

The Bidugade Project, "Breaking Barriers": Protection of children at risk and children without parental care (in kinship care) in North Karnataka (2011-15)

Project Aim: To keep children of Madiga (Dalit) community within their families and prevent children from being abused and sexually exploited by the Devadasi system, child marriage and child labour.

An ancient tradition in southern India devotes young girls to the goddess Yellamma. By devoting their young daughters as devadasi, families are able to keep their daughters at home to help earn money, rather than lose them to marriage. Traditionally, Devadasi women were highly regarded by the community, but as temples became poorer they fell into a life of poverty, misery and abuse. Instead of leading a life in the temple, these prepubescent girls are trafficked into sex work, either in brothels or on the street, in order to survive. The practice of child marriage is rampant in this area, leading to abuse of young girl children and denial of their basic rights.

EveryChild's Bidugade project aims to break the cycle of exploitation of young girls through dedication to goddess Yellamma, child marriages and child labour by bringing about lasting change to their lives through education. Through education, EveryChild believes we can help these children and their communities understand the damaging effects of these practices and their rights as children. EveryChild India with local partners MASS, SGGKK, PRERANA and FENCE have been working with girls and their families to help these changes occur.

EveryChild India Focus: Our main focus in India is preventing and tackling violence against the most vulnerable children in society: those who are living and working on the streets, or engaged in domestic labour and young girls dedicated to Devadasi system. Therefore, our target groups are primarily Dalit children. Since 2005, our programmes have directly benefited approximately 15,000 children in Tamilnadu and Karnataka States, and in the last few years in Bangalore we have managed to reintegrate almost 4,000 with their families, family-type environments or communities.

EveryChild India Bidugade Partners:

Mahila Abhivrudhi Maththu Samrakshana Samsthe (MASS) is a membership organisation comprised of over 2,500 devadasi women. The organisation promotes development of former Devadasi women and other in Belgaum district, Karnataka.

Sri Gowthama Gramina Kalyana Kendra (SGGKK) is a non profit organisation, registered with the Societies Act. The organisation focuses on the development of Madiga community and prevention of devadasi system in Bagalkot District.

FENCE is a NGO registered under Societies Act. The organisation focuses on the education of Madiga children and preventing them from becoming child labourers, and organises the Madiga community by building institutions and promoting community leadership in Siruguppa block of Bellary district.

Prerana is an NGO registered under Societies Act. The organisation focuses on the development of women and children of the Madiga community; supporting the children to secure their futures by creating access to quality education, spearheading the campaign for effective implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme to ensure food rights and food security for the most marginalised families and keeping them together in the Raichur district.

EveryChild India and MASS, PRERANA, FENCE & SGGKK entered into a partnership in 2007 to implement the Bidugade project in the four blocks of North Karnataka. Through this project EveryChild and our partners have been working towards protecting at risk children from being dedicated under the guise of the Devadasi practice, creating awareness about dedication of children and its ill effects, supporting the children for their secure future and creating access to quality education, prevent child marriages. Simultaneously, the projects organising the Devadasi and other women of Madiga community and form their federations. The economic organisation of these groups in to into a co-

operative bank will contribute to long term sustainability of the political organisation/ federation of these marginalised women and education related interventions.

170 Child activity centres in 150 villages from 4 districts of north Karnataka

Current situation in country

North Karnataka is one of the most under developed regions in India. The most marginalised and discriminated group are the Madiga caste; children have poor access to state education and are at risk of entering child labour, bonded labour or being trafficked to become domestic child workers or commercial sex workers. Poverty disproportionately affects girls, as they are often the first to drop out of school and enter the labour market. Statistics from the Indian government show that 16% of girls drop out of primary school, but this rises to 46% at middle school level.

Grinding poverty and lack of opportunities for Madiga families from the lowest caste can lead desperate parents to resort to dedicating their children to serve as Devadasi. The caste system plays a key role in both the corrupted Devadasi system and trafficking of girls into the sex industry. The practice is historically related to the worship of deities particular to the lower, Madiga caste. Extreme poverty and routine discrimination experienced by Madiga families further increase the risk of dedication. Parents who have no male children sometimes dedicate one of their daughters so she will be able to care for them in their old age. Women who have been widowed, or who are living with HIV dedicate their daughters as Devadasis if they struggle to support them or anticipate difficulty with marriage prospects. It is not uncommon for the female children of Devadasi women to be dedicated as Devadasis themselves, repeating the cycle.

Young girls are at particular risk of being dedicated as Devadasis or being trafficked to brothels. Parents are unable to adequately support and care for their children often using them as a form of family income. As a result children lack confidence, skills and opportunities to build successful futures, experience abuse and exploitation and are at risk of separation from their families.

The impact on girls is extreme. Most Devadasi girls are separated from their families at a very young age and are forced to work in the sex industry at abysmally low wages which increases their vulnerability to trafficking, malnutrition and infection of HIV and AIDS.

Main problems in the project area/ project rationale

EveryChild's project was set up to combat an additional and significant risk that exists for young girls in these impoverished communities, and one which has negative implications for the health, education and life opportunities not only for the girls themselves but for their own families. Girls in these communities are dedicated to temples under the Devadasi ('*god's servant*') system, which entrench disadvantage from one generation to the next. In medieval India, a Devadasi was in effect 'married' to the temple goddess, and was trained in maintaining the temple and its rituals. In later years, each Devadasi had a wealthy patron, who would support her and their children. This development resulted in families with no male children dedicating one daughter, so that parents would be cared for as they became older, and women who had been deserted by their spouses or widowed would dedicate a daughter as a means of ensuring financial security. Yet a once-respected Hindu tradition has since become a smokescreen for commercial sexual exploitation. The system is now synonymous with the trafficking of girls from Madiga communities into India's growing sex industry: over 95% of Devadasis are Madiga women. The system was made

illegal some years ago, but, at present, it is estimated that there are more than 20,000 devadasis in southern India. With the system now underground, dedicated girls are invisible in society and therefore even more vulnerable.

Devadasi women are marginalised and treated with contempt by the wider society in which they cannot participate: they cannot marry, have no access to social security or property rights, and have little recourse but to continue sex work; furthermore the social stigma surrounding them is such that it is rare for their children to complete school. Girls born to



Devadasi are often then dedicated, further perpetuating the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. In some of Karnataka's villages, one family in five has a daughter working in the sex industry. UNAIDS statistics for 2008 show women are a growing proportion of those living with HIV in India: HIV prevalence of 16% has been found among home-based sex workers, 26% among their street-based peers, and 47% among those working in brothels. When their mother's health declines, children must work. If she dies, a lack of health awareness means that orphaned children will face further stigma and marginalisation within the communities.

Project Objectives and Activities

EveryChild supports a number of interventions to keep children within their families and prevent children from being abused and sexually exploited in the Devadasi system. Working with local partners MASS, SGGK, PRERANA and FENCE EveryChild operates a multi-faceted approach, which aims to protect girls from being sexually exploited and raise opportunities and expectations for girls in vulnerable low-caste groups through three objectives.

Objective 1: To campaign against the practice of dedicating young girls as Devdasis and child marriage through promotion of a community based child protection system and strengthening state child protection mechanisms and structures.

Child Rights Protection Committees (CRPC) are organised and run at the village/Panchayat level to intervene on behalf of children at risk of abuse including, dedication, child marriage and child labour. The children who have been dedicated to the practice and suffering abuse, exploitation, orphan and vulnerable children who are in kinship/extended family care are tracked and supported. The support from state welfare department would be mobilised by the Child Rights Protection Committee by linking them to governmental child protection structures including Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) and an integrated child protection scheme recently launched by the government. In addition CRPC play a crucial role in communities to raise awareness on the issues of dedication, child marriage, child labour. Each of the 150 villages in four blocks of four districts of North Karnataka has a Child Rights Protection Committee. The project also works to strengthen Child Welfare Committees to effectively address the issues of the children in need of care and protection under the frame work of Juvenile Justice Act.

Objective 2: To promote and support quality education to 5,000 children through activity centres in 4 blocks

Centres are run in communities and provide an opportunity for play, education support and workshops in which children discuss their rights and the dangers of practices such as Devadasi dedication, child marriage and child labour. The aim of such activities is to increase the opportunities available to the children as well as simultaneously empowering their parents and wider communities through raising their dignity, self-confidence and expectations. These centres provide classes taught by locally-recruited and trained Motivators in a safe environment. Each centre is equipped to provide 30-40 children with quality education, helping children who have dropped out of school catch up and reintegrate back into mainstream school. Older children are given career advice and the opportunity to enroll in job oriented courses, graduate courses and computer training; a community fund has also been set up specifically for Devadasi children to supports access to higher education.

EveryChild, in Collaboration with NIMHANS (National Institute for Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences), has developed a focused intervention for children at risk of losing parental care. The intervention provides children at risk with psychosocial care, life skills training, student enrichment and family enrichment interventions which enhances learning abilities and promotes self confidence and self esteem. The project also promotes children's empowerment through facilitating their participation in the child rights Grama Sabha (Village Assembly) linked to local panchayats (the lowest elected government unit). Under the 73rd constitutional amendment, panchayats have a duty of care of all children and their families in the community.

Objective 3: To promote community based institutions to support families to stay together through enhancing access to emergency credit needs, support higher education and economic development.

Savings and credit societies are being set up to provide loans and grants to families but paid only to women. This prevents financial emergencies relating to consumption needs and aims to improve the status of women in the family and wider community. The scheme encourages and enables women to control finances, which in turn promotes their participation in decision-making at family and village level. 4,000 women are members of Thrift and Credit Societies in 150 villages across four blocks of four districts in North Karnataka. The women's banks also aim to support children to pursue higher education/technical education through a higher education fund constituted by the

Women's Bank. This will enable the community to significantly enhance livelihood options for the younger generation by empowering them to get out the clutches of traditional exploitative systems in the longer term.

Project sustainability

We will establish a sustainable community based child protection mechanism to ensure that children remain within the education framework. We will work with community volunteers, building their capacity to manage village child activity centres, monitor the status and movement of children in the community and coordinate the Child Rights Protection Committees. Village community leaders, women's groups, local community based organisations (CBOs) and local officials will be closely involved in the implementation of this project. Sustainability will be achieved by i) building local capacities to own and further develop the new systems, ii) lobbying the government for effective implementation of the Devadasi Rehabilitation Programme, legislative reform of the Prohibition of Devadasi Act, a strengthened national child protection mechanism and improved access to education especially those denied of parental care and living in extended families in particular and vulnerable Madiga children in general iii) thrift and credit cooperatives and funds that have been secured by EveryChild for the next 3 years of the project. The project will be managed by four local NGOs operating in 150 villages. EveryChild India will support its partners to ensure that appropriate financial controls and participatory monitoring and evaluation frameworks are in place.

Monitoring and Evaluation

M&E is carried out by project teams in all four sites, involving managers from our partner organisations, community organisers, teachers and administrative staff from the activity centres, and community volunteers. All our local partners document the work's impact on the target group: village-level committees meet monthly with representatives of the women's groups and Child Rights Protection Committees to monitor the implementation of the programme. Our partners submit detailed quarterly financial and narrative reports and full annual reports in line with EveryChild's global monitoring and reporting systems that measure progress and impact against key indicators. Progress is also monitored by EveryChild India's programme team (Programme Coordinator / Programme Manager) by quarterly visits to project sites.

Stakeholder participation (children, families, communities, local government bodies, etc)

Children are consulted in the process of developing the intervention at the project location. Children's feedback is received throughout implementation of project activities. In addition community leaders, parents and the women members of the thrift and credit societies play a major role in monitoring the activities at the village level. The project engages with the Authorities of Department of Women and Children and the Education Department very closely to ensure children are protected and provided quality education in the main stream schools for the children at risk of losing parental care and to reintegrate children back to mainstream schools for drop out children rescued from child labour and child marriages. Involvement of Child Welfare Committees and police departments are key to the success of the project. EveryChild works closely with both of these stakeholder groups during prevention of dedication of girl child to the devadasi system and during Child marriages.

Case study and photograph

At the age of three Hanamavva was dedicated as a Devadasi. Her own mother was a Devadasi and felt she had no choice. By the age of 13 Hanamavva was trafficked to the town of Sangli and forced to work in one of the many brothels in the town. As a new girl she was in great demand and was forced to have sex with more than ten men a day; she had no idea that this was the fate that awaited her when she left her village for Sangli.

'I just wanted to kill myself. I planned to climb to the roof of the brothel and throw myself off but the thought of leaving my family destitute prevented me.'

At just 14 Hanamavva gave birth to her first son. By 18 Hanamavva escaped the brothels of Sangli with her two small sons and returned to the village she had grown up in. For a year men in the village harassed her for sex and threw stones at her house when she refused them. Eventually Hanamavva beat the men away from her with her shoe and they started to leave her alone.

Although Hanamavva was now free from the abuse she experienced in the brothels, she felt deeply for the young girls still suffering, and those who had been dedicated and did not know the horrific fate awaiting them. 'The girls suffer great pain and humiliation in the brothels and I wanted to prevent as many as possible going through what I did. Some girls in the villages round here believe that a good life awaits them in Sangli and other places. They have no experience of men and are very naïve. I tell them that the reality is that they will be expected to have sex with as many as 10 to 20 men per day and that it is painful and horrible. I take great satisfaction in saving a girl from making this mistake.'

Hanamavva now works for an EveryChild local partner SGGK as a volunteer to prevent young girls from being dedicated as Devadasis. She visits different villages in her area to speak to girls at risk of being dedicated and to inform them of the dangers of becoming a Devadasi. She uses performances of dance and song to also reach girls and their families and explain the connection between the Devadasi system and trafficking and the sex industry.

Hanamavva is positive about her own life and feels in control. Her two boys are studying hard so that they can become teachers when they grow up. Hanamavva's story shows that with support girls can be empowered to decide their own destinies. Her own mother, is relieved that the cycle has been broken: 'I now understand that doing this to your child is wrong and I feel very sad about having my daughter dedicated as I was. I feel very proud that she is now working to help stop the trafficking of Devadasi girls to the brothels.'

Beneficiary numbers from January 2010

- Each of the 150 villages in 4 blocks of 4 districts of North Karnataka has a Child Rights Protection Committee
- 4,000 women are members of Thrift and Credit Societies/Self Help Groups in 150 villages across 4 blocks of 4 districts in North Karnataka
- Psychosocial care interventions provided to all vulnerable children in 175 Child Activity Centres in 150 villages in North Karnataka
- 4 CBOs have increased capacity respond to the issues of children at risk/without parental care in North Karnataka
- At least 5,000 marginalised Madiga children, including 2,500 children at risk of losing parental care, are benefiting from the programmatic interventions in 4 blocks of 4 districts in North Karnataka
- Identification and support to at least 500 children who are with out parental care who are living in kinship/ extended families in the four locations.
- Nearly 500 children access quality education through enrolment in *Navodaya* and *Morarji* schools (National/State level pioneer boarding schools) and mainstreaming into formal education system
- At least 500 vulnerable children benefit from the higher education fund constituted by the community.
- Strengthening collectives of Devadasis and other women from Madiga community (like MASS comprised of former Devadasi) in 4 districts in North Karnataka that work towards protection of young girls from trafficking via dedication and from becoming victims of child marriage or child labour.