

EDUCATION

WHEN Mani dropped out of school, his parents were happy. They had reason to be. They could not only save Rs 50 per month, spent on his education, but also gain Rs 400 more once Mani began work at the garage. How could education help anyone? It had not helped them. And what had not helped them would certainly not help their son.

An increasing number of school-educated parents in Bangalore's urban slums express similar opinions. Most of them are from the skilled and artisan caste groups, have lost their livelihood in the rural areas and have migrated to the cities. Though educated up to high-school levels, they are now part of the urban informal economy and casual labour force, and face a variety of problems such as language barriers, lack of information on schools, and disenchantment with education. As a result, their children are unable to attend school or are not encouraged to be in school.

Born and educated up to the eighth standard in Thiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu, Mani's parents Ramalingam and Vasanti came to Bangalore 15 years ago in search of an "office" job. While Ramalingam aspired to become a peon in a government office, Vasanthi hoped her schooling would fetch her a "respectable" job. After two months, both began work at a construction site as daily-wage labourers. Till date, they continue in the same 'profession' and have given up all dreams of

The growing number of new generation illiterate children in the Bangalore slums, who are neither in school nor in wage labour, indicates a range of problems wrought in our education system, writes SARITA TUKARAM



"office" job.

"When I was a young boy, my father, an agricultural labourer, sent me to school so that I could lead a life better than his. He believed that education would help me get a government job and I would live comfortably. But even after completing my eighth standard, I do the same work that many illiterate people do. Some of them are even wealthier than me," says Ramalingam.

He does not want his son to waste precious learning years in a school.

"What use is education? My wife and I are educated but we do not have secure jobs. How will it be different for my son? If he begins to work at a young age, he

will learn faster. I am happy he left school," he says.

While some of these children are withdrawn from school and made to join the labour force, many others are neither in school nor in wage labour. According to survey conducted by the Sociology and Social Anthropology Unit at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, in August 2001, 1040 of the 1500 households in a slum in the city have children between 6-14 years, who are eligible to attend school. Of the 2106 children in this age group, 69.9 per cent are enrolled in school while 30 per cent are out of school. Of this, 30 per cent, are employed in wage labour while the remaining 70 per cent of the out-of-school children are neither in school nor employed.

Eleven-year-old Veeramani is enrolled in school but does not attend class. His father Annamalai has completed his tenth standard and his mother Unni dropped out of school after her fifth standard. Asked why he

does not attend school, Veeramani says, "I don't like going to school because I am punished if I do not complete homework. The teachers shout at me."

Annamalai is upset that his son refuses to work. "He's not going to school so he can work at the construction site or in a garage. But he refuses to work and spends the entire day with other boys playing marbles and

roaming around. If he was employed somewhere, he could contribute to the family income," he says.

According to the NIAS survey, 21 per cent of the children in five slums that were studied were "nowhere" children - neither enrolled in school nor employed. Similarly, another survey conducted by an NGO, Paraspara, in Malleswaram constituency showed that of the 9737 children, 36 per cent of these children were neither in school nor involved in wage labour.

It is important to focus on this growing number of nowhere children and to the new generation of illiterate children as they indicate a range of problems in education opportunities of children in poverty. In addition to dysfunctional schools, inadequate parental attention, lack of motivation from teachers, absence of a favourable environment for education and failure of the schools to transcend these obstacles have heightened the problem of basic education deprivation. Unchecked, this could reproduce social and economic inequalities. Schools must therefore act as a buffer to the disadvantages faced by children in these poverty areas and intensify education opportunities for them.

