

Striving forward in life

Pournami Krishnan K

CB.CM.U3MAC11023

Coimbatore: Durga Devi, 22, a university degree holder, is the living example to the countless child workers in the country that anything can be achieved if there is a will and support.

She came to Coimbatore along with her family, with lot of hopes. But, she had to drop out from school and go for work to support her family financially.

Durga, a native of Madurai, came to this city at the age of 10 years, as her father shifted to Coimbatore for his job and got settled here. She and her elder brother had to drop out from their school.

Both the children started looking for jobs, so that they can help their family. Their parents forced them to these jobs. Durga found a job in a house in the city. She did all the household works for a family for just Rs.500 per month.

The work in the house was very heavy and many times she found it very hard to do such jobs. "I did everything without saying anything because I wanted money. My family was in need of money. So, I had no other option but to do it," she said. She worked there for more than six months.

The turning point in her life was when she heard about the special training schools by the National Child Labour Project (NCLP), which help children from child labour. She was always interested to continue her studies. She put forward her interest to her parents. First, they didn't agree to her. But, after hearing that the government will put Rs.100 per month on an SB account on her name, they allowed her to join the school.

Durga completed her studies there for 6 months and she was transferred to a regular government school with scholarship. After completing her schoolings, she didn't have any idea of what to do next. She had lost all the contacts with her friends and teachers from her old school.

A series of programmes has been planned in Sulur, Karamadai, Sultanpet, Anamalai and Annur blocks by NCLP Coimbatore to create awareness and to stop child labour employment in these areas.

"Parents mainly send their children to work for the money they bring home. They all are money-driven. Even educated people employ children, which is such a sad situation", Mr. D. V Vijayakumar, Project Director of NCLP, Coimbatore, said.

Child labour is the actual sign of violations of a range of rights of children. It is now recognised as a serious and complex social problem in India. Even after a lot of policies and acts have been implemented, child labour continues to be a significant phenomenon in India.

According to the 2001 national census in India, it is estimated that 12.06 million children of the age 5-14 years are employed. Out of this, about 0.12 children in India were in a hazardous job.

It is estimated to be large as 60 million in India as many children are hidden workers working in homes or in the underground economy, and that is such economy which makes them handicapped forever. Children are working in Dhabbas, industries, hotels, and illegally in construction works, quoted a site 'Greater Kashmir, Srinagar'.

Until now, the Child Labour Act, 1986 permitted children to work under 'non-hazardous industries'. The Act is now amended to ban all work for those under the age of 14. Employing a child under the age of 14 for any work has been made into a cognizable punishment with imprisonment up to 2 years or a fine up to Rs.50, 000, or both.

Although the constitution of India guarantees free and compulsory education between the ages of 6-14, child labour is still prevalent in almost all informal sectors of economy. The worst form of child labour would probably be Bounded Labour. It refers to children who are sold by their parents for money, or to pay off debts and even for a loan.

NCLP aims to rescue child labourers and give them free education and a meal. With the help of a team of dedicated teachers and field staffs, they assure primary education to children under the age of 14 years. In 2000, such non formal education centres were started all over India. There are 20 special training centres under Coimbatore chapter – 18 in Tirupur and 2 in Coimbatore. They held classes for the students for 5 hours a day, but in the Coimbatore centres, they take full day classes. The students will be trained for a maximum of 3 years and after that they will be admitted to any government school.

Luck knocked at Durga's door in the form of her teacher. One of her teacher from the training centre found her and helped her in joining college, financially too. "She came for me, she searched for me, and she finally found me. I am the luckiest girl. God gave me her to fulfil my dreams."

She completed her B.Com (CA) from CBM College, Coimbatore this June. Now she is searching for jobs. Durga got scholarship to complete her college.

Durga feels sad when she sees children working in the city. She feels a 'heavy - weight' in her heart, taking her back to her old times when she was in their position. "I want to do something for them. But I still haven't earned much to support them financially. But, when I do, I will certainly do whatever I can."

NCLP Coimbatore has conducted 53 raids in Coimbatore and Tirupur in 2012-13 and rescued 92 children and all these children are rehabilitated. They are provided with monthly stipend by the Central Government.

A drive conducted by NCLP raided various shops and establishments and rescued 20 child labourers employed in these shops in and around the city. They raided bars, bakeries, eateries and workshops in Ukkadam, Saravanampatty and the rescued children were handed over to parents. The store had to pay for the rehabilitation of these children.

The State government was not happy with the way the department works in the registration of such cases. So, a special task force was created to monitor the actions of the labour department. The officials will have to submit monthly progress reports about their activities to the government.

Non-governmental organisations campaigning against child labour have accused the NCLP of not doing enough to check the serious social problem. They claim that they could have done a much better job in tackling the problem if they had received the same support from the government as the NCLP.

“If we are given the same support as the government’s NCLP, we would have done even better,” S. Solomon Roy, managing trustee of an NGO “The Power of Youth Hand Trust,” said in an interview.

He said the NCLP was not working to its full potential. “They are given power and funds to abolish child labour, but still they don’t make use of the facilities provided to them,” he said. Mr. Solomon called for stronger action by the government in curbing child labour.

“Once we tried to expose the rackets behind child begging with the help of then Coimbatore Police Commissioner, Sylendra Babu. When we were about to succeed, the IPS officer was transferred and we couldn’t complete our work,” he said.

“We need to create awareness among parents. That is the main job. That’s where we should start. The non-formal education system or schools by the government needs to be appreciated. They are doing a great job by providing free education and scholarships for the rescued children,” said Solomon, with higher dreams of making our city a child labour free one.