar as a maid servant with a family and later worked with a local dairy farmer after this family dismissed her. She was discovered by Nirmala Kumari, Girl Child Development Officer, crying as she had nowhere to go and did not need any persua-

sion to attend a school for free education. Karuna Jothi of Anksapur village used to roll beedis, found the school like a jail. For 15 days the women officials worked on her, persuading and counselling her. Today she is happy she stuck on. She passed her 7th class exam. Asked what she wanted to become after her schooling she said, work in a big office like you! Nagamani, an orphan proudly said he could now read 1st class text book in the last nine months in the school. She would like to pass 10th class and help orphans like her.

The success of the project inspired many an individual and institution to pitch in with their contribution. A private hospital donated uniforms to the girls and provide free medicare whenever the need arises, a bank gave free accommodation to house the boys' school, trunks were given to the children to put their books and other stuff and even a TV was donated so that the children can take a break now and then.

The Velpur project team doesn't agree that the families of child labourers suffer when this source of money is blocked. Often the parents, especially the father finds it convenient to use the children while he himself either lazes around or spends all his earnings on liquor. When the child's income is lost, he simply gets back to work or uses the meagre earnings with more responsibility. In one case the team found that the mother used half of the advance of Rs. 9,000 she got for her seven-year old son's earnings to buy a gold chain for herself.

Not all the children released from daily labour are in residential schools. Those who remain with their families are monitored by individuals appointed by the village level committees since retention is a tougher challenge. Any prolonged absence is investigated and parents persuaded to send the child back to school. The "Velpur model" of eradicating child labour is being studied by various organisations and funding agencies.

By next June the district administration wants to similarly rid eight more mandals (out of 36 in the district) of child labour. Having worked out and tried out the Velpur model successfully, the administration has identified 17 NGOs to carry on the work in other areas. Velpur does any government and citizens proud!

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in Hyderabad