

## **Planting Seeds of Leadership**

### **3 Day Residential Summer Camp for Human Rights Club Members**

27 April 2015 marked the conclusion of the Human Rights Clubs summer camp for Government school children hosted by PARA (People's Action for Rural Awakening) and partnered by Don Bosco Mondo. From three different districts, Hyderabad, Ranga Reddy and Khammam, 71 boys and girls joined for three full days of education and implementation of their rights to development, protection, participation and survival. The event took place at Don Bosco Navajeevan, Ramanthapur at Hyderabad.

The children woke early, first gathering for an assembly, morning yoga and breakfast. I joined them during mid-morning on the second day as Fr. T.D. John SDB was addressing the group, sharing a pertinent article from the newspaper as well as the book *Malala* which speaks of the international work of Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani girl who has inspired a tremendous movement toward achieving equal rights to education for women in the developing world. As Fr. (T.D.) John (SDB) was speaking to the children, he prompted them to respond loudly and with conviction, not in fear of the volume or vibration of their own voices. I observed this brief exchange as symbolic of the principal message imparted to the children during this camp. Each child is born with human rights and is consequently entitled to demand protection and recognition of such rights until they are heard and acknowledged.

The children broke into smaller groups, each collaborating to produce skits, songs, posters, speeches, slogans and debates. Some of the children first gathered inspiration from recent newspapers which spoke of injustices to children in a number of the featured stories. Others listened intently to one another as each boy and girl shared personal stories from their own lives or those close to them whose human rights had been blatantly violated in pursuit of monetary gain, convenience or demonstration of perceived superiority. The children had been additionally challenged earlier in the morning to consider in their individual projects such questions as, "What do you do if your rights are violated?" and "Who will protect our rights?"

In the afternoon, they had the opportunity of speaking to Smt. Chaya Ratan, IAS who retired as Special Chief Secretary after 35 years of paradigmatic government service in the state of Andhra Pradesh in 2013 and continues to promote recognition of rights for women and children. This interaction was facilitated by Fr. Thomas Pallithanam SDB, director of PARA.

During the evening session, I was privileged to witness the presentations made by the groups as they proudly displayed their finished products. The posters, songs and slogans represented various rights which had been violated in acts of child marriages, corporal punishment, gender inequality, bonded labour and denial of educational opportunities. They identified individuals in their personal lives who should be held accountable for failure of protecting their own rights or those of children in their classes and neighbourhoods. I was able to observe firsthand the transformation of this group of children from a somewhat disjointed group, dutifully timid, to a standalone and united body, all speaking loudly, clearly and harmonized in

their delivery. Within a single day, they had acquired such incredible momentum and comprehension of self-advocacy that the room, both stage and audience, pulsed with their fervor and energy. It was in their slogans, skits and songs that if listening closely, one could hear a sound of change.

Ms. Katie