

Our Children: Our Responsibility

A commitment by Child Rights Protection Forum

An initiative of M.V. Foundation



*O Almighty, bless all my people to work and transform
Our country from a developing into a developed nation.
Let this second vision be born out of sweat of my people,
And bless our youth to live in a developed India.*

- A.P.J. Abdul Kalam

Many voluntary organizations across the country have undertaken innovative development interventions. Each of these has unique experiences, to share and learn from. However, there has been little effort at documenting these efforts for dissemination among a wider audience.

This publication has been developed out of a growing concern that sharing of information is a critical area that requires attention in order to strengthen development processes. It is hoped that the publication will be of equal interest to academicians, policy makers, development activists and the interested public.

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Research, documentation, design:

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CRPF



M V Foundation



Preface

If a child from the middle class urban families does not go to school, a hue and cry is made. Yet there is total absence of societal response for children from poor families who are out of school and are at work. In fact there is a tolerance of child labour and a social approval for poor children being out of school. It is justified on the ground that children need to work to earn an income and keep the family going. Even policies on universalisation of education look for arrangements where the child can do both, work as well as learn.

These responses and attitudes are evident through all layers of society and are even internalized by the parents themselves. At times children too are prepared to accept their lot - unquestioningly.

Unless these attitudes are changed, it is difficult for children to be in schools. This is possible only when a social norm that supports poor children's Right to education is established. MV Foundation (MVF) initiated a programme to address this need, based on the conviction that 'no child must work and every child must attend full-time formal schools'.

In this effort, youth volunteers from the villages supported MVF in dealing with the resistance from the villagers especially the employers of bonded labour children. They converted every provocation into a challenge, and used this as an occasion to build consensus on the issue of protection of Child Rights. Any act of violence, insult or resistance was answered by debates and discussions, thus winning over even the most difficult community members, may they be parents or employers, as partners in the campaign for protection of Child Rights.

The support for children and their Rights was institutionalised with the formation of local institutions such as the Child Rights Protection Committees. With the setting up of the committees, every section in the village was alerted that violating the Rights of a child would not be accepted. The committees acted as watchdogs of Child Rights and brought incidences of bonded labour, girl child abuse or even child marriages to the fore.

This helped in making more and more information available about the tribulations and struggles of children, the situation of bonded labour, and in the case of girls, their engagements, proposed marriages, violence on older girl children and their dropping out of school. At the same time, parents and village institutions began to discuss the problem frequently. The committees helped the community internalise the idea that children need to go to schools.

These committees which were subsequently registered as Child Rights Protection Forums, also bridged the gap that existed between the household and the local bodies. They mediated through existing social and cultural hierarchies and local power structures, reminding them about their responsibilities in protection of Child Rights and compelling them to act towards protecting them. This marked beginning of a genuine democratic process.

It is in the process of participation in the protection of Child Rights that every single member of the local body began enjoying the status of an elected representative, projecting public interest at the gram panchayat. The ward members who previously had little or no role in the functioning of the local body began to formulate policies, interacting with the forums and committees set up in the village. Schools became public places available for community scrutiny, making it possible to address all other Rights of children such as the right to health, right to nutrition, right to protection and development. Thus, the norm that children have to work because they are poor was combated and replaced by a norm that did not allow children to work and stated that every child, no matter how poor, MUST go to school.

The members of CRPFs demonstrated that ordinary people in the local communities are capable of taking up issues based on universal values and principles. They proved that they can come together putting aside parochial sentiments and trappings of existing wrong practices for taking up the cause of Rights of children. In getting the public institutions to respond to Child Rights they earned the respect of one and all in the community. It gave them the confidence to contest for the local bodies and significantly over 750 members of CRPF have won the elections as members of gram panchayats, mandal parishads and zilla parishads. Thus, in taking up the cause of Child Rights based on secular principles of equity and justice, members of CRPF have become genuine leaders contributing to deepening of democracy in our country.

Shantha Sinha

Secretary

MVF

January 2008



Dear Reader

As development writers, we get an opportunity to get an exposure to a variety of processes of social change and contextualise these experiences into the nuances of organisations which play proactive, facilitative and catalyst roles to make change happen.

While documenting the experiences of Child Rights Protection Forums (CRPF), a vibrant community-driven, unique initiative, the challenge was to be constantly alert to the fact that we were documenting the experiences of CRPF and not those of MVF. This was especially because MVF, the agency responsible for envisaging, originating and facilitating CRPF had an impressive history being a premier player in the Child Rights sector.

Therefore, from research of the secondary sources to interaction with the MVF volunteers, CRPF members, parents, children and others, the concern was to understand the relationship between MVF, the core strengths and the CRPF, the dynamic and forceful agent for change. While writing too, it was important to share the processes in a way that will underscore the thin line between the roles of MVF and CRPF and yet bring the synergy to the fore.

This document is an attempt to share the CRPF model and underscore that the community has a potential to question biases and barriers embedded in the culture of the area and they are ready to take responsibility to correct the beliefs in the interest of its health and well-being.

We hope that this document will capture the readers' interest and enthuse them about the power of community action.

CDL Team

Chapter One

Coming together for children

Thirty-five year old Krishnamurthy, clad in a checked *lungi*¹ and *kurta* and a towel around his neck, does not appear to be the most powerful and affluent person in the village. Yet he owns 15 acres of land in Mukundapur, a small village in Nalgonda district of Andhra Pradesh. In fact he looks like any other ordinary farmer from the community. By temperament, he is as soft spoken and humble as other community members in the village.

Yet there is something more to Krishnamurthy than what meets the eye.

He is one of the landlords who have released the bonded child labourers formerly employed by them. Krishnamurthy's eyes glow with high self-esteem as he says, "I feel that accepting my mistake and agreeing to release Biksham who was working for me was one of the most responsible and wise decisions I have ever made. He was 13 then and had been in my employment for five years. He lost five precious years of his childhood, but I could at least give him an opportunity to go to school again and enjoy his childhood once again."

"When Biksham's parents approached me for employment, I agreed on two counts. On one hand, I was getting a labourer from whom I could get more work, while paying lesser wages. On the other, I felt I was helping Biksham and his parents by employing him. With Rs. 5000 a year, they could cover some part of the expenses of running the family and Biksham was assured of his daily food and clothes. I felt that I was providing him everything. He was not going to school anyway, so what else would he need," he recalls.

Employing children by paying a fixed sum to their parents for one year – from one *ugadi*² to the next *ugadi* - was a routine practice in Mukundapur, nearby villages and almost in all districts of Andhra Pradesh. Everyone believed that poor parents have no other choice than to pledge their children to landlords for work. They also felt that it was the duty of the children to contribute to the family income.

Born and brought up in such an atmosphere, Krishnamurthy, like many others, was not even aware that by employing Biksham he was actually restraining his development and violating his Rights as a child. He had not felt that the work he was extracting from

¹ *Lungi* is a garment worn around the waist in India

² *Ugadi* marks the beginning of a new Hindu lunar calendar



Biksham was not helping him; and that instead it was causing him harm.

Krishnamurthy became aware of the concept of Child Rights and the need to protect Child Rights when the scenario in his village underwent a transition. A group of members in the community had started taking interest in convincing the parents of children who were out-of-school as well as employers to enable the child go to school. As a result, there was turmoil in the village... rounds of discussions and debates... persuasions and pressures... Nobody had ever heard of the concept of 'Rights'. But gradually everything was changing...parents were getting convinced that they need to send their children to school. They were ready to alter their life-styles to enable the children go to school.

Yet the change in Krishnamurthy did not happen overnight. He took time to understand the new concept that children like Biksham have Rights. He needed answers before he could make a decision. He wanted to know what is wrong with a poor boy like Biksham working in my field when I am compensating his work with food and money?

Biksham had run away from his school

five years back. Does he really want to go back to school?

I had neither pressurised Biksham nor his parents. It was their decision to make him earn by working in my field. Then why is the community targeting me for employing him?

Once these questions were answered Krishnamurthy realised that the rightful place for Biksham, or in fact for any child is neither the field nor any other place of work nor the house. The child's place is at the school alone. This was a turning point in his life. He not only agreed to release Biksham from bondage but also ensured that he went to a residential camp³, which prepared him for the seventh standard examination. Over the next year, he also observed the change in Biksham and his transformation from a bonded labour into a school-going child, bright and eager to learn.

The whole process also transformed Krishnamurthy from an employer of child labour to a believer of the concept of Child Rights and then to a Child Rights activist.

Krishnamurthy became a member of the Child Rights Protection Forum (CRPF), in Mukundapur. In fact it was this same forum that had earlier explained the

The National Sample Survey 2000, reported 16.4 million Indian children aged 5-14 years were 'engaged in economic activities and domestic or non-remunerative work'. Another 46 million children of school-going age are unaccounted for; they are neither enrolled in school nor officially working.

Most child labourers are found in the agriculture sector. They amount to around 85 per cent of the total child labour.

³ Residential camp provides a bridge between work and school by preparing the child to enter formal school in classes appropriate to their age



concept of Child Rights to him, giving answers to all his questions, and ultimately motivating him to release Biksham. Today, in 2006, Krishnamurthy is actively involved in inspiring other employers to release bonded child labourers and convince parents to send their children to school. He is also a part of all the other activities that the CRPF undertakes to achieve its aim of protecting the Rights of all children from the village.

But what is the Child Rights issue? What is the need for promoting Child Rights? Why is it important to protect

Child Rights? An understanding of Child Rights will lead to an appreciation of the concept behind the CRPF.

The need for protection of Child Rights

Childhood is a period of learning and development. This development process comprises behaviour patterns that mark the child's journey from an immature and dependent child to an independent and mature adult. The inputs in the early period of life therefore, have a strong influence in preparing the ground for adulthood. This hence demands fulfilment of the child's needs which can in turn lead to his/her physical, cognitive and psycho-social growth.

The manner in which these needs are met in childhood makes a strong impact on the child's intelligence, personality and social interaction. These needs include protection, health and nutrition care, affection, interaction, stimulation and learning etc. and are framed as legitimate Rights of children which society has an obligation to respect and provide for. Child Rights are a part of the fundamental freedom and the inherent Rights of all human beings below the age of 18. These Rights apply to every child, irrespective of the race, colour, sex, creed or other status of the child/ parents/ legal guardians.

Despite the criticality of fulfilment of these Rights to a child's life, there are still a large number of children who live in miserable conditions, with no food, no shelter, no education, no health care and no chance for a better future. Many of them work in agriculture fields, factories and as domestic help. They are poorly paid and meagrely fed. They have a hopeless life with no opportunities to develop their potential. Poverty, homelessness, abuse, neglect, preventable diseases, unequal access to education and justice systems that do not recognize their special needs are the reality of their lives.



At the global level

- *Hunger and malnutrition kill nearly 6 million children a year. Many die from treatable infectious diseases including diarrhea, pneumonia, malaria and measles*
- *640 million children lack adequate shelter*
- *400 million have no access to safe drinking water*
- *270 million lack health care amenities*
- *140 million — mostly girls — have never been to school*
- *150 million children are malnourished worldwide*

At the national level

- *72 million children in India between five and 14 years do not have access to basic education*
- *Number of out-of-school children, as reported by States/Union Territories (UTs), was down to 95 lakh in 2005 from 320 lakh in 2001*
- *There are 58 deaths per 1,000 live births in the country*

Moreover, being vulnerable due to their young age and dependency on adults, they become victims of several unjust practices such as child marriage, child trafficking and child abuse. The girl child is even more vulnerable as they are victimized by the patriarchal system. Discriminatory treatment within the family in relation to food, nutrition, health and education is common. Additionally, the girl child also suffers from practices such as female foeticide, female infanticide, child prostitution and illegal trafficking into the sex market.

The extent and magnitude of these practices by society suggests an urgent and dire need to address these violations of Child Rights, as healthy development

of the child is crucial to the well-being of the society. Considering the dependence of children on adults, the onus to defend children's Rights naturally rests on the adults. They have to ensure that children meet their basic needs and get opportunities to develop their full potential - cognitive, emotional and physical. Thus only by making a special case for protection of Child Rights, several interconnected issues such as healthcare, education and literacy, and caste and class inequalities could be addressed.

“Children are the responsibility of the community and it is possible to eliminate violation of Child Rights only when everyone in the community, as parents, neighbours, teachers, politicians,



journalists, professionals, bureaucrats, activists and most importantly as citizens plays proactive roles in favour of children. Change is possible only when parents and communities are informed about Child Rights,” says Shantha Sinha, Secretary, MVF.

The informed community can play different roles to protect Child Rights. They can exert peer pressure on parents as well as employers of child labour; they can provide sustainability to all efforts of checking violations of Child Rights; they can influence the local government bodies to take necessary action, resolving immediate problems as well as tracing and addressing their root causes.

CRPF is a step by the community towards taking the onus of protecting the Rights of children with support of the neighbourhood and the village or the town.

Recognising community’s potential of knowledge, skills and human as well as financial resources to play a pivotal role in protection of Child Rights, MVF attempted to institutionalise the community support. It envisaged a larger role of an active and important player in the protection of Child Rights.

About MVF

MV Foundation (MVF), a registered Trust, was established in 1981 as a research institution on issues relating to social transformation, in memory of the eminent educationist and historian Prof. Mamidipudi Venkatarangaiya in Andhra Pradesh. In 1991, MVF began working actively on the issue of child labour and released the first 30 children from bonded labour in Ranga Reddy district.



The Non-Negotiables

MVF's Charter of Basic Principles for Emancipation of Child Labour

1. **All children must attend full-time formal day schools**

Non-formal schools should only be a bridge to formal education and not a substitute for night schools.

2. **Any child out of school is a child labourer**

The definition of child labour encompasses every non-school going child irrespective of whether the child is engaged in wage or non-wage work, working for the family or for others, employed in hazardous or non-hazardous occupations, employed on daily wage or on contract basis as bonded labour.

3. **All work / labour is hazardous: it harms the overall growth and development of the child**

4. **There must be total abolition of child labour**

5. **Any law regulating child work is unacceptable**

Any justification perpetuating the existence of child labour must be condemned arguments such as the ones listed below are all anti-child and go against their real development.

- Child labour is the 'harsh reality' of the family
- Children have to work due to poverty
- Necessity of the child's earnings and income for the family
- Parents are not willing to send their children to schools
- The teachers and schools are of poor quality
- The present education is irrelevant in the rural areas as it can not provide employment
- Children who are educated lose relevant vocational skills

From the initial work in Ranga Reddy district, MVF has spread to another 12 districts of Andhra Pradesh –

Direct intervention: Ranga Reddy, Adilabad, Hyderabad, Nalgonda and Kurnool

Intervention as a facilitating agency: Mahbubnagar, Anantapur, Kadapa, Chittoor, East Godavari, Srikakulam and Vizianagaram

In 2006-07, MVF is working towards elimination of child labour in the age group 6–14 years and ensuring that all children under six years of age enjoy right to education, health and nutrition. It also works towards empowering women through collective action on issues relating to livelihoods and natural resource management.

MVF believes that there are only two categories of children, those who go to

work viz. child labourers and those who go to full time formal schools. MVF, therefore, believes that any form of work by a child deprives him/her of the right to childhood and violates his/her right to develop the full potential. Hence any work done by child should be treated as child labour. It believes that the only way to keep the child away from work and recognize the child's right to childhood is to send him/her to a formal school.

MVF spearheads the movement of elimination of child labour in Andhra Pradesh and has influenced several policies and programmes of the government. It has created a niche for itself in the sector, with a growth - both in the scale of work as well as richness of philosophy that it strongly believes in.

"MVF's strategy and goals are clearly defined through a Charter of Non-Negotiables, which is the nucleus of MVF. These non-negotiables give us new energy and make us more responsible in our efforts in making education a reality for every child," says Shantha Sinha, a firm believer of the non-negotiables.

Surveys and studies conducted by MVF to identify the number of out-of-work children in the state of Andhra Pradesh, have given MVF an overview of the changing scenario and area perspectives on the child labour issue. With a strong belief that school is the best place for children to be in and a strong alternative to check child labour, MVF has mainstreamed over 4,00,000 children from 12 districts of Andhra Pradesh into formal schools since it started working on the child labour issue in 1991.

MVF's strategy is to help children prepare for the entry into formal school and help them make up the missed schoolwork through residential bridge camps.

MVF's approach

Most experts argue that poverty is one of the main causes of child labour and poor parents view children as wage earners who can supplement family income. They strongly believe that the problem of child labour cannot be solved if poverty is not alleviated. But MVF challenges this standard argument.

"These rationalisations have been involuntarily internalised, both by the poor and by society in general. We need to question and challenge such positions favouring the status quo, to the extent where a consensus is built, especially among adversaries, around the concept that every child should be in school," explains Shantha Sinha. Citing the experience of MVF she adds, "If this was true, the poorest of children in every village would have dropped out from school and entered the labour market. However, the reality is that there are instances of children who belong to very poor families and yet go to school while their relatively better off counterparts work in the labour market."



Understanding the child labour issue

Child labour means 'children in employment'. Making a child work is considered inappropriate or exploitative except for some household chores and schoolwork. If children below a certain physical maturity are made to work, their education and social development are interrupted. Life of drudgery and deprivation without care and protection is their lot.

Different people understand and perceive 'child labour' in different ways. They consider the following as child labour

- *Children doing wage-earning work*
- *Children working in hazardous occupations like carpet weaving, match factories, glass factories etc.*

Some also opine that doing work especially in family occupations is good for children as it acts as a learning process for them. However, all these perceptions exclude children doing domestic work like fetching water, looking after siblings as well as children who are neither at work nor in schools from the child labour category.

It clearly demonstrates that even poor parents are willing to sacrifice for sending their children to school.”

MVF's experience indicates that sending a child to school or work is not a purely economic decision. Number of factors such as tradition, ignorance of parents due to illiteracy, parent's unfamiliarity with the schooling system and lack of access to alternatives, insensitive administration in schools and education departments influence the decision about the child. Also, child labour is not the effect of poverty but the cause of poverty. Children at work affect adult employment in a number of ways. It reduces wages, arrests development and creates a poor quality of life for communities and society as a whole. **MVF therefore firmly believes that the right place for all children is at school. It therefore, takes**

an approach where universalisation of education and elimination of all forms of child labour are twin programmes that go hand-in-hand.

MVF employs several strategies such as residential bridge camps (RBCs), motivational camps, short-term camps etc. to ensure that children who are withdrawn from work are able to match the learning level of their peers in the



There are 246 million children under the age of 18 working full-time in the world today.

The Census of India-1991 recorded the presence of 1.20 million working children in India, while the Census-2001 has recorded 12.66 million working children in the ages of 5-14 years. Ninety percent of the children workers are from rural areas⁴.

Out of the 12.66 million working children in 2001, about 5.77 million children were classified as 'main workers'⁵ and the rest 6.88 million children were as 'marginal workers'. Most of the working children are engaged in agricultural activities as wage labourers or cultivators. Manufacturing, processing, servicing and repairs in the household industries engaged three percent child workers, while three percent child workers were engaged in factory work and the other 15 percent working children were engaged in service sector, mostly as domestic workers, and in small trade activities.

school. MVF also plays the catalyst's role in assisting these children by identifying the hurdles in the process of transforming a child labour into a student in mainstream school – may it be getting birth certificates, negotiating with teachers for admission or ensuring hostel admissions.

Recognising the unseen and hidden work of girls and their discrimination, MVF makes special efforts to ensure girls' admissions to schools and check child marriages to ensure their retention in schools.

MV Foundation understands that retention in schools is as important as re-admission. Hence, it attempts to remove all barriers that push children out-of-school and factors that compel them to join the labour force. It makes efforts to enable the child continue in school without any disruption or pressure.

Recognising the role the government, social systems, culture and tradition play in allowing children to work instead of going to school; MVF follows a multi-pronged approach to counter the issue of child labour.

At one level, MVF attempts to put pressure on the formal education system to deliver services. However as MVF believes in strengthening of local institutions and not setting up parallel institutions, it strengthens the existing institutions and structures such as formal schools, hostels, etc. It works to enhance the capacities of the state and national governments in their efforts to ensure that children enjoy their right to education.

⁴ These figures are sourced from the official data. There are varying estimates of magnitude of working children in India due to differing concepts and methods of estimation.

⁵ Workers who are engaged for production activities for more than 183 days in a year are called 'Main Workers.' Workers engaged for less than 183 days are called 'Marginal Workers.'



At yet another level, it influences the policy makers at the state and national level to bring about systemic changes for addressing the special needs of children such as first generation learners, children rejoining schools after a long absence, released child labourers and girls who have sought education by stepping out of marriages.

MVF strongly believes that the reality of child labour is that it will exist wherever it is allowed to exist, where laws are not enforced and where there is a cultural acceptance of children not being in school.

Moreover, MVF also mobilises the

community for public action and motivates it to accept an alternate social norm – **‘No child should work and all children should be in school’**.

By doing this MVF attempts to create an atmosphere in the villages which is conducive to education. This process involves campaigns, strategies to resolve conflicts and building of alliances and networks in support of Child Rights.

It is interesting to trace how this support has taken the form of a community-based institution called Child Right Protection Forum going beyond being a mere sustainability mechanism and becoming a force to reckon with.

Chapter Two

Emergence of CRPF

“**T**he concept of CRPF emerged and evolved through an experiential process. It was not pre-designed,” states Shantha Sinha. “When we first started releasing children who worked as bonded labour, we realized that in the process of doing so, the children and their families were getting isolated. Even the atmosphere in the village was unsympathetic. This wasn’t what we wanted. Instead, we visualized a congenial and conducive climate for Child Rights in the village. We felt that this was possible only if support was forthcoming from one and all in the village community.”

MVF, therefore, decided to mobilize the entire community to debate and discuss the possibility of making their villages and their society child labour free. “It meant that we had to convince the communities that children’s Right to education is important and central to society as a whole,” says Mr. Venkat Reddy, project coordinator, MVF.

Identifying people who understood the MVF approach and were willing to support it, perhaps even defying the cultural norms in the village, was not easy. However, with a great deal of effort, community members started responding positively to MVF’s appeal in several areas. Initially, the community members came together to support specific cases only. These cases varied from protection of girls from getting married at a tender age to release of children from bondage.

The members - youths as well as elders – did not have an understanding of the Child Rights issue, but felt a sense of goodwill. More often the community support was not leveraged through any organized effort. The community members came in their individual capacities. Though there were times when they did not involve themselves actively, yet their presence facilitated the process. The atmosphere of conflict and antagonism changed into an atmosphere of trust and support.

These support groups started growing as they gained clarity on the concept of Child Rights and the role they could play to protect Child Rights. Gradually, the impact of exposure to several issues and experience of addressing these issues through offering support to MVF was visible. It transformed their goodwill into conviction and conviction into commitment.



“The commitment of these support groups, their eagerness to understand the Child Rights issue and act to ensure that basic Rights of children from their villages are not violated, made us understand the value of organizing these groups. From our side, we ensured that any mobilization



of the community was not left with loose ends. Each mobilization effort led to institution building and facilitated our efforts towards sustainability,” says Venkat Reddy.

This understanding resulted in MVE volunteers institutionalizing community support by forming support groups in all operational areas of MVE, initially in Ranga Reddy District but, subsequently in other districts too. “We followed a strategy of inclusion instead of opposition. We included landlords who were employers of child labour earlier but had changed during the process of releasing the children,” says Venkat Reddy. “We even felicitated them and projected them as role models. This motivated other employers and helped in the process of creating a positive atmosphere in the village,” he adds.

Crystallization of the concept

The members came forward to form groups, commit themselves to the cause and take on the onus of ensuring that all children from their respective areas go to school. Yet their understanding of

Child Rights was ad-hoc which could prove to be a hurdle in the work. The need was to understand MVE’s philosophy and the reasons as well as the experiences behind it.

“We felt the need to strengthen these support groups by building their understanding about Child Rights. This was essential for both identifying cases where Child Rights were violated and taking up these issues in favour of the children whose Rights need to be revived,” Venkat Reddy adds. This resulted in various training programmes and workshops on various aspects of Child Rights and on the ‘non-negotiables principles’ of MVE.

During a workshop on Child Rights in Srikakulam district in the year 2000, the need to formalize the informal groups into community-based groups working on Child Rights emerged as a concept.

“Some of us who were a part of these informal groups were motivated not only to continue the work but to take more responsibility. We also felt that it was important to have a collective identity

and collective voice to negotiate with the government officials from a position of strength as well as to convince the community,” recalls Janardhan, District Secretary, Ranga Reddy District CRPF. “The possibilities were churned in the workshop and resulted in the formation of committees which were named as Child Rights Protection Committees, or CRPC in short,” he adds.

Set up with an aim to support efforts towards making their village child labour free, these committees worked to convince the community members, the parents, landlords and others in the village of children’s Right to education. Once their existence was formalized into CRPCs, the ad-hoc nature of the efforts changed to a consolidated action. As a result, CRPCs were organized in other districts such as Adilabad, Nalgonda Mahbubnagar, and other districts where MVF was operational.

The presence of CRPCs across the state of Andhra Pradesh gave visibility to the Child Rights issues as the committees took up various cases of violation and raised their voices at various forums. At one level, the officials recognized the strength of the community interventions and offered to support their efforts in their official capacity, wherever required. At another level, the change in attitude of the parents, employees of child labour and the general populace in the villages helped the process of creating a social norm in favour of children’s Right to education.



“The realization of the strength of CRPCs motivated us to network the CRPCs into district level as well as state level committees. We felt that we could maximize the impact of the CRPCs, if we create an appropriate structure and assign roles for CRPCs at different levels,” says Mr. Y. Rajendra Prasad, MVF Project Coordinator and Member Secretary of CRPF.

CRPF gets its own identity

This was the germination of the concept of a state-level body that binds all the committees at different levels into one entity – creating a common identity, beliefs and ideology and threading a system that could





work as one entity and not as separate groups. At the end of the brainstorming workshop attended by around 150 CRPC members, CRPF was registered as a state-level forum⁶ on 1st March 2004.

As CRPF was perhaps the first community-based organisation in the state of Andhra Pradesh and even in the country which was formed to take on the onus of protecting Child Rights, there were no models nor any pre-set path that it could follow. However, it had a strong base of the non-negotiables of MVF which served as guidelines.

“We did the mapping of Andhra Pradesh on Child Rights issues and also developed a peer evaluation format for the *mandals* to evaluate each others’ strengths and weaknesses. This helped both *mandals* - the one that was evaluating and the *mandal* that was getting evaluated - to work on the weaknesses,” says Rajendra Prasad.

Once the CRPFs were formalized, a membership drive was taken up. A membership fee of Rs. 25 was fixed. This was done to ensure that the members were committed to the cause, in letter and spirit. Today, there are more than

20,000 CRPF members in the country at various levels cutting across castes, income groups, education, age and gender. They bring their own strengths to the forum and build a synergy.

“We consider CRPF as an equal partner in the sector of Child Rights. We have therefore, included their representatives in the core group of MVF. Initially they were observers but the level of their participation has increased with inputs in the planning process and discussion on finances. This has created transparency and also helped their learning process,” explains Shantha Sinha.

Objectives of CRPF

- Work towards building a social norm for protection of Child Rights as listed in the CRC of the UN.
- Ensure total abolition of child labour and ensure that every child goes to school and is retained there
- Act as a pressure group on all public institutions concerning Child Rights
- Involve the related government departments of the State such as education, social welfare, labour, health, revenue, police, women and child welfare as well as local government bodies and elected representatives thereof in various child protection activities.

Structure of CRPF

Formation of CRPF at the state level and the functional requirement to work

⁶ The name was changed to Child Rights Protection Forum as a result of the formalities required for the registration process.

at different levels made a tiered structure necessary. While the state level CRPF is at the apex, the other tiers are

- CRPF at the Village level
- CRPF at the *Mandal*⁷ level
- CRPF at the District level

The village level CRPF is the basic structure where the members keep a constant watch on various village level institutions such as *anganwadis*, schools and hostels and monitor their functions. They also identify school dropouts and out-of-school children and motivate their parents to send them to school. They also try to convince the employers to release children from bondage. Setting up of the forum itself alerts every section in the village that violating the Rights of a child would not be tolerated. The presence of the forums helps the community in internalising the idea that children need to go to schools.

Two representatives from each village CRPF become the members of the *Mandal* CRPF and attend the *Mandal* level meetings. These members perform an important task about sharing the decisions at the *Mandal* level with the village level CRPF members and vice-versa. Primarily, at this level the role of the CRPF is that of the watch-dog and conscience-keeper. It also motivates gram panchayat members to take active roles in protection of Child Rights.

The *Mandal* level CRPF is the middle level structure. It takes up issues which are not solved at the village level. These are especially issues which require collective action at the *Mandal* level. These could involve contacting the *Mandal* level officers from revenue, education, police and other relevant departments and invoking their support. Representatives from each *Mandal* CRPF attend the district level meetings and trainings and share the proceedings with other members of the *Mandal* level CRPF. At this level the role is basically that of a pressure group and problem-solving.



The district level CRPF is the apex structure in the district and has the important role to review the activities and make future action plans for the whole district. At this level, the CRPF establishes contacts with the district officers from the government departments, media and political leaders. They perform advocacy roles and take

⁷ A *Mandal* in Andhra Pradesh, is an administrative unit consisting of about 30-40 villages and an average population of around 50,000. The administrative structure in Andhra Pradesh comprises the district, *Mandal* and gram panchayat.



Who makes up the CRPF?

Members of the CRPF include gram panchayat members, school committee members, youth, school teachers, previous employers who have released child labour, members of women's groups and political leaders. It means that anyone and everyone who makes a commitment towards the cause of protecting Child Rights can become a member of the CRPF.

The CRPF consists of a general body of all members and an Executive Committee at the State, District, Mandal and Village level. The Executive Committees consist of a Convenor and Member Secretary and 11 executive members. The role of the Executive Committee is to co-ordinate the day-to-day activities of the CRPF, co-ordinate with other Child Rights protection forums and to give overall guidance to the activities of the CRPF. To become a member of the CRPF, one has to be introduced by an existing member of the CRPF and pay a membership fee of Rs. 25.

collective action if necessary. They also undertake training and capacity building of the CRPF members at village and Mandal level and studies and fact-finding investigations on various issues to serve as the basis for action. At this level, the CRPF has to perform a variety of roles from a pressure group to fact-finding group and from strategy building to monitoring.

Creating opportunities through innovations

“Interestingly, even though the structure of the district CRPFs and the roles they perform are similar in all districts, they adopt innovative strategies to address issues specific to the district,” says Rajendra Prasad.

In Nalgonda district, the atmosphere is politically charged and people are politically active. The district CRPF therefore uses protests, *dharnas* and campaigns as powerful tools to pressurize the government officers, police or employers on different issues. The district CRPF in Nalgonda has also

made efforts to bring the political leaders from all the parties on one platform called ‘Aikya Vedike’⁸ where despite all their differences they all agree on one point that the Rights of all children must be protected. The CRPF is also making efforts to ensure that all political parties open a cell for Child Rights to give focused attention to the issue.

Similarly, when the Nalgonda district CRPF felt that it was difficult to convince government officers in the absence of data to support, it conducted an in-depth study and collected relevant data on the status of social welfare hostels in the district by surveying 253 hostels. They consolidated the data on the basis of constituencies and presented them to officers, MLAs and members of various standing committees for follow-up. They also conducted similar studies on residential bridge camps especially those managed by NGOs and schools with reference to facilities, enrollments and availability of teachers.

⁸ Loosely translated it means a ‘platform for unity’

“As a spin-off of our sharing the findings of the study and the response of government officials at the state-level meeting, other district CRPFs have also decided to do similar studies in their areas,’ says Nagaiah, Convenor, Nalgonda district CRPF.

For instance,

- In Kurnool district, the *dalit* issue is a strong concern and a number of *dalit* organizations are active in the area. The district CRPF used this as an opportunity and built an alliance with these organizations to address the issues of the marginalized children
- In Adilabad district where the issue of bonded labour is prominently present especially among the dominant tribal community, the district CRPF chose to write a petition to the Human Rights Commission and involve the Deputy Collector in releasing the bonded labour.

These innovations are a few instances of responses to area-specific problems and outline the space for emerging new practices to take the issue forward. Moreover, these are shared with other CRPFs in the district level or state level meetings to allow replications.



Chapter Three

Translating commitment to practice

“We were very clear from the beginning about CRPF not undertaking implementation of any programme. This clarity was essential as assuming an implementer’s role would have robbed the moral capacity of CRPF to work as a pressure group,” shares Venkat Reddy. “It would have brought CRPF on to the same level as other implementing agencies and would not have created a position for itself from where it could monitor the programmes and projects undertaken by the government as well as NGOs,” he adds.

The stand of CRPF of not having any vested interests in the programme has helped it continue being morally correct and convincing the community as well as general public about the inviolability of Child Rights.

CRPF, therefore plays the roles of activist, conscience keeper, support group and pressure group. All the tiers in the CRPF play appropriate roles while conducting these activities according to their own inherent strengths and expertise. These activities are predominantly of two types

- Activities for taking Child Rights agenda forward



- Activities which are targeted at building the capacities of its members

Activities for taking Child Rights agenda forward

- o *Release children from work and bring them back to formal schools*

The primary commitment of any CRPF is to ensure that not a single child from the villages is kept away from the school. Identifying children who do not go to school, finding out the reasons behind it and facilitating the process of going to school emerge as an important set of activities, especially at the village level.

This process comprises of several sub-processes such as releasing the children from the workforce, may it be cottonseed

farms, industries or individual residences, by convincing the employers and parents. This crucial process includes dealing with problems which emerge while releasing the children ranging from managing the resistance of employers, motivating the parents, solving issues related to returning of advance payments to the employers and facilitating admission to schools.

- o *Resolving issues with the employers*

“Parents are interested in sending their children to school. Yet sometimes, if the parents are very poor, we try to adopt mechanisms that can help them in their struggle for survival and enable children join schools,” says V. Krishna, a member of Mukundapur CRPF and vice-president of gram panchayat. This includes influencing the gram panchayat members to select poor parents as beneficiaries for several government schemes like old age/ widow/ handi-capped pension or *Antyodaya* scheme that provides 30 kgs of rice to poor families.

In some cases the parents are unable to pay off the advance taken from the employer. CRPF members intervene and convince the employer to accept the repayment in instalments. Sometimes the *Mandal* level CRPF has to intervene and bring the *Mandal* Revenue Officer (MRO) or police to pressurise stubborn employers. At times the intervention of the district level CRPF is also necessary.

- o *Helping with readmissions to schools*

CRPFs also facilitate the dropout children to rejoin schools. They counsel and help them adjust to the bridge camp where they see other children enjoying the transition from child labourers to students.

At the other level, CRPF tries to assist the parents to handle problems they encounter in getting transfer/ caste certificates, paying school fees and arranging for school uniforms etc. For the parents who are mostly ignorant and illiterate, understanding and meeting the requirements for school admission is frightful especially in the absence of birth/school transfer certificates.



“During the school opening period we try to solve this issue collectively at the *Mandal* level. At the school level individual cases are taken up by the village level CRPF. The *Mandal* level CRPF assists them in dealing with difficult cases,” says Sanjeev Rao, *Mandal* Convenor, Penpahad *Mandal*, Nalgonda district. “We petitioned the *Mandal*





15.4 per cent of Indian girls get married by the age of 13, 33.3 per cent by the age of 15. Almost 1/3 of the female population is married before they reach the legal marriage age. By 18 years of age, this figure reaches 64.6 per cent, at 20 it is 79.4 per cent, at 22 it increases to 87.9 per cent, and at 25 it is 93.7 per cent

Revenue Officer to issue orders to all gram panchayats in the *Mandal* area to register and issue birth certificates to all the children seeking school admissions from their areas and ensure that the admission procedure is smooth,” he adds.

o *Mobilise communities against child marriages*

Despite being banned by the law, not much has changed in the actual practice of child marriages. While this is a result of interplay of several factors, resistance of the parents that emerges from fear of safety of their daughters if she remains unmarried, and pressure from their communities to adhere to the traditional systems have deterred them from stopping of child marriages.

CRPF, therefore, works on changing the practice of child marriages at different levels. At the village level, it maintains a close watch on all marriages and tries to convince the parents to postpone the marriage if the girl is below 18. Simultaneously, it mobilises the community to make sure that any girl

in the community is not married until she completes 18 years.

If the efforts do not yield positive results, CRPFs at the *Mandal* or even district levels intervene with different strategies such as involving the Police Department and MROs or undertake protests etc. Sometimes when there are instances of child marriages arranged as a part of mass marriage functions, a number of CRPFs in the area come together to pressurise the agencies or individuals or religious institutions which arrange the mass marriages.

“We stopped more than 3000 child marriages this year,” says a proud member of Chittoor district CRPF. On every *Mahashivaratri*⁹ day, mass marriages are organised at the Srikalahasti temple in Chittoor. Many of the grooms and brides are less than 18 years of age.

Since this is an important occasion, thousands of devotees gather at the temple for the celebrations. In 2006, CRPFs decided to put an end to this practice and designed several strategies

⁹ *Mahashivarathri* is a festival dedicated to lord Shiva and considered to be the most auspicious day by all the devotees of lord Shiva

of intervention. These included

- o Presenting street plays in the surrounding villages and the temple town closer to the festival as well as on the festival day to generate awareness and motivate people
- o Pasting posters in prominent places to create awareness on the issue
- o Announcing punishment by law in cases of violation in the name of the Superintendent of Police
- o Petitions to the Human Rights Commission
- o Vigil by CRPF members and other volunteers
- o Compulsory registration of marriages stating the correct age of the groom as well as the bride

Similar multi-pronged strategies are also used during the marriage season. CRPFs persistently follow and oppose child marriages while simultaneously tackling the social and political repercussions of such an action.

- o Monitor schools, *anganwadi* centres, hostels, residential schools and schemes such as mid-day meal

“The government, both at the state and central level, have very good schemes such as *anganwadi* centres for the pre-school child, hostels and residential schools

for SC/STs and other poor children and mid-day meal scheme for all children studying in government schools,” says Venkatesh, district in-charge, Nalgonda CRPF. “However, the problem lies in the implementation of these schemes. CRPF, therefore, considers it important to monitor the programme and advocate for better quality services,” he adds. Monitoring the mid-day meal scheme, raising voice

against the lacuna and gaps and influencing policy for improving the scheme to meet the needs for child’s right to food form a thrust area of CRPF activities.

CRPF believes that the mid-day meal programme is a very effective programme that recognises children’s Right to food and keeps children away from hunger. Moreover, it also boosts school attendance,



especially among girls. However, the problem lies in the implementation of the programme. CRPF sees a role for itself in monitoring the implementation of the programme in the schools, demanding corrective actions and advocating changes at the policy level, if need be.

There are certain issues that have been addressed at the school level itself by closer monitoring and other quality safeguards. Some issues that have been taken up are

- o Low nutritious content of the mid-day meal
- o Same menu being served day after day
- o Lack of basic facilities such as cooking sheds and storage space
- o Misappropriation of food or funds by vested interests

“If mid-day meals are provided in the school they have to meet a certain standard. Parents rely on these meals to meet the nutritional needs of the children and if the meals do not provide this, then it actually causes more harm to children,” says Nagamma, member, Bandiatmakur village CRPF. “We take this activity as a part of our social responsibility and commitment to the cause.”

There are some issues which call for collective action for building up a strong case for advocacy at the policy level. The issue such as - continued provision of cooked mid-day meals during the school vacations and during the summer months on the basis of children’s ‘Right to food’, especially in drought-affected areas where the school meal is often the

only square meal in the day for deprived children – for example demanded intervention of CRPF at the district / state level.

The Nalgonda District CRPF for example, collected 60,000 signatures during the summer of 2005 and sent it to the Education Minister as a part of the state level signature campaign to demand a change in the policy regarding supply of mid-day meals on all days in a year including the holidays.

- o *Take up cases of violation of Child Rights and bringing them to the notice of the government, media and Human Rights Commission*

There are several hard issues in Child Rights such as selling of babies, child trafficking, corporal punishment in schools, employment of children in factories, death of children due to pesticide inhalation in production of hybrid cotton seeds and so on. These cases get hushed up due to pressures from the vested interest groups. Action on these issues is rarely taken in the absence of pressure from the community.

CRPF from different areas, identify such cases of gross violation of Child Rights



and bring them to the notice of the concerned government departments. They negotiate with the government authorities, convince them about the need to work together and get their assistance and support in the struggle to protect the Rights of children and also ensure that appropriate action is initiated.



For example, in Yellamma Gudem village in Agamothkur *Mandal*, Soundarya, a young girl who was employed as domestic help was beaten, raped and killed. The murderer put poison in her mouth in his attempt to camouflage it as suicide. CRPF pressed for a proper post-mortem to be conducted thus establishing the cause of death and resulting in the Superintendent of Police booking cases against 15 persons.

If the case is serious and the government departments have not taken any action, local CRPF does not hesitate to petition the Human Rights Commission for seeking protection of children against the atrocities. For instance, when CRPF from Kondagal village, Mahbubnagar district exposed the authorities of the social-welfare hostel who were exploiting hostel children by engaging them in illicit activities, they referred the case to the HRC. This was done as petitions to the MRO and complaints to police were neither responded to nor was there any assurance from the authorities. In fact the police pressurised children to give wrong statements.

CRPF also tried to draw attention of the media and facilitate accurate portrayal of the Rights of children highlighting the occasions when these Rights were not upheld.

“When an important case of violation is identified, we form a fact-finding committee which conducts an inquiry based on interaction with the child, parents, the violating individual/agency and the government departments, and in fact all those who have a role to play. We then provide the Fact Finding Report to the media, political parties and government to bring the real facts to light and press for appropriate government action,” says Yallappa Rao, State CRPF member, East Godavari district.

Activities for internal capacity building

Considering that many CRPF members, especially from the villages are illiterate or lack exposure to the larger world around, building their capacities and exposing them to various related topics is extremely vital for building their confidence level and understanding to continue working.



CRPF, therefore, includes building of internal capacity as one of its activities. This activity comprises various training programmes and exposure visits as well as sharing of information and experiences with other CRPFs at different levels and areas. MVF provides technical inputs as well as linkages with resource agencies.

“We, at the district CRPF get training inputs from the state-level CRPF members as well as MVF team members. In return we train the *Mandal* and grassroots level CRPF members. The training programmes typically comprise Child Rights related issues. In addition, we also include information that helps the work of protecting Child Rights,” says Basheer, a state CRPF member from Mahbubnagar district. Giving an example of the recently conducted training programme on Employment Guarantee Scheme, he says, “This theme may not seem related to Child Rights directly. However, availability of work in the local areas under this scheme has a bearing on reduction in migration and therefore positively impacts school going

behaviour of the child. We feel that the CRPF members can use this information while working in their areas.”

The training programmes are organised in such a way that they coincide mostly with meetings of the district /state level CRPF. Apart from optimising on time, these platforms also create opportunities for learning from each others’ experiences and share information from different areas. The training programmes aims to create

- o In-depth understanding of the concept of Child Rights issue, its magnitude, depth as well as present status
- o Knowledge about the existing scenario at various levels and information on new developments
- o Knowledge about the legal and financial provisions
- o Knowledge about various schemes and programmes of the government.

Referring to a training programme organised by the CRPF on the topic of state-wise and district-wise budgets for education, Ramakrishna Reddy, from Chittoor district says, “Budgets are normally considered highly technical and difficult for a rural person to understand. The lack of understanding of budgets has been a limitation and thus any argument or demand for improvement in schools ended with the authorities mentioning lack of ‘budget’. But this training demystified the budgets. Not only was it easy



for us to know the provisions for different heads, but we could also know what percentage of the budgeted amount under various heads was spent and what percentage lapsed as it remained unspent.”

“In the absence of a taluk/village-wise break-up in budgets, it is difficult for us to understand the exact amount we can demand for upgradation of schools or for any other head. Whereas, the fact that we know the budget heads and unspent amounts under each head gives us a position of strength while negotiating with the authorities,” adds another member.

Similar trainings on Right to Education Bill, Right to Information Bill etc. enhances the articulation of CRPF members and empowers them to handle different situations that arise while working on Child Rights issue. These training programmes also help in strengthening their own groups. “The CRPF members can also ask for training in relevant subjects,” he continues.



Understandably, all these activities of CRPF have a strong thrust on the Child Rights issue. But more interestingly, these thrive on local leadership and demand participation from the community. These are not MVF-centric despite the fact that they follow the MVF philosophy and build their work based on MVF ideologies and technical inputs. CRPFs are

emerging as truly independent entities and are encouraged and empowered to carry out the activities independently.

“Our efforts to create a movement on Child Rights is gaining momentum day-by-day. The spirit of CRPF members is increasing with the kind of response CRPF is getting to its efforts by the community as well as officials,” says Tulasiram Patel from Adilabad district.



Child Trafficking

"I have leased my farm in Potlapadu village. But when I was passing by the farm, I noticed that 10 children were working in the farm along with other adult labourers," says Mr. Rama Reddy, a farmer and active member of Penpahad Mandal CRPF. He went to the farm and asked the children, "Do you go to school?" There was no answer- in fact all of them tried to run away. My lessee pleaded ignorance saying that he was not involved in this as a labour contractor had supplied labour to the farm.

Even the contractor did not respond positively. He asked Rama Reddy, "Are these children related to you? If not who gives you a right to talk on behalf of them?"

Anybody else would have given up as neither the children's nor the contractor's response was positive. But being a CRPF member, Rama Reddy filed a petition with the police and the District Collector and got a task force comprising of the labour officer, MRO, MEO and others to take action. The children were all released and the contractor had to supply adult workers instead.

Rama Reddy went along with other active members of the Mandal CRPF to Kanagal Mandal from where the children were brought and ensured that they were enrolled in the school again.

In another case, a CRPF member spotted a group of children at Banganpalle village in Kovelakunta Mandal who were trafficked from Bangalore to work as labour in cottonseed farms. Suspecting foul play, she contacted the farmer and tried to convince him about Child Rights, legalities of employing child labour etc. and requested him to release and send the children back.

The farmer refused to release the children. Instead he beat her up. As the CRPF member was very committed, she threatened the farmer with police action and told him about the punishment for violating their Rights. He had to release the children and make arrangements to send them back.

Child labour in cottonseed farming

In response to a case of the death of 13-year-old Mallesh while spraying pesticide in a hybrid cottonseed farm in Dudekonda in Kurnool district in 2004, the district CRPFs surveyed the cottonseed farms in Kurnool and Mehbubnagar districts. A detailed report about children being employed by the cottonseed farmers through MNCs was prepared.

The CRPF had also made efforts to negotiate with the representatives of the MNCs and persuade them not to employ children. However, the MNCs breached their promise of not employing children and continued to employ them as before. The CRPF took on the task of monitoring the farms and sent petitions to the District Collector to take action. They also took support of the media to create awareness on the issue.

In areas where MVF is not actively involved, CRPFs have the capacity to carry out these activities under the local leadership. In this sense, these activities are the heartbeat of the Child Rights movement initiated by MVF.

Change in the priorities is visible

The efforts of CRPFs have shown positive results in several areas. The atmosphere in the villages where CRPF is active has changed positively. As a result of the rallies, street plays, protests, monitoring mechanisms and mobilisations, everyone is aware that employing children or marrying a child below 18 years is prohibited by law and is against the interest of the child. Parents, former employers, school teachers, *anganwadi* workers, hostel wardens, mid-day meal providers etc. know that they will have to face grave consequences if they fail in their duties and violate Child Rights. Government officers such as police officers, MROs, MEOs quickly respond to CRPFs appeal and offer support.

The number of out-of-school children is on the decline. The number of children in the RBCs and hostels has also increased.

Resistance to change is still felt

In spite of succeeding in most cases, there are several instances where the CRPF has met with stiff resistance. For example, in Adilabad district, there was an outrage by the tribal community on the issue of stopping child marriages. For the tribals getting their children married at an early age was justified in the name of tradition and culture. For the CRPF and MVF, this was clearly a case of violation of Child Rights. The tribals resisted the rescue of their children from early marriages and argued that it was an onslaught on their cultural practices. In spite of the tribal community threatening to boycott MVF, both the CRPF and MVF took the position that no culture can be against children and their Rights. Ultimately it was the decision of the children themselves who decided to continue education and think of marriage later that resolved the bottleneck.

In Nalgonda District, the CRPF members prepared a list of employers of child labour and those who supported child marriages. There were names of MLA's as well as important office bearers of most political parties in the list. This announcement proved to be counter productive as the political parties were in the process of including Child Rights in their election manifesto. Once alerted on the lists of those who have violated Child Rights, political parties were not willing to take up the issue of Child Rights in their manifesto.

Response of CRPF to resistance

CRPF remains undeterred by these roadblocks. They work relentlessly in ensuring that the concept of Child Rights is accepted by one and all. For example, in Nalgonda district, even after repeated petitions to



Voices of children and their parents

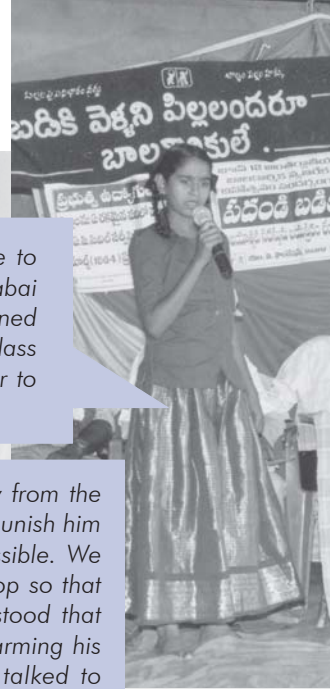
"I had gone home from my hostel at Anatharam village. I was not able to come back after leave as I was seriously sick. On return our warden, Tarabai did not permit me to rejoin and started abusing me profusely. I was frightened and thought of discontinuing my education," says Nagalaxmi, an eighth class student from a nearby village. "CRPF members helped by convincing her to take me back," she adds.

"The CRPF at the village level as well as the Mandal level identify cases of violation of Child Rights in terms of child labour, bonded labour and child marriage. They also make efforts to motivate and mobilize parents and other community members against these issues. We offer them official support to deal with these problems especially if there is a need to use authority in case of non-cooperation. However, with CRPFs in all villages, the atmosphere has undergone a drastic change," say Naveen Kumar, MRO, Penpahad Mandal.

"After my father's death, my mother had to rear goats for a living. She left me at home with the job of taking care of my younger brother. These people, (I am sorry because only recently I came to know that they belong to a group called CRPF) helped me to go to a residential bridge course camp and later enrol into high school. If I have passed my 10th class, it is only because of these people who convinced my mother about my future and enrolled my younger brother into a crèche at the anganwadi," says 16 year-old Prabhu from Damargidda village from Chevella Mandal in Ranga Reddy district.

"Venkatesh, my son ran away from the hostel as the warden used to punish him using the smallest excuse possible. We got him a job at the cycle shop so that he can stay with us. I understood that by doing this I was actually harming his future. The CRPF members talked to me and took me to the nearby camp where children of the same age were preparing for joining school. They looked healthy, fresh, happy and most important 'child-like' as against my son who is always tired and grumbling with a hardened face. They tell me it is not too late. I have decided to send him to the bridge camp, come what may," says Laxmidevi, from Kamalapur village.

"I am studying at the residential bridge camp at Dhone. I had left school two years back and worked as a head-load labour. My back and neck used to pain a lot...yet this was the only option before me as I did not want to go to school where I was humiliated for one or the other reason. The CRPF members from my village talked to me and urged me to get myself educated. I understood the change a school would bring to my life. Now I am now looking forward to appear for my class 7 examination and then get readmitted to school," says 13-year Ramachandrudu from Kamalapur village.



release bonded labour children there was no response from the Deputy Collector. CRPF finally decided against giving petitions but seeking the advice of the Deputy Collector on how to release children being employed as bonded labor. This discussion led to the officials' involvement in the CRPF activities and gaining his support.

“Resistance in fact does not allow us to be complacent after success in the cases that are sorted out in favour of children and their Rights. It constantly reminds us that there is still a long way to go. It also strengthens our spirits to face the bigger challenges which we encounter in our journey to make Child Rights a priority,” says Nagaiah.



Face to face with Ms. Shantha Sinha

Q1: MVF believes that parents want their child to go to school. Yet there are many cases where parents themselves violate the Rights of their own child. Comment.

The experience of MVF is that there is no parent who does not want his/her child to live happily. In fact there is an explosive demand for education among the poor today and the poor parents are struggling against odds to keep children in schools. Despite this, there are cases where parents violate Child Rights. This is because parents are located in a social environment that condones child labour. Being part of this environment parents too are influenced by the thought processes of those in authority and power structures. What the poor parents need is an enabling environment where the voices of authority are in favour of protection of Child Rights. It is in such a framework that parents gain confidence to send their children to schools.

Q2: Why have you not included children in CRPF? Doesn't it violate their right to be included in anything concerning them?

MVF could not have rescued a child from bondage or child marriage if these children themselves would not have stood their ground against all kinds of pressures. By courageously fighting stubborn cultural practices these young boys and girls have paved the way for future generations of children in the area.

While we respect the child's Right to participate, we are not sure about how much a child can become its own agency. What a child needs is a shield or protection and this is being provided for by the CRPF.

Q3: MVF has been organising a range of forums such as CRPF, Girl Child Protection Forums, BKVV (Teachers' Forum against Child Labour) etc. as a strategy to build support structures. What different kinds of roles does MVF envisage for these different forums?

MVF believes that the programmes taken up by it to mobilize communities such as street plays, public meetings, rallies and marches create a swell of support for the cause of Child Rights. This needs to be

consolidated and institutionalized. Therefore, MVF sets out to build support structures for children which take on a role of protagonists of Child Rights through their respective forums.

Q4: What role does MVF envisage for the national level CRPF?

MVF envisages that CRPF plays a role of watchdog. It hopes that the authentic concerns and voices from the ground would bring pressure on the government to modify their policies in the best interest of children and their Rights.

Q5: What kind of funding possibilities have been explored by MVF for CRPF?

MVF believes that this kind of an initiative does not depend upon funding. It transcends the financial limitations and runs on its own steam that comes from its commitment to the cause and a sense of social responsibility. Currently, CRPF depends on the subscription fee of its members. However, CRPF will find its own way if it needs funding to take the issue of Child Rights protection forward.

Q7: You have received the Magsaysay Award for your contribution to the sector. Has it helped the issue in any way?

It is hard to imagine the dramatic effect the Award has had. Protection of Child Rights has now made the headlines in the press and on TV. The possibility of children enjoying the right to education is being intensely discussed in the media, in schools, at work places, in farms and factories and in government departments. This is something we had always dreamed must happen. The Magsaysay Award has made it possible almost overnight. We do hope to seize this moment to move further towards the abolition of child labour.



Chapter Four

The challenges and the way forward

From inception till date, CRPF's growth in scale and spread has been phenomenal. It has taken up issues at different levels – which are varied and multi-dimensional in nature. Despite a positive impact, it has had to face several challenges.

Challenges

Making Child Rights a political issue

“The issues involving the Rights and privileges of children need a serious consideration, political initiative and action at the highest level. At one level, public action and pressure on the system can make the government machinery perceive the injustice and bring about substantial change in favour of Child Rights. At the other level, it is important that political parties bring this issue for serious discussion and debate ensuring that the state meets its obligation towards Child Rights,” says Shantha Sinha.

Making all political parties realise that Child Rights is a crucial issue, significant even for the electoral calculations and deserving inclusion in all policy matters, is vital for bringing the Child Rights issue to the fore. The challenge therefore is to make Child Rights a political issue and ensure that political parties exhibit passion and political commitment to Child Rights issues and

to make them include it in their agenda by clearly stating their position on this issue in their election manifesto and by emphasizing on child-sensitive public policies.

Establishing legitimacy of CRPF as spokesperson on Child Rights

As an empowered community-based institution, CRPF has emerged as the voice of the voiceless children. With a belief that putting children in the public spaces especially with reference to conflicting issues makes them vulnerable and tense. CRPF has assumed the responsibility to take up issues on behalf of these children. Yet, there is a need for CRPF to establish its credentials and legitimacy as a spokesperson for the Child Rights issue, both at the organisational level as well as individual level. The credentials are absolutely essential particularly because many cases related to Child Rights require delicate handling and are also prone to risks and controversies.

Sensitising officials

Officials, governmental organisations and community initiatives have to bear a collective responsibility for Child Rights protection. The officials from government departments such as education, women and child development, health, police etc. have

significant roles to play in this regard of putting official pressures, monitoring schemes, controlling crime etc. CRPF therefore, needs to work with the officials on a day-to-day basis. Sensitising them on Child Rights issues and demand for prompt action poses challenges at different levels.

“Coping with transfers of government officials is a challenge. By the time we establish a rapport with an officer and start getting cooperation and support, the officer gets transferred and we have to start the whole process from scratch,” says Reddy. “On the other hand some officials heavily depend on data before they take any action. It becomes very difficult to convince them that each number is not a numerical entity but a physical and emotional reality. Every number in the data talks about a life of a child...it is not the statistics, but the lives that are important,” he adds.

Making CRPF an independent identity

From the inception of CRPF, MVF has taken care not to act on behalf of the community. CRPF represents the community in all forums and speaks on behalf of the community. CRPF members do not need to depend on MVF for decision-making. On the basis of the non-negotiables, they have developed Do's and Don'ts for themselves, which serve as guidelines for any decision. They have also identified clear demarcation of roles for MVF as well as CRPF.

Yet, there is still some amount of interdependence. Respecting the autonomous status of the CRPF, MVF feels that a strong leadership should emerge out of an organic process which will create a larger identity for CRPF than MVF. It is only then can it play an advisory role. Creating an organically independent identity is always a challenge.

Learnings

CRPF's journey in the child right sector has been very meaningful. Through review and reflection in the process of identifying responses to various issues and interacting with different stakeholders in the sector, several insights and learnings have emerged. These insights have helped CRPF adopt innovative strategies and also avoid certain actions. Some of the significant learnings are

- CRPF members feel that the strategy to include community members from different backgrounds into their fold has helped CRPF create a changed social milieu. Herein the community accepts Rights of the child to education and development and is ready to commit to protect these holistically. Exclusion on the other hand, would have resulted in shifting the attention from the Child Rights issue to a clash of class interests.
- CRPF accepts the parents and landlords who release the child from bonded labour as active members. This attitude and inclusive approach has helped generate love, affection and cooperation in the



community instead of breeding antagonism.

- The capacity of CRPF members is built through various training programmes and exposures. However, for practical application of these learnings, the members need more clarity on the legal framework of Child Rights. The understanding about the financial provisions and allocations at the national, state as well as the district level provides a basis for negotiations with officials.
- It is also important for them to understand the financial allocations at the micro levels such as the *Mandal* or village or school level to enable them to negotiate from a position of strength, based on knowledge and information.

Their experience has shown the CRPF members that it is easier to convince the officials to take action if they are supplied with data and facts to substantiate demands. The survey conducted by the CRPF members about the facilities available at different hostels in Nalgonda district was enough to support their demands for better facilities.

- There is a need to constantly remain relevant and updated as new Child Rights issues emerge with the changing times. For example, the disability sector has shifted from special schools for children with disabilities to a Rights-based approach of inclusive schools. Stress on admission to special schools in the changing scenario, might trigger a Rights issue.

Beyond the state borders

Any innovative concept that yields success and demonstrates effective strategies that work tends to get replicated elsewhere. MVF's work on the Child Rights issue, especially with reference to its efforts to bring the out-of-school children back to the mainstream of education was no exception to this. The ripple of its impact reached states such as Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra who wanted to replicate the MVF model to address the issue of child labour in their states.

MVF saw in this an opportunity for mutual learning and sharing of experience of what works and why it works the way it does and what is essential to its effectiveness. It also hoped that this opportunity to spread the ideology was potent with a possibility of networking of like-minded people and institutions at the national level, which in turn could get more political attention resulting into policy change and larger allocations of resources.

From the beginning MVF was aware that its role in these states was very different than its role in Andhra Pradesh. It was limited to a demonstration of the model, establishing the infrastructure of RBCs etc. handhold the agency for sometime and handover the programme to the respective agencies. It therefore worked out strategies for work in the other states on the basis of individual needs, contexts and the requirement of the partner agency, government or otherwise. More importantly, they were based on the learnings from MVF's work

in Andhra Pradesh. “The approach in these new states rested on our experiences of what worked in our state.” says Venkat Reddy.

“One of our best worked practices was to establish CRPFs, which were forums for community participation and vehicles of sustainability. Hence one of the strategies we used in these new states was to organise CRPFs at the state and district levels, orient the members to important concepts such as Child Rights issues and role of community in protection of them,” says Yadaiah, convener of CRPF. Thus, in each state though MVF worked with different local partners, the common strategy was to organise CRPFs as a cadre of people who are ready to commit to the Child Rights issue. These CRPFs took the responsibility of spreading the CRPF concept at different levels after the withdrawal of MVE.

“Despite the commonalities of issues, due to the diverse cultural and social backgrounds, the extent, magnitude and manifestation of these issues vary in different states. The CRPFs face different challenges, which need a different handling. And though the core approach remains same, applications are different,” explains Yadaiah.

This variety brought not only flavour but also richness of experience to CRPF’s work. It also had a space to discuss and debate various issues and share the learnings across different areas. Moreover, there was a need to build a collective understanding about these variations, set priorities and decide the plan of action.

More importantly, the presence of CRPF across different states indicated prospects to build a strong collective that can effectively influence policies at the national level in favour of the child. The CRPFs, therefore, decided to come together and form a national level CRPF as a forum to exchange experiences, discuss area-specific issues, learn from each other and create a critical mass of child right advocates at a national level.

In March 2004, the members of the village level CRPFs from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa and Assam got together and formed the Child Rights Protection Forum at the national level. The state representatives meet regularly – once in a quarter. “The process is enriching and motivating. The magnitude of the work and stories of impact instil confidence in us and make us proud for being a part of this movement,” shares a member. “Yet, it also makes us aware of a huge task that still needs to be done,” adds another.

The foot-print of national level CRPF

Assam

In Assam, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan invited MVF to replicate its model in eight districts in 2002 to 2004. MVF sent its resource persons to Assam, established model RBCs and mobilised the community



especially the youths into CRPCs¹¹. Exposure visits to Andhra Pradesh were organised for the CRPCs.

MVF's partnership with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan was time-bound and when it was time to withdraw from active involvement, MVF handed over the responsibility to the CRPCs and continued to give support through its RPs to three district CRPCs - Dhubri, Moregaon and Barpeta. These three districts were chosen as the CRPCs were active and ready to take on the responsibility. It offered support in mobilising communities and form CRPCs at village and *Mandal* level and negotiating with the education officers at different levels.

Presently, the strategy of CRPF in Assam is to establish rapport with different active groups such as All Assam Bodo Students Union, All Assam Student Union and All Assam Minority students' Union and convince them to adopt Child Rights protection as their core agenda. It has also organised a separate students' forum. It also makes efforts to involve lawyers and journalists who can positively impact the process. The reporters have already formed 'Reporters Forum for Child Rights Protection'. The thrust of this forum is on working collectively through media as pressure groups on Child Rights issues.

"Our contacts and interaction with the political parties have enabled us to convince them to make child labour and child marriage as election issues and include them in their manifesto," says

Nurul Haq, member of the national level CRPF from Assam.

Madhya Pradesh

In Madhya Pradesh, MVF worked in 25 blocks of 25 districts with Rajya Shiksha Mission as the partner agency from 2004. In each district, committees were formed and orientations as well as field visits to Andhra Pradesh were organised. In Madhya Pradesh, nine districts are selected and strengthened to work as resource districts.

CRPFs have conducted surveys in 15 GP areas to identify out of school children. The survey reflected some shocking facts. It revealed a large number of out-of school children in the state. It also showed that a large number of children are not able to appear for the examinations due to lack of resources to pay fees," shares Mahendra Singh, a member of the national level CRPF from Madhya Pradesh.

The strategy to bring them back to school is planned with the Gram Panchayats, block administration and village-level community groups.

CRPFs in MP are also making efforts to advocate for merging of all departments related to child such as education, labour, women and child development etc. to ensure that the children or their parents can get their work done at a single window.

Maharashtra

MVF has partnered with Apeksha Homeo Society and Montfortian Child Rights Movement (since 2004), both

¹¹ Later titled CRPFs

voluntary agencies in the Vidarbha area. While Apeksha Homeo Society has organised CRPFs in five blocks of two districts, Montfortian Child Rights Movement has taken up five taluks.

The exposure to Adilabad CRPF brought about a significant change in the Apeksha Homeo Society's perspective who have since started working with all the out-of-school children as against only with children who were engaged in wage earning. They have also stopped providing incentives to parents for addressing poverty which they believed was the cause of child labour.

In this area, the strategy is to form programme advisory committees taking representatives from different areas of work.

Tamil Nadu

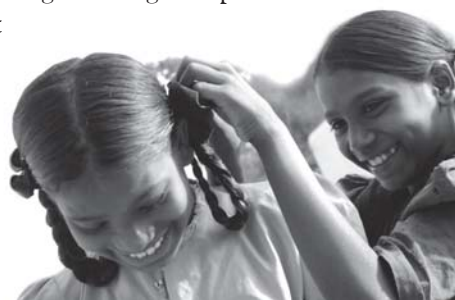
MVF started work in Tamil Nadu in partnership with an NGO called 'Hand-in-Hand' in Kancheepuram block from 2005. In 2005, on an invitation from Action Aid International, MVF started working in the Tsunami affected area in Nagapattinam. This programme is expanded to include 89 habitations within 12 panchayat areas. The CRPF members in these areas were sent for exposure to CRPF's in Andhra Pradesh.

The path ahead

"To be able to become a national level forum in the true sense of the term and get perspectives, experiences and figures from the other states, we need to expand to states where MVF is not present," says Yadaiah. "Even in the states where CRPF is present, we need to ensure that it reaches out to the maximum number of districts, *Mandals* and villages," he adds.

The future path ahead is to strengthen CRPFs at the state and national level to develop into powerful pressure groups on Child Rights. Equipped with a strong sense of commitment, information on policy issues and collective strength, these pressure groups should be able to perform appropriate roles as per the need. These could be - act as watchdogs in society preventing violation of Child Rights, as an instrument for creating awareness among public and officials, as powerful brakes on state institutions, as challengers of the nexus between vested interests groups. More importantly it should be able to lobby for Child Rights bringing it to the fore as a national priority and influence policy in the interest of the child.

The strengthening process has to include a strong sense of ownership by all the members and an identity as spokespersons for Child Rights. The future path is also to identify leaders from the community through an organic process and build their perspectives to forge ahead in the right direction.



End note

The vision of MVF is that all children without exception must attend school. MVF sees a greater and more proactive role for CRPF in realising its vision. The presence and spread of CRPF at both, the national level as well as at the smallest unit of villages is an indication that enabling and empowering a community-based organisation can work towards realising the vision. For it is when the community takes Child Rights seriously, involves local bodies, and questions, negotiates as well as bargains with authorities to deliver services in the interest of the child, there is hope that the collective action and commitment to protection of Child Rights will lead to mobilisation on a large scale translating the vision to reality.

However, the CRPF model has space for replication beyond the Child Rights issue.

At one level the CRPF model demonstrates that it is possible to meet any development challenge when the community assumes responsibility for their own development. At the other, it shows that when an intervening agency believes in the potential of the community and initiates an empowerment process, it can stimulate change in the community from passive beneficiaries to active agents of their own development.

Thus the model highlights that a community that has undergone an enabling process, and is equipped with relevant information is able to build an understanding about the issues affecting them. With skills to articulate and negotiate, the community is in a position to ensure that appropriate action is taken to address issues - Child Rights or any other.

Government urged to increase fund allocation for children

CRPF undertakes signature campaign, distributes pamphlets

Abolishing Child Labour

Making education a reality for every child

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ఆంధ్రజ్యోతి | సోమవారం 19 మార్చి 2007

బాలల హక్కుల పరిరక్షణ వేదిక

ఆంధ్రప్రదేశ్, రిజిస్టర్ నెం: 645/2004

తూర్పు గోదావరి జిల్లా కమిషనరీ



బాలల హక్కుల పరిరక్షణ వేదికపై ముఖ్యమంత్రి కన్వీనర్

బాలల హక్కుల చట్టాలను

అమలు చేయ

బాలల హక్కుల పరిరక్షణ వేదిక కన్వీనర్

నందనగిరి(రాజమండ్రి), మార్చి 18(ఆన్లైన్):బాలల హక్కుల చట్టాలను పూర్తిగా అమలు పరచాలని రాష్ట్ర బాలల హక్కుల పరిరక్షణ వేదిక కన్వీనర్ సి.హెచ్. నాగయ్య అన్నారు. ఆదివారం ఆంధ్రప్రదేశ్ హాల్లో జిల్లా బాలల హక్కుల పరిరక్షణ వేదిక కన్వీనర్ లోడ అప్పారావు అధ్యక్షతన జరిగిన సందర్భంగా నాగయ్య మాట్లాడుతూ రాష్ట్రంలో 40 శాతం బాలల అందరినీ అధికారంలో వున్న ఏ ప్రభుత్వం అమలు చేయలేదు. దేశ భవిష్యత్ తరగతి గదిలోనే నిర్మించిన బాలల హక్కుల చట్టాలను దేశంలో వుండడం దురదృష్టకరమన్నారు. అభివృద్ధి రక్షణ కొరకై బడ్జెట్లో నిధులు కేటాయించాలన్నారు. అన్ని రాజకీయ పార్టీలు కలిసి బాలల హక్కుల చట్టాలను అమలు చేయాలన్నారు. సుప్రీంకోర్టు ఆంగ్లనామం సెంటర్స్ ఏర్పాటు చెయ్యాలన్నారు. ముఖ్యమంత్రి కోసం చేసిన కార్యక్రమాలు

Enquiries into missing child cases sought

Child Rights Protection Forum stages dharna

Staff Reporter

HYDERABAD: The brutal murders of several children in Noida has set off alarm bells among child rights activists here, who are now demanding enquiries into over 3,000 cases of missing child across the State.

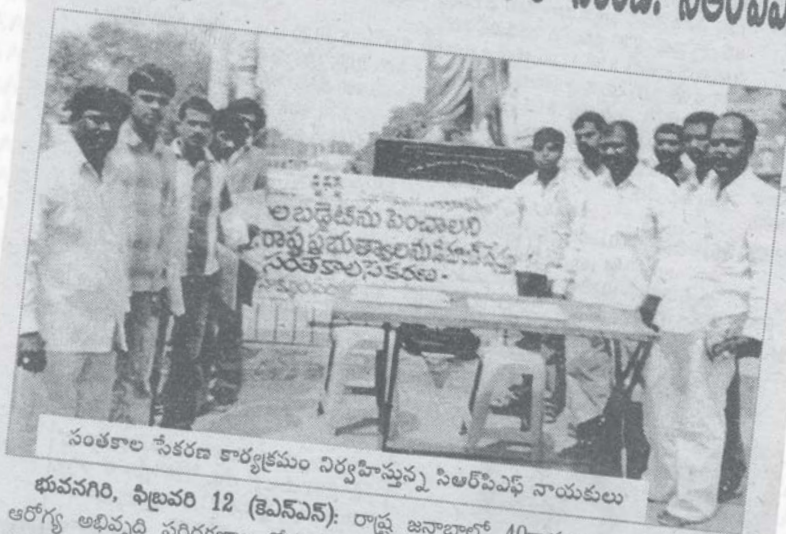
The Child Rights Protection Forum, a city-based NGO, staged a dharna at Indira Park here on Monday asking the Government to compile and disclose all the missing child cases in police stations across the State.

A report on the efforts of the police and the action initiated to trace these children should also be made public, the Forum demanded.

Forum secretary Y. Radha Prasad said that the Noida case was an accidental discovery, whereas 2079 children in the Telangana region and 1016 children in the Andhra Pradesh region had been reported missing.



బాలల బడ్డెడ్ను పెంచేందుకే సంతకాల సేకరణ: సిఆర్పిఎఫ్



భువనగిరి, ఫిబ్రవరి 12 (కెఎన్ఎన్): రాష్ట్ర జనాభాలో 40శాతం ఉన్న బాలల విద్యా ఆరోగ్య అభివృద్ధి పరిరక్షణ కోసం ప్రభుత్వం ప్రత్యేక బడ్డెట్ కేటాయించాలని బాలల హక్కుల పరివేక్షణ వేదిక(సిఆర్పిఎఫ్) నాయకులు చింతల కిష్టయ్య, కూనగల్ల మల్లేశంలు డిమాండ్ చేశారు. సోమవారం ప్రభుత్వ జూనియర్ కళాశాల ఆవరణలో బాలల బడ్డెట్ సంతకాల సేకరణ కార్యక్రమం నిర్వహిస్తున్న సిఆర్పిఎఫ్ నాయకులు



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