

Recounting Velpur's story in ending child labour

Every year, June 12 is observed as World Day Against Child Labor (WDACL) under the auspices of the International Labour Organization (ILO). In an attempt to draw the attention of the world on the issue of child labour, the day brings together governments, employers and workers' organisations as well as civil society to work towards ending child labour. Though Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 calls on the global community to take effective measures to end child labour in all its forms by 2025, we are far from achieving this.

Child labour is prevalent all over the world, robbing many children of their basic right to live with dignity, enjoy their childhood and attain their full development potential. Across the world, 160 million children are estimated to be involved in child labour – which is almost one among 10 children. The Africa, Asia and the Pacific regions together account for almost nine out of every 10 children being in child labour. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation for many underprivileged children, when their schools closed, and their parents lost their jobs/wages. Many children who dropped out of school, and who were forced to work to supplement their family income, have not returned to school.

The extent of child labour in India

India has a significant incidence of child labour. Census 2011 estimated that 43.53 lakh children in the age group of five to 14 were involved in child labour due to factors such as poverty, non-accessibility and illiteracy. Child labour is preferred in beedi, carpet-weaving and firework factories.

India enacted the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act (CLPRA) in 1986, while the National Policy on Child Labour, 1987 sought to adopt a gradual and sequential approach with a focus on rehabilitation. Its action plan included strict enforcement of the CLPRA and implementation of the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) in areas where there is a high incidence of child labour. The CLPRA was replaced with the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, which prohibited the employment of children below 14 and had provisions for the prohibition on employment of adolescents (14-18 years) in scheduled hazardous occupations. The Right to Education now mandates that the state shall provide free and compulsory education to all children in the age group six to 14 years.

Most drives against child labour have been



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effective but only for a short time. There are several instances of children who were engaged earlier in labour and who dropped out of school returning to their workplace. But there is a success story.

The Velpur model

Velpur Mandal (tehsil) of Nizamabad district in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh (now Telangana), was once notorious for child labour. But in a dramatic way it became a rare exception of shunning child labour due to the total control, the commitment and the involvement of the local community. In June 2001, a drive involving the community was started in Velpur to ensure that all children in the age group of five to 15 years went to school and that no child would be engaged as labour in any form. After a sustained campaign for about 100 days, Velpur was declared to be a "child labour free mandal", on October 2, 2001. Twenty-four years later, there is 100% retention in schools and no child labour in a mandal once notorious for it.

The campaign to identify and track every out-of-school child and enrol them in schools was initially led by a committed set of officials. But the fact is that there was large-scale resistance in the beginning. Canards were spread that the teams moving in villages were part of a nationwide racket to kidnap children and sell their organs such as kidneys and eyes. Hotels refused to serve even tea, with those in hotels making sarcastic remarks that all their servers had joined school.

But after persistent efforts and discussions with the people, the tide began to turn. People began to cooperate and even transformed it as their movement. Children who were seen in work places were sent to bridge schools under the NCLP. Public meetings emphasised the necessity of education and the need for children to go to school. In these meetings, children recognised their (former) employers who let them stop work and go to school.

Under peer pressure, former employers also made a public announcement of writing off the balance amount (principal, the interest and penal interest) owed to them by the parents who took hand loans from them (the children were used as mortgage and as child labour till the amount was repaid). They even distributed school stationery to the children.

A study found that a total amount of about ₹35 lakh was written off – the price for a good cause. All sarpanchs signed a memorandum of understanding (as in the provisions of the Andhra Pradesh Compulsory Primary Education Rules, 1982), with the government (district education officer in the presence of the District Collector) to

ensure that all children in the five to 14 age group in their village were sent to school. The government in turn undertook to provide access, infrastructure and teachers. This was the first time that such an agreement had been signed between sarpanchs and the government. There is no child labour – an achievement that is very zealously guarded by the community. To cherish this proud achievement of being the first mandal in the State to be declared child labour free and to remind them of their commitment to sustain it, villagers erected boards in every village with the words, 'There is no child labour in our village'.

On October 8, 2021, as a part of the 'Azadi ka Amruth Mahotsav', the V.V. Giri National Labour Institute, (VVGNI) Noida, Uttar Pradesh (under the Ministry of Labor and Employment, Government of India) organised a programme in Nizamabad. The event was to celebrate 20 years of successful intervention "to eliminate child labour and the declaration of Velpur Mandal, as Child labour free". All sarpanchs, caste elders, zilla parishad members and people involved in the campaign were honoured for their role in sustaining it. The challenge made to the local media to identify at least one child who was not in school had no takers. A leading news magazine had an exclusive report on this event.

The Velpur story is well documented and has been appreciated by the ILO and the media. Velpur has been visited by many experts in the fields of education and child labour. The former President of India, A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, and members of the National Human Rights Commission India sent letters of appreciation.

The Velpur model, where there was the complete participation of the community in sustaining the fight against child labour, is an integral part of all training programmes that are organised by the VVGNI. Made aware of its sustained success, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development asked the then District Collector, who led this campaign, to make a presentation before it on November 24, 2022. The Parliamentary Standing Committee appreciated and acknowledged its success.

What is vital

This is a community-led success story that is testimony of the axiom that social issues can be successfully and sustainably addressed only if they metamorphose into a people's movement. It is a proud moment for this writer to have been associated with it. He was the Collector of Nizamabad district, when this drive against child labour was taken up in Velpur in 2001.

Twenty-four years later, there is 100% retention in schools and no child labour in this mandal in Telangana