



# From Exclusion to Education **Nurtured by Nature**

Voices of Primitive Tribal Groups of  
**Araku Valley**



Moving from exclusion to inclusion does not happen overnight. It requires overcoming negative beliefs and stereotypes, which cannot be undone in a few years. The impacts of some changes may be felt years into the future.

World Bank Report



NATURE is a grassroots Tribal Development Foundation working in the tribal regions of Andhra Pradesh for more than two decades now. Founded by S. Balaraju in 1992, NATURE started with several voluntary activities promoted by a group of like-minded professionals from TATA Institute of Social Sciences and Xavier School of Management.



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**Save the Children**

ARAKU VALLEY





# W

e take off on the narrow hill road, humbled by the vastness of the mountains on one side and amazed by the unfathomable depths of the valley on the other, with the steep curves gradually unfolding the treasure the Eastern Ghats of India hold in them and drawing us more and more into the sheer magnificent beauty. After a three hour and a hundred odd kilometer drive from Visakhapatnam, the second largest city of Andhra Pradesh, we arrive at Araku Valley, a small yet popular hill station.

Covered with thick forests, terraced rice fields and world famous coffee plantations, Araku is not just rich in biodiversity but also hidden under its mountain forests are vast resources of minerals of very high industrial value, evident from the rising interest and invasion of mining industries in the region. The stark silence spread over the lush green valley juxtaposes the abundance it holds underneath. At the outset, the silence is overwhelming and brings one the closest they can get to nature. However, it soon makes one wonder if a mystery surrounds the silence. Are there voices in the valley which are not finding expression or are suppressed under the overpowering machinery – economic, social, political and now the industrial?





According to 1/70 Act (land transfer act) non-tribals are barred from acquiring land ownership in scheduled areas.

Araku is home to 19 tribes of India. They comprise the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTG), communities from among all the Indian tribes with particularly low development indices. The tribal population is highly dispersed with the population of individual villages averaging between 100 and 200.

The arduous way leading up to these villages requires one to scale mountains and descend down through roads and terrains that allow only one vehicle along the width of the road which often ends much before the village, leaving walking as the only means of access.

The villagers have to walk at least a few kilometers to reach the nearest point of access to public transport, and the same is true for the nearest source of water for most of them. Away from the power centers and education, they have limited or no awareness about their rights and entitlements, and so, are paid little attention by those in power. Inaccessibility to their villages is often and most conveniently cited as the reason for service

providers and provisions not reaching them. In situations when they come forward to become equal beneficiaries of their entitlements as the other citizens, they are subjected to exclusion, an institutionalized form of discrimination and denial of rights on the basis of their primitiveness and perceived low caste. Exclusion and displacement over generations have kept them away from getting to higher positions.

Adding to their problems is the heavy tourist influx, owing to the state government's extensive efforts to promote tourism, which has resulted in exploitation of the poor and young tribal girls and women. Araku has an increasing number of unwed mothers and many cases of HIV/AIDS. Moreover tribal areas witness seasonal migration of large populations as unskilled labour. Many children miss out on education and access to food entitlements delivered through ICDS (Integrated Child Development Services). They do not have any health services available to them either. For most of the tribal children, education remained a distant dream until recently.

There is exclusion even within the tribal groups; most of the schemes are directed towards the non-PTG villages.



Traditionally, tribals engage in agriculture and trading minor forest produces. The Constitution of India makes it mandatory that they get their share from every development and promotional activity taken up in the tribal areas. But instead, the new laws are supporting mining companies and making the tribal population lose the rights on their own lands and forest resources.

In 2009, NATURE initiated Save the Children's IPAP project to improve the status of the most socially excluded children so that their voices are heard and recognized institutionally by formal and informal structures. Under the project, 30 villages, 17 Anganwadi centers, 21 schools, and 1235 tribal families in the valley were identified.

The project started by capturing the reason, gravity, magnitude and various dimensions of exclusion of the tribal children and communities. Then in phases, the project took up activities to build linkages between the communities and the service providers, so as to make the communities self-sufficient and the service providers accountable. After all, exclusion faced by children is a direct or indirect factor of exclusion of their communities, and only more due to the vulnerability owing to their tender age and lack of experience.

The program targeted a few families at some places and the entire village at some places. We travelled long miles to interior tribal hamlets and met children, parents, grandparents, village leaders and many champions of change who are playing a crucial role in bringing children to where they belong – in schools. We present to you here such stories of triumph.





# Our land, our rights!

**W**e grow crops in monsoon and after that we have nothing. We work for six months and six months we have no work. We grow rice, red gram and vegetables like broad beans, etc. We get very little produce, we do not sell it. When there is no work we go for coolie (labour) jobs. If we do not find even that work, we just stay back at home. We travel to the main Araku town or other cities where construction of houses happen and work there. We carry sand loads and do other works.

Some of us also migrate to other cities for work. We stay there for four to six months. If there are four members in a family, one or two persons go and the rest of them stay back at home. Our girls also travel to far off places, like Visakhapatnam every year to support their families.

We are farmers, this is our land. We depend on the flora and fauna here. We depend on our land for everything. We cannot leave our lands just because we do not have returns from them for six months.

We had these forest lands from the time of our great grandparents. This is our land. We are not doing something new. We have owned these lands for a very long time but we did not have any documents. In our parents' and grandparents' time we had our rights even without any documents.

In 2009, people from APMDC (Andhra Pradesh Mineral Development Corporation Ltd.) visited our villages. They wanted to take our hills. They said that if we do not give them our land they will force us to vacate and if we agree peacefully then they will give us jobs and relocate us. Private mining companies had also come in helicopters; they did survey and said that this is the right place for mining.

How will they give us any job when we are not educated? We said we cannot give our hills. This is our land. We depend on this forest and hill for everything. We get everything here. We grow vegetables, fruits and everything we need. We cannot survive in any other place. This is where we belong.

Forest officials also trouble us. They tell us this is not our land. They destroyed our crops and took away all the implements which we use for agriculture.

They tell us not to cultivate crops on land where they have cultivated some crops. They say it is forest land and only the





forest department has rights on it and that they will get us arrested and many such things.

We are tribals, we do not have any proofs on paper. That is the main reason we are left behind. They called us to the court few times.

So, we fought for our land and our rights with their help (NATURE organisation). We put up applications to get documents for our land ownership. We will not give our hill and we will not move from here at any cost. We even told them, you can do whatever you want but we are not going to give you our land. Some of them even got a sanction order to start mining here but NATURE went to the Supreme Court and got a stay order. After we got stay order now they do not come.



If we get documents of our lands then we can tell that we have rights on our piece of land. We can show them that this is our land.

Earlier we did not have the capacity to come forward and talk. Only these days some of us are coming forward.

Initially they did not accept us because of many barriers like language and as we did not belong to their village. They would not come out of their homes or talk to us. But we kept going. We did not give up! We had to build their trust in us. We used to go and stay in their village even if they did not come out and talk to us. After a few days, one or two of them would start talking to us and seeing them, gradually, others would also come out.

**NATURE TEAM**

## Naraji

I studied till 10th standard but dropped out because I failed in one subject and also we did not have money. I have two sisters and two brothers. My father is a farmer and mother works at home. We grow crops on our land and use the produce as food. When the produce is excess we also earn some money.

When outsiders used to come and tell us that this is not our land, I used to be scared - what if they take away our land! But now we have proof and we can tell them that this is our land. I feel very good.

My parents never asked me to stop studying. They said if I have money I can study. I want to become a nurse but I need money for that and we do not have so much money. So I started working. Now I go to construction-sites, stay there for a few months and I earn money. Once I collect enough money, I will join college.

In my parents' and grandparents' generation, girls did not study but in the present generation, they are studying. Many people think that girls cannot do anything. I want to study and show my talent.







After we started interacting with the communities, we first built their awareness and formed community groups involving women and youth. We conducted village level meetings and promoted convergence meetings at the mandal level involving ITDA (Integrated Tribal Development Agency) to help groups establish links with the service providers.

**NATURE TEAM**

Earlier when we saw someone in pant and shirt coming to our village, we used to get scared and run away but now we do not. We are also learning that we should get educated and that is the reason we are able to fight for our lands now.

We do not have enough money and food. We also need to have money for education. If we have to pay fees from where can we pay? Our children are not able to continue their studies after 10th as the fees are high and we cannot pay the fee collected by private colleges. Government will take care of them only till 10th class but after that it is difficult. After 10th class, there are colleges in Araku and if we have to send our children to college, we need money. The children need to rent a room, spend for food and many other things and because we cannot afford all that, they drop-out after 10th.

Our parents were not able to send us to school, or buy us uniform and shoes. We want at least our children to be well educated. Even if they are not able to get good jobs, we want them to grow up and be good citizens and be aware of what is happening around them.

We did not have any kind of work or ration cards, job cards and many such things. They (NATURE team) got identity cards, ration cards and job cards for us. There was no drinking water so we put an application and now some of the villages have access to drinking water.

Before they came, it used to take us many days to get any work done at government offices. Now it is a little better. They even helped us to start some savings groups and now we also get loans. We are learning many things. They even made the Collector visit our village.



He asked us to grow crops in one acre and if we have one more acre he said we can use that for growing pepper or any other crops, so that we can make some profits out of plantation.

NATURE facilitated 43 families in receiving land ownership documents.





## Making Sarubedda, alcohol-free village

**E**arlier, we never thought about the problems of the family and our village. Most of the time, we consumed alcohol and remained in an unconscious condition the whole day. Our women went to work. We did not have money for buying basic things like soaps, clothes and medicines for our children. We did not have money to even buy food for our families. Our children did not go to school. Men would ask their wives for money and if they did not give, they used to beat them. The situation was very bad.

We did not think about anything but alcohol. Government schemes were not reaching us and we were not even aware. We used to take money from our wives for ration and buy alcohol instead. Sometimes we would even sell off the ration at a lower price to buy alcohol. There were irregularities in the ration, but we would not object. We used to go all the way across the border to Odisha to get alcohol, if not available here.

We did not care about children's education. Children used to roam around the village and not go to school. Families did not take care of their hygiene; they would wear dirty clothes and drink contaminated water. That caused us many health problems. Many of us got diseases like jaundice and skin allergies. Three young people died of alcohol poisoning.

We always stayed in the village. We did not go to work. Our families went hungry for days. Our relatives avoided us because they thought we would ask them for help. Even our children were humiliated among their friends because of us.

One day, NATURE team came to our village for a survey. When they found out about our problems, they started conducting weekly door to door campaign. They explained to us how much money we were spending on alcohol. They shared with us some statistics to show how the expenses on alcohol can be utilised to develop the family and the village. They pointed out the health problems that arise due to consumption of alcohol.

Initially, most of us showed no interest and continued to drink. They did not give up. They continued their effort to get us out of the alcohol trap. They conducted meetings for us. We gradually started realising that we can do a lot of things for ourselves if we quit alcohol.

They would always talk about the future of our children. Even we began thinking about the future of our children. It was hard to quit immediately. But NATURE continued with their "no drinking" campaign. We realised the value of their words and started following them. We stopped drinking. Our children

The villagers have been given training on how to mobilise entitlements from the government. 30 such groups have been formed with one group established in each of the villages.



started going to schools. They have even taken many initiatives to solve the problems in the village.

We have changed a lot after they have come to our village. We now conduct meetings every week to discuss the problems of the village. We also shared our problems with the concerned officials in the 'Rachabanda' meeting organised by the Government. A cemented road is sanctioned to our village which has made our lives much better, especially during monsoon. Government has sanctioned 'Indiramma' houses (under the housing scheme) which have been constructed already. Now we have proper houses to live. They also got us job cards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The whole village community had a Gram Sabha meeting. There, we decided to give a written application to the Mandal Revenue Officer and land departments for MGNREGA cards. After a month, they sanctioned the cards. With these cards, we now get paid for 100 days of work.

Now our children go to school and have proper food and clothes. We realised that education is the medium to make our children's lives better. They (NATURE team) encouraged us and made us realise how it will be good to have a school in our own village. We gave application for school building. Now we have a school in our own village and feel so happy to see our children go to school daily.

The village community has become very active about education. They regularly monitor the school activities. If they find any problem, they immediately go and ask the teachers. If any student leaves the school in the middle of the year, the villagers take her/him to school and readmit them. Do you know, our village is completely alcohol-free now! We are a happy village with happy children.

We are utilising schemes meant for the Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) and our children are getting seats in PTG schools. They are going for higher studies in cities like Visakhapatnam and Hyderabad as well. Recently, one of our girls got the post of ANM (Auxiliary Nurse Midwife) in Hyderabad.

We realised that if we want the children to not suffer exclusion, we will have to first make the men of this village quit alcohol. We are happy that we are successful. The men have quit alcohol completely. They now even go to work. This has brought positive changes in the lives of the women and children. Children from this village are now going to other cities for higher education.

**NATURE TEAM**





## I do not have to work anymore. I am studying now



**M**y father passed away when I was just nine years old. He had AIDS. My mother and I were also tested positive. My mother was not well. She had fever all the time. She could not go to work. There was no money at home. To help my mother, I went far to the town, got goods and sold them in the weekly market. I was making Rs 200 and from that money I got her medicines and food. My village people are nice to us but they could not help us.

I went to school whenever I had time. My mother used to cry seeing me work. She would say, "My dear son has to work at such a young age because of my illness". She used to cry a lot. She was helpless. She could not do anything. Like my father, even she left me one day. She died. I have a younger sister and grandmother. My grandmother was old. She could not work. The responsibility of my grandmother and sister was on me. I wanted to study, but how could I? I did not go to school for two years. Every time, my biggest worry was - will I be able to sell all the goods? Will I be able to earn some money for my sister and grandmother? If not, what will we eat?

I thought there will never be an end to our problems. One day some people (NATURE team) came to our village. They did Child Rights campaign. With other children, they registered my name in the Child Club. I always wanted to study so I attended some meetings and through those meetings I came to know

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about our rights. But how can I go to school. I have to work. This thought always troubled me. I went to school once in a while. I had to earn.

I lost my grandmother soon after. My sister and I were sent to a home. They (NATURE) facilitated our stay and education from there on. I did not have to work anymore. We both are studying now. I am given healthy food and medicines.

Now, I play cricket. I am good in batting and bowling. I attend trainings where they teach us to make movies and report child issues.

I tell my sister we have to study and get good jobs so that we can help other children like us. Education makes our lives better and also helps us to make the lives of others better. After I learnt about our right to protection, I am telling parents to make their children free from work and send them to school. I keep meeting them till they are convinced. I also inform Sir (NATURE staff) if I come across any orphan child so that the child can get a shelter. That is my way of saying thank you to them (NATURE team).

I miss my parents and grandmother but I have made very good friends. I go to their homes. Their parents really adore me. They are very nice. Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night thinking if they (NATURE team) had not helped me and my sister, what would have happened to us? I have not told anyone about the infection. Our people do not have awareness yet. The biggest positive for me out of this has been that I once took part in an essay writing competition on HIV/ AIDS. I won it (he says with a smile)

*Ramesh is not his real name. We have changed the name of the child to protect his identity*

We made a film on the difficulties children were facing due to the long distances between our villages and school. We showed the film to the Sarpanch. A school was sanctioned. Our film also got an award in Hyderabad.





**Sarala**

## The future of our children is in education

**M**y son used to go to Chennai for work. He has four children. His wife stayed here taking care of us. In our days, we did some work in the village itself. We used to make a few things and sell them. That was enough in those days but now it is not like that, things have changed a lot. They go to other places for work because the money which they are getting here is not enough. There are some problems even here like there is no water for crops and we cannot depend on agriculture throughout the year.

My son fell sick and my daughter-in-law was unwell too. Their illness became serious. We were only aware of tuberculosis, nobody knew about HIV. They used a lot of medicines but nothing worked. After a while people realised that it is not going to be cured. They started staying away from my son and daughter-in-law. They said it was a communicable disease. Nobody went close to them. They lived in a house far from the village and died one day.

My two grandchildren were going to school while their parents were alive but they had to stop going to school after their parents' death. They faced discrimination even by the teachers in school. They were asked to sit away from other students. Even during the midday meal, they were not allowed to eat with their classmates. The teacher asked them to bring their own glass and plates from home.

My grandchildren were taken to the hospital for tests. Two of them also had the same infection. The villagers started keeping them away and after their parents' death, the situation got even worse. Nobody took care of my grandchildren. Their

uncles, aunts, all stay close by but nobody came near them. My husband works for the railways. He earned just enough to take care of us. When NATURE volunteers visited our village, I told them about my grandchildren. They took up the issue with the Headmaster of the school. The teacher was transferred to another school. They (NATURE) organised *Kala Jatha* program in which they tried to bring awareness about what HIV/AIDS is and how it is transmitted. It was then that all of us got to know about HIV/AIDS. *Kala Jatha* was organised once in every quarter in the village.

Now the situation has changed for good. The infected children are allowed to play with other children. No incidents of discrimination have happened in the recent past. They met the ITDA Project Officer and enrolled my grandchildren in an English medium residential school.

I used to get very worried thinking about their future. I used to cry a lot thinking who will take care of them after us. We are old and there is nobody to help me look after them. But now, I am confident that my children can survive even without me. A lot of my confidence has also come from seeing our villagers accepting them.

My only wish is to see my children get some education and in good jobs. The future of our children is in education. Even if they do not get good jobs, owing to politics and discrimination that exist, we know education will give them insights about life and keep them protected. Once they get educated, I am certain they will manage to do well for themselves.

*Sarala is not his real name. We have changed the name to protect their identity*





## For their better tomorrow **Children's Collective**

If bringing awareness and supporting communities was the first step towards inclusion of children to education, the second and the most crucial step that NATURE took as part of the IPAP project was to introduce Child Clubs and make children aware of their rights.



### **What is the name of your Child Club?**

We call it Mahatma Gandhi Child Club.

### **Why 'Mahatma Gandhi' Child Club?**

Mahatma Gandhi fought for India's freedom. We children also want freedom. We want freedom from child labour and child marriage. Our rights have to be protected.

### **What are Child Rights?**

Children have 54 rights. These rights prevent us from being harmed. A lot of children drop out of school and start working. If they do not go to work, some parents do not give them food. Some get used to cigarettes and alcohol, so they do not come to school. Every child has the right to get educated and be protected. We go to such children and talk to their parents about the importance of education. We tell them about the harmful effects of consuming such things and so many other good things that we learn at school from our teachers. Our group got 15 students to join school again.

### **How is the Child Club helping you all?**

Earlier we faced many problems. But nobody was there to listen to us.

There were no toilets in the school. There is a road outside the school. Girls used to go on one side of the road and boys on the other. Girls always had the fear of boys walking by.

Sir and Madam from NATURE came and told us about our rights and grouped us into Child Clubs. We then wrote a letter to the Headmaster of our school about our problem. Now we have separate toilets constructed in our school for girls and boys.

We got clean drinking water to the school through our committee. The cooks take care of the water now; they boil the water and give it to us. We write if the curry (food) is not good or if the teachers are not teaching properly or if they are not coming regularly. We write about all this and put the letter in the box. The teachers and the Headmaster read the letter and solve our problems. There used to be a sir, he did not teach well. He used to just come, sit on the chair and smoke. Now it is not like that. All the teachers come in time and teach.

We were not used to going and talking to people like a group before. Only after the Child Clubs started, we are bringing school dropouts children back to school.

30 Child Clubs have been formed and membership is given to active child students. They take up issues and problems of children.

### **Why is school important for children?**

There are not many people in our village who are educated. If we study well and become a doctor or a teacher then we can help people of our village. If we are educated we can lead others on a good path, like our teachers are doing. We do not like to see children roaming in the villages, getting into bad habits and going to work. We know that even after getting educated, we have to work but if we are uneducated we have to struggle always.

They also tell us that we should not grow our nails. If we have long nails then there will be germs and the germs will go in our stomachs and we will fall sick. So now we wash our hands with water and soap.

We check if garbage or waste is dumped anywhere near, school, our homes or in our village and if flies and mosquitoes are breeding in such places. Because if we eat food on which germs and flies sit, we will get fever and many other diseases.

There is a box called the honesty box. If we find money or anything which does not belong to us, we put it in the box.

### **What is a child's right to protection?**

We all come from different far-off villages. Our villages only had primary schools. We had to walk through the forests and cross many big rocks to reach school. It was dangerous during monsoons. But even then we used to walk and come only to see that the school building was leaking and classrooms were filled with water. There would be snakes and cows taking shelter in the classrooms. We took some pictures and videos of the classrooms and gave it to our teachers. Now our school has a new building and also a boundary wall.

This school is till 7th class. After 7th, we have to go to hostel in Araku main town. We gave an application and now the school is being extended to 8th class. A new building is also being constructed. We do not have to go to hostel for one more year.

Many children drop out of school and start working. If they do not go to work, some parents do not give them food. Every child has the right to get educated and be protected.



## Children have become the mediators for social transformation.

We do not mind walking to school every day, we are used to it now. And, it is fun coming to school with friends every day. We will never stop coming to school.

In olden days, there were no schools and girls stayed at home. Our elders regret they could not study well. Girls are married when they are young and they suffer a lot. Some even die

when they cannot bear the torture. I once told my mother it is not right. But she simply kept quiet. Now we know if we see anything like that we have to call 1098 (Child Helpline) and they will come to help us. For child marriages, child labour, orphan children, for everything we have 1098. Now girls are also getting educated and are working like boys.

### Meenakshi

## If something is not right, we call for a meeting and discuss

We go to school and talk to teachers. We see if they are teaching children well. We ask the teachers to make our children study so that we can join them in other hostels later for higher education. We also monitor the food served and whether children are given nutritious food! We make sure that all the children are regular to school and that school maintain hygiene and give them food on time. Our children come and tell us everything that happens in school. If something is not right, we call for a meeting and discuss.

We approached higher education officers and told them how our children will face less problems if we have a school building in our village. They can study here instead of going to some other place. So, all the villagers discussed this issue and then asked for school building in the meeting.

After the school building construction, children are regular to school. They are learning how to read and write. They are even reading newspaper and books.

We are learning to come to school only after they (NATURE team) started coming to our villages. Earlier, we never went out so much. We stayed at home and worked as farmers. Because we did not go out, we did not have the awareness.

We never thought that it is so important to have a bathroom in the school. We were not even sending children to schools. We usually make our elder children take care of their younger siblings when we go for work.

My children had to walk many kilometers through forest, hills and rocks to reach school but now we have our own school in the village.

*Meenakshi is a mother of four children. She is an active member of Child Protection Committee (CPC).*



We did not know much about education and development and that we should have a school in our village, but now, we attend meetings and know how to approach higher officials.





Ram Babu

## Leading the path

Every morning Ram Babu leads a group of young children going to the Nandi Valasa school and makes sure they reach back home safe in the evening.

Ram Babu is one among many other students who come from far-off villages to attend school at Nandi Valasa. Ram Babu's village is under threat of displacement from a mining company. The mining company threatens them saying the Government will throw them out of their village.

There is not even a primary school functioning in his village. Young children have to walk several kilometers through forests and hills to attend school. With help from NATURE, the village has managed to get a stay order from the court on mining and against displacement.

Ram Babu is studying in 7th class now. All the children of his age from his village have moved to hostels. He did not. He felt it is his responsibility to ensure none of the younger children from his village discontinue education because of the circumstances of their village and the distance they have to walk.

He is happy he can complete his 8th standard in the village itself.

Every morning Ram Babu leads a group of young children going to the Nandi Valasa school and makes sure they reach back home safe in the evening.







**Lakshman**

## **We filed an RTI application to know the status of the school building sanctioned**

**W**e have a primary school in the village. But during monsoon once, the roof of the school building collapsed due to strong winds. That scared children and they stopped going to school. It remained like that for 9-10 years.

We put the older children in hostels. But we could not have done that for the younger ones. Sending them to schools in any other village was also out of question as they would have to walk a lot and cross many streams.

Every time we told the Sarpanch that children are dropping out, he just ignored. He asked us to go to the Mandal Education Officer (MEO) and the MEO would then send us to somebody else. They kept sending us to various officers, but nobody did anything. We even went to the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly). They do not care for us. There are 430 people in our village. A majority of us voted for MLA, but we are poor and

powerless people, so they do not bother about us.

Our parents did not study. Even though we wanted to study. We did not know where to go. But we were determined. We wanted our children to study well and lead better lives. So, we went directly to the Collector; we heard about the public hearings he conducted. Finally, a new school building and Rs 5 lakhs were sanctioned in 2008 but the construction was stopped halfway through. Because there were no roads in our village, the contractors were scared to come and work. It was impossible to get the construction material to our village. So, again we started making rounds of offices to get the road constructed. Once, the road was sanctioned in our village's name but the money was used to build another road.

Through NATURE, we got to know about RTI (Right To Information), so we filed an RTI application on the status of



the school building sanctioned. It was after that that one road from another village was linked to our village and the work on school building resumed. Because there were no roads, even the teacher came only 2-3 times a week. And throughout monsoon, children would stay back at home. NATURE volunteers stayed in the village and taught children whenever teachers did not come. Only after NATURE came, they appointed some volunteers to teach and they got the roads constructed.

Now all our children are attending school. They are able to read and write. They also read the newspaper and keep us updated on a lot of information about government schemes. NATURE volunteers also keep informing us about Government

schemes, and our rights and entitlements from time to time through programs like *Kala Jathas*. As a member of the School Management Committee, I take responsibility of all the needs of children in the school. I see if children are coming to school regularly. We talk to the parents and see that there are no dropouts in the village.

**Laxman is a School Management Committee (SMC) member**

*SMCs are formed in every village to monitor the functioning of schools, but have remained more or less inactive. NATURE took steps to make SMCs functional and built their capacities to take leadership and play a proactive role in bringing children to schools.*



**Lalitha**

I bring water and cook rice at home. I like to study. It takes at least an hour to reach school. If I study then I will be able to read and write. I can read bus numbers and destination if I want to go anywhere.

We have taken video training and show how we are struggling to go to schools every day in our videos. It took almost three or four months to get the school for our neighbouring village.

Children are now more involved in extra curricular activities such as drawings and making videos. Extra classes are also organised for children after school hours. Child Protection Committees (CPC) have been formed where every member takes care of 4 to 5 students.



**Vikas**

Till my 7th standard, I studied in our village. Then I had a health problem and I stopped going to school. I did not like that school. Water was not good there. Then I started going to the fields with my father. I was earning Rs. 50 for working from 9 am to 3 pm.

Teacher (NATURE staff) came to know about me. She told me that I will get a good job if I study well. In the beginning, I did not listen to her but she met me many times and told my parents that I must go to school. Now I am in 8th grade. I want to become a teacher and teach children who come to my school.



**O**ur focus is children's education and their participation in government and NGO programs, facilitating and streamlining the education process at both the schools and Anganwadi centers and supporting the community to build rapport with service providers.

Villages were selected based on the non-availability of education facilities, low literacy and other aspects like remoteness and villages completely cut off during monsoons. We found that the communities did not mingle or connect with other social groups. They did not know that there are government schemes for them and if some villagers knew about them, they did not know how to approach or talk to government officers.

There were incidents when one or two of them had raised their voice. But it was not a collective act. Usually, the officials would retort or simply ignore them. After our intervention and campaign, they started coming out and questioning the officials. Now they are giving applications under RTI, but still, our support is required. Service providers were ignoring them and some had set restrictions. But community's pressure and slow transformation has brought some change.

We followed scientific techniques like transect walk, participatory exercises, resource mapping and network mapping, etc. After developing these exercises, we went to the communities and identified the strong points like local leaderships whom we should contact for huge gatherings. We developed IEC (Information Education and Communication) materials, ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and TFDs (Theatre for Developments) for communicating with people. With the help of these tools, we have covered many villages which brought some level of awareness.

The most important achievement was sanctioning of school buildings and Anganwadi centers. Since the villages are located in very remote areas, it was difficult to transport the construction material. Contractors were not happy as they had to spend more. We provided some financial support. There were no ANMs (Auxiliary Nurse Midwives) available in the health centres, so we conducted health awareness campaigns like 'hot water festivals' where people were taught to drink only boiled water.

There are some powerful men in the village called 'Muthadars'. They have a great influence in these villages. We identified the 'Muthadars' in four to five villages. We also identified the best officers in departments like electricity and revenue. We also approached elders in the communities.

The major impact of the program was that some of the isolated villages were brought into mainstream. Schools and Anganwadi centres were established and made functional. Children got access to education. Many schools got toilets. PTGs have started accessing their specific entitlements. They have also started accessing 32kg rice scheme for every family. The women were sensitized. They started thinking of their rights. They started utilising the health facilities. Two years ago, Araku hospital was upgraded to a 100 bed hospital. The facilities have been increased. Now, pregnant women can come to the hospital one month before the delivery and stay. Men are being motivated to take care of women during pregnancy.

The project that was initiated in 30 villages has actually benefited around 150 villages. There are a lot of service providers but they should also see that the villagers are aware of these services and that they benefit from them. So, the government should become more functional and more active. We always have some limitations. Limitations, not in work but, that most of the projects we do are time bound. Our ultimate aim is that they should lead and solve their problems.

The biggest challenge is that the community should take over complete ownership of developing their villages.

