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■ Coimbatore ■ Young IAS officer sets out on a mission to cut school dropout r

Young IAS officer sets out on a mission to cut school dropout rate in Top Slip



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Twenty tribal children have gone back to school in Coimbatore's Top Slip, thanks to an ambitious initiative by a young bureaucrat to cut the increasing drop-out rate.

With the help of students and staff from Hill Tribal Middle School in Top Slip, B Priyanka Pankajam, assistant collector (training) Coimbatore, cajoled reluctant parents and conditioned the general mindset to send the children back to school.

"I learnt that the dropout rate in Hill Tribal Middle School in Top slip has climbed up as tribal children tend to avoid attending school due to their lower socio-economic status and lifestyle, the IAS official said.

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“Some of the other reasons for them to stop attending schools could be a lack of transport facility and fear of wild animals,” she added.

The determined officer says she realised then and there that something drastic has to be done “if the hapless children are to be brought back to school again”.

Recounting her struggle to get the dropouts successfully back to school in the tribal pocket of Kolikamuthi near Top Slip, Priyanka said, “The Hill Tribal Residential School caters to the tribal children living in Top Alip, Koomati, Erumaiparai, and Kolikamuthi. But these children do not want to stay in the school for all the seven days as they want to return home, often. Some of them just left the school in the middle year and never returned.”

The officer began by scouring the school attendance only to find out that there were 20 odd dropouts and regular absentees, all from Kolikamuthi, a tribal hamlet, and an hour’s walk from the Top Slip camp.

But there were some welcome exceptions!

Masani and Aiyappan who hail from the same hamlet have pursued their education with diligence, staying in the tribal school hostel.

“I brought them into the loop and the two boys cited lack of transport facility and fear of wild animal incursions as reasons for other children to leave school”.

Priyanka took the help of Masani and Aiyappan to conduct a role play in the hope of convincing the dropouts to return to school. A school teacher would don the role of a dropout’s mother, and the students were asked to question her. The ‘mom’ would come out with as many answers as possible such as “we are afraid of wild animal attacks”, “the children could not walk the 7 km distance to school” etc. In the end, this exercise prepared the boys to question their parents, who were unwilling to send their wards to school.

Having prepared the boys, officer Priyanka and the young brigade set out to knock on every door, which had a school dropout in Kolikamuthi. Head mistress Vanaja and other teachers accompanied the team. Masani and Aiyappan have formed the vanguards.

“We cajoled and reasoned, with the parents. Some of the mothers plainly said that they don’t know the value of education. And others blamed children for playing truant,” the officer said.

“Finally, I realised either the children wanted to accompany their mahout fathers or simply spend the day playing, but going to school remained the last option on their minds.”

The officer helped the parents see reason by saying if they don’t send their children to school they might end up doing menial jobs, like their fathers.

“Commissioner of Police A Amalraj is ready to extend training to tribal students to take up a career in Tamil Nadu Police, after they complete school. Do you want them to become mahouts or a police constable?” Priyanka had persisted.

Recently District collector T N Hariharan conducted a drive to enroll tribal families in Family and Aadhaar cards, and Chief Minister’s Comprehensive Health Insurance.

“So I wanted to make use of these benefits for a good cause,” Priyanka said.

She warned the parents that “if they don’t send their children to school, we might be forced to withhold all of it”.

“We want your children to get schooling and educated. Please cooperate with us,” Priyanka had said in a final attempt at persuasion.

Call it cajoling, coaxing or persuading, the young officer could successfully convince the parents to send their children to school.

“I am happy that my efforts have borne fruits and the children are going back to school again.”

It didn’t end there. Once officer Priyanka completes her training, she has plans to convert the school into a day boarding one, seek coporate donors’ assistance to organise transport facilities.

“This would be top priority,” said assistant collector Priyanka Pankajam.

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