

"A success story in Dalit land

Villagers make a new beginning with help from pharmaceutical major

Special Correspondent

JAIPUR: The Dalit-dominated Nagala Harchand village in Bharatpur district of Rajasthan has taken up self-employment ventures in a big way to drive out poverty and bring prosperity to each household, thanks to the intervention of a pharmaceutical major as part of its corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative.

Joint efforts by the local community and the Lupin Human Welfare and Research Foundation – a CSR wing of drug manufacturer Lupin Limited – have seemingly paved the way for unity, courage, hard work and success in the small village situated near Kaman town.

Less than five years ago, the villagers – most of whom were agricultural labourers – could hardly see a ray of hope for their economic development. Whatever they earned, they spent on liquor and gambling. Some of the villagers worked in Kaman on a daily basis and most of the children were out of the formal education system.

Lupin Foundation adopted Nagala Harchand at 2004-end with the objective of initiating a holistic development process. It determined the priorities for development on the basis of villagers' demands at a series of community meetings.

"The meetings were initially not taken seriously and



WOMAN POWER: Women preparing tulsī garlands at Nagala Harchand village in Bharatpur district of Rajasthan. - PHOTO: ROHIT JAIN PARAS

were rather poorly attended. They gathered momentum once the villagers were convinced of our intentions," says Lupin Foundation Executive Director Sitaram Gupta. The first decision taken in 2005 was to start a school and build roads for transport.

Mr. Gupta says the Lupin Foundation established a "parallel panchayat" and entrusted it with the responsibility of developing the village. The first pledge taken by the villagers was not to consume liquor and refrain from gambling. If anyone was found violating the resolution, a fine of Rs.121 was slapped on him.

The work for providing ba-

sic facilities to the villagers started with the construction of a primary school and roads. As a result, the number of school-going children rose by 70 to 80 per cent within the first year. According to Mr. Gupta, 100 per cent admissions were secured subsequently through continuous efforts and persuasion.

While identifying new sources of employment, the Foundation hit upon the idea of manufacturing tulsī garlands for sale at religious places such as Mathura, Vrindavan, Nandgaon and Barsana in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh. Realising the scope for profit in the business, trainers were arranged from

Narigaon in Mathura districts for the first batch of 60 women. The Foundation arranged for loans on easy terms from Rashtriya Mahila Kosh and other agencies for this vocation. Almost all women in the village are now earning from this profession. An agent regularly visits Nagala Harchand with raw material for making tulsī garlands and purchases the manufactured produce.

Four model dairies, five poultry farms, three general merchant shops, eight loading rickshaws and six sugarcane juice machines were provided to the village youths for self-employment after arranging loans from various financial institutions. Farmers having sufficient land for agriculture were supplied with high-yielding seeds and fertilizer for vegetable production.

According to Mr. Gupta, the Foundation gave financial help to youngsters who wanted to go in for higher education. Following the insurance cover provided to villagers against accidents and natural death, the next of kin of three persons who lost their lives in road accidents received timely compensation.

Women's self-help groups in the village are now engaged in manufacture of ready-made garments and sewing and embroidery work. The accrued savings are deposited in their bank accounts, while the SHGs also provide loans to their members.

ASRP Mukesh

Think of widows of Vrindavan and the first thing that comes to mind is the images of women in miserable condition living a life of desolation. But then there is always more to what meets the eye and that is what US-based photographers Brik Brooker and David Harmon found while shooting the widows.

At the exhibition *Lonely images, Lasting impressions - A Journey of Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi*, which they held at India International Centre after coming from Varanasi, the images showed how the clichés about their lives are no longer relevant.

Sample this: A picture shows 35-year-old Rashmi Ma cleaning a floor. The widow who once scrounged the streets of Vrindavan and earning a paltry sum of Rs 2 for four hours of singing, is today a cotton bag maker which is shown in another picture. Not only does she make bags but also encourages other widows of *Apna Ghar* (an ashram where they live) to take up activities like planting trees, cleaning schools, organic vegetable gardening *et al* which is depicted through other pictures.

Another picture showed Anand mai, 65, clad in colourful sari with *tilak* and bangles. She undertakes water-harvesting works and has been responsible to bringing water to the lesser-known areas of the city.

The other images on display too depict how the widows are coming out of their seclusion and are engaging themselves in activities that are socially and environmentally relevant.

Said Brik Brooker, "The world over, this city is known for widows who come here to seek *moksha* and end up living life in miserable conditions. I too had a preconceived notion about the widow here. But after I came across some of the widows who were involved in activities like planting, cleaning drive etc my consciousness suddenly stirred. I instantly started shooting those moments that presents them in a positive light."

The works displayed mostly were portraits. "I tried to capture their stories in their faces because I feel portraits are

Positive karma

Widows of Vrindavan have taken up activities like planting trees, organic vegetable gardening *et al* to sustain themselves



A still from the exhibition

very telling," added Brooker.

His fellow photographer felt that experience itself was enriching which egged him to shoot on. "Just three days were enough to observe their routine and feel their resurgence. What kept us involved in this project is that we are now seeing a fresh energy in these widows who are coming out of their shells and are contributing to the society," said Harmon.

The exhibition was organised by an NGO Guild for Services in collaboration with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) to raise funds

for the benefit of widows. The Guild has been at the forefront of efforts to bring in the attitudinal change in these widows. "Vrindavan still resonates with countless paeans sung in praise of Lord Krishna, prayers for *moksha* but the mouths aren't denied of voice today, faces have vision and lives are re-claiming dignity. After working for over decades, we are now able to engage these widows in tasks where they can contribute to the society. And the widows who once only led dark lives, are now slowly yet steadily dedicating their once 'colourless' lives for the upliftment of the society," said V Mohini Giri who heads the Guild. "This is an effort to initiate something to salvage the dignity of destitute widows further, instead of just using their lives as a subject to make a film," she added.

The photographs that comprise portraits and everyday scenes will be part of a coffee table book, titled *A Widow's Karma*.

Be it improving their living standards by providing proper sanitation or by remarrying them, the wheels of change have to be set in motion. As for the Guild, they are making efforts to impart skillsets to the widows as at present, the only source of income for the majority is begging. Giri said the younger widows are being trained to become nurses and the older ones are being taught simple eco-friendly techniques such as making cotton bags, jute utilities etc to keep them mentally flexible and economically self-reliant.

"Also, it helps to positively contribute for the sustainability of the environment. Just blaming the system is not enough but a change in the traditional psyche is important, especially since the influx of these widows is only on the rise," she added.

photo Pradeep Gaur