

An Interview with:

Yallappa Irakkal
Karnataka, India

The nine years he put into developmental work with Ujwala, an NGO in North Karnataka, India, made Yallappa aware of the trials and tribulations of the Lambani community in the area. The Lambanis are a migrant community. They travel to neighboring villages during the harvest season to work in the fields of landowners on a contract basis. The rest of the year, for almost six months, they move to the cities to work as construction laborers. This constant migration displaces the children from schools, and they too are often found helping their parents in the fields or at the construction sites.

Yallappa approached Child Relief and You (CRY) and became a Fellow under the Rippan Kapur CRY Fellowship in the year 2000. He worked in four villages in the Gadag district of Karnataka, which is populated mainly by the Lambani community. Approximately 450 families live in these villages. The objective of Yallappa's initiatives in this area was to put a stop to child labor and enroll working children into schools. Yallappa reactivated the government-run Anganwadis (pre-primary schools) that had become defunct and initiated a School Development and Monitoring Committee. Self Help Groups were formed within the village community, and their members were mobilized to take decisions for the benefit of the village. Yallappa also coordinated and organized polio and vaccination camps with the help of the Self Help Group members. He met the local health workers and convinced them to visit the villages more often. The village women were made aware of health and hygiene matters and urged to go in for regular health check ups, both for themselves and for their children.



Over the past two years, Yallappa's interventions have not resolved all the problems and issues faced by the Lambanis, but they have definitely brought about awareness among them on the importance of education and healthcare for a better life for their children. Yallappa continues in his endeavors to make education a reality for all.

*HelloLife.org thanks **Poonam Chengappa** for conducting this interview.*

What inspired you to initiate this work? How did friends and family react to your decision?

I started doing social work as a student. Later I participated in the 'Sakhshartha' movement, and worked with Vasudeva Tholabandhi of Ujwala Trust for 8 years, gaining a lot of experience. My friends and family members have been very helpful and cooperated in my work. I have their encouragement as well as their participation as volunteers.

What are some of the major obstacles that you have faced in your work and how did you deal with them?

When I initially visited the villages and discussed an organized movement for development, the people did not cooperate. "He has come to collect money" was the general opinion. But after repeated visits when we discussed problems and possible solutions with the villagers and the local authorities, the people began to trust us and cooperate.

In one incident in Hesroor village, 15 women were supposed to get help through the Self Help Groups. Of these three women were Below the Poverty Line (BPL) but unregistered as such with the authorities, due to which the bank refused them a loan. When this problem was discussed with the women, their husbands started fighting with me and threatened me with bodily harm. I brought this to the notice of the women's organization, village elders, and the *Panchayat* president and members. They convened a meeting and the women got together to confront the husbands of the three women who had been denied loans. They said they would not take no one would take any loans but would sit in front of the men's houses in a *dharna* (demonstration). The men, faced with such opposition, listened to the counsel of the elders and the *Panchayat* president. They then apologized for their behavior. After discussions with the bank officials, their names were registered in the BPL list and they could avail of the bank loan.

What kind of interaction do you have with the local government bodies? What has been your experience of working with them?

We introduce ourselves to the officials of local government bodies, discuss our activities, and keep them informed. We make a list of problems of the local people, discuss them directly with the officials, and invite them to the village to find solutions and help the people. We participate in meetings at the village level, *taluka* level, and the district level. The main objective is to provide education to the children.

About 100-200 people participated in a workshop conducted in April 2002, due to the Block Education Officer's speech and invitation letter. The School Development and Monitoring Committee president, members and Children's Rights group members attended the meeting. Yet there are many officials who do not cooperate and obstruct our work. These issues are brought to the notice of their bosses and then perhaps our work gets done.

Is there any unique event or experience that you had while working that you would like to share with us?

There are many invaluable experiences that I would like to share. In Hesarur village the work we did for the three women who were deprived of entering their names in the Below Poverty Line register is one such experience.

In another incident in 1996-97, in a place called Sikhlagara in Jamakhandi town, we tried stopping 20 child marriages. We faced a lot of threats from the people there, but we still succeeded in stopping the marriages.

I worked for Ujwala Trust for village development for eight years. I taught at non-formal education centers and the child labor special school, and worked especially with rag pickers. Children were taught cleanliness, discipline and given basic education. In six months they learnt to read and write. As a means to alternate income in villages, people were taught to make woolen yarn and weave blankets, and *Lambani* women were trained to embroider, making them self-sufficient. People were made aware of health care facilities. The Trust also worked on children's rights, and formed women's groups for their empowerment.

These have been experiences during my work in this field that have brought a lot of satisfaction as well as given me valuable learnings.

Do you have a message for young people who would like to do similar work?

With devotion and dedication you must take care to know the problems of the underprivileged children. Try to look upon the village and its children as your own and participate actively in the development of the community and its people. It is the responsibility of the youth to develop the village for education and health care. There should be right guidance and groups must be formed for the development of the village.

Are there any other organizations or people doing similar work in your area? If yes, is there any cooperation / networking with them?

Yes, there are many other similar organizations in the area. For the local children there is an organization that provides education, *Hindi Prathishtana Samithi* at Laxmeswara. There are five working children who have been enrolled in this school.

IDPMS, an organization that focuses on self-sustained improvement of socio-economic conditions of the people living in the rural areas, organizes talks and meetings on women's empowerment. We are invited to be a part of the meetings too and we get a lot of cooperation from them for our work.

In Gadag at the district level, there is Concern Against Child Labor, the Children's Rights Forum, State Alliance for Education, and the Village Democratic Forum. I participate in their discussions and meetings and there is good co-operation and help from all concerned. There is also a district level volunteer-organizations' association in Dharwad, Gadag, and Haveri.

What are your future plans?

I plan to form an association with the right guidance and with the help of friends -- to grow stronger and to work better. I want to ensure that underprivileged children from the villages and the urban slums are provided education. I also want to start self-help-groups of poor and backward women to work towards their empowerment and uplift, and motivate them to start savings deposits.

I intend to form Youth Volunteer Groups and mobilize them to help in the development of the village and the community, as it is essential to develop and harness hidden talents and skills of the people. I also plan to build relationships with donor agencies, local organizations and philanthropists for resource generation and to work closely with government departments to ensure that the people and the community benefit from the various development schemes.

If you are reading this interview and are motivated by the work of Mr. Yallappa Irakkal, then you can consider making a small donation through CRY to support the work he is doing by going to <http://202.71.136.120/home/donor/donationList.asp>. Please mention that your donation is for Mr. Yallappa Irakkal's work on health and child education for the Lambanis and it will be considered as part of CRY's "Adopt a Project Scheme". He may be contacted via CRY at:

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