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60% of rural pupils could go into child labour: Teachers

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Belagavi: Rajesh, an SSLC student, phones his teacher at least thrice a week asking when Vidyagama will resume. Ever since the programme was halted, his father has pushed him to work as a construction labourer for Rs 300 a day. Meagre as it is, the pay is a boon for the family.

When Vidyagama was on, Rajesh had an easier schedule. His teacher had persuaded his parents to send him to tenement school at remote Vola Ballari village in Raichur district. The suspension of the programme has hit him hard and he now works from 9am to 5pm.

"I call my teacher very often in the hope of returning to school," Rajesh said. "I feel disappointed every time I'm told the suspension has not been revoked. If there is no school for the next couple of months, then I may not be able to continue my education at all."

The cancellation of Vidyagama has had a deep impact on the lives of children. Teachers estimate that about 25-30% children in government schools have been pushed into menial jobs. Like Rajesh, there is Laxmi (who works as a house help), Shabana (tailoring shop),



Madhusudhan SR

HUGE AREA OF CONCERN: Teachers say if Vidyagama classes do not resume and schools remain closed, a whole generation in rural Karnataka could grow up without formal education

Nitin (textile shop), Suresh (footwear shop), Basavaraj (agriculture farm), Vinaya Kumar and Narasimha (both at grocery shop).

Sumalata, a teacher from Ballari, said 75% of the 450 students in her school attended Vidyagama. An assessment by Sumalata and other teachers show about 200 children have been pushed into child labour.

Sumalata says the lockdown changed dynamics in rural areas. She says she convinced many dropouts to attend classes, but children would go to work after completing classes. "Stopping the programme will trigger a massive child labour crisis,"

Sumalata said. "About 60% of children will drop out of school in rural areas."

Laxmi, 12, said her parents initially did not send her to work. "But later when they thought schools won't be opening soon, my parents asked me to work as a maid. Even after Vidyagama was announced, I did not stop working, but somehow I attended classes too. Now I have to work full time."

Kotresh, a high school teacher in Raichur, said of the 419 students in his school, 150 are employed, most in menial jobs. Some sell flowers and vegetables, while others work as farm hands. Land owners pay children studying in 8th

standard or below Rs 100 a day and those above Class 8 Rs 150. Due to a labour crisis, owners prefer to hire children as they are cheap. And since regular school has been suspended, parents, most of whom are daily wage labourers, also take their children to work.

Siddu Malawad, a teacher in Gadag who recently recovered from Covid, was given a grand welcome from villagers on discharge. He said locals who want to send their kids to school do not have unnecessary fears of Covid. Suspending classes, he said, will only increase child labour. "About 30% of the 272 students in my school work in various sectors. This is alarming as an entire generation will grow up without formal education," he said.

Uday Gaonkar and Aravind from Udupi and Dakshina Kannada said the issue of child labour is not so huge on the coast, but at least 10% of high school kids are working. At least three sell fish and Vidyagama was their only hope, they said.

Prakash, a teacher from Koppal, said the situation is grim in the district. Many high school children now work in farms. He thinks discontinuation of Vidyagama would push 60-65% of students into child labour.