

## **Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK)**

The Biligiri Rangana (B.R.) Hills, rising over 5000 ft above sea level and thickly forested, located in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, are home to the Soliga tribes. The Soligas are said to have inhabited these hills for thousands of years and megalithic burial sites dating back to 1000 B.C. have been found here. Set off the main road, which ascends into the hills, are the stone and clay-tiled buildings of the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK), a voluntary organisation working among the Soligas. What began as a precarious venture in a hut thirty years back now has a radius of over 60 km, covering Yelandur, Kollegal, T Narsipur and ChamaraJanagar in Karnataka, taking in its ambit a tribal population of 20,000, and it works in the areas of health, education, cottage industries, community organisation and environmental preservation.

Dr. H. Sudarshan, the Founder-Secretary of VGKK, was awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 1994 'for showing how tribal culture can contribute to a process that secures the basic rights and needs of indigenous people and conserve their environment'. The Padmashri, one of the highest national honours, was conferred on him in the year 2000 by the Indian government. Dr. Sudarshan has been appointed by the state government as the head of the Task Force on Health and the Director of the Vigilance Commission, spearheading the movement to clean up corruption in public life.

### **VGKK: The Beginnings**

In 1979, H Sudarshan, a twenty-nine year old doctor from Bangalore, inspired by the likes of Dr. Albert Schweitzer and nearer home, Dr. Narasimhan who had worked among the tribals in Ooty, first arrived at B.R. Hills wanting to serve the Soliga tribals. 'If you want to find God, serve man!' his preceptor Swami Vivekananda had urged and his medical training had tempered his zeal with a rational and scientific edge. The one hitch to Dr. Sudarshan's plans, however, was the reluctance of the Soligas to be served. But he persisted, living in the forest, putting up with incursions of snakes and elephants, hoping to win their trust. 'For three years he lived amongst us,' says Shivane Gowda, head of Hosapodu, President of VGKK Council, adding with a touch of pride, 'but he did not get our measure. It was only after three years that he understood our problems.'

A dramatic cure for snakebite that Dr Sudarshan effected helped establish his credentials – both as a doctor trained in the western allopathic tradition and as a person who was truly committed to the Soliga people. However, total acceptance was slow and hesitant. Describing the early days, Chakravarthy, now Head Master of the VGKK Higher Primary School and Mallesh, now Project Co-ordinator and Secretary to Dr. Sudarshan, among the first volunteers to join Dr. Sudarshan, say, 'We did everything, right from trekking to the podus (settlements) in the interior of the forest to distribute medicines, giving injections and suturing'.

The VGKK was formally founded in October 1981, with Dr H. Sudarshan as Secretary, G.S. Jayadev as Treasurer, and eight representatives from the Soliga community on the executive committee. But the first few years' experience had been the seeding ground for the organisation. Dr Sudarshan and his team learnt that the health-related problems of the Soligas were just the tip of the iceberg; he also understood why the Soligas had fled from his well-intentioned attempts to help them.

## **The Soligas**

The Soligas or 'Children of the Bamboo' are traditionally a semi-nomadic people, practising shifting cultivation and living off the minor produce and small game of the forest. They live in podus or settlements, groups of 10 to 50 thatched huts. Each podu has a headman and is fairly self contained. The barter system has been the basis of economic transaction. Disputes are settled by the Nyaya Sabhe or the people's congregation and even today, the Indian Penal Code notwithstanding, most disputes are settled by the Nyaya. Though women have still not been elected to head their podus or as Nyaya judges, they speak openly at the congregational meetings and take on all work, right from cultivating crops to hunting. The caste system of mainstream Hindu society, which might well have begun as a system of division of labour, but has now developed into a privileged ordering, is absent among the Soligas.

The religion of the Soligas could broadly be described as Nature Worship. Deep in the B.R. Hills forest stands the Doddasampige, the gigantic Champak tree, (*Michelia champaca*) believed to be over two thousand years old, revered by the Soligas as a manifestation of their God Madeshwara. The Soligas speak directly to their deities or celebrate them in the most lyrical of songs and poetry. The nature worship of the Soligas captures the spirit of Rig Vedic culture where forces of nature were deified as Gods. The Soliga priest's appeal to the Sun God echoes the Rig Vedic hymn where Agni, the God of Fire, is addressed as 'my father, my kinsman, my brother and my friend'.

Whenever the Soligas cut down a tree, they perform a small ritual in penance. Their songs also celebrate the little bird that builds its nest in various trees. This song can continue for hours, till all the trees in the forest are listed, an ingenious way of making their children learn the names of the trees. To plough the land, the Soligas use a spade and not heavy animal-drawn implements, so that the earth is not hurt.

After the year's harvest, the whole podu meets in the festival of thanksgiving, the Rotti Habba. Ragi pancakes are offered first to Lord Jadeswami, in acknowledgement that all human endeavour is an offering to God (echoing the Bhagavad Gita), and then shared among the whole community. The sentiment that everything comes from God, the ultimate protector, is expressed in this verse from The Song of the Doddasampige.

'Let not the bunch of buds ever wither  
Nor the bloom-shoot break!  
May you protect us like a flower,  
The bud and the bloom are thine.'

No one goes hungry as long as there is food in the podu, which takes care of all its inhabitants. The community, thus, is the backbone of Soliga existence and the forest their natural habitat.

### ***The End of 'Splendid Isolation'***

The commercialised forest policies of the British and the post-independence growth mode of industrialisation led to rapid deforestation. Further, the Forestry Act of 1971 resulted in the B.R.Hills forests being declared a 'protected' area, leading to the eviction of the Soligas from their interior podus, and their traditional way of life becoming redundant. Shifting cultivation, hunting and collection of minor forest produce were disallowed. And so began the vicious cycle of land alienation, exploitation by landlords and indebtedness often resulting in bonded labour. The government rehabilitation schemes, though well-meaning were neither culture-specific nor

need-based, and they often went awry because the Soligas remained ignorant of them. The Soligas, unused to heavy tilling, were not able to cultivate the land given to them in compensation. Monetary compensation was whittled away in no time at all. Branded as 'lazy and land-hungry', the community sank further into poverty and disease, and also into their shell, refusing to trust any figure of 'authority'.

### **The Formulation of the Objectives of VGKK**

In a complete meshing of the abstract and the actual, Dr. Sudarshan found the ground realities in B.R. Hills calling for an actioning of the spiritual values he (and others in the team) believed in and had demonstrated in his earlier work under the Ramakrishna Mission – the Vedantic path of Karma Yoga as expounded by Swami Vivekananda, his concept of service and development and the work ethic of the Bhagavad Gita.

### ***The Spirit behind the Objectives***

Common to the Hindu view of life -- right from the philosophical flights of the Upanishads to the nature worship of tribes like the Soligas -- is a belief in the divine nature of every living being and the inseparable unity of the material and the spiritual world. All the Hindu sects that subscribe to Vedantic/ Upanishadic philosophy see the human quest as one of 'self-realisation', of union with the 'eternal soul' or Brahman, or simply, freedom. However since human beings differ in the constitution of body and mind, there are different ways to attain this 'union' or yoga. These ways are -- the path of Karma Yoga, the concrete and practical path of work; Bhakti Yoga, the path of love, suited to the mystic; Jnana Yoga, the path of knowledge suited to the thinker, and Raja Yoga, the 'psychological' path, with its appeal to a life of secluded contemplation. These paths, however, are inter-related.

The renaissance in Hindu life and thought in the 18th century saw the rise of many reform movements. One of these was the Ramakrishna Mission, a humanitarian, pan-human order founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897, with public service and Vedantic teaching as its two-fold task. Swami Vivekananda brought to the fore Karma Yoga, as a system of ethics which advocated unselfishness and good works as the path to spiritual development.

To work for the regeneration of one's brethren, according to Swami Vivekananda, a worker had to meet three requirements. The worker had to really feel the pain of his brothers as his own; find a remedy for their ills and act on it and finally, the worker had to constantly question his true motives. The worker had to render, in ascending order of importance, physical, intellectual and spiritual help to the people amongst whom he was working. Further, a combination of 'immense idealism with immense practicality' was required. Vivekananda exhorted his monks, 'You must be prepared to explain the intricacies of the shastras now, and the next moment go and sell the produce of the fields in the market.'

According to the Bhagavad Gita, the right attitude to work is very important and unselfish, detached work alone is truly regenerating. Unattached work consists of looking upon all work as worship and offering the fruits of our work to Him. The ideal way of working is working in complete freedom which is possible through love and not the slavery that attachments produce. Only then will the worker not be disappointed if the receiver is not grateful to him, or his schemes miscarry. What is really achieved by doing good to others is that one improves oneself. Swami Vivekananda emphasised the practice of 'witnesshood' – we do not mix in the fray but hold

ourselves as witnesses and go on working. By questioning his motives constantly, the worker can make sure that duty does not degenerate into self-aggrandisement or selfish attachment.

### ***The Objectives of VGKK***

The VGKK team concluded that they had to work on the comprehensive development of the Soliga people and that to start with the physical and work up to the spiritual dimension, they could not separate the health, economic, political and social aspects of their work. Moreover, any help that they rendered should not end up making the Soligas more helpless and dependent but empower them to manage themselves; teach them how to fish rather than supply fish.

The VGKK evolved the following objectives for its integrated tribal work.

- To realise the vision of a self-reliant, united and progressive Soliga community.
- To identify the potential of the Soligas and help them build their confidence through motivation, education and training. Development efforts would have to encourage them to retain and build on their intrinsic values, traditions and culture; efforts at modernisation must combine synergistically with the positive dynamism of their life; ('Keep the gold and remove the dross of the old ideas' as Swami Vivekananda had urged.)
- To build up people's organisations to educate the people about and work for social justice and fundamental rights.

Further, the VGKK believed that the tribals were an inseparable part of the forest. Their future depended on preventing their alienation from nature; at the same time, they needed help to cope with and reap the benefits of modern civilisation.

### **Support for VGKK**

In the initial years, before the days of government grants and international interest, VGKK survived on the generosity of its well-wishers. (All services of the Kendra were, and still are, free.) V. Krishnamoorthy from Bangalore and Dr. Sudarshan's friends who had settled abroad were among the first donors, the former donating Rs one lakh (Rs 100,000) for the hospital which was built in 1983. The organisations which followed with financial help were the Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries (HIVOS ) from Holland, EZE from Germany which contributed to tribal housing and the school building project and the Christian Children's Fund which helped in education and community health. The Kendra now gets regular grants from the Government of India ministries of health, education and rural development programmes and works with several specialist organisations in different areas.

### **VGKK Activities**

#### ***Education***

The VGKK School, which started with six students in 1981, today has a total of 566 students in the school, the junior college and the job-oriented courses sections, and a residential hostel. Of the 451 students in the school section, most of them first-generation learners, 180 are girls. The students take the state level exam and Mr Chakravarthy reveals with a quiet sense of satisfaction, 'In our first batch in 1989, we had a success rate of 17%, but now it averages between 55%-60%. Our drop out rate is now only 2%.'

Education for the Soligas had largely meant learning forest survival skills and the VGKK structured a system of education which would reinforce the Soliga way of life on the one hand

and incorporate the benefits of mainstream education, particularly of modern science. H.Ramachari, one of the first teachers to join the school, describes the 'indigenous games' and 'science play' methods devised to take forward their system of value-based experiential learning. This included making the Soliga children document the plants and herbs that they knew, as also their songs and folklore. The school has now brought out the culture and environment specific text books for the initial schooling years in Soliganudi, the dialect of the Soligas; the intention is to introduce them gradually to the state language, Kannada. Optional courses in forestry and animal tracking, and vocational courses, including a course in dramatics, have been introduced in the high school for those students who do not want to pursue the conventionally academic subjects. The classrooms overlook the hillocks and the hostel rooms have been designed with the Soliga podu in mind.

The morning prayer at the VGKK school is a tribal song in praise of the sun, the giver of life. This is followed by the Suryanamaskar, the salute to the sun, a yoga asana and in the classroom, the scientific process of photosynthesis is explained, thus completing the knowledge loop.

The school builds on the sense of fellow feeling that exists in the community. When one boy hurts another, says H Ramachari, he is not punished but made responsible for the other – for taking him to the dispensary and washing his clothes. Children undergo leadership training programmes and are actively involved in educating the community on matters of health and hygiene, nutrition and individual and community rights. With the junior college shifting to the plains in Yelandur recently, the Soliga students are now relatively less secluded. Mixing with non-tribal students has given them the semblance of a spirit of competition, M. Revanna, the principal of the college observes, and travelling by bus, a sense of time.

The VGKK kitchen, run largely on solar power and gobar gas (fuel from cattle dung), provides students, staff and visitors with a simple, nutritious meal. While this is of immense practical convenience the act of the entire VGKK community breaking bread together, is an indirect way of negating the caste rules of Indian society, and of reinforcing the equality of all human beings as one of the founding principles of VGKK.

'One of the most important things the school did for me,' says Jadeya Gowda, one of the first six students of the school, who today is working towards a Ph.D. in agriculture and is a member of the VGKK Governing Council, 'was to instil a sense of pride in myself and my community, to give me a sense of worth. It is this sense of pride which will form a counter weight against all the blandishments of the modern world.'

### ***The Soliga Concept of Development***

So much so, that the concept of progress or development in the Soliga mind, adult and child alike, is linked with the community as a whole and with education. The old days of isolation are over, they agree, and it is education that they see as their passport to the modern world. 'We may be a generation of thumb impression wallas,' Shivane Gowda says, 'but our children and grandchildren will not be. My son is educated and that has given me strength.' They believe that both boys and girls should go to school. Jalasiddamma, a dai or traditional birth attendant, who has delivered three generations of Soliga children — 'all pass, no fail, neither mother nor child' -- wants her grand daughters to travel, go to college and become teachers, nurses and doctors. Tara, a high school student, who wants to become a doctor says firmly, 'Nothing is impossible for girls. All things that are possible for boys are possible for girls as well.'

For the high school students of VGKK, development entails not just education but political awareness and the ability to think for themselves. To Sankala, who aspires to study law, this would mean reassessing certain tribal customs, such as their belief in being ‘possessed’. While their scientific training makes them think of it as illogical, their customs reinforce it. ‘We must decide for ourselves what we want to think,’ he sums up. Students also need moral guidance, says Jadeya, to reassess such customs as eloping in one’s teens, the sanctioned system of marriage among the Soligas.

Remarkably, the Soligas do not seem to fear that modern education will alienate their children from their culture. For the younger Soligas, it is largely because the VGKK School has brought the advantages of the city to the hills while simultaneously strengthening their roots. ‘How can they be alienated from the forest,’ Shivane Gowda asks, ‘when the forest is our God, our source of strength, our justice? *We* are the keepers of the spirit of the forest.’

### ***Health***

Rising from its ‘solitary hut’ beginnings, the 18-bed VGKK Tribal Hospital, now the base hospital for the region, has in the year 2001-2002 handled over 500 in-patients, almost 11,000 out-patients and its laboratory has a range of facilities from haemogram to ultrasound scanning. The special programmes include drives to eradicate leprosy, control tuberculosis, epilepsy, blindness, diabetes; calorimetry and electrophoresis to identify sickle-cell anaemia, (a genetic disease prevalent among the Soligas), cancer and HIV/STD awareness and detection.

While curative medical care was the VGKK entry point into the Soliga community, the emphasis has shifted to preventive community health. The community health programme includes the immunisation of children against polio and other diseases and in an effort to nip malnutrition in the bud, the Mother and Child Health programme targets pregnant and lactating mothers.

The VGKK hospital works on a three-tier system. To entrust grass-roots health care to the villagers themselves, the Village Health Workers (VHW) and traditional healers who form the first level are selected by the people of the village and trained to handle first aid, community health and health education. The Multipurpose Worker and Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) form the second tier. Three medical officers, including a surgeon and a paediatrician form the first tier. Mobile medical units visit the podus deep in the forest regularly. Education on health, hygiene and nutrition is provided through films, songs and flash cards. Telemedicine has brought the services of experts into the forest and the hospital has been recognised as a centre for training house surgeons for rural health.

A special effort is made to encourage the use of traditional herbal medicine, especially at the VHW level, as are homeopathy and ayurveda. ‘Twenty-five percent of the health problems can be managed through traditional systems,’ Dr. Sudarshan opines. Further, the doctors have come to recognise the wisdom of many of the local practices. For instance, the Soliga dais insisted on the squatting position for the mother while delivering children, despite Dr. Sudarshan’s best efforts to convince them otherwise. Finally he realised that the squatting posture was better for the mother, helping in the contraction of the pelvic muscles; the force of gravity too aided delivery. So far he has not noted a single Caesarean delivery among the Soligas and the dais manage complicated cases competently. What the dais needed was training in basic hygiene, immunisation and pre- and post- natal care which is provided by the VGKK. Nagaratna, an ANM in charge of 10 podus, recounts the suspicion with which surgical gloves were regarded when she first wore them to deliver a baby. It was through constant interaction, of being ‘nice’ to them that she earned their trust. Dr Sridhar, a paediatrician and one of the Medical Officers, concedes that he has learnt to

make allowances for interventions by the priest in the course of treatment, and not stand in judgement over the efficacy of sacred ash.

The Karuna Trust, an affiliated rural development project, was started in 1987 to eradicate leprosy and today the Trust manages a fully-fledged government Primary Health Centre (PHC). Based on the experiences of the VGKK Hospital and the Karuna Trust, the government has evolved the Karnataka model of PHC management. Dr. Sudarshan's appointment to head the state's Task Force on Health is seen as a vindication of the VGKK's methods.

### ***Vocational Training and Cottage Industries***

The Vocational Training and Cottage Industries section (VTC) trains the community, particularly the youth, in weaving, carpentry, knitting, tailoring and printing, and other trades, in collaboration with government training centres. The raw materials for the industries come from the forests and its surrounding areas and the Kendra has been careful not to introduce exotic species of flora and fauna. The fifteen centres in this section, including honey and food processing, hand made paper, leaf-cup making and screen printing, have generated sales worth over Rs 15 lakhs (Rs. 1.5 million) in the year 2001-2002. The Kendra has assisted the training of the Large Scale Adivasi Multipurpose Co-operative Society (LAMPS) to enable the Soligas to manage their cottage industries and market their goods by themselves. The Industrial Training Institutes, assisted by the VTC, train students in tailoring, motor winding, home appliances and welding. A credit union which gives loans at nominal rates of interest is run by the Soligas themselves.

### ***Environmental Preservation***

In an effort to conserve local health traditions, medicinal plants, nursery and seed storage techniques, including traditional seed conservation, assess extraction levels of forest products, harness and regulate the collection of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and herbal medicines and evolve forest management programmes, the VGKK has launched projects in collaboration with organisations such as the Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT), the Tata Energy Research Institute, the University of Massachusetts at Boston and the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE). The Karuna Trust runs a herbal medicine processing unit.

### ***Community Organisation***

The VGKK's philosophy of people development is truly an actioning of Swami Vivekananda's quest for a religion/philosophy 'which will give us faith in ourselves . . . self-respect, the power to feed and educate, the power to relieve the misery around (us) . . .' Through personal involvement in the Soliga struggle against the intransigence of government authorities and the strong-arm tactics of influential landlords, the VGKK realised that it was imperative to develop a grass-root power base and organise the solidarity that already existed in the community. The VGKK would act as catalysts or change agents in the process.

Out of a leadership training workshop conducted in 1985 was born the Soliga Abhivruddhi Sangha (Development Council) – SAS. The individual podu sanghas were grouped into taluka sanghas, which in turn formed the chief Soliga Abhivruddhi Maha Sangha. Young Soligas are very active in them, as are also the traditional leaders. All Soliga men and women are members of the sanghas and efforts are made to include at least one woman in the committee. Local problems are discussed and solutions worked out and often contact meetings are organised with officials to work out contentious issues.

The SAS, through its programmes, has sorted out issues of alienation of tribal land by conducting a systematic study and collection of accurate facts and figures and, by educating its people on the latest programmes, it has been able to get pensions, training and development programmes, housing and agricultural projects and bank loans sanctioned. It has co-ordinated with the Forest Department for the sanction of tree patta (right to harvest the produce of certain trees), irrigation, housing and drinking water schemes. By far the most important contribution of the sanghas has been the management of minor forest produce by the people themselves. Further, the Soliga systems such as their nyaya have been rejuvenated by the unity that the SAS has created.

In building the community organisation, effective use has been made of street plays, jathas or community meetings, festivals and fairs. The Soligas have evolved the strategy of the three Ps – *petitioning* the authorities; airing their grievances through the local *press* and finally, *picketing* or non-violent, mass demonstrations when the first two do not work.

‘Now, thanks to the Sangha,’ says Shivane Gowda, ‘the government knows we come 20,000 strong. With such numbers, the government is our mother’s house, a source of strength. It takes our demands seriously.’

The state cabinet meeting held at B.R. Hills in January 2002, where the Chief Minister addressed the problems of the local people, is seen as a sign of the recognition of the legitimacy of the claims of the tribals and that they finally have the ear of the highest decision-making authority.

### **Philosophy of Work of VGKK – What is there in it for me?**

The success of VGKK in empowering the Soligas has been in large measure due to the commitment of its workers and their ability to work as a team. And without subscribing to it consciously or spelling it out in words, the ideal of public service as expressed in the path of Karma Yoga and the Bhagavad Gita’s concept of Nishkama Karma is the strong undercurrent of the VGKK’s working philosophy. (Despite the eponymous name, the Kendra does not formally subscribe to any philosophy and other than the celebration of Swami Vivekananda’s birthday and the singing of special songs, the students too are not ‘indoctrinated’ in any way.)

The VGKK realises that social work can be a slippery slope. It is easy to slide into a paternalistic, ‘feel good’ charitable mode. Building on Swami Vivekananda’s prerequisites of a social worker, its workers at all levels are continuously challenged to understand the realities of the field and apply their mind to find solutions to the problems on hand, and finally put them into practice. While a professional social worker would stop here, it is the next step, the continuous self-questioning regarding one’s motives (What is there in it for me?), the ‘working with awareness’ that completes the VGKK approach.

VGKK’s total of 120-150 workers fall into three categories. Honorary workers who are not remunerated by the organisation; those who are paid a small honorarium and those who depend on their VGKK jobs for a livelihood and are paid a regular salary. Those who dedicate themselves to the community, Dr. Sudarshan believes, should be taken care of by the community and so the basic requirements of honorary workers are met by the Soliga community. However, even those workers who were job-driven rather than by a redeeming vocation, have found that ultimately it is the immense sense of personal satisfaction, of the self-worth they feel in being part of a worthwhile cause, or simply of finding opportunities to express their creativity to its fullest, that is primary and the rewards are the by-products of their work. This is the actioning of the

Gita's ideal of Nishkama Karma. (Moreover, now with the government grant-in-aid scheme, many of the Kendra workers, especially the teachers, are getting competitive salaries.)

Clearly, the personal example of the older workers, their idealism and commitment, their demonstration of the values of VGKK through their work has influenced new entrants to a great extent and Dr. Sudarshan is widely perceived to be a role model among the students and workers, many like M.Revanna having joined VGKK inspired by him and others like Tara, Jadeya and Sankala hoping to emulate him.

For some like Dr. Sudarshan, Venkat, Project Director, H.N. Somasundaram and Dr. Paran Gowda, a nuclear physicist who is now a facilitator for VGKK, their inspiration has been the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. But for others like Mallesh with no conscious 'spiritual' leanings, it is simply the satisfaction of doing his work to the best of his ability and the joy in discovering his own growth through empowering others. For H. Ramachari, it was the satisfaction of treading the same path as Maria Montessori and Pestalozzi, of the freedom to teach as he was trained to do, of living his life by what he believes in.

In fact, Dr. Sridhar opines that 'development', if it happens at all, would be a by-product of their activities. He himself was drawn to VGKK by the natural beauty of B.R. Hills and the opportunity to practise his professional skills. In the process, his involvement with life and nature and his sensitivity to both have increased, helping him bring greater refinement in his approach to his profession.

Dr. Sudarshan himself, who had aspired at one time to become a monk and 'realise God by the age of thirty', found in the course of his work the 'certain balance, an exact equilibrium of inner powers' that Swami Vivekananda talks about. He found all the contradictions he faced gradually ironing themselves out. His own spiritual growth and that of the community he realised, were inseparable and he had to establish a dynamic equilibrium between the two. And in establishing this equilibrium, he discovered the truth of the Gandhian method of looking within himself and working on internal flaws, when he found disharmony in the community. It is this resolution of all conflict which gives him the strength to do the right thing in his demanding task as the Director of the Vigilance Commission.

In order to reinforce its work culture, strengthen the team spirit and update skills, staff meetings are held from time to time with open discussion forums. The decision-making machinery is transparent and in a conscious effort to decentralise authority, work units are planned and executed through committees. Since the organisation ultimately aims at withdrawing from the community once it is self-reliant, efforts are made to draw on the tribal community for VGKK staff. There are several teachers, paramedical and social workers from among the Soligas. While many from their school have gone on to become graduates and post graduates, the community is still looking for their first doctor to head the VGKK hospital.

As in all organisational endeavour and human dynamics, VGKK has had its share of conflicts and all conflict resolution, they have realised, whether with the government or within the organisation, is a dialectical process. What is important is the willingness to listen to others, be transparent in one's dealings and remember that ultimately the goal is the same. Within the organisation, most differences, says H.N. Somasundaram who has long been associated with the 'human' aspect of the organisation, can be sorted out through patience and persistence. Commitment to a common cause is the basis of teamwork and transparency of operations and freedom to express oneself, keep the wheels oiled. With long interaction and understanding,

differences disappear, says Venkat, who is involved in Youth Training, but investment in the community and acceptance of the people is a pre-condition.

### **Learning from the Soligas**

At some point in time, the VGKK workers realised that they had imbibed much from their 'beneficiaries' and that many of the Soliga strengths had gone unconsciously into building the organisation. A partnership based on mutual respect had evolved, where the workers had learnt to value their work and build relationships on give and take.

The team spirit, which is the backbone of the VGKK's success, owes much to and is perhaps a reflection of the communitarian spirit of the Soligas. While the 'unworldliness' of the Soligas can still exasperate the VGKK workers, it has made many workers reflect on their own attitudes and their life and needs have been simplified as a result. For instance, both Revanna and Ramachari see their children's future not in terms of 'success' but as a following of their dreams.

H.N. Somasundaram concedes that the 'laid back' lifestyle of the Soligas without a thought for the morrow, which used to amaze him in the beginning, may have actually helped him evolve methods of conflict resolution within the organisation. 'I realised the futility of anger,' he says, 'and that patience and love are the best ways of winning people over. I also learnt to look at every Soliga child as a possibility.'

Many have seen in the way the Soligas live their life, their modes of worship, their songs and dance, a simultaneous reverence of life and a celebration of it, an affirmation of the many and mysterious ways in which nature or the divine regenerate the human spirit. Dr. Sudarshan admits that many things that he had earlier dismissed as superstitious, such as the Soliga practice of hugging trees, he now knows, are positive stimuli. He can understand why the Soligas dance when it first rains. 'Here,' he says, 'I have learnt to appreciate beauty and understand the regenerative power of love.'

K.R.Usha

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By:  
Usha K.R.  
760, 37<sup>th</sup> Cross  
4<sup>th</sup> T Block  
Jayanagar  
Bangalore 560 041  
Email: [mkragh@bgl.vsnl.net.in](mailto:mkragh@bgl.vsnl.net.in); [krusha@iimb.ernet.in](mailto:krusha@iimb.ernet.in)