

ROOTS

The bamboo children

The Soligas, the shy and innocent residents of the BR hills, were a vulnerable lot, exploited by land-owners and forest officials. Besides wising them up to this, Dr Sudarshan's education programme teaches them to appreciate their own traditional knowledge and to survive the mainstream instead of joining it

by Shoba Raja

The thing that I remember very clearly from my first visit to the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK) project in the BR Hills is that every time I passed the *Sampige* (Champak) tree outside my room there were, at least, two or three children up on the tree. I remember thinking 'Why are they always up there? Are they plucking something or are they hiding or playing?'

Now, over two years later, I realise that the children were simply living out their natural lives of which the trees, the forests, the hills are such an intrinsic part. For these are children of Soligas — a semi-nomadic tribe which has been living for hundreds of years, in the serene deciduous forests of the Biligiri Ranga hills located some 200 kms south of Bangalore. 'Soliga' means one who has come from within a bamboo. The Soligas believe that their ancestors originated from the bamboo.

My contact with the Soligas and their children came through the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK). Nestled deep within the forests of BR Hills, the Kendra has been working progressively to make the Soliga community self-reliant, within the context of their distinct cultural identity and way of life.

Why education?

VGKK's founder, Padmashri (Dr) H Sudarshan, first came to BR Hills in 1979 to provide medical care to the

"Protect Us! Oh, Lord of the Dodda Sampige!"

Oh! Great God of the *Dodda Sampige**
Pray, do protect us!

Let not the bunch of buds ever wither
Nor the bloom-shoot break!
May you protect us like a flower,
The bud and the bloom are thine.

Till a day like this again come
Through this long chequered year
Pray, have an eye ever watchful
And do preserve us, Oh Lord!

* The literal meaning "The great Champak." It is a huge tree believed to be about two thousand years old. It stands deep in the forests of BR Hills and is worshipped by the Soligas.

Soligas. However, in a short time he realised that this was just not enough. For, with the advent of 'development' in the country, the Soligas, like other tribes, were exposed to the outside world. And their innate simplicity, shyness and naivete made them vulnerable to exploitation by landlords, forest contractors and even forest officials. Therefore, educating them was important, so they could become equipped to deal with the realities in their lives which included exploitation in various forms — land alienation; harassment meted out by forest officials in the name of forest conservation; denial of access to the source of their sustenance, their forests. As Dr Sudarshan stresses, "It is important to understand that educating Soliga children should not mean 'mamstreaming' them or 'inflicting development' on them. For the Soliga way of life links them, intrinsically and sustainably, to their environment. This should not be destroyed. Educating them should equip them to survive the 'mainstream'."

Traditional education

The Soliga child's earliest 'school' is the forest where s/he learns to collect honey, *amla* and hundreds of medicinal herbs. Folklores, songs, dance and religious practices provide training in linguistics and culture. A Soliga child's knowledge of flora and fauna is astounding. A twelve-year-old Soliga child can identify as many as 260 plants and trees. As for 'physical education', climbing trees, swimming, trekking in the forest are skills that every Soliga teenager has acquired.

The VGKK *patashala*

The VGKK *patashala* or school began in a small hut in 1981 with six Soliga boys. Today there are 480 children studying from nursery to Standard X, following the Karnataka state syllabus. One hundred and fifty of the children stay in the hostel, for children come here to study not only from the *podus* (tribal hamlets) in BR Hills but also from adjoining (as well as far off) districts and/or *talukas* of Chamrajnagar, Kollegal, Yelandur and even HD Kote near Mysore. In the initial years, there were only boys, particularly in the hostel. Gradually girls were also taken in. Today there are 50 girls living in the hostels.

The hostel

The hostel comprises of round stone buildings, each of

which is a dormitory housing eight children: The school teachers also live in the campus with some of them responsible for looking after the hostel children. Each day the children in the hostel are up at dawn and assemble in the open ground for *surya namaskar*. After this, it's study hour when they sit with their books and lessons, supervised by the teachers. 7 o'clock is prayer time - in the large hall/verandah that is part of the main school building. The children pray to the tribal deity, Jadeswami. Once this is over, they file into the huge dining hall, behind the school building, for a hot and nutritious breakfast. Then they rush back to their dormitories to get ready for school, which begins at 9 a.m. The rest of the children come from their *podus*. School goes on until 3.30 p.m. with two short breaks and a longer lunch hour in between. Lunch is again served in the dining hall, this time for all the 480 children. After school, the hostel children regroup in batches to attend to the daily chores of collecting firewood for cooking, horticulture, clearing and cleaning the campus. This done, they are free to play. At 6 pm, they reassemble for prayer and then regroup for study —again supervised by their teachers. 8 o'clock is dinner-time and 9.30 is "lights-out".

Lessons and Games

The medium of education is Kannada. However, the children speak the Soliga dialect, Soliganudi. Therefore the state prescribed text-books, all in Kannada, have been re-written by VGKK, with the help of some of the ex-students and the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore (using the Kannada script) into Soliganudi. Published with the help of the DPEP, these books have been accepted by the state education board as regular textbooks. The school follows the exam routine of the rest of the state's schools. Children have to go to Yelandur to write their Standard X exams.

Sports is an integral part of the curriculum. Speaking of the children's sporting skills, the school headmaster Chakravarty says proudly, "Our children are naturally good in athletics, *kabbadi* and other such physical sports. In fact, they very easily win all the inter-school competitions at the *taluka* and district levels."

Unique features of the VGKK school

The first and most obvious unique feature of the school is that it is the only one of its kind in the state - i.e. a school 'custom-made' to suit the distinct needs and characteristics of tribal children, at the same time ensuring that they do not remain isolated and oblivious to the life (and its ensuing influences) outside their hamlets and forests. Nevertheless, the school's uniqueness extends well beyond this to make

the school and what it imparts to its students, completely relevant and useful to the Soliga way of life amidst the modern-day realities that surround them. The school achieves this unique blend in educating tribal children by:

- **Introducing the experiential learning concept.** Environmental studies are given a major thrust. The children learn their basic science outside their classrooms through activities like animal tracking, collecting leaves, herbs, fruits - all of which comes instinctively to these children of the forests. The teachers draw the children's instincts and knowledge of their environment into a conscious experience for them, so that learning and retention occurs naturally.

- **Drawing upon the Soliga traditional knowledge.** The tribe's rich traditional knowledge about trees, herbs, plants -

the overall bio-diversity of the region has been studied and documented by VGKK. This is used by the teachers and made part of the syllabus, requiring a high level of creativity and innovative skills from the teachers. By linking Soliga traditional beliefs and knowledge to present-day science, the teachers have succeeded in helping the children make sense of their environment even as they assimilate this knowledge. No traditional belief or practice is discounted as *mumbo-jumbo* but is harnessed as a base to build further knowledge. E.g. Soligas traditionally worship the sun as a source of life. This is the base on which the teacher builds the children's knowledge about the sun, about solar energy and photosynthesis.

- **Introducing ideas on poverty, exploitation, rights, as part of school**

'lessons'. The VGKK social workers (some of whom are young Soliga adults who are ex-students of the school) spend time in the classes (from Standard V onwards) as part of the timetable, where they introduce and discuss issues of poverty, exploitation (of the tribal, their natural resources) as it occurs in their lives. In the higher classes, the social workers and students analyse some of the problems faced in the hamlets. They discuss the need and efficacy of community mobilisation to counter these problems. Therefore, consciousness about their life situation is developed gradually and naturally.

- **Early introduction of vocational education.** The Gandhian idea of learning vocational skills early has been taken up by VGKK in earnest. From Standard V the children learn carpentry, tailoring, cane and bamboo craft, mat weaving, etc. The idea is that by the time the children reach Standard X they are adept at one or more of these skills giving them added options for a livelihood in future.

- **Learning the basics of livelihood - forest produce, agriculture, and horticulture.** With the depletion of for-



Outside the girls' dormitory: 50 of them live in the hostel

Back to their roots

Sanerangowda, Raju, Madegowda, Jadeya were among the six boys who were the first students of the VGKK school Putta is also an ex-student and so is Ratna. After completing school, Sanerangowda and Raju joined VGKK as community organisers. They are involved in organising their community people to address the crucial socio-economic-rights issues in all their lives.

Madegowda got a bachelor's degree in social work from Roshanilaya School of Social Work, Mangalore. After gaining a year's experience at VGKK he went back to do his master's degree. Simultaneously he also did a post-graduate diploma in management by attending evening college, for which his family and VGKK assisted him financially. He now works as a research assistant at ATREE, a research organisation with which VGKK collaborates. He is also doing (through correspondence) a master's degree in sustainable develop-

ments and increasing displacement of tribal for different reasons, tribal families have had to turn to cultivating the land for sustenance. In order to equip them to deal with this, the children grow vegetables and fruits in the campus for consumption. The school routine and time-table takes into account the 'collection' season(s) at various times in the year when the children are needed by their families to join in collecting honey, fruits like *amla*, medicinal herbs etc.

After school - what next?

All the students of the *patashala* are first generation learners in their families. So, what should they do with their education? How should they use it? Is it to help them "get a job"? Or is it for a "steady income"? How can these "uses" of education be linked to sustaining tribal culture at the core of which is the sustainable conservation of forests even as its inhabitants "live off" its produce?

Nearly 80 Soliga children (now young adults) have passed out of the school. Several girls and boys have then trained in nursing, medical technology, social work, teaching and other forest/agriculture related courses. Most of them have come back to work in the BR Hills among the Soligas - not as "do-gooders" but with a clear focus on the potential for sustainable livelihoods in their own forests, among their own people. They are clear that they will not migrate to the big cities. (See box: *Back to their roots*)

Measuring success

It is clear that VGKK and the Soligas of BR Hills have the same yardstick for measuring the 'success' of their educated children. None of them speaks of success as "getting a government job" or "living in Bangalore and earning three thousand rupees a month". Instead, the now-grown children themselves speak with passionate involvement of the issues that the Soligas face. And dealing with these issues is also

ment. He works, with Ms Soliga community people in different hamlets, to regularly make estimates of the forest produce (honey, *amla*, herbs etc.), helps each *podu* group to calculate the level of sustainable harvest possible each season and also monitors their levels of income from these produce,

Putta, after doing VGKK's special job-oriented course in forestry, works as a field assistant with ATREE. His job involves collecting different plant specimens and working on documenting the area's bio-diversity.

Jadeya post-graduated in agricultural sciences and is now in charge of a project for conservation of medicinal plants. He has also applied for a PhD. in this and plans to collect his field data in BR Hills.

Ratna is the first Soliga girl to join a master's degree in sociology at Mysore University and is in charge of the tribal auxiliary nurse midwives project

their livelihood!

So far, none of them have been "lured" by the city and its deceptive development offerings. Instead each of them has a livelihood that is either in conserving the forest sustainably, initiating sustainable and profitable harvesting of its produce, research and documentation of traditional knowledge of the forest and its rich resources or through involvement in the health, education aspects of the Soliga life. Besides, they also use the skills and strengths they have developed through their school education to assert their rights to land, to the forest and its produce.

Experts, professionals, economists, social workers whose passionate efforts are directed at 'mainstreaming' the indigenous tribal people, have hijacked development concepts the world over. Meeting Madegowda, Putta and others like them and getting a glimpse into the unique way they have easily blended their traditional skills, knowledge with "modern" education, makes one re-think about ideas considered "mainstream".

The Soligas and other tribes have lived in their forests for thousands of years. It is the "modern", "educated", "civilized" people who are doing their best to snatch away their forests, homes, livelihoods and then are speaking of working for tribal "good", "welfare" "development". And the onslaught of development has been so forceful that the survival of the tribal is at risk as never before.

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Shoba Raja is a research and policy analyst at BasicNeeds, Bangalore. She can be contacted at rash536@yahoo.com