

Ramakka: A success story of OMPLIS



Orvakal , about 22km from Kurnool in the Rayalseema region of Andhra Pradesh is known for many things :its rocks mainly of silica and quartz formations amongst pools of water ,its Palaeolithic age rock paintings , the Urs Sharif of the Sufi Saint Hazrat Syed Mahamood Sha Khadiri and the Orvakul Mandal Podhupu Lakshmi Iky Sangam(OMPLIS) a federation of 10,000empowered women who have become the harbingers of successful women empowerment programmes.

How, When and Why did this remarkable movement take place were some of the questions uppermost in my mind when I visited the Mandal headquarters where a meeting of the office bearers of the federation with Smt Vijaya Bharati (Amma), the Advisor to OMPLIS who had been the Project Director of the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP) from 1995- 2002 from which the federation has evolved and was later supported by the Society for Elimination Of Rural Poverty (SARP) Andhra Pradesh was taking place . Training sessions were also in progress at the SMELC – the training centre of OMPLIS for women mentors of Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir. The centre has provided training to 24000 mentors around the globe .The federation had a number of other achievements to its credit :it has a Mahila Bank created and managed by women themselves; Jeevan Jothi , a corpus created by women to utilise the fund for support of young widows , deserted and destitute women ;Bhavitha - a school for child labourers which has enabled making the Mandal free of child labour and Balbharati , an English medium convent .

I was informed by Smt Murthy , that to gauge the impact of the at grass root level I should visit one of two villages which had been identified in the pilot project because of its backwardness and poverty and had now been transformed into resource villages viz Hassanpuram and Kalva . Since Kalva was only 7 km away, I decided to visit it.

Kalva was once typical of the villages of Orvakul Mandal: high percentage of poor, a back ward population comprising mainly of Muslims and Dalits, migrations due to scanty rainfall, practice of untouchability, child labour and 90 %instances of child marriages. Today , the village is prosperous with well irrigated land and free of child labour. All children are now in school .

In the village there are nearly eighteen self help groups and I had the opportunity to meet two women leaders of the SHG ,Remake and Mohamedi begum- both highly inspiring personalities .But it is the gutsy and never die spirit of Remake whose story I have chosen to narrate .

Ramakka is a leader of the SHG named Maneka Gandhi .Married at twelve to a landless agriculture labourer; she had five children four of which she lost due to her poverty. Her husband was badly affected by the loss of two children in a year, fell into depression, and became ill and passed away. Now only she and one son remained. Working as a labourer she managed to earn about 30 rupees per month by watering a hundred trees on a farm .Her son earned two to five rupees per day .Between them they were able to eat a meal a day .

In 1995, when the village was surveyed by UNDP, a Kala Jatra or drama was organised on how to save money, collect money, form groups etc. She became a member of a group which collected Rs 30 per person, i.e. a saving of Rs one per day. As her son was now earning Rs 5 per day she was able to contribute the necessary amount .In about six months, the group had Rs 1500 and were able to give a loan of Rs 1000 to her with which she bought a scale for Rs 500 and vegetables with the rest and went to the nearby villages to sell the vegetables .By evening all the vegetables were sold and she had a profit of Rs100! As she continued to earn profit she was able return the loan in ten instalments. Later when seed capital was distributed to the Mandal Mahila Sanghatan out of which Rs 50,000 was given to her group, she took a loan of Rs2000, bought and sold eggs during the month of Ramazan, earning Rs 5000 during that month. Slowly she progressed and now she has been able to buy 6acres of land which she had watered as a labourer from the loans raised, where she grows onions, groundnut, banana etc, earning an income of Rs 50,000 a year. She is also rearing goats, sheep and buffaloes on her farm and has a Pucca house with eleven members! Besides her son and his wife and two children there are seven more inmates? Now who are they? One would be quite amazed to hear how she acquired this extended family.

It happened that during the Sunami which ravaged the southern coast of India , her son was sitting in a wayside restaurant in Chennai where three boys who had lost their parents came to beg .Deprived of his siblings during childhood , he felt great compassion for them and brought them home .Ramakka welcomed them home after reporting their presence in the police station so that if any of their family came in search they would be able to locate them .She then adopted them , providing them food and education though both she and her son are illiterate .Today two of them are married with children .

Ramakka is a truly remarkable woman: women who despite her deprivations and struggle did not hesitate to provide shelter and comfort to the orphaned young boys and bring them up as her own. It indeed is rare to meet a woman like her.

Today at 60 she feels fulfilled .She has been a CRP to 6 districts :Karimnagar ,Medak , Nalgonda Prakashan ,Adilabad ,Hyderabad .She has also visited Jammu and Kashmir .Her message to women is that they should unite for in unity is strength .In her melodious voice she sings a song in Hindutani praising SHG for women's unity and progress .The other women join her in the chorus of praise .

I sit zapped watching and listening to these unlettered village women .Can formations of Self help Groups and their sincere implementation bring about such dramatic change? It needs to be seen to be believed .