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## It takes more than just poverty to quit school

CHENNAI: What keeps a child away from school? Though poverty could be the main reason, the cases presented at the public hearing organised by non-governmental organisation CRY (Child Rights and You) points to other reasons such as caste discrimination, the school's obsession with its reputation and the lack of quality education which can push a child out of the school system and eventually into the labour market.

Hurdles begin right at the level of informal schools. In Elanthaikulam village, Tirunelveli district, it is the caste factor that takes away the innocence of little girls at the balwadi they attend.

It was difficult for Selvi (5) and Nithya (4), to understand in the beginning, why they were treated differently.

The two belong to the Arunthathiar community, while the rest of the 21 children in the balwadi belonged to the Nadar community.

"Papathi madam, (the caretaker) always screams at us, using abusive language.

She calls us 'Sakkilichi Pillaikala' (daughters of the scavenger caste).

She gives us only half an egg while the others get a full one," said Selvi.

In the Government Higher Secondary School, Athiyur Thirukkai in Villupuram, 13 students in classes 9 and 10 were forced out.

The reason cited by school authorities was poor performance.

They have not been allowed to write their annual examinations. Murthy, member of NGO Pasumai Trust who works with them said, "With great difficulty, the poor parents keep these children in school. When the school prevents them from appearing for exams, the consequence is that they drop out of school." Two of the students who were forced out of the school, began working in construction sites and earned money to pay the Rs 2000 tuition fees at the tutorial college and finally appeared in the exams.

When it comes to tribal schools in the State, it is the teachers who do not come to school. Most of the teachers, including the head master are from the plains and by the time they reach the hills it is almost noon and then by 2 pm they head back towards the plains, social evidence from CRY indicates.

The Government Residential School in Kodaikanal is a classic example of such a case.

The school is supported under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and the government allots Rs.10, 000 per child annually which covers uniforms, note books, toilet articles, three meals a day, an egg weekly twice, and non-vegetarian food once a week.

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