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## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-345**



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## Light & laughter in a forest camp



Mangaluru-based organisation reaches out to tribal children

For the past three months, the forests of the Western Ghats in Uttara Kannada district saw an addition to its symphony of sounds: the laughter of boisterous children gathered in the clearings. For most of the past year, the pandemic added a new dimension to distance the world over. While people with means, especially in cities, could remain connected with each other and the world outside their homes, those who were left out of the telecommunications infrastructure -- such as the children of tribal communities of Uttara Kannada district -- found their lives disrupted more than others.

Enter Sahyadri Sanchaya. The Mangaluru-based organisation headed by environmentalist Dinesh Holla decided to reach out to the children of the tribal Siddi and Kunbi communities. "When the lockdown was implemented, students had a hard

time being away from classes and routines. But many private schools were quick to organise online classes. The government's Vidyagama programme also helped many children. But tribal kids living in their hamlets somehow escaped focus. So, we decided to give these kids a fulfilling day to get together, sing and dance, and meet their friends.

The idea was to motivate them and ensure they remain in touch with their studies and extra-curricular activities," Dinesh says. Teams of a minimum of six people from Sahyadri Sanchaya travelled all over the district between November and February, contacting local school teachers. They held 32 camps, reaching out to around 800 children and 50 teachers. Starting with Kiravatti village in Yellapur taluk, and ending with Mestabiroda in Joida taluk, each camp was held near a school and had between 20-35 children.

Roopesh Naik, a Class 5 student belonging to the Kunbi community, says he had a great time when a camp was held in his hamlet Amshet in Joida. "I met my friends after a long time. We tried many crafts for the first time. Making kites and flying them was a great experience," he says. Dinesh says that they organize camps for the tribal children of the region every year, but never on this scale. "Usually, we organize camps at one or two schools. But this year, we decided to extend it due to the lockdown, to reach out to kids deprived of classes and other programmes. We called the programme Vana Belaku (light of the forest)," Dinesh says

Starting at 8.30 am, the children gather to make crafts, sing songs, tell stories, try mimicry, painting, kite-making and

flying. "At some camps, even the parents tried their hand at crafts and enjoyed themselves," Dinesh says. The camp would be wrapped up after lunch, usually provided by the school or local administration. Naturally, there were prizes -- chocolates and toys - - for the competitions. The group even gave copies of Kannada comic books to the kids. A US-based entrepreneur, Panambur Vasudev Aital, sponsored the camps.

"Most of the camps were held under a large tree in forested areas, some of which were on the fringes of forests. The kids enjoyed it as it had many interesting games for them. It was a new kind of camp for many children, who came to attend even when we could not reach them," says Yeswant Naik, a teacher at a school in Kumbarwada village, Joida taluk.

Another teacher, who was deputed to the district and declined to be named, says, "Compared to children living in villages and towns, tribal children already have several skills. Many young tribal children know medicinal plants and their uses. They graze cattle, and find their way to school through thick forests. Such camps bring out other hidden talents in many children," she says.