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### **High Court restores Korku counsellor programme**

Special Correspondent

The Bombay High Court has come to the rescue of a Korku Adivasi counsellor programme, which was summarily discontinued by the Maharashtra government.

With at least 400 to 500 child deaths reported a year, the Melghat region is a special focus for government programmes. Yet last month, doctors and activists had written to the government raising several issues, among them the abrupt end to the counsellor programme.

In response to a public interest litigation filed by Purnima Upadhyay, the High Court ruled on May 7: "Prima facie, we are of the view that the Korku girls and boys who are already trained and employed as counsellors under the scheme which, according to the petitioners, are about 22... should not be discontinued from employment, particularly, on the eve of monsoon till the court examines the matter in depth."

#### **Healthcare**

The court noted that the counsellor programme provided access for healthcare to the Korkus and persons dwelling in the forest and these counsellors are paramedical workers. The State appears to have taken this as an employment-generating programme and employed people without taking into consideration the purpose and object of the scheme.

Therefore, the court directed the State to constitute a Committee of the Principal Secretaries, Tribal Development, Rural Development and Health to re-examine the scheme and then file the affidavit as to what they propose to do in the matter.

#### **"Extend scheme"**

It also asked the Committee to examine the implementation of the scheme in all other reserve forest and forest areas in Maharashtra. The court also made it clear that those already working for the last two years as counsellors should not be discontinued till further orders.

Dr. Ashish Satav of MAHAN based in Melghat, which was spearheading the counsellor programme, mainly to reduce child and maternal deaths, said: "MAHAN trust along with another voluntary organisation KHOJ invested efforts in the form of time, human resources, expertise and money to train the counsellors and coordinators, implement and make the programme successful in Melghat for the last three years. But suddenly in the first week of February, I received the fax that the counsellor programme has to be stopped without any sound reason. I was told the government will appoint their counsellors without involving voluntary organisations."

#### **Poor quality of food**

Dr. Satav said that before the programme was launched, the conditions in most government hospitals were bad: patients were not treated after 12 noon, severely malnourished babies were given poor quality of food, referral facilities and ambulance services were shoddy even for serious patients, and the hygiene of hospitals very bad.

The treatment provided was not satisfactory. Patients were reluctant to admit severely malnourished babies due to the negative attitude of hospital staff, he added.

After the programme, the number of patients attending the Out Patients Department and indoor services increased by 13 per cent. The number of hospital deliveries increased from 5 per cent to 15 per cent, he points out. The duration of stay of severely malnourished babies increased. The referral facilities, ambulance services and food quality to severely malnourished babies improved. The hospitals were providing services to patients for 24 hours and the attitude of the staff towards the patients improved.

#### **Third-party evaluation**

Bhavishya Alliance, an international tri-sectoral partnership, conducted a third-party evaluation of the programme and recommended its continuation and replication in other Adivasi blocks of the State.

Keywords: [Korku Adivasi counsellor programme](#), [child deaths](#)

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