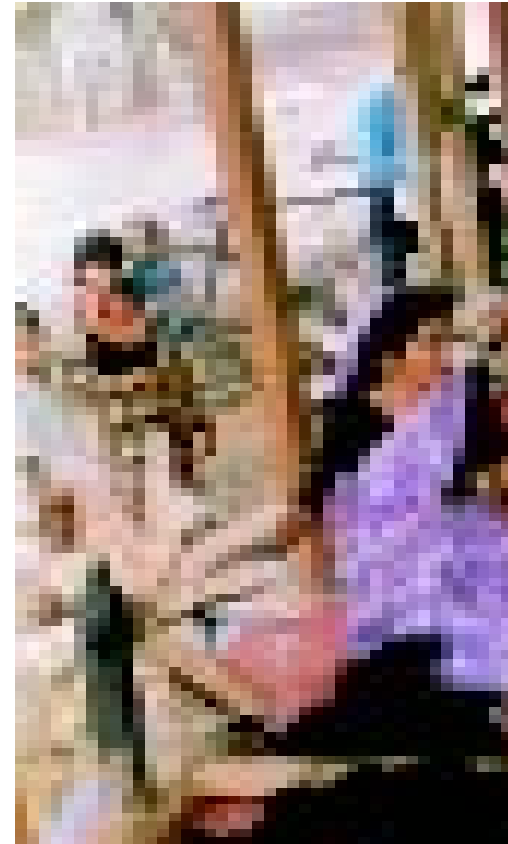




# TRAVAILS AND TREASURES



**M**ore than 65 per cent of our people live in villages. Here, women work endlessly, engaged in a multiplicity of tasks. Ranging from collection of water in earthen pots, fuel and fodder, cooking, cleaning, being a farm hand, and of course, tending to their children. Hassled, they have been at the lower end of the development chain. Not many of them are skilled, given their own little world to which they seem to be chained.

To bring them into the development ambit, to unleash their creativity and to help them make a little money, the Government has initiated a series of schemes. One among them is encouraging women to band into Self-Help-Groups, take up a skill and market it. Banks such as The Small Industry Development Bank of India, through its special arm –

the Mahila Vikas Nidhi, NABARD and IDBI, among others, have earmarked funds exclusively for disbursement among women, the goal being to spawn as many women entrepreneurs as possible across the breadth and depth of our nation.

Since the setting up of the Aditya Birla Centre for Community Initiatives and Rural Development under Rajashreeji's direction, aiding people achieve sustainable livelihood has been, and continues to be, a thrust area. Nearly two years ago, within sustainable development projects, women empowerment processes have assumed a special importance.

Consequently, most of our Group Companies' rural development teams have been encouraging women to form Self-Help-Groups as that is a sure

shot to empowerment.

Grasim – Harihar have done some splendid work in this regard, for which, they deservedly shared the Planet Award for Excellence in Community Work. Along with Rajashreeji and our team, our Director, Mr. Shailendra K. Jain, oversees the Project operations.

Mr. S. S. Maru, Senior Executive President, Mr. B. R. Paramesh, Mr. B. N. Agarwal, Mr. N. H. Ramanna and Ms. Renukamma, dwell on their unique Project, admittedly happy about the way it has shaped up.

“When we were conceptualizing our Self-Help-Groups project, we outlined three clear-cut goals. Firstly - To work in a manner that would enable marginalized women develop some self-confidence.

Secondly - Work towards our



*Self-Help-Groups at work.*

first goal through formation of Self-Help-Groups that would be sustainable in the long-term, and generate revenue for them on a continuous basis.

Thirdly – To raise the self-esteem of women and try and weave them into the mainstream from the backwaters where they lay huddled.

If we were to achieve these objectives, we believed we would have given these women – a new dignity and a distinct identity.

### **THE BLUEPRINT**

We took “a business model” approach and evolved a plan defining our market (13 villages), our target population (women), and the outcomes we wished to attain. In essence, we followed the social marketing mode. But instead of marketing a product, we tried our level best to sell a

cause – that of women empowerment through the formation of Self-Help-Groups.

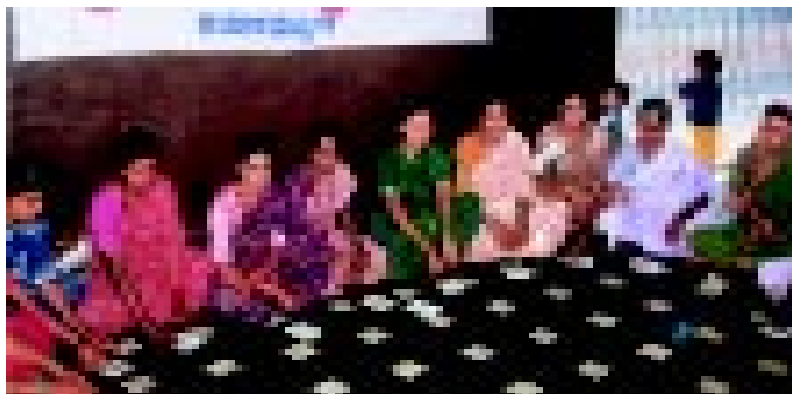
To identify our customer base, as a starting point, we conducted a baseline survey in 13 villages, accounting for a nearly 30,000 population. What we found was both painful and startling. More than 90 per cent of the families lived below the

poverty line. Women were of little consequence. Unhygienic living conditions, for them, were hardly a cause for concern. Their condition was simply sub-human. And the most tragic part was that they lived in oblivion of all this. They just existed – to put it in a brutally frank manner.

### **JUMPING THE HURDLES**

An illiterate populace not given to reason was a serious obstacle. The treatment meted out to the women folk is pathetic. In most of the houses that we surveyed, their status was lowly, and a tough slog awaited them round the clock, 365 days a year. Apart from all this stress, they bore many children – which also took a heavy toll. In the village, superstitions play their own part as people put their faith in them. In such a milieu, banding women together to form Self-Help-Groups was a formidable challenge.

But not given to despondency, we said – whatever the hurdles, we will overcome. There were some positive sparks in that circle of darkness, who were willing to heed to the voice of reason. We took them into our fold. Cajoling them ceaselessly on working with us to mobilize the support of the majority of villagers. Additionally, we began interacting intensely with the community leaders. Almost for 35 days, we were hammering at their heads – on the benefits that would flow out of





our Project. Eventually, realizing that our single mission was to better their lives, they caved in.

#### **GALVANIZING SUPPORT**

Then we began networking with school teachers, post office officials, Yuvaka and Yuvati Mandals, the Panchayats, Government Agencies and local Banks, besides NGOs. Collectively, we launched its advocacy – raising its fervour to that of a movement – The Self-Help-Group movement. It took all of 60 days to motivate and convince men and women to start the Self-Help-Groups. However, the survey results aided us in selecting the skill-sets that could spark the formation of Self-Help-Groups.

Another two months and Self-Help-Groups were up and running. Self-Help-Groups are voluntary informal teams of women – who rustle up a kitty with a nominal sum of money, with the intention of starting a mini-trade, and enroute, become self-reliant.

#### **NURTURING TALENT**

They had no money. So to get them started, we had to provide them with seed money. They were “maha” excited. We gave them the money with a caveat.

Whatever they earned, part had to be saved in a common bank – which could be availed later, to take a bank loan to grow their enterprise.

Having got them hooked onto the concept, we went all out to provide them with the necessary training in whatever they felt they were best at learning, honing their skills. The canvas is indeed vast. Tailoring, blanket weaving, knitting, crafting dolls, creating designs out of rope, candle making, agarbattis (incense sticks), were some of the creative arts which they opted for easily. Some chose raising coconut nurseries, vermiculture, sheep rearing and setting up small dairies – as these are seemingly more lucrative.

Apart from the training provided by experts, whom we paid handsomely by the village standards, we incentivised the women in diverse ways. For instance, the groups that were interested in tailoring were provided with 23 sewing machines, threads, and cloth too.

In many cases, we have been able to help them market their products in the local “Mandi” (market). Likewise, agarbattis are picked up by Mr. Azizulla Khan, a local entrepreneur, who furnishes them with the raw material.

Subsequently, he brands and markets them.

#### **THE SCENT OF FREEDOM**

The 356 women who constitute nearly 50 Self-Help-Groups work comfortably, sitting in the well-lit and airy six community halls that we have given them, in the villages at Kavaleuthu, Nadiharahalli, Hirebidhri, Airini, Kavaleuthu-Hospet, Kavaleuthu-hamlet. The formation of Self-Help-Groups have opened a new window of opportunity for all of these women. For many of them, this project has been like a breath of fresh air as they step out of the four mud walls of their huts and thatched roofs.

What pleases us most is that these 356 women who constitute the Self-Help-Groups are now absolutely addicted to their work-craft. No sooner are their household chores done, they come running to the Centres and start their second shift. Each one of them has a passbook, and you should see the glee on the faces as they deposit part of their treasure. They have had the scent of freedom and a sense of self-worth. What a transformation.”

- *pragnya ram.*