

Grassroots

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Change agents, they are an HR manager's dream

Vidyarambam offers free supplementary education to rural children in government schools. The NGO was started to help children get over the English-learning barrier, to enable them to complete schooling and do better in life. Ranganathan, the founder, enrolled village girls who had passed Standard XII and trained them to be teachers, fondly called *akkas* or elder sisters. The care and freedom evident in their interactions with the children is the key differentiator. So, an army of '12th pass' village girls is now triggering a societal transformation, and enjoying it, too

THOMAS ABRAHAM, Chennai

It is a balmy afternoon in Karaimedu Village in Tamil Nadu's Nagapattinam District. Along a cart track 2 km off the main road, an English rhyme can be heard above an assortment of sounds predominantly from crows and cattle. It is a group of some 20 children energetically participating in an action song about Nature. They have occupied an 8' x 12' cemented platform with a thatched roof, adjoining a thatched house.

Leading them is a diminutive young woman, joyfully enacting the song. She laughs out along with the children when spinning around to show the earth in rotation. Her name is Kanimozhi. She teaches supplementary English, Tamil and Mathematics, to Standard IV and V students of the nearby Panchayat Matriculation School. Every afternoon, she takes two-hourly classes for them.

Kanimozhi is an *akka* (elder sister) with Vidyarambam, an NGO that offers free supplementary education to rural children in government schools, using child-friendly teaching

methods. After a course in Nursing, she had worked as a nurse in a Karaikal hospital. But their daughter staying in a hostel and working some 120 km away was clearly not her parents' plan for her. So Kanimozhi returned, was introduced to Vidyarambam and underwent training in the NGO's teaching methods. The job was literally at her doorstep, to the great relief of her family. Since then, afternoons in the neighbourhood have been lively, with the womenfolk entertained by the children in action.

Just two houses away, Kanimozhi's cousin Parimala is teaching a group of younger children seated in a circle beside the cart road. She is Karaimedu's first BEd, awaiting the results of her MA(History) results. But there is no question of her travelling for employment, especially with her father, a forest officer, coming home only during weekends.

Rs 1000 a month for two enjoyable hours a day with the children is not bad, as Kanimozhi acknowledges. It is an assured supplementary income for her family that lives off a leased



Kanimozhi.

Vidyarambam was born because one man refused to ignore a problem that stares people in the face. Following a career with L&T and then a stint in the Gulf, V. Ranganathan was in Vattakottai, Kanyakumari District, in the summer of 2002. He was scouting for a place to settle down for his retirement, maybe teaching a useful thing or two to village children. He got talking to pre-primary school children. Soon it was evident to him that the children knew little of Maths or even Tamil. "Why do you go to school?" he asked them in desperation. The children answered by opening their bags and triumphantly pulling out the battered aluminium plates they use for the free midday meals.

Ranganathan soon found out that the dropout rate was the highest at Standard VIII: that is when the 'dreaded' English is introduced in State Board schools. He realised that if only the village children were helped to get over the hurdle, more children would complete schooling and would do better in life. He took help from former teachers to develop indigenous and ingenious ways to make learning a fun thing and not a torture. He enrolled village girls who had passed Standard XII and trained them to be tutors, nay, *akkas*. The care and the freedom evident in their interactions with the children

agricultural land. Additionally, both cousins work as 'temporary' teachers in their village schools, earning only a similar pay for full-time work.

highlight the attitudinal differentiator that makes Vidyarambam different. That has allowed the NGO to silently trigger a societal transformation in over 5000 Tamil Nadu villages by boosting the learning skills of over seven lakh children, mostly first-generation students, replacing their diffidence with a new confidence to aspire and achieve.

Equally, Vidyarambam has been a life-changing experience for more than 6200 village girls who have been *akkas* with Vidyarambam at some stage in their lives. As Pavitra and Kanimozhi explain, but for the jobs at their door steps, they would have been sitting at home confined to constricting spaces, doing nothing. In rural societies, once the family decides that the girl has studied 'enough', then the next natural event is marriage, and "earlier the better". There is no question of them stepping out for jobs which would normally entail walking a few km to the main road and then catching a bus. Families and society would prefer that they stay at home. Vidyarambam offers an interesting and socially acceptable alternative, to stretch the gap between studies in the teens and marriage in their twenties.

Rural societies still respect a teacher, and more so a Vidyarambam teacher with her special teaching methods and skills. She is perceived as an asset to the family, now and in the future. The greatest thrill for the girls is the positive feedback from their wards' parents. The families of the *akkas* also earn the reflected respect, which boosts the standing and self-image of these teenagers/young women. The job gives them a circle of likeminded friends - their Facebook as it were, but more real and reliable, to confide in and to hold hands. The sense of belonging

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Parimala with the children in her class.

FOCUS

A farmer-activist leads a band of earth warriors

It is no longer possible for anyone to mess with Meera Chaudhury of Janakpur Village in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Over time, the 50-year-old has been transformed. From being a loving mother of six and a hardworking farmer, she is now a seasoned union leader. Farmers' rights, livelihood issues, especially rural women's access to work and land, and gender equality, are priorities for Meera and her group. Meera's brand of activism is centred on women. Gender inequality is what drives her to work tirelessly

MEHRU JAFFER, Gorakhpur



Photos: MJ/WFS

Meera Chaudhury (left) of Janakpur Village in eastern Uttar Pradesh, with her friends. The hardworking farmer leads a feisty union of small and marginalised farmers in the region.

Meera, 50, is the backbone of the local branch of a powerful union of small and marginalised farmers that was formed in December 2000, following a state-wide farmers' conference held in Lucknow. She has been associated with the group since 2003 and understands the challenges, both environmental and administrative, faced by the farming community.

The first time that Janakpur Village in eastern Uttar Pradesh took notice of the feisty woman was around six years ago when she led a movement against alcoholism ensuring that the age-old tradition of fermenting *mahua* fruit to make country liquor was eliminated. The drive earned her the title of 'commander-in-chief' of Meera's Sena, a group of rural women and men that raises its voice against all cultural, social and government policies that do more harm than good. Farmers' rights, livelihood issues, especially rural women's access to work and land, and gender equality, are priorities for Meera and her group.

Livelihood concerns have been dogging the local farming community

for a few years now. Climate-related risks in the form of floods and droughts that hit this region with frightening regularity have been responsible for this, as crop failures and loss of livestock become a part of life. And with the responsibility of running a household getting tougher with each passing year, the burden on women has increased manifold – they stretch themselves doing household chores and then looking for ways to supplement the family income.

Understanding the need of the hour, Meera's Sena has taken it upon itself to ensure the implementation of livelihood schemes in their area and has, on occasion, even confronted officials who create unnecessary hurdles. Recalls Satyendra Kumar Tripathi, a farmers' rights activist and project officer with the Gorakhpur Environmental Action Group (GEAG), a non-government organisation that works with the local community and provides support to the farmers' union, "On one occasion, Meera took the local bureaucracy head-on when she boldly asked an official who was demanding a bribe, whether he hadn't received his salary

from the government that month."

Of course, Meera's brand of activism is centred on women. That's because she knows that not only are they central to the home economy, they are the ones who are critical to the success of climate change adaptation strategies, which can ensure a more stable future for the next generation. Gender inequality is what drives her to work tirelessly. "Both women and men are part of the same society but they do not enjoy the same rights," feels the union leader, who has been a keen observer of women's rights for over a decade.

Why is Meera seeking to change women's fate? She is driven by the belief that while the problems faced by Indian women in general are multiple, those emanating out of acute poverty and anonymity have made life for rural women even worse. Till date, there are no official records of women owning productive assets, especially agricultural land. Despite the fact that nearly 70 per cent of the female work force in the country is engaged in agriculture, only 10 per cent of women farmers actually own land. In Uttar Pradesh, the situation

is even more alarming – just six per cent women farmers hold land in their name, less than one per cent have participated in government training programmes, a meagre four per cent have access to institutional credit and only eight per cent have control over agricultural income.

Supporting her in her crusade is GEAG. "Awareness is the key to any social change," believes Tripathi. Keeping in mind that gender is a social construct and that the position of women is quite unfavourable in these parts, most awareness campaigns initiated by the organisation have started off by addressing and promoting gender equality. This has meant a special focus on looking at the disadvantages women are up against in their own environment so that they can challenge the unfair practices themselves.

Meera herself has been a beneficiary of such an approach, having been associated with GEAG for many years. She says, "There was a time when I was afraid to even look at the men in my family. Today, I am ready to take on any man, including government officials."

An incident that took place in Janakpur regarding the issuing of job cards under the government's flagship rural livelihood guarantee scheme, the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), indicates how far she has travelled. "When the village head told me that under the MGNREGA, women were

not entitled to a job card, I promptly called the toll-free number of their office headquartered in New Delhi to report the matter," she relates. She also went ahead and convened a meeting in the village to talk to people about their entitlements under the scheme – how they have a right to demand 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a year, how every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work can benefit under the Act, and how when women in the village – who are usually paid less than men for working for an equal number of hours – they can insist on equal wages.

Bringing a balance in gender relations can really impact the way in which communities deal with climate change. But as Aditi Kapoor of Alternative Futures, a New Delhi-based development, research and communication group that is documenting gender-differentiated climate change impacts and adaptation interventions, has pointed out in the report, *Engendering the Climate for Change: Policies and Practices for Gender-just Adaptation*, "Transforming gender relations is not about 'adding' women to existing power structures and institutions but is about doing things differently to address women's and men's needs and concerns."

That is why Meera's role in the formation of self help groups (SHGs) in Janakpur, home to 300 poverty-stricken farmer families, as well as the neighbouring villages, is significant. The SHGs are a Ministry of Rural Development strategy to organise rural women into interest groups that concentrate on basic social issues, like health and hygiene awareness or anti-liquor mobilisation.

Women like Meera and her friend Putla Devi are the pillars of the SHG movement in Janakpur. Taking time off from tilling, sowing and harvesting – common activities that local women are engaged in – they get down to other business like improving access to credit for poor women who are now perceived even by the mainstream financial sector as creditworthy. Women chiefly use their savings and credit to overcome climate change threats, a process that has benefited the larger community.

The other advantage of a vibrant SHG network is that the organisations working on adaptation interventions can make use of these groups to expand their work. They enable rural development specialists like Tripathi to get to know the local women and help them take up specific adaptive mechanisms like creating grain banks and resource centres for agricultural equipment.

Meera's determined army is well on its way to building a more environment-friendly and gender just life for themselves, but much still needs to be done. As Tripathi concludes, "Together we are getting there, but of course there is still a long way to go."

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Fighting for their rights is on every village woman's agenda.

Uncared-for and forgotten: the helpless plight of the Paharias

The Paharias of Odisha live mainly in Nuapada, Kalahandi, Balangir, Bargarh and Nabarangpur Districts of the state. Eighty per cent percent of them are landless and almost none of them have proper houses to live in, making do with makeshift mud houses. Their literacy level is less than 10 per cent. With little government support, the 2000-odd Paharia households in Odisha are finding survival difficult. Many of them are now migrating to different parts of India and are being exploited by labour contractors and employers

AJIT KUMAR PANDA, Khariar (Odisha)

Photos: AKP



Where time stands still: women and children of Khadang Village.

Their lives revolve around the bamboo plant. The Paharia or Kamar are a group of people who are considered Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in some states of India, but not in all. In Odisha, they do not fall under the list of Tribes, possibly because of a mix-up by some long-ago officials who compiled a list of tribes, with the term Kamara, which refers to blacksmiths who are not considered tribes.

Be that as it may, the 2000-odd Paharia households in Odisha are finding survival difficult. They mostly weave bamboo baskets for their living, and with dwindling bamboo thickets, their raw material is dwindling too. To make matters worse, their being denied 'tribe' status prevents them from availing of many a government benefit.

In January this year, over 2000 Paharias of Odisha met in a convention and chalked out a five-point charter of demands which they sent to the chief minister of Odisha. They are seeking action by Odisha MPs to bring pressure on the Union Government on the matter of granting them tribe status. The Tribes Advisory Council (TAC), Odisha, under the chairmanship of the Odisha Chief Minister has recommended the inclusion of Paharias in the constitutional (ST) order, but the issue has been pending with the Centre for more than 10 years.

The Paharias in Odisha live mainly in Nuapada, Kalahandi, Balangir, Bargarh and Nabarangpur Districts of the state. "Eighty per cent percent of our people are landless and almost none of them have proper houses to live in, most of us live in makeshift

mud houses. Our backwardness is evident even in our literacy level, which is less than 10 per cent," says Indra Paharia of Kamajari hamlet in Bargaon. The Paharias usually stay near forests where bamboo is available. They live in small clusters of houses, with rarely more than 12 houses per cluster.

The Paharias in present-day Odisha State were considered tribal people when the area was under the Central Province during the period of British rule, prior to 1936. The *gauntias* (headmen of villages) who belonged to Paharia Community had even been accorded protected status during the first and second land settlements in 1891 and 1901 by the British. Land transfer was not allowed at all under the Central Province Tenancy Act. But the annexation of their habitats in present Nuapada District in 1936 stripped the Paharias of their tribal status. The Paharia *gauntias* were replaced and most of the lands owned by the Paharias was transferred to people of other castes. The land records (Zamabandi records) of the 1940s show that most of the land transfer from the Paharias to non-tribal people were made after the annexation of the areas.

There are other documents to prove that the Paharias are indeed tribal people. The administrative reports of feudatory states prepared by Richard Temple in 1868-69, for example, as well as the reports of V. Ball (Jungle Life in India - 1880), the work of M.S. Shring (1879), etc state that the Paharias are aboriginals, cave dwellers, hunters and gatherers. The Census Reports of 1901 and 1911 too describe Paharias as tribals.

The issue of tribal status of the Paharias was first raised by Fanindam Deo in his research work in 1983. "The scheduled list of the tribals perhaps was prepared by the officials without any proper study, which excluded genuine groups like Kamar from the list. The officials might have thought that Kamar and the Kamara who are non-tribal (blacksmiths are known as Kamara in Odia) are the same. This caused the exclusion and deprivation," says Deo.

A question was raised in the Odisha Assembly in 1985 by some members on the exclusion and marginalisation of the Paharias. But no action was taken by the government at the time. After a long gap, the issue drew the attention of the government again, when the Paharias continuously raised the matter through agitations

and engagement in dialogues with politicians and officials at various levels. In 2005, the TAC under the chairmanship of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik recommended the inclusion of Paharia in the constitutional order. The Council wanted the matter to be pursued with the Government of India for quick notification. The TAC has subsequently raised the issue every year, but the matter has not been taken up by the Centre.

The Odisha Government in the meantime has issued an administrative order extending various facilities to Paharias at par with tribals in all development activities. However, the Paharias of Kalahandi, Balangir and Bargarh Districts complain that the administrations in the districts are not implementing the order.



The only occupation they know: A Paharia man weaving a basket.



Forlorn looks on their faces - children of Dhekunpani Village.



For Paharia children, the only food more often than not is rice. It's what you may call a bland existence. (Right) A Paharia woman enters a small well in Dhekunpani Village to collect water. These are the kind of hardships tribal people face in 21st Century India.

Sukalsai Paharia, the only college educated person within the Paharia Community of Odisha, recently filed a case with the National Human Rights Commission of India and the Commission has issued notice to the chief secretary of Odisha to furnish detailed information on the tribal issue.

"Our livelihood revolves around bamboo basket weaving, but non-availability of bamboo these days has drastically affected our livelihood. Most of our people are now migrating under distress conditions to different parts of the country and are being exploited by the labour contractors and employers," says Sukal.

The January Convention urged the government to initiate a special project in Odisha for the development of Paharias. It also sought facilities such as housing, land allotment under the Forest Rights Act, land development under MGNREGS, raising of bamboo plantation, etc. The district collectors of Nuapada and the project director of the District Rural Development Authority have assured the people that they would take up the issue with the government. ■

(The writer is a social activist working in the rural areas of Odisha. He is engaged in reporting and documenting various problems faced by rural people as well as their success stories.)

Bold women who took the plunge into the unfamiliar and survived

Meet Susheela, Rukmini, Sarla and Ganga. They are friends, they share a common past and perhaps even their future is going to be alike. These women from the OBC (Other Backward Classes) Community are domestic workers in Lucknow. Five years ago, none of them had ever thought that there would come a time when they'd have no option but to leave their native villages and small farms in neighbouring Chhattisgarh to build a new life in the city. Leaving the village behind has proved to be a boon; it has brought them independence and a regular income

TARANNUM, Lucknow

Migration from the predominantly tribal, insurgency-hit state in eastern India is not a new phenomenon. In the book, *In Search of Livelihood: Labour Migration from Chhattisgarh*, published by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar National Institute of Social Sciences, authors Y.G. Joshi and D.K. Verma have noted that, "Seasonal labour out-migration is today a regional characteristic of the area, involving nearly a million population which, barring few southern states, moves nearly to all parts of the country. The labour migration from this area... is a part of household survival strategy of the marginal farmers and landless workers who are unable to find work locally... Nevertheless migrating out for work has become an essential component of household economy for a large section of the poor population..."

Susheela's household could well be one of the marginalised ones that Joshi and Verma have written about. It was a failed harvest that brought her to Lucknow, over 700 km from her home in Bilaspur, nearly a decade ago. She says, "I came with my husband's parents, to work as a labourer on a flyover. Due to a bad crop there was a huge loan to be repaid. Around three dozen families from my village got work on that flyover."

Later, while Susheela's father-in-law went back to tend to their

small farm, she and her mother-in-law Rajbala stayed on to find work either as construction workers or domestic workers, simply because "there was no way our small field in Bilaspur could feed a large family of 13". Susheela may have started off as a seasonal migrant but her move became a permanent one.

Statistics of the UP Labour Department reveal that there are around 22000 migrant domestic workers from other states in Lucknow alone and, of these, around 3000 are from Chhattisgarh. They come in search of better prospects but the transition is hard on them – physically and emotionally. Says Susheela, "I had to leave my one-year-old daughter in Bilaspur in the care of my father-in-law and husband, who is a mason. Every day, I wanted to go back to her, but my mother-in-law told me that we needed to earn so that we could pay off the debt."

Saving money in a big city, however, is easier said than done. Susheela's friend from Bilaspur, Rukmini, 25, who is also working in Lucknow as a maid, says, "Initially, the biggest problem we all faced was of language. The Hindi dialect spoken in Lucknow is different from that of our native place and it took a long time getting used to it. This is especially true when we go into homes to work." Negotiating unfamiliar city routes, living in one-room tenements

in squalid slums and surviving on subsistence wages, arbitrarily fixed, are just some of the other problems.

What kept Susheela going were the biannual visits back home. "We used to save money and then, twice a year, went back to hand it over to my father-in-law. While returning, we brought back food grain so that we didn't have to buy it from the shop," she recalls. In this way, it took Susheela and Rajbala eight years to repay the loan and then acquire an additional small piece of land in Bilaspur. Says Rajbala, 65, "My husband thought that buying a little more land would help us settle back home. But it never happened. Lucknow is our home now."

For the past 10 years, life has been fairly constant for Susheela. Two years ago, her husband and daughters – she has three now – joined her in her Patel Nagar home in Lucknow. Her only connect with Bilaspur is the annual visit to her *sasural* (marital home) to collect her share of the produce from the small farm there.

Life in the city has worn her out. The 35-year-old dusky woman, wakes up every morning, hurriedly completes a few household chores and is out for work by 7.30 am. As a domestic worker, she toils in a dozen households in the Indira Nagar and Nishatganj localities before heading back home in the evening. Her monthly earnings? Anywhere between Rs 8000 and Rs 10000. But it's not enough to survive, considering how expensive everything is – her daily commute generally involves a bus and rickshaw ride.

It is well established that domestic workers are among the most exploited and under-represented members of the workforce in India. Although there is the Domestic Workers (Registration, Social Security and Welfare) Bill 2008, which seeks to regulate and improve their conditions of work, it has remained at the drafting stage. Implementing even minimal protections has been difficult given that the work is conducted in the private space of the home and that there is a singular lack of will on the part of the upper and middle classes, as well as governments, to address the specific concerns of this section of society.

It may be a hard daily grind for Susheela, but she insists that she is a happier woman today. She is just grateful that she has some money every month and is oblivious to the fact that she is being exploited. For



Susheela, 35, who hails from Chhattisgarh, has been working as a domestic worker in Lucknow for over 10 years now. Out at 7.30 am from her home, she toils in a dozen households in the Indira Nagar and Nishatganj localities before heading back home in the evening.

her, it's important that her family is with her – her sister-in-law and elder brother-in-law with his wife also stay with them.

The steady move out of the village has also impacted Sarla – her entire family has come over, bag and baggage. Sarla found it difficult at first to make an entry into the labour market because of her nine-month-old daughter, but now she has found work cleaning homes and washing dishes. Her husband and brother-in-law work as bricklayers for housing projects in the city.

While Susheela and Sarla have their families by their side, Rukmini is still waiting for her 11-year-old daughter and husband to join her. In the past 10 years or so, Rukmini has not been able to save enough to support the entire family in the city. While her elder daughter lives in Bilaspur, the two younger daughters, age nine and four, are with her. "They are too small so I have them here with me," she explains. Would she like to go back to Bilaspur? "What will I do there?" she shoots back. She now plans to call her eldest daughter over and teach her domestic work. Her husband can then follow.

Interestingly, Susheela and Rukmini's 'prosperity' has encouraged many of their friends and neighbours

to migrate too. In fact, Sarla and Ganga were once Susheela's neighbours. Says Sarla, "It helped to have people from the village here. It assisted us in coping with the initial difficulties we faced."

Here are courageous women who took the plunge into the unfamiliar and survived. They all believe that leaving the village behind has proved to be a boon – it has brought them independence and regular income which "ensures food on our plates", as one woman put it. But what about their living conditions? The education of their children, especially their daughters? The unrelenting pace of work? Because if they do not work, they do not eat.

These are questions that remain unanswered. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Photos: Tarannum/WFS

Sarla found it difficult at first to make an entry into the labour market because of her nine-month-old daughter, but now she has found work cleaning homes and washing dishes.

Strangers in their own land; so, whose country is this anyway?

Untouchable: it is only one of the harsh realities facing the Koragas, an Adivasi community in Karnataka and Kerala. They and other tribal groups across India are being displaced due to increasing incidence of land-grabbing and are facing the threat of disappearing livelihoods and dying dialects. It is ironical that indigenous people across India continue to struggle for the forests, animals and rivers which have been an integral part of their lives for hundreds, probably even thousands, of years and which they are equipped to safeguard

PUSHPA ACHANTA, Bengaluru



Koraga men – Sukesh, 13, Sneha Nagaraj, 28, and Ranga Koraga, 43.

“Untouchability is a sin, it is inhuman,” said Gandhiji. Articles 14 and 15 of the Constitution of India guarantee the Right to Equality and Non-discrimination. However, as is the case with much legislation, the adherence to these and other laws, policies and government orders that seek to protect the interests of socio-economically marginalised groups such as Dalits and Adivasis is poor. It is therefore sad and shameful, but not surprising, that treating people as untouchables and other types of social isolation are still practised in a number of places in India.

‘Untouchability’, a term that is often used in India, is only one of the harsh realities facing the Koragas, an Adivasi community living in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi Districts of southern Karnataka and Kasargod in north Kerala. “Our lands



Suseela, 30, a Koraga agricultural worker from Karnataka.

were taken away from our ancestors and the forests where the Koraga Community used to live, are being encroached upon by the government, factories and private companies,” laments Ranga Koraga, a cultural activist. “There are over 10000 of us Koraga people in southern Karnataka who speak a mix of Malayalam, Kannada and Tulu. We are forced to work as labourers on farms for around Rs 100 a day, which is lower than the minimum daily wage,” says Ranga, who himself ekes out a living as an agricultural labourer. “Women, who are accorded great respect in our matrilineal society, are paid even less for their work as labourers,” he adds.

For the past couple of decades, Soliga, Siddhi, Hakki Pikki, Jenakuruba, Koraga and other tribal groups have been involved in various joint campaigns to save their lands and forests, but their efforts have met with minimal success, according to Ranga. “It is obvious that the government does not have much regard for the Forest Rights Act 2006 under which we are entitled to the land that we have occupied for generations,” he says. The articulate Koraga, in his early forties, is part of a troupe which has been using traditional songs, accompanied by the melodious flute, the powerful beat of drums and rhythmic body movements, to create awareness about the tribal community and its customs.

In addition to the alienation from their traditional areas of habitation and livelihood, members of the Koraga clan are considered to be untouchable. Suseela, a soft-spoken Koraga woman in her thirties, says, “We are not easily allowed into the

homes or even streets where people from the dominant castes live, as we are regarded as polluting. It is an assault on our dignity and also a violation of our rights as human beings. We are not permitted to draw water from wells or tanks that are located in places occupied by people from other castes. There are very few sources of clean water which can be accessed easily by us Koragas. The few Koraga children who study in government schools are also made to sit and eat in segregated spaces.”

Karnataka has passed the Koragas Prohibition of Ajaru Practice Act 2000 to punish those who treat others as untouchables. Nevertheless, the problem persists, making one wonder how much awareness there is about the Act, especially among government officers who are responsible for acting against those who violate the law.

Adivasis such as the Koragas and the Santhals in Jharkhand have in common their relentless fight to retain their unique socio-cultural traditions and reclaim their right over the land and water bodies that they have been using or living with. “I usually talk in our dialect wherever I go as I am keen to make others know of its existence and also convey that we are being displaced from the places where our predecessors lived. I also impart to others the knowledge which I acquired from my elders about medicinal herbs, natural cures and the nutritional content of various plants,” says Salge Mardi, a determined 48-year-old Santhal woman from East Singhbhum District of Jharkhand, who can talk fluently in Hindi too. Incidentally, the language of the Santhals does not have a script, as is the case with many other indigenous tongues, and thus faces the risk of becoming extinct.

“If we raise our voices against the injustice meted out to us by the state



Koraga women – Lalitha (left), 24, and Padmini, 25.



Photos: PH

Santhals from Jharkhand – Salge Mardi (left), 48, and Siddheshwar, 60.

and private agencies, we are issued threats, falsely accused of causing disturbance and sent to jail,” laments Anand Marandi, a young Santhal man. “A few of our associates were killed while some others received grave injuries during a peaceful march that we had organised in 2008 against the forced acquisition of our land and the adverse effect of the pollution on air and groundwater because of mining activities,” he recalls. “We have been successful in some of our campaigns to stop the RPG, Tata and Jindal Groups who are interested in mining coal, iron ore and uranium. However, there is a chance that one or more of these organisations will return. That is because local mining contractors, entrepreneurs, government officers, bureaucrats, politicians and ministers are in collusion with each other,” he adds.

Marandi is a writer and filmmaker who has studied up to Class X and hails from a family which makes its living from a piece of agricultural land they own. According to him, when the land belonging to Adivasis is taken away by the government or private corporations, monetary compensation and alternative land are either non-existent or minimal. Further, jobs that are promised to the Adivasis whose livelihoods are impacted due to displacement often do not come through because of their lack of necessary skills.

Also, the *jan sunvai* (public hearing) that must be conducted in the presence of the persons to be uprooted, is often a farce, Marandi alleges. It is rarely held, and if it is, it is done with hardly any prior notification of its date, time and venue. At a recent

such meeting, not only was sufficient notice not given to the Adivasis, but, it is believed that many of the people present at the hearing had been chosen by the organisers for being neutral or in favour of the mining companies, he added.



Anand Marandi, 26, Santhal activist and filmmaker from Jharkhand.

There is a dearth of schools and health care centres in the Adivasi areas, reports Marandi. The roads could do with improvement too. “However, we are not easily allowed to hold meetings or awareness campaigns regarding our basic rights and entitlements,” he says. ■

Teaching young women self-reliance and resilience

It is an exceptional experiment in education for rural girls of Gurdaspur and Amritsar. This girls' school in Punjab, which started with 14 students, has much more than a regular curriculum. Today, 3500 girls are enrolled up to the master's level. The school educates its students on life skills and lets them live and learn for themselves. It is one of the few institutions that offers to educate anyone willing to learn. While the tuition fee is only Rs 800 a year, boarding and lodging comes for an annual fee of Rs 5500

DEEPIKA, Gurdaspur (Punjab)

Photos: Surendra Bansal



Bonding while readying rotis for a meal.

Constant giggling, playful pulling of plaits and good-natured teasing are part and parcel of life in girls' schools. They are very much a part of life in the Baba Aya Singh Riarki College in Gurdaspur. However, the institution is a far cry from the run-of-the-mill educational institution. This is a school with a difference. It is an exceptional experiment in education for the rural girls of Gurdaspur and Amritsar. It dates back to 1934, when a social worker called Baba Aya Singh established a small *putri pathshala* (girls' school). He went on to set up the SKD High School in 1939. The institution has pioneered women's education and empowerment in the state.

The female child sex ratio in Punjab is amongst the lowest in the country

(846 as against the national average of 914), because of which the college has been creating awareness on the importance of girls. It has, for almost 80 years now, been providing young women an intrinsic understanding of self-reliance, resilience and sustenance. Today, Principal Swaran Singh Virk is at the helm of affairs.

"Women are the pillars of any society. With a weak foundation, how long can any structure possibly stand?" asks Virk, as he emphasises the importance of women's education. He recalls the early challenges the college faced in a society reluctant to grant its daughters an education. "In 1974, after campaigning from village to village about the need to give girls higher education, I was promised 34 students. Twenty backed out and so we started with a batch of 14. These

girls sat for the Prep exam (equivalent to Class XI) and Giani (a Punjabi language examination) and secured excellent results."

Today, the school has the required number of teachers and is affiliated to the Punjab School Education Board. There are around 3500 girls – boarders and day scholars – who are enrolled from Class VI to the master's level. The college falls under the jurisdiction of the Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU) but is not affiliated to it, as it is not a conventional institution. Students of the college appear privately for their graduation and post-graduation examinations.

The college has six teachers, who teach the senior classes. The remaining classes are taken by senior students through the 'each one, teach one' approach. This not only cuts down the cost of hiring teachers, but also inculcates a sense of responsibility and confidence in the 'student lecturer'.

The college and school have no funding or subsidy from outside. Interestingly, the tuition fee is only Rs 800 a year. Boarding and lodging comes for an annual fee of Rs 5500. It is one of the few institutions that offer to educate anyone willing to learn – there are classes for those who cannot pay, those who can pay a little and those who can afford to pay the full fees.

With such limited resources, the school is an exhibit of excellent and fool-proof management. Homespun rugs, or dhurries, are used to seat the students; desks and benches are used only during examinations. The college utilises naturally and locally available material such as sunlight, cow dung and human excreta for the generation of electricity and biogas.



Students plant saplings on campus.

The eight-acre school farm supplies vegetables and grains and dairy produce from buffaloes for the girls' dietary needs. The girls are in charge of everything on campus. Student-secretaries run the administration, and each class has one. Even the menu is discussed and cooked according to what everybody agrees upon.

There is no 'imparting of education' to students here. They learn what they practise in their daily life. The girls schedule their day in line with their duties – in the kitchen, manning the gate, etc. Regular classroom learning is interspersed with music classes and religious studies. Stitching, sewing and cooking, first aid and craft work are a few other areas that the girls are trained in. Along with the generic curriculum of the school and college, the girls imbibe life skills deeply rooted in values, culture and tradition through practice. A city-bred student might not take kindly to such tasks

but here in Tugalwala, the girls pride themselves in looking after their school.

"We would rather do without aid than take orders from others. We use solar lighting to save on electricity. We have no fuel bill as we have our own biogas plant. The stationery and general store is run and managed by the students and makes a profit of Rs 150000 a year. Even the fittings and infrastructure is recycled or sold for scrap," explains Virk.

The excellence in standards extends to the classrooms. The students pride themselves on an unblemished record in examinations and this, without a single case of cheating. The college offers a reward of Rs 21000 to anyone who can spot someone cheating or copying in the examinations. The girls also in public admit to incidences of cheating in

prior schools. When asked if they are ashamed of acknowledging the fact, they proudly respond, "I should have been ashamed of cheating then, not admitting my fault today."

Values are of utmost priority here. Sikhism is part of the curriculum but the students are taught to respect all faiths. Various sayings from different religions adorn the walls of the school, inspiring young minds. The institution also boasts of treasuring culture and tradition. The campus houses a museum of old utensils and other things that were once an integral part of Punjabi culture, like handmade pots, *madhaanis* (churning implements), coins, etc, reminding the youngsters of the rich heritage that is now almost lost.

Love for the school and for her peers resonates in second year BA student Simran's voice when she says "There is no place like home, and this is home! The bonds we build and share here are nothing short of familial ties. So it is obvious that we miss each other and the college when we are at home..." Adds Keerat, a final-year BA student, "Each time we go home for vacations, we are filled with mixed emotions. Sometimes, midway through the vacation I feel like running back here. The freedom of thought and speech we have here sometimes outdoes our status at our own homes."

(Courtesy: indiawaterportal.org)



Embodying the spirit of freedom of thought and speech — a day of revellry at the school. (Right) All attention as a class is in session.

An ode to a forlorn 7-year-old urchin and other stories

Every year, the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai, sends its students to various parts of India's hinterland to cover issues in deprivation. This year, in January, one group was assigned Vellore and the prospect of feasting on the famed Ambur biryani (Ambur is a town in Vellore District) was reason enough for the group to rejoice. Student **Jairam Seshadri** says he enjoyed the biryani but ended up with an upset stomach and slight fever, and so stayed away from food that evening. When his roommate left the hotel to grab a bite, Seshadri ventured out for a walk. Along the way, he spotted a forlorn child, not more than seven years old, dressed in almost tattered clothes. He knelt and offered the boy a chocolate bar. The boy retreated, not even looking to see who the Good Samaritan was. Seshadri never saw the boy again. When he got back, his poetic instinct got the better of him (see below). And then, of course, he penned other stories as well (bottom and on next page)... all of them reflecting the lives lived in the Real India.

An attempt to share a Cadbury with a muse, disguised as a seven-year old urchin; a darkness enveloping him alone, brightness elsewhere and all around. Kneeling beside, proffering the chocolate, in condescension, for as is 'their' wont to snatch at any offering. But surprisingly, his face withdrawing, almost cowering, in retreat. Bemused, my pride, not in any way bruised, delving within, what to him, deep pockets, I offered small change, but that too with a sudden sprite-fiery, summarily brushed aside. My calm remained unbroken. I asked, "What will it take to quell the ember? What would you like if not lucre?" "Do not appease with measly fare," said he, "If you so dare, feed me to the full, properly." My smile not judging, I stood in quiet gaze, feeling some Force, kindling kindness ablaze and another Dark Force urging no quarter. Then, a compelling, quick voice, disembodied, took over: "Lead. Let's quench your desire's banter." And as he skipped and trotted leading the way, the menacing darkness vanishing with neon invading, with his shadows prancing in separate jigs, toward some thatched shack, through a mud-laden path. To my chagrin though, eleven more cackling muses emerge from cracks paving the sun-bludgeoned earth, revelling in the manna. I could not shoo, not when the Force within, held and had won, and this they knew. And so it was, twelve in a frenzy, gathered, blathering incoherent, and despite little largesse in my heart, the sudden electric injected into the Dozen, seemed to siphon my reticence. The food served, all gorge, except the one instrumental in bringing us to this lodge. Seeing I had not ordered for myself any food, asked in earnest, if I were not in the mood. "No," I said cursorily and asked him to begin his chew. But he would not listen - despite hunger-rats gnashing, evident within. Demanded I take from his share, most insistent. I coaxed, I cajoled, even threatening to make my way home, leaving them to pay for it all, cold. Not moved was he, not shaken. No fear of missing a meal lurking in his famished frame awakened. He just would not eat. Well and truly defiant, till I had taken a bit at least from his share, as his treat. Admitting defeat, hiding well the awe owed a living god, I helped myself to a little of his food and only after, did he join with the earnest, ravenous brood, not taking eyes off, from his remaining portion. Now who was I to pray for blessings to flow his way? Above any human-being seen, towering, for blessed was he from his very birth, this king of men, so becoming. And in the hush and the awe that prevailed, I heard a peal, a light laughter within his nimbus-gold, despite the visible cataract, a vale of tears, with all tinsel shorn.

Battered by odds, she lives for herself, and with dignity



Photo: JS

Maheshwari in a rare moment of stillness on the matchstick factory floor.

"I am living for myself - not for society and how it tells me to live." Those are the words of Maheshwari Devi, 35, one of 11 workers sitting on the floor, packing matchsticks in the Jayalakshmi Match Factory at Vilinapuram, Vellore, into a matchbox, at a speed that made it impossible to take a picture without her hands being blurred.

Maheshwari was married when she was 14 and her husband's village was 22 km from her parents' village. "From the very beginning he would entertain other women. At first, I thought it was the normal thing to do, as I was still young. Then when I learned it was not all right to be married and going after other women, I confronted him," she says.

The consequences of such confrontation are unnerving to hear, despite knowing many rural and urban women go through the same ordeal. "He would beat me, sometimes stay away for days, drinking," she says.

Maheshwari put up with her husband's abusive behaviour for 18 years, during which time she began doing coolie work. This enabled her to meet her basic needs. "My parents were poor and so I had to drop out of school when I got married," she says. On being asked whether her children are being sent to school, she smiles and says, "I never had any children. My uterus, the doctors say, is too small. And so I was never able to conceive." She dismisses the fact surprisingly cheerily, especially when every one of her co-workers in the factory is a married mother.

Would she like children? "Of course. Which woman does not? But, if there is not enough income and a stable family, bringing children into this world is a curse. I am glad that I was not able to conceive," she says.

Two years ago, "almost to the day", abandoning her husband who had been gone for days from her village, she moved back to her own village to live with her parents. On being asked what she will do when she is old, she retorts, "Am I not earning now? I will continue to earn and save a little every day for my old age. I can take care of myself." Every woman working seated on the floor in that dimly lit factory applauded on hearing those words.

Although Maheshwari's story reflects the social ills of India's poor - exploitation at work (she earns Rs 100-Rs 150 a day packing matchsticks into a matchbox seven hours a day), early marriage, alcoholism, domestic abuse, lack of access to free education - she has carved a niche for herself that allows her to look ahead with hope. "Who knows," she says looking into the distance, "I may yet meet someone who is responsible and I can start a family."

They really don't believe in saving up for a rainy day



Photo: JS

Ponni, with Gopi and their six children outside their hut in Seduvalai.

The Nari Kuruvas, a tribal community in Tamil Nadu, remain mired in poverty, frittering away scant resources on drink and whiling away their time in front of the television set while they wait for a government to give them the confidence that education will ensure prosperity for their children.

In the village of Seduvalai, Vellore District, off National Highway 46, in a patch of land hidden by trees, a few semi-pucca (solid) houses and some palm-leaf huts shelter a group of 200 Nari Kuruvas. Ponni, 35, and Gopi, 42, have been married for 22 years and have lived in the clutch of

homes with their brood of six children (four girls, two boys), all their married life. The Nari Kuruvas hunted wildlife in forests for a living in the past, but Ponni, Gopi and the others now make a living selling bead necklaces, catapults and trinkets.

"Why save? I want to drink and be happy and die happy," says Gopi. "If my son wants to go to school, I will try to send him, but I am not stopping drinking every day." In fact, the men of the community gather to drink every single day. This attitude of 'living for today' pervades the community; the sense of contentment is tangible. This palpable contentment among Nari Kuruvas is both a blessing and a cause of their abject poverty. The government does nothing to alleviate their problems. Ponni whiles away her spare time watching a colour TV gifted to her by a political party using money that could have been used for education and infrastructure.

Don't they want to save money for the sake of their children? They could rise like the proverbial phoenix from the mire of poverty if they did. Gopi and Ponni are well aware of the need to save so that their son, Janakiram (currently in Standard VII) can continue his education. Janakiram's elder sister Sandhya dropped out after Standard IX. But the parents freely confess that they do not look beyond their daily meals and their daily dose of alcohol. Yes, Ponni sometimes joins her husband in drinking.

"How can I trust the system to deliver?" Ponni asks. "Just the other day, my friend was asked to pay Rs 2000 to the school for a certificate stating that her son had passed Standard VII." The friend had needed the certificate so her child could be shifted to another school.

Recently, a prominent politician claimed that "poverty is just a state of mind". This assumes that the poor, like Ponni and Gopi, are not intelligent enough to know that saving for a rainy day will help them break their shackles. In an IQ test conducted by Gift Siromoney, social scientist and a professor at the Madras Christian College in the 1970s, the Nari Kuruvas were found to be no less intelligent than other groups. What Ponni and Gopi want is to be able to trust the government to provide them the means to better education and health.

Says Ponni angrily, "If I am sure that by sending my son to school he will get a job, I will certainly ensure that he take his education seriously. Now though, we wonder whether it is worthwhile for him to go to school. He might as well work and earn his keep right now."

Since being banned from hunting by the government, the Nari Kuruvas, who had earlier been free of the constraints of a monetary system, were forced to move from the jungle to the periphery of villages and city slums. The traumatic ripples of that shock are continuing to be felt collectively by the community.

Good days for a lucky potter

You and I

You were the seed that fell, and I was the earth that bore you

I was the plant that grew out of the earth, and you were the water that fed it

I was the sunlight for the plant, you the breeze around it

I was the flower that bloomed from that plant, and you the woman that adorned it.

Everyday is a good day

Does the sun wait for a good day to rise?

Does the rain wait for a good day to descend?

Does the wind wait for a good day to blow?

Does the heart wait for a good day to beat?

Does love wait for a good day to blossom?



Photo: JS

Poetry with clay: Munuswamy hard at work.

(Translation by Vinithra Madhavan Menon)

Munuswamy, 65, gangly, graceful, ageing, crouching close to the spinning potter's wheel, caresses clay into a smooth, symmetrical, objet d'art – of sorts. His profile is not typical of someone in his profession. He did not drop out of school, nor was he forced to take up the family profession. He has an undergraduate degree in History, and held several clerical jobs before sitting at his father's feet to learn the craft of pottery more than 20 years ago. The epigraph above is from some Tamil poems he had written. They were published in a Tamil daily.

Potters are a dwindling breed. Only one other potter is active in Munuswamy's village, K.V. Kuppam in Vellore. This is not surprising, considering that clay and red soil are in great demand and there's a 1981 government edict that levies a penalty of Rs 1 lakh from those collecting clay for pottery from lake areas in the state. Nevertheless, Munuswamy chose to become a potter. He remains silent when asked why.

Perhaps it was his filial devotion that drew him to his ageing father; perhaps he just got tired of the urban rat race; perhaps he wanted to breathe the pristine air of his village. Or maybe, he wanted time to write poems.

In spite of a government order (issued on October 21, 1977) granting permission to pottery manufacturers to use clay from reserved government land, no action was taken. And so, the plight of the potters has steadily deteriorated.

What Munuswamy had going for him though were several factors: little competition in his vicinity; family members (his wife and mother) who live with him and are willing, dedicated helpers; and a spacious home with a courtyard in the middle where his potter's wheel spins, giving off a continuous light breeze that caresses Munuswamy even as he cajoles soft clay into aesthetically appealing shapes. And last, but not the least, luck.

Luck, because in all his comings and goings between home and the lake areas in Peekaipuram and Kousambettu (5 km from his home) in the 20 years he has been a potter, he has had no run-ins with the law. He gets the clay surreptitiously in the dark of night. "If I get ready access to clay and red soil," he says, "I am King." One tractor or bullock cart load of clay and red soil costs Rs 1000. With that, he is able to make Rs 5000 worth of pots that get sold in less than a month. Munuswamy's son and two daughters are pursuing college degrees. It is creditable that Munuswamy has put all three of his children through school.

Change agents...

(Continued from page 1)

is strong. And Vidyarambam gives them a mission in life - at least till marriage takes them to another place - by empowering them to be change agents who leverage quality education to transform young lives, triggering a societal transformation.

"My father is very proud of me, especially when I tell him about my meeting at the collector's office." That is Karthika who joined Vidyarambam as a 20-year-old akka in 2005. A BSc in Mathematics, she grew rapidly to become assessor, assistant coordinator and master trainer. Meanwhile, Vidyarambam facilitated

her BEd with flexi-time and finance. In 2009, at the age of 25, she became the headmistress of Vidyarambam's Rotary Model School that caters to the tsunami-affected and fishing communities in Nagapattinam. She is happy that the community is changing for the better, with Vidyarambam School's children educating and influencing their parents.

"Vidyarambam showed me a world outside my village," says Karthika. Daughter of a milk vendor from Srikazhi, she enjoys her new standing in the community. She stays with 16 of her young colleagues, chosen from the best and qualified akkas. The teachers also enjoy the opportunity



Sathya (left) and Karthika.

for cross-functional contributions. Many of the songs-with-a-message as well as some teaching methods and charts that are employed across Vidyarambam have been developed by the teachers and perfected by the 'product development' teams at each district, which they call resource centres.

A similar case of self-development is 24-year-old Sathya. The eldest of three daughters of a marginal

farmer in Mayiladuthurai, she is the assistant headmistress of the school. She was a dull student, but with Ranganathan's encouragement, has become a confident public speaker. "I have lost the fear of failure," she says. Sathya is proud of the founder's trust in her abilities, underlining a serious motivational factor that is common to the team: access to the founder, who knows each akka and her family.

Seeing the team in action, in classrooms and more so at various events, what strikes one is the quiet and no-fuss style. Missing are cell phones thrust to the ears, and frenzy of any kind. It is well-oiled team work - somewhat like a trapeze team that performs based on mutual trust and predictability.

The Rs 1000 they earn every month cannot explain the passion they bring

to their jobs. They operate at the higher planes of motivation, of joyful group-belonging, of recognition that boosts self esteem, and of self actualisation itself. The akkas are any HR manager's dream.

And to imagine that these are '12th pass' village girls who know that the engagement is no lifetime bond! They will get married and move on in life. But if the past 12 years of Vidyarambam are any indication, their liberating experience of empowerment makes them compulsive change agents wherever life takes them. They have discovered their mission for life. And the higher rewards that come with it.

(The writer assists NGOs as a communication facilitator.)

Turning scrap into strength in a fight for their rights

It is said, 'where there is a will, there is a way'. Those who want to achieve something always look for ways to move ahead, overcome challenges and find solutions to problems. Domestic workers are one such group of women who have taken the innovative route to becoming mistresses of their destinies. How else can an organisation, of, for and by poor, illiterate women generate money to fulfill its agenda? But there is still a long way to go – lack of uniform wages, leave, bonus, maternity benefits, pension and health insurance

ABHA SHARMA, Jaipur



Photo: KGS

The Kashtkari Gharkamgar Sanghatna in Thane, Maharashtra, has been funding its advocacy and initiatives, aimed at the welfare of 35000 domestic workers in the state, by selling bhangar or household scrap.

The Kashtkari Gharkamgar Sanghatna (KGS), in Thane, Maharashtra, has been funding its advocacy and initiatives, aimed at the welfare of low-paid domestic workers, by selling *bhangar* or household scrap. Realising that it would be difficult to introduce even a meagre membership fee, the core group at KGS came up with the idea of asking the women to bring in *bhangar* instead. Anything from paper, plastic bottles and tins to broken slippers and discarded vessels could be contributed to help them raise funds. Initially, though, the move did not take off with the ease that KGS's president, Madhutai Birmole, had anticipated. "Members had to be reminded constantly and it took nearly two years before this system of selling household waste could be put into place," she recalls.

The KGS, which was set up in 2007, has around 35000 members across the western state of Maharashtra. Of these, almost 10000 are from the Mumbai and Thane areas. There are 500 group leaders and 150 of them make up the core team. Different committees look into various issues that the group tackles. There's an *aarthik*, or economic committee that is the fund raiser, the *niyojan* committee does the planning, the *arogya* committee

looks after the health issues, while the *takrar* (clash) committee tackles disputes. There are at least 10 women members in these committees from each locality or suburb.

"Today, the members are conscientious and make it a point to bring along scrap when they come to attend the monthly meetings. The group chief of the locality or suburb sells this scrap to raise funds," says Birmole. The leader also has the authority to keep half the amount with her to aid her in discharging her responsibilities or for use when she is visiting other places for the organisation's work. The remaining half of the money collected is put into the organisation fund, which is used to help members out in times of crises.

Birmole shared KGS's innovative fund-raising idea at a recent consultation in Jaipur of domestic workers and the organisations that support them. It was hosted by Jagori, a Delhi-based resource centre which works on advocacy of women's issues, training, and documentation. Like KGS, there are several other collectives across the country fighting for the rights of domestic workers and evolving ways to keep themselves going. Collectively, they are all struggling for a national

policy on domestic work so that domestic workers can be recognised as legitimate workers, or *kamgars*.

Parichiti has taken the rights-based approach to advocating change. They have been mobilising domestic workers, who commute to and from Kolkata by train. It conducts meetings at the Dhakuria and Bagha Railway Stations every Tuesday and Thursday and has also been running a drop-in centre, or *bishram ghar*, since 2007 where women workers can relax and rest between jobs. In addition, right from its inception, the Kolkata-based organisation has been intervening in cases of workplace violence against domestic workers.

Moumita Chakraborty, who works with Parichiti, reveals that her organisation is a member of Maitree, a women's rights network in West Bengal. "Through collaboration with different institutions and organisations, we are working hard to provide the much-needed financial support for working women," she adds.

Sangini in Indore (Madhya Pradesh), Astitiva (Dehradun, Uttarakhand), Mehanatkash Kalyan Evam Sandarbh Kendra (Rajasthan) and other such unions in different states are also taking exemplary steps to protect domestic workers' rights. Some state governments have even been prodded into taking relevant policy measures. For instance, in 2001, West Bengal introduced a provision for Provident Fund. Since very few people were aware of it, social organisations like Parichiti have been making efforts to ensure that more workers can avail of this benefit. Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh, minimum wages have been fixed, with provision for leave and other welfare measures.

In Maharashtra, the Gharelu Parivar Kalyan Mandal gives social security to unorganised workers in case of death, accidents or health problems. Moreover, a welfare board is expected to come up in each district that will address issues like uniform wages and leave, while putting into place measures to handle cases of sexual harassment. In a victory of sorts, domestic workers in the state have also been able to convince the authorities that an FIR should not be lodged against a domestic worker – a very common occurrence – without first verifying the prima facie

evidence, in case she is accused of theft by her employer.

Despite the gains, the challenges before the vast workforce are many and there are no quick-fix solutions. Lack of uniform wages, leave, bonus, maternity benefits, pension and health insurance continue to be major sources of grief for them. Protection from sexual harassment and violence at the workplace as well as alleged trafficking by placement agencies are the other vulnerabilities that need immediate attention.

Domestic work is closely connected with migration of women, which brings into focus the menace of trafficking. Hundreds migrate from their native places in search of greener pastures, pushed by reasons that range from crushing poverty to floods or the lack of employment opportunities. Many fall prey to rogue placement agencies that lure women and young girls from poor families on the pretext of ensuring well-paid jobs. While some lucky ones do get gainful employment, others end up trapped in the sex trade. According to Surabhi Tandon Mehrotra, an independent researcher on women's issues who is also associated with Jagori, "There are reportedly placement agencies with the dubious distinction of catering to the need of girls from particular states to work as sex workers."

A possible solution lies in the enactment of the national policy on domestic work, which is on the anvil. This will entitle domestic workers to derive benefits from at least eight laws, including the Workmen's Compensation Act, Trade Union Act, Payment of Wages Act, and the Maternity Benefits and Contractual Labour Act. Meanwhile, the indomitable women battle on, drawing strength from their numbers and innovating as they go along. ■

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)

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Lighting up the lives of street children through theatre

Twenty-two years ago, when Zulfiqar Khan chanced upon a group of urchins looking for scraps in a large garbage bin, he found his calling. He didn't want the youngsters to end up as vagabonds. For Khan, who was then conducting theatre workshops at an elite school in Chandigarh, it marked a major turnaround. He started off by roping in children from the Labour Colony in the city's outskirts – children of boot polishers, sweepers and rag pickers. And so happened the Theatre Age Group. Over the years, it has notched 1500 performances, enacting scripts on gender equality, health, hygiene and education. The slum children are now also taught how to use computers, to dance, paint and play tennis

VINATI BHARGAVA MITTAL, Chandigarh

Like any other young man of his age, Zulfiqar Khan had big dreams. As a gold medallist from the Department of Indian Theatre, Panjab University, Chandigarh, he even toyed with the idea of shifting base to Mumbai to try his luck in the Hindi film industry. But one day, in 1992, as the young man was cycling to his rented room, he came across a group of urchins looking for scraps in a large garbage bin. Khan observed the frantic way in which these youngsters were trying to lay their hands on whatever they felt would fetch them some money.

Recalls Khan: "That day was the turning point for me. I was already holding theatre workshops at an elite school in the city. Since theatre has tremendous potential to instil self-confidence, I asked myself if I could do something with these children. I knew that if these youngsters were not guided properly at this stage, they would end up as vagabonds or even worse."

Khan, now in his forties, decided to start off by roping in children from Labour Colony on the outskirts of Chandigarh. This is home to boot polishers, sweepers and rag pickers, who live in pitiable conditions in makeshift shanties. Convincing their parents proved an uphill task since

they had no concept of theatre or how it could be beneficial.

It took the theatre artiste and his friend several days of continuous engagement with the community to persuade them. Reminisces Khan, who hails from a poor family in Shahabad, Hardoi District, Uttar Pradesh, "In the beginning, the children were irregular and I had to motivate them constantly. Eventually, they also started bringing along their friends."

As the numbers grew, Khan zeroed in on a vacant plot near the local crematorium to hold practice sessions. Since it was extremely filthy, the entire group got together to clean up the area. However, the very next day they were disheartened to find it dirty once again. "We finally moved to a site in front of the Department of Indian Theatre at the Panjab University," says Khan, who used his monthly stipend of Rs 1800, given by University Grants Commission, to fund the group.

Initially, since most of the established plays were too remote for the children to comprehend, the talented teacher decided to write fresh scripts. Within a few months, the group, under the banner of Theatre Age, staged its first street play, Raja Aur Kisaan (The King and

the Farmer), incorporating elements of folklore, folk songs, folk dances and aerobics into it. "Since most of the youngsters were illiterate, they found it difficult to comprehend and memorise dialogues. This, in turn, hampered their performance. So I also started encouraging them to study and helped them enrol in government schools," adds Khan.

It's been nearly two decades since Theatre Age came together and the group has staged many plays in Chandigarh and other cities. While a majority have been written, directed and produced by Khan, there are others – those that highlight issues like female foeticide, drug addiction and prevention of AIDS – which have been supported by various organisations.

Over the years, enacting scripts on gender equality, health and hygiene and education has also helped the young actors understand these concepts better. "Through theatre, I have consciously tried to inculcate the idea of good health and cleanliness among these young actors," says Khan. When they had first started attending the workshops, most of them had no idea of personal hygiene – they had never brushed their teeth and preferred to wear filthy clothes since they felt the dirtier they looked, the easier it would be for them to find menial jobs. There is a noticeable change in their appearance today, as most now turn up for rehearsals looking neat and tidy.

Theatre Age, a registered non-profit society, operates from the campus of the Government High School in Sector 24 A. It has two state-of-the-art classrooms, a kitchen and a toilet. Sixty-two children are part of the group, which takes care of their education, books, and uniforms besides providing them with two meals every day. The entire set up is managed by the youngsters themselves who even make the props for their plays, and design costumes from old donated clothes. Most children have joined Theatre Age through word-of-mouth, and new ones are readily welcomed into the fold.

As Khan's resources are meagre, friends and volunteers chip in to fund the activities. "We never ask

for money. Instead, people take care of our needs. For instance, someone can help us by depositing school fees or buying uniforms," informs Khan. Incidentally, Amway Opportunity Foundation is paying the fees of 20 children while the State Bank of India has donated 10 bicycles. A group of volunteers has even contributed a three-wheeler rickshaw.

"We also generate money from selling *raddi* (scrap paper). The idea came from some of our kids who were rag pickers earlier. The rickshaw is used for collecting old newspapers and discarded material from homes, which is then sold to raise money. Every month, we are able to generate about Rs 40000 like this, which is about half our expenses," says Khan.

Though staging plays remains their core activity – it has an impressive 1500 performances to its credit – the slum children are now being taught additional skills like using computers, dancing, painting and tennis. Moreover, volunteers, who include some well-to-do professionals as well as college students, hold extra classes in English, Sciences and Maths to strengthen their performance in school.

"Fifteen of our children are enrolled in the non-medical stream in high school," says Khan proudly. He adds, "Since it is difficult for them to study in their dimly-lit homes, we are now looking for a place where the senior students can stay and study late into the night."

It was Theatre Age that gave Geeta, 32, a new lease of life. She had joined the group as a young girl, and today this confident woman has not only given numerous street performances, she has even acted in a film to promote Adult Literacy that features several Bollywood stars. Sahil, 18, too, is going to school because he is part of Khan's theatre group. This former rag picker is a Class 11 student at Government Secondary School at Dhanas and he has high hopes for his future.

Meanwhile, Raman Kumar, 22, a resident of Dadoo Majra, is an inspiration for the entire group. A final year student of Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) at Panjab University, he secured the ninth position in the All

India entrance examination held for BFA and is now pursuing the much sought after Applied Arts course. Although his father works as a sweeper with the Health Department, Kumar wants to do Master's in Fine Arts (MFA) from the Sir JJ School of Arts, Mumbai.

Every day after college, he comes down to Theatre Age to help train youngsters in computers, painting and drawing. Kumar, who looks after the maintenance of the computers donated to Theatre Age by Infosys, says he has taught the Corel computer design programme to several children. "Just like Zulfiqar Sir helped me, I would like to continue being associated with Theatre Age so that I can help other underprivileged youngsters," he says. His words not only reflect the purpose of Theatre Age but also find an echo in its anthem, composed by Bollywood lyricist Ajay Jhingran: *Aao kasam ye khaen, insaniyat nibhayen. Joh chirag bhuj rahen hai, woh chirag fir jalayen*. Translated it goes something



Sahil, 18, goes to school because he is part of Khan's theatre group. This former rag picker is a Class 11 student at Government Secondary School at Dhanas and he has high hopes for his future.

like this, "Come, Let us take a vow to uphold human values/ Let us light once again the extinguished lamp."

(Courtesy: Women's Feature Service)



Photos: Theatre Age/WFS

Zulfiqar Khan with children who are part of the Theatre Age Group.

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