

## My Experiences with Child labor

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### Prologue

Effects of most of the drives against child-labor end in a short-time after the completion of the drive, with the children dropping out from schools to return to their erstwhile work-place as Child-labor. But here is a case where a drive against Child labor in a sub-district, is sustained even after 20 years of its completion, thanks to the total control, commitment and involvement of the community.

The successful drive against child labor practices in Nizamabad<sup>1</sup> was the outcome of a dream translated into action, by breaking it down into very micro level tasks after careful planning based on brainstorming sessions with sincere volunteers and discussions with the stake holders; by sustained concentrated efforts put in by a set of committed people and total involvement of community. The close monitoring and daily feedback to the District Collector by the team in the field helped in making course corrections and changing strategies suited to various situations arising in the field on a day-to-day basis. This flexible approach but firm commitment of volunteers won hearts of the local public attracting them to join in the efforts making it a mass movement involving everyone irrespective of caste, creed or political affiliations. These efforts culminated in making [Veilpur a child labor free mandal](#)—having all 5-15 year old children in schools. The sense of pride built into the movement helped it to sustain the efforts **even after 20 years** of the completion of the drive.

Taking over as Collector, Nizamabad in May 2001, thrust area I identified to work was on issues that would lead to “*betterment of quality of life*” of the people in the district. First I undertook a firm, but very successful drive against the *Jogini* system prevalent there. In a series of steps, I could put an end to the thriving traditional practice in the district, making a significant change in the lives of young girls who were being converted as Jogins in God’s name! This caught national attention and the press described it as an “*historical social revolution*”. Enthused by this, I decided to focus on *education, health and hygiene*; and *tourism* sectors to usher in betterment in quality of life.

### Background:

In the year 2000, the Government of Andhra Pradesh (AP) directed the State Project Director (SPD) of DPEP (District Primary Education Program) to identify four mandals<sup>2</sup> in every district to be taken up for a special drive for Universalisation of Elementary Education (UEE). In Nizamabad district, four mandals viz- Veilpur, Renjal, Yedpally and Nandipet were identified to be taken up to achieve 100% enrolment of children of the age group 5-14 Yrs under the UEE scheme. Some preliminary survey was taken up in a routine manner and statistics obtained to be sent to state head quarters in the normal way.

Nizamabad is a district known for prevalence of child labor. Lots of children in the district are engaged in the beedi industry. The dowry rate of a bride-to-be in this district is said to be based on the number of beedis the girl can roll. The more beedis her nimble fingers can roll, the lesser the dowry amount. The National Child Labor Project (NCLP) of the Department of Labor, Government of India had identified this district as a child labor prone district and had started 34 NCLP schools in the district in 1994 itself. About 1400 girls were studying in the 34 non-residential bridge schools of the project in the district in 2001.

While reviewing the activities of the education department in the district, the Asst Project Co-ordinator (APC) of DPEP informed me about the activities taken up till then for the UEE program. A survey had been conducted to identify the “out of school children” in the selected four mandals and a

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<sup>1</sup> Nizamabad is a district known for prevalence of child labor in beedi sector in the state of Andhra Pradesh, India

<sup>2</sup> Mandals are the revenue administrative units below the district, akin to Tehasils in other states

meeting of MEOs was held. This sounded to have been done in a perfunctory manner and there was hardly any involvement of people.

A review with the Project Director, NCLP revealed that the bridge schools started long back were never shifted from places where those were started, thereby defeating their purpose. They were masquerading as regular schools. Bridge schools are intended to facilitate children who have dropped out from schools to come up to the level of the students of their age and get mainstreamed in regular schools. Once all such children in an area are mainstreamed, the bridge school there should be discontinued or shifted to a new area where similar children are available. This was not happening. No mainstreaming was done and the bridge schools were running as regular schools over a period of time. I felt that these schools were maintained for the benefit of the NGOs which run these schools rather than for the child labors for whom these were meant.

When I asked Mr. Jagadeeshwar Goud, the APC, DPEP and Mr. Sudhakar, CMO<sup>3</sup> whether could we make a mandal child labor free in six months time, though shocked initially, they responded that they would try if supported. I assured all support from my side and from the side of the entire district administration. We pored over the data available and I picked out Veilpur as the pilot mandal to try out our mission to make a child labor free mandal.

I picked up Veilpur as the pilot mandal for a couple of reasons. Though known for beedi making, the number of out of school children as per the initial survey data appeared to be relatively less. But when the drive started we found almost this double number in the field. This was a compact mandal with strong presence of Village Development Committees. These non-statutory bodies had good control over the villagers. This mandal was easily accessible, near to the district HQ and was known for its progressive farmers. The key officers like the MRO (Mandal Revenue Officer), the MDO (Mandal Development Officer), the MEO (Mandal Education Officer) and the Nodal Officer were young, committed and sincere workers. The political set up was also very congenial. Freshly elected to the Panchayati Raj Institutions they were also keen to make a mark. There were many active youth clubs.

### **Kickoff:**

Doubts were expressed in the beginning, as this type of drive was never attempted earlier. Many were skeptical. But a set of people like Jagdeeshwar Goud, Sudhakar and me wanted to give a try. We had a lot of brain storming sessions on how to go about the program and some rough plans worked out. We identified committed people who would be interested in these innovative programs.

By the time our background preparations were over, the Government came out with a new idea called “Chaduvulu Panduga”- festival of education. As far we were concerned this concept came in the most appropriate time. We wanted to use this festival as the launching pad for the drive against child labor in Veilpur.

A core team was formed with incorporating some active youth from the mandal. The team under Sudhakar, CMO was a very highly motivated one. Sudhakar led from the front, taking “Akshara Deeksha”. He stayed in the mandal for the entire period. His zeal kept the team members in high spirits. Smt Nirmal Kumari, the Girl Child Development Officer (GCDO); Sri Prakash, Sri Lakshman, Sri Sreenivas Reddy, the Mandal Resource Persons (MRPs) formed the core team. They were supported by Mr. Sayanna, the Nodal Officer for the Mandal, Mr Ravi Kumar, Mandal Revenue Officer (MRO); Mr Subramaniam, Mandal Development Officer (MPDO); Mr. Shanker (MEO). The GCDO was from Women and Child Welfare department and took care of the girl child issues; the Nodal Officer was the Assistant Project Officer of DRDA directly related to the

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<sup>3</sup> CMO- community Mobilisation Officer

DoWCRA<sup>4</sup> groups in the district. He could push the DoWCRA groups into action. The MRO is the Mandal Executive Magistrate and had some control over the police. The MDO looks after all the developmental works in the mandal and had good contact with the members of the Panchayat Raj Institutions and MLA. The MEO had control over all the teachers in the mandal. Sri Jagdeeshwar Goud was the APC, DPEP and was instrumental in co-ordinating the team in the mandal. Collector, as the District head and Chairman of DPEP and DRDA in the district had control over all the departmental officials and could use his discretionary powers for dovetailing funds for any confidence building measures. Thus the team had a good combination to achieve results.

On July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the campaign was launched at Veilpur. I addressed the meeting of all headmasters, school education committee members from all the schools in the mandal and the core team members. All promised to work to achieve the target of 100% enrolment. Role and responsibilities of each member were clearly delineated.

### **Drive and the strategies adopted:**

Based on the initial survey reports, key villages were identified and strategies worked out habitation wise depending upon the predominant caste or religion or nature of the economy of the area. Prominent persons of the area identified. It turned out that some of these people were the main employers of the children. The core team members met these village elders for their support for the drive. Sub-teams were formed to make detailed survey of all school aged children in each habitation. They listed out the name, father's name, age, caste, address, source of income for the parents and reasons for not attending a school if they are not attending any school etc. This was a fairly thorough exercise with data cross checking done with multiple sources. The children seemed to be the best source who would tell without fear where their friends and same age group children were engaged. This survey brought out many startling facts like the extant of indebtedness, complex relations between parents, moneylenders and contractors etc. Prevarication of the parents and employers were exposed by the children creating embarrassing situations to the former. The actual number of children engaged as labor almost doubled compared to the initial survey data. The initial friendliness of the villagers turned to suspicion and in cases even to outright hostility.

Canards were spread that the teams moving in villages were part of the nationwide racket which kidnap kids for taking out organs like kidneys, eyes for sale. Some hotels refused to serve tea and eatables, sarcastically saying that all their servers have joined school and now nobody is left to serve them. They were even asked whether the team got extra amount apart from salaries they for taking up the drive. Some offered to pay that amount if they left the mandal. The sight of the white ambassador car hired for the use of Sudhakar and the mandal team made the employers of child labor red with anger and forcing them to send the kids in their workforce under cover...Some villagers refused to give even drinking water to the team. But the team persisted...

The more the troubles they faced, the more they got determined. Daily the team used to assemble at the mandal HQ under the guidance of Jagdeeshwar Goud and Sudhakar to review the progress. After their meetings Sudhakar used to brief me, the District Collector, over phone in the night between 10PM and 11 PM on the progress made, problems faced, new strategies worked out and seeking further instructions. The district administration put its entire weight with the team. As District Collector, I ensured that all major programs, even the district level programs, connected with education and literacy were organized in Veilpur during the period. I attended these programs, which gave opportunity for mandal elders and representatives of PR institutions to interact freely with me. All the opportunities were used by the Collector to impress upon them about the need for elimination of child labor and necessity of education. Large number of posters were printed and

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<sup>4</sup> DoWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural areas) groups are the Self Help Groups of Women organized by the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) in the district.

pasted all over. These posters warned people not to engage children below 15 years. The punishment of fine of Rs 20000 and/or imprisonment was prominently mentioned in the posters. The Sub Inspector of the Police was directed by Collector and District Magistrate to implement the provisions of child labor Act strictly. The policemen attending the public meetings were openly directed by the Collector to register cases against the violators of the Child Labor Abolishment Act.

By then the Government of AP had broadened the definition of the child labor. From the limited scope of children engaged in hazardous occupation, the new definition identified all children who are not attending schools as child labor. This made the drive easy, as any body who is not sending a child to school could be booked under the child labor act of the state. In Veilpur, actually no case was booked, though the act and its penal provisions were publicized. The team worked up fear on the hard-core cases. They threatened to fine Rs 20000 for keeping a child out of school. They took photographs of children working and used this as “blackmailing” evidence. The employers bought peace of mind by sending the children to school. In one hotel after taking tea served by a child “waiter”, the team members paid the bill and pasted by the side of the cash counter the poster declaring Rs 20000 fine for engaging child labor. The next day the hotel owner came with all the young waiters in his hotel and joined them in the bridge school. The involvement of the executive magistrate- the MRO, the MDO and Nodal officer gave the power of law to the actions initiated.

The team raided work spots and located children engaged in labor. The team raided fields, forest areas to catch children engaged in cattle grazing; raided brick kilns to capture children engaged in brick making units; raided construction sites to prevent children from carrying bricks and mortar on head; raided hotels, tea shops, cycle shops, car service stations, beedi factories, houses of people with small kids to relieve the “baby sitters” and sibling care takers....

Migrant labors posed another very big problem. They were very difficult to track down as they did not have a fixed address and a place of stay. But special teams got “latched on” to them and traced them wherever they went. They were told that if they want employment in the mandal their children should be sent to school. Or else they were asked to leave the mandal. Very small children were admitted to Anganwadis, thereby relieving many children from the burden of sibling care.

Teachers were another reluctant entrants. The Mandal teachers initially thought that it is a project of DPEP and that they were not concerned with it. But with the direct involvement of Collector and MEO, they were forced to join in. I held meetings with the teachers’ unions and sought their support. I also held meetings with Head masters of schools in the mandal and the teachers. It was impressed upon them very clearly that the drive is directly related to education and that the teachers should be personally responsible for the retention of the children so painstakingly identified and joined in the school by the team/ villagers. They were asked to motivate the School Education Committees to involve in the drive and to make education in the schools interesting and attractive. They were told to take special care of children coming from the bridge schools and children who were having the fear of schools due to some bad incidents earlier in their life. They were asked not to beat or use very harsh words against the children. Slowly, as the momentum picked up, they were also carried away by the wave sweeping the mandal.

Two residential bridge schools were started in the mandal. One was for girls at the Mahila Pranganam run by the Women and Child Welfare department. This is a training center for women in crafts like sewing, candle making, printing, embroidery etc. Since sufficient place was available for secure and safe accommodation of girls in the premises, the identified girl child labors were brought to the Pranganam School. There were over 120 children at one time. They mutually supported and gave confidence to each other. Reluctant parents of girl children were taken to this school and shown the facilities, security and comfortable accommodation available to convince them to send their children to the school. Once the children were in the school, they were taken care of properly. Only after three or four days- once the child is acclimatized and comfortable- was the assessment of their

competency level taken up and teaching initiated accordingly. Most of the dropouts had forgotten almost everything they had learned earlier. Using different strategies like games, word play, role-play, word cards, counting of seeds etc the learning was made interesting and enjoyable. Their fear of schools disappeared. They were willing to go to schools.

The highly visible presence of the team members in the villages, their relentless campaign day and night moved people. They began to reason that when these officers of the Government worked hard for their cause why not they should join them. Some VDC members came forward; got convinced they motivated the rest to join the drive. The caste elders joined in. They castigated people who had children working with them. They even threatened to ostracize families who kept children as labor.

Series of meetings and counseling the core team members and the Collector had with the VDC members and mandal elders began to give positive results slowly. They started responding warmly to the issue. The pressure put all around- by the media, posters, visits by Collector, public meetings, the dogged persistence of the mandal team even in the face of severe reprisals and opposition, Sudhakar's Akshara Deeksha, hype all began bring about an attitudinal change – first among the caste elders, VDC leaders and then through them among the villagers. They began to realize that there is some sense in the campaign. Once the change started, there was a snow balling effect. The mandal people were told that theirs could be the first mandal in the state to be declared child labor. This played on their pride.

The elections to Mandals and Gram Panchayats were just over. The newly elected Mandal Parishad President, members and Gram sarpanchs wanted to do something positive for the mandal/village. The local press and intelligentsia openly came out in total support for the campaign. Sensing the mood of the people the political leaders joined the fray. They started attending the drive. The village and caste elders started to take a very proactive role. The VDCs took upon to themselves the task of sending the children in their area to the school. Allotment of new schools to the district by the Government helped the district administration to improve access and to meet the demand of the village elders for school.

The VDCs passed informal resolutions to send all children in the 5-15 age group to school. They warned everybody against engaging any child in their farms or to graze cattle or for any purpose. Even the migrant workers were told that if they wanted to work in the mandal, they should send children to school. This was followed by formal resolutions in the Gram Sabhas. In the end of the drive, every gram panchayat erected 10ft by 6ft boards giving the details of the number of children available in the school, number going to school etc. In every board they proudly painted "Children in the age group 5-15 from the village not attending any school - ZERO". This acted as a reminder to them and every time they saw the board, it was an inspiration to retain the zero drop out status.

Children were the best source of information and inspiration. They had details of their "counterparts" working in shops, factories, fields and else where. They could ferret from these kids, inside information about the details of bondage or obligations of their parents with the shop owner, moneylender or landlord that made their children work for them. Armed with such specific information, the team could call the bluff of many landlords who insisted that they had no kids working for them or that they had no idea why the children are coming to them for work. With these inside information, the team effectively countered lies of drunkard fathers or mothers who took loan to buy ornaments by keeping their child as mortgage. The children who were released from bondage would narrate their experiences in public, moving many people. The songs they would sing brought tears in the eyes of the listeners, strengthening their resolve to fight against the child labor. The "*Bala KalaBrindams*" – the teams of child artists- were a very big draw, attracting huge crowds to watch their performances.

Apart from child to child motivation, parent-to-parent motivation and mother-to-mother approach yielded good results. The women groups of DoWCRA discussed the issue of child labor and need for education in their weekly meetings. They felt that their parents did not send them to schools and hence they are made to depend on outsiders to keep their savings/thrift accounts. They decided that this should not happen to the next generation. They resolved to send all their children to schools, even if they lost the income brought by their school age working children. DoWCRA meetings resolved to support such families with credit on priority basis for such families faced with sudden reduction to family income due to stoppage of income from their school-age children who were sent to schools, as part of the drive. They resolved not to take beedi leaves for making beedis from contractors who gave beedi leaves to those who engaged child labor for beedi rolling.

Many public meetings were organized to drive in the point of necessity of education and the need of children to attend the school. In these meetings the children honored the ex-employers for releasing them from work. Under peer pressure, many of the ex-employers publicly announced writing off the balance amount (principal, its interest and penal interest) due to them from the parents of the kids and even gave books and pens to the children to pursue the studies. A rough study has found that the total amount written off totals to about Rs 35 lakhs! They did this, justifying it as a price for a good cause. Many of them not only waived off the dues but also gave materials for the kids to study in the school.

As the tempo picked up, more and more people joined the campaign. Press people were very supportive. They wrote many positive articles in favor of the campaign. They highlighted the provisions of the law against child labor. When the bridge school started, they gave lot of help. NGOs joined the fray. Not to be left behind all political leaders jumped into the bandwagon one by one. All religious leaders were persuaded to come out in open in favor of the drive. Team members held meetings in mosques after the Friday namaz. Powerful caste leaders were roped in. All these helped the movement to pick up momentum and slowly it snow balled into a massive people movement. Local MLA participated in many functions and in Padayatras in the mandal in support of the campaign. He donated 100 blankets to the children in the bridge school. Local Doctors offered free medical check ups to them. Not to be left behind, local MP distributed shoes. Local LPG dealer gave cooking gas cylinders free. Local bank gave toothpastes and brushes free. VDC gave free trunk boxes to children. All the time the Collector was directly involved in closely monitoring and guiding the campaign. This also helped to bring in an aura of seriousness to the campaign.

On 2 October, 2001 Veilpur was declared as a Child-labor free mandal. All the 8057 children in the mandal were in schools. This included the 800+ children brought back to schools and the 9 mentally retarded children identified during the drive and admitted to an institution catering to them.

To formalize the results of the campaign, all gram panchayats passed formal resolutions banning child labor in all forms in their jurisdiction and undertook to send all school age children to schools. They decided to ostracize anybody who employs a child for work. This was given wide publicity. They have challenged with a reward of Rs 500 to anyone who can report to them any school dropout student within its jurisdiction. Then in a public function all sarpanchs entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government committing to send all children in their jurisdiction to school. They also undertook to ensure retention of all school age children in the schools. The Government in turn undertook to provide access, infrastructure facilities and necessary teachers. The agreement was signed by DEO in presence of the District Collector. This was as per the provisions of the AP Compulsory Education Act 1985 and this was the first time in the history that such an agreement was signed between the Sarpanchs and the Government.

## **The Impact:**

The biggest success of the program is its sustenance by the community, ie even 20 years after declaring it child-labor free, there is still 100% retention in schools and no child labor in a mandal which was notorious for it. The cover story of the Eenadu's Sunday supplement on 18 April, 2010; the article in "The Hindu" newspaper on 25 September,2017 and acknowledgement on 12 June,2020 by VV Giri National Institute of Labor (VVGNIL), New Delhi bear the testimony and emphasizes that only when community gets involved, can social evils be tackled effectively and sustainably.

Prof Mahavir Jain, Sr faculty in VVGIL-a person who served as Amicus Curiae for Supreme Court in many Child labor cases- and his team visited Veilpur many times to assess the successful drive against child labor. Impressed with what he saw, he published a book "Elimination of Child Labor –A possibility" in March 2006, totally based on their assessment of Veilpur model.

Success in Veilpur spurred similar drives in all other mandals in Nizamabad district. Within a year, TEN other mandals achieved near elimination of child labor and 100% enrolment/retention. The film "*Maa Orulo Blakarmikalulu Ieru,*" based on this [drive in Veilpur](#), won the Golden Nandi award for the Best TV documentary in Andhra Pradesh state in the year 2002.

Personally speaking, I am overwhelmed with the love and affection the villagers in Veilpur mandal shower on me, even many years after I left the district. Every year, around April/May months when the results of SSC exams are published, I get calls from many child-labor-turned-students who passed the exam. It is very fulfilling when they call and thank me and say "but for you, Sir, I would still be working as a tea-boy in a hotel or an errand boy or a beedi-roller."

The most memorable incident happened in May 2006. I was then the Collector of Kadapa district. I was seated at New Delhi airport, awaiting my flight to Hyderabad after attending the Prime Minister's meeting/dinner with selected District Collectors, when my cell phone rang. The call was from the President of Mandal Praja Parishad of Veilpur. She said that the last meeting of the elected body was going on, as their 5 year term had come to an end and that all the members wanted me to address the meeting as I was "their Collector" who had motivated them to fight against child labor. She said they were still ensuring that all children in their mandal were in schools. Brushing away my protests, she said that she was keeping her cell phone on speaker phone mode in front of the mike, so that all members can listen to me. I had the privilege to address a Mandal Praja Parishad meeting for 3 minutes as "their Collector," that too 3 years after I had left the district, sitting in an airport, more than a thousand kilometers away.

That was the commitment of Veilpur villagers in the drive against Child labor. That is why it is sustained even after 20 years and still show-cased in all concerned training sessions in VVGNIL.

## **Epilogue**

The success in carrying community along in implementing socially relevant programs helped me to get closer to people as Collector. The district topped in the state in implementation of many governmental programs. Their total involvement saw construction of 1.4 lakh house-hold sanitary toilets and functional toilets in 1000 schools in 2002; in formation of 1168 habitation drinking water committees which collectively resulted in drastic reduction of the GE and diarrhea cases in the district. Jogin system, prevalent for over 700 years, was put to an end. The old dilapidated district hospital was modernized at a cost of Rs 10 Crores. Organized "Indur Utsav"- a pioneering concept of a "5 day district tourism festival" in 2001 and 2002, by raising funds from local people. There was a perceptible improvement in the quality of life of the people in the district.

As a mark of their appreciation, the loving people of Nizamabad district were magnanimous to rename a 200 acre historical lake near Nizamabad city as "[Asok Sagar](#)" after me, when it was transformed into a tourist attraction!