

How the SHG movement transformed Nilgiris Adivasis

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Masinagudi (Nilgiris), Dec 21: When the saga of SHG-driven rural empowerment in the State gets written some day, Chokkanalli may well be seen as a test-case for what a combined thrust by all stakeholders-- government agencies, the local community and NGOs-- can achieve.

Nestled in the foothills of the picturesque Bokkapuram hill range in the Nilgiris northern division, three Adivasi hamlets-- Chokkanalli, Anaikatti and Siriyur-- stand transformed, thanks to their unlettered wom-

en who have braved all odds in their struggle for a better life.

Ever since former District Collector Supriya Sahu brought them under the State government's Hill Area Development Programme (HADP) in 2001, these three villages have never looked back.

Behind this stand a cluster of SHGs which have instrumentalised a shift in crop pattern from the traditional ragi, beans and paddy to aromatic floriculture. Three SHGs-- Malisudar, Malar-sudar and Vanavalarppu Thittam Magalir Kuzhu-- function in Anaikkati- Siriyur and Pudhiya

Poo and Kalasam in Chokkanalli. While the first three have 40 members in total, the latter two have 29 members combined.

Says A K Ulaganathan, District Forest Officer, Nilgiris North: "The HADP is a joint effort between the Forest and Horticulture departments. While we put up solar fences around all three villages to keep away elephants, the Horticulture department extended loans to the SHGs to cultivate aromatic crops like rosemary and thyme or exotic flowers like anthurium which are then sold to luxury hotels in Bangalore."

In addition, the Forest department also set up drip irrigation facilities in all villages and the SHG members have been asked to go in only for organic manuring.

In Chokkanalli, a temperature-controlled greenhouse was set up for anthurium cultivation and the village has seen four harvests so far. Each harvest yields 400-500 flowers and each cut flower is sold for Rs 5 to hotel agents.

The result: in the 45-families-strong Chokkanalli, for example, the women now say they feel sufficiently bolder to vent-

ure out into the world on their own, even as their men laze around in drunken stupor. The magnitude of the change has to be seen against the fact that earlier the Irulas did not even have proper housing and lived in little caves in the mountains.

Where no child in Chokkanalli had ever been in a school before, the Irulas--who are mostly a matriarchal society--now send their daughters to the nearest school in Masinagudi. Other development indicators are also coming in: drinking water is now available and a public

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health centre will be opened soon.

Banti(26), one of the more articulate members of Pudhiya Poo declares: "Very soon we will start extending credit facilities to members. We are planning to buy more pumpsets and a few milch cattle."

In addition, these rural entrepreneurs are also into honeybee farming, thanks to the efforts of a Kothagiri-based NGO, Keystone Foun-

dation, which provided the training and the bee-boxes and will also buy back the harvested honey.

Anaikatti has done even better: "Earlier, we had to depend on middlemen for selling our produce. Now we sell them directly at the Ooty and Mettupalayam markets," says P G Saroja, president of the Vanavalarppu Thittam Magalir Kuzhu.

"We regularly monitor the progress of all schemes," says N Srinivas-

an, Assistant Conservator of Forests, Nilgiris North.

In addition, Forest Range Officer P Premkumar visits the villages daily to personally sort out any problems.

The anthurium plants are now into their fifth harvest and the bank balances accruing.

"As women, we have learnt to think and work alike. We will pass on this to our daughters as it is upon them that our futures depend," asserts Banti.