

Unity is Strength

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Challenge

The state of Andhra Pradesh had progressed economically and socially at an unprecedented rate in the last couple of decades firmly gaining the status of a stalwart state. Despite this skyward growth, basic necessities of healthcare, education, and safety were still a pipe dream for women and children especially in the tribal areas. The Erukula tribe, an indigenous ancient tribe residing in Korlagunta, near Tirupathi was no exception. Moreover, the societal construct had unfortunately pegged the women and children at the lowest strata of the pyramid as recipients of benefits and growth. The 50 families whose traditional occupation was weaving bamboo baskets and mats were struggling to make their ends meet. The lives of the tribals were influenced by their habitat, level of traditional and ancient knowledge, and the skills they possessed in using the resources that were available¹⁶. Despite the knowledge and art of basket weaving, the illiterate women were at the mercy of middlemen who would charge a heavy commission for access to market. Hence, the tribal women needed to upskill and take charge to survive in today's dynamic competitive marketplace.

Response

In an earnest endeavor to improve the livelihood of folks residing in the remote corners of the country, the Indian government launched and extended the cover of the Development of Women and Child in Rural Areas (DWCRA) to all the districts in 1994-95. To help the women living below poverty line, the Self-Help Groups (SHGs) in Andhra Pradesh found support under the DWCRA scheme to empower the women living in abject poverty.

However, the success of scheme relied heavily on the participation of targeted social group to meet the objectives. Under the program, five DWCRA groups were successfully formed in the late 1990s involving the women belonging to the Erukula tribe. They were named i) Sri Balaji DWCRA Group, ii) Sri Sai Durga, iii) Sri Durga Bhavani Mahila Abhyudaya Sangam iv) Alamelumanga Group and v) Venkateshwara Group. Each group consisting of 10 members was enthused with a relentless commitment for self-sustainable development.

Actions Taken

The first step after the formation of the groups was to get rid of the middlemen. The appointed women leaders of the group were entrusted with the task of paving the way to the market to find customers. The group leaders, Smt Venkatamma and Adilakshmi took up the responsibility of meeting the officials of the Devasthanams and Municipality in Tirupathi. Empowered by the DWCRA programme, they found their first big client in the Tirumala Tirupathi Devasthanams. Things immediately started looking up once the group started supplying baskets to the Devasthanams as it ensured a constant source of income. They were not only producing goods but were also marketing their products independently without losing out the hefty fee extracted by middlemen.

As opposed to individuals involved in weaving, the group found it easier to even procure raw material from neighboring villages at better rate. The collective strength had increased their negotiation power in procuring bamboo from area near Renigunta, Chandragiri, and Ithepalle. The leaders looked after all the financial matters like filling tenders, collecting the amount from the buyers, and distributing the income among members depending upon the number of baskets supplied. In exchange for their work, the leaders took a commission of meagre 10 paise for every basket supplied. Every member earned close to two thousand rupees in a month which ensured proper food and shelter for them and their children.

13 Political Economy of Tribal Development: A Case Study of Andhra Pradesh, M. Gopinath Reddy K. Anil Kumar, Working Paper No. 85, Feb 2010, Centre for Economic and Social Studies

Soon, as the word spread, these five DWCRA groups also started supplying baskets to the Tirupati Municipality. The earning combined with the urban exposure transformed the lives of these women and their children. Since basket making was a traditional family craft, every family member contributed to the activity. However, the illiterate women of the tribe gradually realized the importance of education and enrolled their kids in the nearby government schools. Due to the urban contact, even girls who were usually confined to the household chores were attending the school along with the boys.

The leaders hosted group meetings once or twice a month to distribute the revenue generated by sale of baskets and foster a sense of cooperation among the group members. Another important agenda was the discussion on issues and problems related to women like health, family planning, hygiene, domestic violence, alcoholism in family etc. Earlier, there was no recourse for the women abused by their husbands or other family members. Post the formation of DWCRA groups, if any woman was abused by the husband or family members, the group would intervene. First, a warning was issued to the erring party and in the absence of any positive response; the matter was reported to the police. The group leaders became members of *Maithri (friendship)* group which was supported by the police department to promote social justice¹⁷.

In a nut shell, by working as a group, the Erukula women gained self-confidence, courage to raise voice against violence, and an indomitable will to educate their children to become self-reliant just like their mothers.

Learning

1. Participation of women is crucial for holistic development of society in the rural and tribal areas.
2. The success of Erukula tribal women can be replicated in other tribes to empower them socially and financially.

Questions

1. What are the methods to empower the weaker sections of the society?
2. Is it important to appoint leader in every group to perform productively?
3. What are the various ways to organize groups to ensure success of the program?

Course Positioning

The caselet is suitable for a course in Organizational Behavior. As the caselet describes how the women groups fostered a culture of cooperation and safety while achieving financial independence, it will be helpful in introducing topics like empowerment and group behavior.