

Village Service Trust

Newsletter

Autumn 2018

Class act: our drive to keep tribal children in school

A generation or so ago the idea of children going to school was as remote to tribal people as the forested Nilgiri Hills they inhabited.

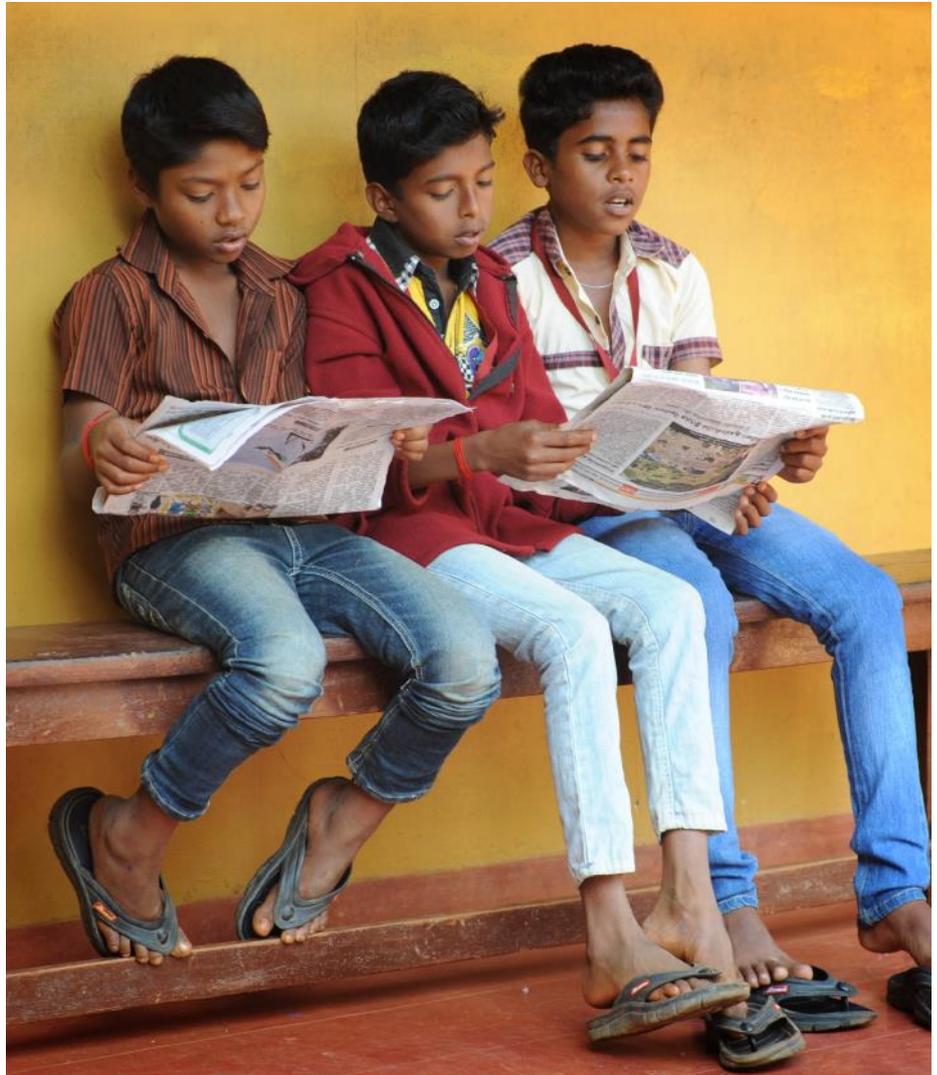
In those days the indigenous people of south India lived on what they could hunt or gather from the forest, and rarely made contact with the farming communities living in villages on the plains, except occasionally, perhaps to barter honey for clothing.

Today the modern world has intruded and the old tribal way of existence has largely gone. Yet tribal people are far from assimilated and remain on the margins of mainstream society. Not surprisingly education has emerged as the No. 1 issue for organisations working with tribal communities. (Others are livelihoods, housing, health, human rights and alcoholism.)

VST has three partners working with tribal people. The Nilgiris Wynaad Tribal Welfare Society (NWTWS) operates in the Pandalur locality in the north-west of Tamil Nadu close to the Kerala border. This area has the highest proportion of tribal people in the state.

NWTWS was started 40 years ago by a UK volunteer, John Wilson, who provided simple health care for people who had no medical services. Some health work continues, especially tuberculosis control, but now it is education that is the main concern.

It is not just the absence of a school-going culture that leads many tribal children to drop out. It is true children



Three boys at the residential school take an interest in the news

lack educational role models, their parents may not see the value of schooling, and tribal communities can be reluctant to engage with mainstream society. But also children might not speak the language in use at school, or there may be relatively well paid work available, or younger siblings to look after. And there are the physical difficulties: tribal hamlets are in remote areas, there might be no school bus, or no roads and getting to school entails a long walk, at times in monsoon rain. As a result fewer than one in five tribal children pass 10th standard (age 16).

NWTWS is addressing the issue in three ways:

- By monitoring and motivating non-attenders to resume school; training

child role models to encourage their peers to value school-going; and arranging cultural events and street theatre to promote education. VST funds two field staff who undertake this work.

- By running a government-funded residential school for tribal children unable to travel daily to school. VST helps fund two school wardens who enhance the effectiveness of the school.
- By operating a hostel for older children who have left the residential school, enabling them to live close to a local school. With funding from the Marr Munning Trust, VST supports 50 hostel places and two wardens.

THE WARDENS

Encouraging words and a touch of drama help win over the drop-outs

Jill Pirdas meets Hynamol and Kethan, young school assistants with a mission

Hynamol is a vivacious 22-year-old journalism graduate and one of the wardens in the residential school at Ambalamoola. We first met her as she was directing "Talent Evening" an occasion of song, dance and mime held in the school hall and performed by the boys and girls from 2nd standard to 8th standard (roughly ages 8 to 14). She introduced each act in English and in Malayalam (the language of the state of Kerala), and the whole evening was very entertaining and well produced.

We asked her what the situation was like before she arrived seven months ago.

"Everyone was running wild. The children had to be taught many basic things. For example some of them didn't know the difference between the

bathroom and the toilet; and no one seemed to be washing themselves." I have to stand outside the door to hear if they are really washing, but the water is cold and it's very chilly here in the mornings and the evenings! When the hot water system is established it will be easier for them. We also supervise medicine-taking which was not done in the past."

She went on to tell us that the children were being left to themselves after their studies; there was no one to listen to their worries either; and there were many problems especially for the girls who didn't know how to use sanitary pads or how to dispose of them. Hynamol would make sure that the boys were not around when these pads were taken outside to burn on a certain day.

"Some children drop out from school now and then too. It's up to me and Kethan, the boys' warden, to go to the villages to search them out and to encourage them to return."

Kethan is a tribal man who after studying to 12th standard (age 18) was working in

the area selling bananas when he was approached by the Nilgiri project.

Kethan tells us that there are many things that boys like to do back in their villages rather than study. They can run free, climb trees, and go out with slings to hunt. They can choose to work too; there is a need for coffee pickers in the area and the pay is quite good. There is still the tribal instinct though: the other day a student killed a squirrel with his sling, roasted it and ate it.

We ask about the reasons for children dropping out. Kethan gives us the example of a 13-year-old lad called Sreekvishnan from the hamlet of Ododanvayal who had dropped out of school after 5th standard for 2½ years. At the time there were no wardens.

We learn that he is very talented in singing, dancing and acting within a group, but otherwise he has trouble in communicating. He is emotional, lacks confidence and has told the warden that he gets scolded by the teacher and that he was going to run away again. In fact he never plucked up the courage, but after the school holidays he didn't return. He was difficult to trace as his large family is semi-nomadic and moves about; also he was working in the coffee plantations and giving his earnings to his father who would spend it on drink.

"If we had not gone to encourage him to return he would never have started school again," Kethan tells us. "He



Talent Night: a chance for the boys and girls to display their acting ability.



Hymarol with Madhavi: "The thing to do is to get eye contact with the child and talk and talk or she will run away."

knows now that he can tell us if there is a problem and last holiday he was the first to arrive back; he was too early even!"

Hymarol tells us of a 6-year-old girl called Madhavi who was going to day school at first as her hamlet was near to the school. This meant, however, that it was easy for her to skip school regularly.

"We were with the field workers who go round villages making sure that children have been provided with school certificates that they need in order to attend school. We were told of a girl in Cherukunnu village who wasn't in school so we went along." Hymarol found the girl and started telling her about the residential school and all the activities taking place. The next day she returned with films and pictures of the games that Madhavi could enjoy with photos of the school.

"The thing to do is to get eye contact with the child and talk and talk or she will run away. Tribal people do not like to confront anyone; rather than refuse they will simply run away," Hymarol explains.

"The third day I returned, and as the parents agreed to the child going to school I took her away kicking and

screaming, she even bit me! But as soon as she was out of the village and sitting on my scooter she stopped immediately and started asking me questions and getting excited. She is in 2nd standard now and because she is living at the school she cannot avoid the lessons as she did before. She is fitting in well although at first she just kept near to me

If Madhavi was in the village she would just do chores and sit about chatting

and watched the others doing games.

"If Madhavi was left in the village she would just do chores like looking after the younger children, and a little cooking. The rest of the time she would sit about chatting."

Before the holidays the wardens talk to the children about the importance of education. They also meet up with "risk" children in the villages, something that teachers cannot do as they have to be

present in school. All this has resulted in less absenteeism and there are now 53 children attending correctly.

On Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays activities after school are organised, while on Mondays and Fridays the children can choose their games.

At weekends some children visit their families, some do some sweeping of the grounds or go to the library. On Saturdays there are English related games, washing of clothes and then in the evening there will be a film show or Talent Night.

Concerning Talent Night. The wardens had encouraged the boys to put together a miming act to demonstrate how we should take care of water conservation. The boys whitened their faces which was very effective; the mime lasted 15 minutes and we were riveted by their acting skills played out on stage to a background of liquid sounding musical effects. Considering that they had taken only two hours to rehearse it was an amazing performance.

Village Service Trust contributes to the cost of the four wardens, two at the residential school and two at the hostel in Ambalamoola.



Study at the residential school. Ensuring girls' education is a priority. Learn more about NWTWS at www.nwtws.org



John Dalton, former NWTWS trustee

“NWTWS is doing something that no other NGO has attempted in the 40-odd years that I have been visiting

Pandalur. Nearly everyone agrees that education is one of the biggest factors in alleviating disadvantage among marginalised groups of people. It is the case in Pandalur - of the four tribal groupings, only one managed to get educated and they have virtually all the jobs. NWTWS work (hostel, field and school) with the other three tribal groups is starting at last to make a real impact on education.

The government funded ‘ARS’ school has 100 children aged between 7 and 14, most of whom would either be underachieving in school or not going to school at all. They have varying needs. The smaller ones in particular need parenting, most need getting ready for school and all need to be kept occupied and watched outside school hours. Many need to be retrieved from home after going to their village or to be taken to their village for leave. The wardens do these essential jobs and organise drama, dancing, singing, sport, working parties, visits and talks by tribal leaders, role models and activists. They facilitate understanding of child, tribal and human rights.

Homework classes and tuition are managed by teachers coming in early or

staying on after school, this is great. The headmistress is supposed to act also as warden and to be there every day and for 24 hours a day which is impossible. The government budget provides for enough food and teachers but for some reason doesn't provide for wardens.

They add so much value, making an ordinary school into a great one.



John Wilson, NWTWS founder

“Being a residential school, the children have considerable free time outside class hours. This is a golden opportunity to organise

song, dance, sport etc, etc as well as confidence and self-esteem building activities for the children. The latter are something which is lacking in most tribals. The teachers having taught all day often did not have the energy or skills to do these things and the children were usually left to their own devices.

When Mr Murali came in early January 2017 he asked if there was any small input that could make a big improvement cost effectively. Immediately wardens came to mind and so a request was sent to VST.

NWTWS appointed two wardens. Their job is to organise out of school activities such as sport, dancing, drama, visiting role models and trainers, talks on health, tribal rights, what it is like to go to college etc, outside trips and visits, as well as supervise

the cleanliness, health and general wellbeing of the children and also to act as mother/father figures, encouraging and counselling the children as necessary. Meeting and liaising with parents and following up children who have not returned from leave is an important role also. They have made a big difference to the happiness of the children.”



Murali Shanmugavelan, VST trustee:

“The project is impressive: I visited both the government-supported

residential school and the NWTWS-supported residential school. The schools are incomparable, and the differences are beyond belief.

The government school had no classrooms (broken chairs, hardly any tables, unclean); no boarding facilities (‘we have no place sir’ - the headmistress said) despite receiving funds from government and a huge campus donated by a tribal family.

The NWTWS supported school was superior in all aspects, and the attendance was more than 80%. Clean kitchen and neat boarding facilities. Most important the toilets and bathrooms were impressively clean. This, I was told, is one reason why girl students want to come back to school.

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