

Women Show the Way with 'Jyothi'



A wave of change has swept across the coastal village of Paruthiyoor in Thiruvananthapuram District of Kerala. The picturesque village is dependent on the sea for its livelihood, with majority of the men engaged in fishing. The area, however, is wracked by economic hardships and illiteracy, leaving the community vulnerable to exploitation at the hands of local political leaders. Majority of the men give little importance to saving money for future, and would rather prefer spending much of their day's earnings in liquor shops. Leaving little to make ends meet, this situation leaves women and children in great distress. Needless to say, being able to arrange educational supplies for children remains out of question. Families continue to suffer in a vicious cycle of socio-emotional and economic agony.

As a people-led platform, while endeavouring to strengthen local self-governance by capacitating community leaders Lok Manch took cognisance of the situation. Lok Manch leaders within the community decided to break through the impasse through economic empowerment of women. By ensuring economic independence of women, greater involvement, ownership and decision-making powers were also envisioned for them. Through a series of meetings and informative discussions, Lok Manch leaders encouraged women in the area to take ownership of their problems and generate plausible and sustainable solutions through their own efforts. During the time, Lok Manch leaders were already in the process of training the community on effective waste management. In line with this initiative and through agreement with women in the community, production of eco-friendly carry bags was decided upon. This activity also supported the government's initiative of prohibition of plastic bags in the State. With support from the Zila Parishad, women in various pockets were successfully trained to not only produce bags from natural, readily available material but also on how to run this community business venture.

The first unit under the name 'Jyothi Paper Bag Unit' was started in 2019 with four members. The idea has steadily gained footing in the community with six additional units with 10 members each in each unit. From among them, the Lok Manch eco-bag making unit additionally provides training and support to individuals interested to be entrepreneurs.



With persistent efforts under close guidance of Lok Manch leaders, these units have gradually been increasing their production as more and more shops and organisations in and around the area are regularly contacted for orders. To increase their reach, exhibitions are organised at other community events/programmes. These units were also able to avail subsidies from Bank of India with the support of Kulathoor Gram Panchayat and Zila Parishad, adding the muchneeded push to their undertaking. While for most people life came to a standstill, women continued to stand on their feet during the nationwide lockdown period as well. They used this opportunity to make face masks from within their homes and supply them to locals, shops, health centres and local government structures such as the Kulathoor and Poovar Panchayats.

Even during the lockdown, women were able to continue their earnings and look after their families. They are now active contributors not only to their family's economic condition, but also of the community as well. They feel confident of being able to do their bit for their children's education and dream of a better future for them. These powerful women boast of a newfound, but hard-earned confidence and are much respected by one and all.

This truly does justice to Abraham Lincoln's saying---"Of the people. By the People. For the People."