

Giving children opportunity to enjoy childhood

Book making, carpentry, farming and tailoring are just some of the skills children at the Green School are able to develop alongside subjects such as maths and English – giving them a head start when it comes to finding employment.

The four-year programme, believed to be unique in India, is completely free to the children – who range from nine upwards and are the offspring of the women farmers.

Teacher Camala, explained: “The sangham members’ children were carrying their siblings and wandering around or working with their mothers in the fields. Some were drop-outs and some were child labour.”

The school, which opened on January 26, 1993, began in simple huts but is now based in specially designed buildings.

“The children used to walk all the way from their villages. We had about 30 children from 10 villages to start with,” said Camala.

Six of the teachers used to go to community meetings and talk to parents to convince them to send their children to school, which now has 120 children (70pc are girls and 30pc boys).

“When the children arrive they are given a test to discover which level they are at. Because having a 15-year-old in the same class as a 10-year-old can seem degrading, the Green School is divided into groups not classes – Parrot, Sparrow, Bluebird, Pigeon, Cuckoo and Woodpecker,” she added.

During the four years at school they will be able to sit the government 10th level certificate exam. Last year 10 students went for the certificate, nine passed and all nine joined college.

“The children in mainstream education do not find jobs even though they are educated,” said Camala. “But our children are learning different skills so they are good carpenters, good at masonry, good tailors. They are using their skills and they are self-employed.”

Originally the school was funded by the government but a change in administration has meant the school will now only receive funding if the children stay for one year before re-entering mainstream education, which is impossible, and so they have to find £13,500 a year themselves.

As well as private donations, the sanghams also provide money towards it.

Camala added: “We never turn children away.”

HOPE FROM ACTION

■ Regardless of religion, ethnicity or nationality, Christian Aid works with and through partners, such as the Deccan Development Society (DDS), to help wipe out global poverty.

■ For more than 60 years the charity has been turning hope into action but the world is not getting any fairer and during this year’s Christian Aid Week, which runs until May 21, they need your help.

■ In 2010/2011, they funded DDS with a £45,000 grant to help aid this life-changing work and expand the number of women, children and families it can help.

■ Celebrating its 25th birthday this year, DDS works with 5,000 women, many of them from the poorest section of Indian society.

■ The programmes it runs, including a college, school and media trust, have evolved to give the women a voice in agriculture, sustainability and education.



Women have achieved simply by being given

It is a story of hope and triumph – 5,000 women from the poorest section of Indian society have transformed once barren land into fertile farms. In the second of two articles, **TARA GREAVES** travels with Christian Aid to meet the inspirational women of the Deccan Development Society.

If they had their way, it would not be me telling you their story, they would be doing it themselves.

Vocal, confident and clear in what they believe, the women of India’s Deccan Development Society (DDS) have come a long way in the 25 years since it was formed – and their enthusiasm is infectious.

From poor, illiterate agricultural labourers, many of the 5,000 members now own and farm their land, using natural methods, to provide food for 50,000 people in Andhra Pradesh.

Their triumph is the result of hard work – fighting discrimination and prejudice alongside drought and crop-destroying pests – and the support of DDS, which in turn is being helped by Christian Aid and its generous donors.

And while they remain solidly committed to traditional agriculture, despite the lure of technologies which could so easily help ease the often backbreaking labour, a group of the women have branched out in a rather modern way – using radio and film to make their voices heard.

It was the late 1990s when, guided by DDS, the women sought to replicate the autonomy they achieved in relation to food production – with more than 100 villages now self sustainable – in the media, which had largely ignored or avoided those in the poorest most marginalised section of society, the Dalit population.

Also known as “untouchables”, under the caste system Dalits are considered the lowest designation and still suffer discrimination despite castes being abolished in India in the 1950s, which makes what the women have achieved more remarkable.

Sitting on the steps at DDS headquarters in the early morning sunshine, a small group of the women talk of how outsiders can often only see part of their story.

Narsamma, one of the members of the DDS Community Media Trust, explained: “Our elders in the sangham (a grassroots meeting group for the poor set up by DDS) thought ‘if we want to share our words and our knowledge, how can we do it?’ The idea is to show others what we do but also to document our own knowledge so it is preserved.”

Clutching a camera like it is a familiar friend, Punyamma, a fellow filmmaker, said when they first picked up the equipment they were a little afraid.

“Everything – stop, play, record – is in English; we didn’t follow or understand what the words meant,” she said.



GETTING TOGETHER: A sangham (women’s collective) meeting at Rechintal Village includes listening to Sangham Radio.

The ever patient PV Satheesh, co-founder of DDS and a former television producer and documentary maker, trained the women who came up with their own meanings for the processes involved.

For example, they call an eye-level shot a sangham shot, representing how everyone is equal within the group.

Narsamma, who glows with pride when she talks of her films, added that they recognised the importance of sharing information to a wider audience because: “What we understand and know is limited to what we see and experience.”

But the cameras also give the women even greater respect in their communities – allowing them to speak to and interview people who might otherwise be closed off to them because of the complex caste system.

Their films, which number 200, are shown within the sanghams and at festivals in India and further afield.

A mobile festival also travels to 60 villages each year.

The 22 members of the trust, aged

from 28-75, have won three awards for their work, which is edited by Narsamma’s brother under the careful direction of the women.

Equally as important in communicating their message is their hugely popular radio station which is available to 150 villages and a potential 300,000 listeners.

Presenter and technician Narsamma Algole, an ever-smiling married mother of two, is from one of the oldest sanghams and has experience of DDS from the ground up.

She attended one of the balwadies (crèches), for the children of women working in the fields set up by DDS members, before joining a special Green School, which features general lessons in the morning and specialised trade-based classes in the afternoon, also run by DDS.

“My parents couldn’t afford to pay for books and fees at the government schools so I went to go to the Green School where there is no discrimination, no uniforms and the books are provided.

“I used to walk 8km to get to school



CAUGHT ON FILM: A community media trust was set up by the Deccan Development Society in 2001 to help poor women gain control over food production and media. Sooremma Bollaradu has learned how to operate a camera



MOVING FORWARD: Narsamma Algole became a producer at Sangham Radio after attending the Green School run by DDS, top. A carpentry class and agricultural training at the Green School, Machnoor village, set up by DDS, above left and right.

so much the chance

but after a year I got a student pass for the bus and then the school was given its own bus which picks the children up from the villages and brings them.

"I enjoyed school. We could learn classes like in a normal school in the morning and then agricultural programmes in the afternoon."

It was as she was leaving that the idea for Sangham FM was floated.

"People said 'just because we do not know how to read or write, we can still express ourselves'," said Narsamma.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) funded the station, which now runs every day from 7pm-9pm, and each of the sanghams contributes money each year to keep it running.

Sensing Narsamma's creativity and thirst for knowledge, Sathesh, as he is known, asked her to join the radio station.

"I wondered, how does this small little box make sounds? I was puzzled. I didn't even understand what a radio was," she said.

When the radio station was put together, with two full time staff, they were at a loss because they could not read English.

They started training and used to record segments, which Sathesh would critique until one day they knew what to do themselves. The recordings began in 2007 and they got a licence on October 15, 2008.

Attending a sangham meeting in a village at night, the unrelenting heat of the day a more comfortable warmth, it is clear how popular the radio station is as dozens of women gather to listen to the show, which includes segments on legal matters, for children and, of course, agriculture.

The evening begins with the singing of a song about seeds, which all the women – young and old – join in with before an almost reverential hush takes over and the radio show begins. With their best saris tucked around them – some with their youngest child curled into them asleep – they can sometimes go on well into the early hours.

Once the radio show finishes, there is other business to discuss and also loan applications to go through.

The women, who all pay into the sangham, can ask for a loan, which they pay back at a rate they can afford, and whether they are given it or not is a matter for the group.

Asked what the men think of them meeting, Kamalamma said: "They used to think 'what is this about?' but now they think it is good for our families. We talk about things such as money, agriculture and our children's education and now they accept it and are happy that good things come to our families."

And while life is still a struggle and undoubtedly hard work, the families are thankful for these good things, such as enough food to eat or a school for their children.

What is more, they do not just want to squander what they have for themselves, they want to share with others.

To expand and replicate this success in other areas of India, DDS needs continued financial support, making funding from organisations such as Christian Aid vital.

The inspiring women of DDS are now strong, caring and knowledgeable – and all because they were given a chance. Just imagine what could happen if thousands more women – and their children – were given that same opportunity.

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