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Schooling Karnataka's tribal students to be guardians of forests



Steady destruction of Western Ghats prompts a group of trekkers to come out with a long-term plan

Children in a government primary school at Nagarbhavi were thrilled to get pen, pencil, eraser, drawing book, and school bag, from a group of trekkers from Mangaluru. Most of 35 students in this school, about 7 km away from Joida town, are from poor families of tribal Gaudi and Kunbi communities.

Among their benefactors were two dentists who teach the children dental hygiene. “Did you understand?” asks Dr. Gopinath. Some blink, others nod their heads.

The trekkers then head to another government primary school in Bidoli Patne. A 3-km stretch is slushy and deep in

the forest. This school only has a guest teacher. The 15 students are happy to get education materials and umbrellas.

A week ago, the trekkers had distributed material to about 110 students in three other government primary schools at Henakola, Gunda and Avruli in Joida (also called Supa taluk). This is the 12th consecutive year they have been doing this, spending from their own pockets.

About 80% of the geographical area of Joida taluk, located 350 km from Mangaluru, is covered by thick forests. Some students from the poor Siddi tribal community also study here along with Gaudi and Kunbi students in 172 schools spread across the taluk. Many of the schools are located near tribal hamlets.

The motive behind the gesture is to empower tribal students. Observing the steady destruction of the Western Ghats during their trekking trips, they felt helping tribal students to become forest officers would be the best long-term plan. A prominent trekker who did not wish to be named said since the tribal community love their forest, they know how to protect it. Yashwant Naik, who teaches at a primary school in Santri, told *The Hindu* that earlier students in many remote schools came to class during the monsoon by covering themselves with sacks. Now, they come with umbrellas and raincoats. Their attendance is regular – all thanks to the trekkers. This makes teachers teach effectively.

Another trekker said their initiative prompted a Minister to distribute notebooks to some schools for about four years. Some donors from Bengaluru are also doing their bit.

Narmada M. Patnekar, president, Joida Taluk Panchayat, told *The Hindu* that 132 posts of government primary school teachers are vacant in the taluk.

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