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**Child Defenders for Child Rights**

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### ABSTRACT

The lives of poor children in contemporary India are episodes of daily battles against hunger, ill health, lack of education, protection, shelter and so on. Children continue to be malnourished, exploited while at work instead of being in school, trafficked far away from their home, kith and kin to unknown lands, subject to abuse and violence and discrimination of gender, caste, community and class. All these continue despite the provision of funds for children causes such as policy reform, access to food, education, and many other social and legal entitlements. This article explores the experience of thousands of child defenders for child rights in India. Their work generally focuses on the abolition of child labour, resolution of tensions and conflicts as well as endeavouring to free children from work. This is further complemented by efforts to ensure that children pursue and complete their education in full time formal schools through the support of the MV Foundation.<sup>1</sup>This article argues that in addition to the legal, policy and programmatic frameworks, the role of child defenders have to be adequately recognised for ensuring that children have access to all their entitlements.

### KEYWORDS

*Child Defenders, Mobilisation, Tribal Community, Right to Education*

## 1. BACKGROUND OF CHILD DEFENDERS

It has been found that wherever there has been some success in reaching out to such poor children in contemporary India, this has been largely due to the relentless work of local level community volunteers especially the youth force. As child defenders they have given confidence to the parents to take the right decisions and enabled bridging the gap between poor households and public institutions. Most of these child defenders are those who have advanced to class 8 and above within the Indian school system; and this too with great difficulties. These boys and girls are the first generation educated in their community to achieve this level of schooling. Their achievement is particularly noteworthy given that they have to compete with other children of more privileged backgrounds.

Tekam Devrao<sup>2</sup> a child defender from Adilabad is from a tribal community hidden in the forests of Adilabad district in Andhra Pradesh, puts this achievement in broader context. He notes:

'There was not even one literate person in and around my village. One day the Naxalites (a Maoist group) distributed a pamphlet that none could read. I really wanted to know what they had written for us. I had to take the pamphlet to a village far away. I found out that the pamphlet was about getting the local tribal communities organised to fight for fair prices. Since then I had an urge to be able to read and write. Those who read out the pamphlet even taught me some letters in the alphabet. I kept practising to write the letters even as I was tending the goats. I would also stop passersby and learn to read and write more letters and words from them. I was soon able to read and write as much as a class 6 student. At the same time, Naxalites started involving me in their activities. They put me in a hostel and even paid for the school fees as my family could not afford it. I have come up to class 10.'

Narsi Reddy,<sup>3</sup> another child defender narrated his resolve to study. He was denied education because he is a person with a disability and as a child limped badly because of polio. He explains:

'My parents thought I was worthless and that I was a burden; they did not want to own me up [sic]. I had to live outside in the cattle shed away from home. The cattle and the fields were my world where I spent the nights among the cattle. Food for me was sent to the farm. I rarely came to the village. When a night school was set up I started attending. As I was not learning much in night school, I decided to go to day school. But my people began to beat and abuse me. They wanted me to look after the cattle. In the daytime after everybody left for work, I would sneak into the house, eat and stealthily attend the day school. I was already 14 years and old for my class. I did not give up. I finished school when I was 20 years old.'

The ones who have attained the status of '10<sup>th</sup> class fail' are part of the achievers while some of them have been able to pass class 10. For example the journey of Pushpa<sup>4</sup> a child defender, who graduated class 10, has been against all odds. She says:

'I studied in a school run by Christian missionaries. My Telugu teacher liked me a lot because I was hard working. I would stitch together scraps of paper to make notebooks as I could not afford to buy new ones. I did even better than my classmates who could buy books. My teacher noticed my interest and encouraged me further. When my parents arranged for me to get married, I went to her for help. She helped me get admitted into a hostel in Warangal where I studied up to class 10.'

What these narrations have in common is individual determination to succeed in the face of adversity. They also show a people with a sense of self worth and fulfilment and are a sufficient cause for the community pride. Being fully aware about the prospects and quality of their learning on the one hand, they have acquired a place of pride in the family, and on the other hand, they are fully aware that they have not received the education that they actually deserved. Yet they are convinced that it is only education that can break the cycle of poverty and ignorance.

## 2. MOBILIZING PARENTS AND CONSOLIDATING LOVE FOR CHILDREN

As the lived experiences related above have shown, low quality education has not appeared to dampen their spirit because the very act of going to school has helped integrate these child defenders into a web of interaction, encouraging them to utilize the modes of thinking and pursuit of knowledge that have gained currency and acceptability. They are able to transcend their local environment and locate themselves in the context of a reality which is informed by a sense of larger society and its complex milieu.

Armed with self confidence and the passion for child rights they engage and open dialogue with parents. Dhanamma<sup>5</sup> a child defender says of his experience:

‘I patiently talk to the parents and tell them about myself and my pursuit for education. I am fully convinced that if I persuade them to get their children out of work they would sooner than later listen. The bottom line is giving them respect. We have to regard them as conscious and intelligent people. We will have to answer their queries with patience. Would education guarantee a job? Parents question. They argue that I am interested in bringing children to schools because I am paid to do so. I am not angry with them because they differ with me. I explain that education is not only to get a job. Without education the poor will always be poor. Educating our children now, will ensure better lives, greater confidence [...] But they don’t get convinced the first time. We need to talk to them many times.’

Their patience is endless as they are convinced that if they were able to complete school any poor parent can send a child to school. Amrutam<sup>6</sup> says:

‘When I talk to the local tribes they say they have heard many from the government say the same. But “where are the teachers”, they ask. “Government teachers are from the plains and don’t come up the hills to teach. Why must we trust you”, they ask. I don’t give up trying. I continue to stay with them even if they abuse or beat me. The first time I went up on the hills, nobody gave me food for one whole week. They were suspicious. Being a tribe member myself, I could connect to them just like a family member. Gradually they would help me cook the rice that I brought from home. When I ran out of my supply of rice, they offered me millets. I spent several months with them. After a time I had the support of the village leaders and the youth. And soon children of all ages were getting ready to join our bridge courses.’<sup>7</sup>

The issue really was of building trust. It seemed that the poor have been betrayed so often that they are wary of new messages and new messengers. Lakshman<sup>8</sup> too narrates how he had to tread from distrust to building of trust. He states,

‘While we walked through the forest area we would sometimes be stopped by the Naxalites. They would ask us who we were and why we were talking to people in the villages. In the villages too people were suspicious. They would not talk to us. They

thought we were also Naxalites. Even the children hesitated to come near us. We felt that we must not give up. After all we had only one mission. That our children must all go to schools. Their experiences with the schools have not been good. There were no teachers, no class rooms and some schools were occupied by the police forces. So, one could not blame them for being so hostile. We had to visit the same village about 10-11 times before they could trust our intentions and sincerity.’

The rewards were plenty as the child defenders befriended the children. Soon boys and girls who had never had education were getting ready to join the residential bridge course. Every girl child who joined the course came only after she threw a tantrum at home and fought for her education. At times these girls even came without parental consent. This was not encouraged by the child defenders, but at the same time they could not ask the child to get back home. As Anita<sup>9</sup> explains,

‘In the camp, we had a student named Naga Lakshmi. Her mother came to take her back home. But the child didn’t want to go. The mother was literally dragging her away. I felt like crying. When I tried to stop the mother, she began to abuse me. However, I persisted in trying to stop her and she became violent. She pulled my hair. She picked up whatever she could find ---- rulers, sticks --- and began beating me. She refused to leave without taking her daughter along. I sent for the sarpanch<sup>10</sup> and other volunteers. They all came and talked to her. Finally she agreed to leave the child in the camp. I was very happy. The mother broke her bangles while beating me. I bought her new bangles, gave her food before sending her home. All through I decided not to retaliate or hurt her mother. The mother was so convinced that she felt bad for beating me.’

Children and their right to education is an obsession for the child defenders. As Dhanamma stated,

‘My mind is all the time preoccupied with thinking about children. I have been involved in this work for 4 years. It is like an addiction/madness – even if I want to stop doing it I cannot. Parents, who have shouted at us for taking their kids to school, now praise us. They have realized the need for education and its value. Now even the poorest of parents are sending their children to school. They even buy children things like clothes, shoes etc for the school with great pride.’

The child defenders render their chores in a selfless manner. Most of them have given up good jobs or small enterprises to dedicate their lives for the cause of children. They leave behind the business of selling bananas, occupations as truck drivers or vendors of books and newspapers and in some cases even abandoning their college education. It is a struggle but they enjoy every moment of the experience. Their practice and everyday lives give meaning for abstract words like dedication, commitment, passion and sacrifice. As Shanker<sup>11</sup> narrates,

‘I took some boys belonging to the tribal community and enrolled them at the local hostel. I stayed with these children as a tutor for a year. My salary was very low. I asked my aunt for some help. She said she had no money, but would pay me if I worked for her. So I would eat at the hostel and go to work for her at 10 in the morning, then return to the hostel in the evening to teach the children. I spent one whole year in this manner.’

### 3. MOBILIZING THE COMMUNITY

The journey of a child from work to school is one of resolving conflict. It is an act of unravelling local power structures, stubborn traditions and cultural practices. It is a well orchestrated strategy of winning over those in authority to join the movement for children's rights and in telling them that they too stand to gain when all children are in schools. It is not an easy task but doable. Pushpa tells us how she risked her life to get Ganesh a bonded labourer to school.

'I went to a village called Ramalinga Puram. I found this boy named Ganesh. His father had 4 sons and 2 daughters. He had pledged the sons in bondage to borrow money to get his daughters married. He incurred a debt of Rs. 50,000. I asked Ganesh if he wanted to study. He said he wanted to. He held me tightly and began to cry. I felt compelled to rescue him from bondage. I was shouted at by his father. But Ganesh was adamant. He said he was even willing to starve if he could go to school. He stayed with me in my house and I sent him to school. After a few days, Ganesh's parents along with the sarpanch and others sealed my house. They threatened me. They said I could complain to anybody, it would not change their decision. They abused me in a most filthy way. "Why are you doing this? What is it that you are gaining from such work?" asked my mother.' She said "We all need to work for a living. If their family needs the child to work, how can you stop them?" At this point I felt very defeated; I had no support. I even offered to take on the debt if the father sent his son to school. I then mobilised support from the leaders, teachers' forum members and others from the neighbouring village. They all came and resolved the issue. The boy was sent to school.'

The role of child defenders is truly in building a consensus in the village that children have rights and they must not be exploited. In doing so, they talk to political leaders, opinion makers, school teachers, members of gram panchayats, and women's groups. They feel that each one of groups is an indispensable and important ally. They generate a public debate and discourse on child rights. The issue of child rights become talking points at bus stops, weddings and wakes, temples and private functions, while fetching water and fuel wood or at farms and work places. Indeed the child defenders make it a point to see that children become centre stage in a village and its consciousness. As Dhanamma notes:

'We form a support group in the village with the youth, sarpanch and political party leaders. There is so much rivalry between political groups that it is very difficult to bring them together. We tell them that they can have differences on other issues, but there needs to be a consensus on child rights. In this manner, we ask them to take sides and stand by children and mobilise support among leaders and women.'

It is in the process of resolving a conflict that a norm in favour of children was beginning to emerge. Narsimha<sup>12</sup> explains:

'I did not know that I would have to face so much resistance from the landlords who kept the children in bondage. I took the children to the camp because parents gave permission. But then the landlords went to the parents and demanded their money. Parents told them that they didn't know anything and that someone had taken their children and joined them in the camp. So the landlords attacked my house – more than 50 people came to my house. They shouted and hurled abuses at me. But I kept quiet. I said nothing. Then I appealed to all the elders, one by one. I asked them for their support for the boy and his future. They dithered a bit and soon realised that there was a swing in the mood of the village. They too joined. I picked up courage to talk to the

employer and encouraged him to support the child's education. He agreed and we felicitated him in a public function. Thus new traditions and cultures were being grounded. Children became visible.'

#### 4. RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND CHILD DEFENDERS

The first generation learners face myriads of problems in coping with the school system. Families that have been denied literacy for centuries would not know how to transact in the world of school and education while they are able to deal with the world of work, labour and employer-employee relation. The act of going to school necessitates an inculcation of culture and habit of packing the school bag and lunch box, doing the home-work, preparing for the endless unit tests and examinations, learning the language, coping with an unfamiliar medium of instruction being punctual and regularly attend school and so on. It requires knowing the procedures of admission, getting a birth certificate, attendance in schools, obtaining a transfer certificate to move from one level i.e. primary school to the next level i.e. the elementary or high school. They are at a loss to deal with the school system, the myriad of procedures, rules and hidden practices that we as middle class have acquired and transact almost unthinkingly. The system is insensitive to these intricate difficulties of the first generation learner and assumes that the everyday life of a student is well charted. That the school governance is designed for those who already know how to send a child to school and its lack of patience with poor children leads to children being pushed out of schools.

It is in this context that the child defenders have played an important role. They have tracked children who have not attended schools regularly and talked to the schools to be kind and generous to the first generation learner. Krishna<sup>13</sup> narrates:

'I was shocked to see Venkatiah herding cattle. I remembered how much courage he showed to defy his employer and insisted on going to school. How could this be? Was it poverty? I found out that he was pushed out of school because he could no longer withstand punishment. I asked him about why he was being punished. He told me that his school wanted him to bring 'a long notebook'. His parents never understood a 'long note book' although they got him some notebook. He could not tell his parents that they were wrong and ultimately dropped out finding the insult and punishment unbearable. I had to talk to the school teacher and convince him to take Venkatiah back again.'

#### 5. CHILD DEFENDERS AS CONSCIENCE KEEPERS

Even as they challenge the system that has fostered inequality for many generations, the child defenders bear many risks to themselves and their families. They learn how to negotiate with the community and show tolerance and magnanimity even towards difficult employers, so that child labourers can eventually become students. As conscience keepers of society, the child defenders bring the system close to the poor and build faith of the poor in the schools.

The child defenders draw strength and hope from their vision of future free of child labour, and the society that values its children. As they go through their daily task, transforming the society in a simple but powerful way they themselves are transformed. In emerging victorious in their battle for schools they have shown how important it is to graduate from school. They in fact give credence and legitimacy to the public school system. They are the real heroes and heroines who have kept the hope of the poor for education. They are the change makers for their community that has been trapped for generations into immobility, poverty and illiteracy. They show that even for the poor, things can be different and better. Given the right kinds of

associations and experience they become the conscience keepers in the community taking up their cause with a sense of idealism and fearlessness. In a way their success has far reaching consequences in a positive manner for India's democracy and demonstrates how child rights can be achieved.

## 6. ENDNOTES

1 The MV Foundation is a voluntary organization that started to work on abolition of child labor in Andhra Pradesh and now takes up all issues relating to children's rights. It has so far withdrawn 600,000 child labourers from work,, monitored over 100,000 deliveries linking pregnant women to local public health institutions. It has its presence in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh and other States in India.

2 Tekam Devrao is from Adilabad district of Andhra Pradesh with a predominant tribal population and vast tracts of land under forest coverage and hilly terrain. It has a strong presence of the Maoist group that mobilized tribal community for their rights, but mostly in the nature of ' confrontationist politics', often resulting in violence and State repression.

3 Narsi Reddy is from Nalgonda in Andhra Pradesh, an area which is semi-arid and dry zone of Andhra Pradesh that has witnessed left wing politics and struggles against feudal landed and cultural practices yet the practices remain almost unchanged.

4 Pushpa is from Nalgonda district in Andhra Pradesh, and is from the scheduled caste community.

5 Dhanamma is also from Nalgonda district and is from the scheduled caste community.

6 Amrutam is from Vijayanagram district, working among the tribal community in one of the untouched and remotest areas of Andhra Pradesh.

7 Residential Bridge Courses (RBC) were started by MVF to prepare the illiterate child from a worker to becoming a student. They were also given the reading and writing skills to enroll such children into an age appropriate class in a regular school.

8 Laksman from Adilabad

9 Anita is from Nalgonda district

10 Sarpanch is the elected head of the local body or the gram panchayat.

11 Shanker is from Ranga Reddy district of Andhra Pradesh. It is also a dry and semi arid zone. It is in this district that MV Foundation first started its activities.

12 Narsimha is from Ranga Reddy district

13 Krishna from Chittoor