

# **Tribal children's education should never be disrupted at all**



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Recently I went on a trip along with my friends to Vilangombai, a forest village of Urali tribes. Meandering through the thick jungles and crossing four big streams, we entered into the tribal village where we solicited the participation of the people from door to door in a meeting of the association. We found some houses locked. When we asked for the reason about it, we were told that some families were away in the far-off places for the work of sugarcane harvesting and the youths in the northern states for working in bore-well lorries. Some were away on duty of guarding food crops from the marauding animals by way of earning their livelihood.

It is the need of hour to put an end to the tragedy of the tribal people, who have been protecting the forests for livelihood, now wandering about at several places like nomadic groups away from their dwelling places.

## **Continuing hindrances**

What has happened to the tribes' life oriented towards livelihood earned from collection and sale of herbs, amla, shikakai, incense, honey and bamboo that abound in the forests? Laws, schemes and governance system – which has wreaked havoc with their life?

The tribes have for ages been guarding and worshipping the forest as a deity. It was during the British reign in India that they were deprived of their rights over the forests. The denial of rights continued even after Independence of India. In order to set right this injustice, the Congress-led union government enacted a law in 2006. Introducing the law, the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said this law would remove injustice meted out to the tribes. But 16 years on, the law is yet to be brought into effect as it has been facing several blocks on many planes.

## **Education discontinued**

Vilangombai is a small village home to over 80 tribes situated among the forests under the foot of the Eastern Ghats. Under the union government's National Child Labour Project (NCLP) scheme, over 30 children of the Urali tribe were being educated.

The scheme had intended to wean the child labourers round to education and after two years of rudimentary training, enrol them in the school nearby. But unfortunately, there is no school in the vicinity of Vilangombai and the only school available is in Vinobha Nagar seven km away. So, the scheme was stopped and the children's education disrupted.

The children studying in class 1 to 9 find it impossible to go on foot through the forests to the school. So, the government has promised some transport facility. But as it did not materialize, 'Sudar', an NGO, rendered help in this regard. The children, who have gone to the school for the past two months, are not going to

school for the past 20 days because of the incessant rains that have kept the streams in spate and the school van away.

But there is an alternative route through the forests. The Adi Dravidar Welfare Department and the Forest Department has not taken trouble to explore the route so the children are taken to the school. Their indifference in this regard has sparked suspicion whether they are not bothered about the tribal children's education.

### **Shouldn't education continue?**

The law on right to compulsory education says that a school must be situated within one-km radius. But it is seven km away from Vilamgombai.

An agitation was launched in front of the school education office to draw the officials' attention to the tribal children's demand for an uninterrupted education. Officials came, enquired and went back.

Is it not possible to set up a temporary school with two teachers in Vilamgombai ? There will be way-out. only if the government wills it.

By the way, one Kumar of the same tribe in Vilamgombai was arrested and died in prison in Coimbatore recently. This suspicious death deserves a detailed probe.

While the looters of forest wealth and politicians plundering the people's money are comfortable in the first-class prisons with first-class medical treatment, the poor people are not given comfort even in death. The body of the man, who died in police custody, could not be transported back home, what with the surging streams blocking the way. So the body had to be transported in a cradle carried by some people in a detour of the 7-km alternative route.

If there is an alternative route for the dead, won't be the same alternative route for the children to the school? So, the Vilamgombai children are now prepared for the next level of their agitation on this count.

**Translated by V.Mariappan.**