

## Muthamma Dares to Dream



Muthamma was the quintessential Indian village woman. A life hardened by abject poverty, back-breaking work and deprivations. Living reduced to bare existence that stretches from one day to the next. One can see thousands of such women through the length and breadth of India.

All that is in the past. Muthamma is now the vice chairperson of the Van Samrakshana Samithi (VSS) in Chinthapally village of Adilabad District in Andhra Pradesh, which has 201 members, 91 of them are women like her. Muthamma and 72 other women make Rs 50-60 (US\$1.12-1.35) each per day making sticks for agarbathi from bamboo slats, besides carrying out VSS work. It suits her as she is earning money that supplements the household income in an important way, and that too at her own pace and from her own house.

Muthamma starts to make sticks after seeing off her children to school and husband to his workplace. She can spread the work to utilize the time she gets between routine chores. This is important to her – she looks to herself as a home-maker who also earns valuable income.

She gets the bamboo slats from the Common Facility Centre (CFC) in Adilabad, which is located at a convenient distance from her home for collection of slats and delivery of finished sticks. One thing that does not need to worry is payment: it comes in regularly. “I have not lost one paisa,” she declares happily. This is a different world for Muthamma. In her earlier job as a manual labourer, she had to plead with the contractor for her rightful wages. She has even been cheated out of her wages by an unscrupulous contractor.



Muthamma at work in her home yard



Muthamma engaged in her household routines

Now Muthamma is relieved that she and her husband Narsaiah can earn their income from their own locality. “It is our range, our locality and our people,” she says. No one will cheat her out of her money. Her husband, a shepherd, gets seasonal work from the VSS: digging trenches or potting holes, pruning branches, cutting bamboo (which the CFC buys from the VSS), collecting seeds, making compost or raising nurseries.

There are several women like Muthamma in Andhra Pradesh, where the community forest management initiative of the Forest Department has recast the relationship

between Forest Department (APFD) and local communities. The opportunity to generate income legally from forest products has created a vested interest for the community to nurture and maintain forest. This in turn has extended the State's forest management capacity to such an extent that it is keen on creating more VSSs and CFCs.

Muthamma's is not exactly a rags-to-riches story. But now she has a regular income, which she earns from the security of her neighbourhood and her home, a life of dignity. It helps meet the education expenses of her children. She wants her three children to have good education – that is the loom on which she is weaving her dreams.



Muthamma (in pink sari) along with her VSS colleagues and Forest Department officials

The Andhra Pradesh Community Forest Management (APCFM) project is being implemented by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department (APFD), with funding support from the World Bank. In 2005, APFD had organized a workshop to explore the possibilities of forest-based livelihood promotion activities, and the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR) was invited to the workshop to present the possible livelihood strategies using bamboo as a resource. In view of its expertise, INBAR was also requested to be part of the Supervisory Mission of the project.

Officials from APFD later visited the Tripura Bamboo and Cane Development Centre (TRIBAC), an Action Research Project of INBAR that was implemented by the Centre for Indian Bamboo Resource and Technology (CIBART). TRIBAC also supplied bamboo (*Melocanna baccifera*) seeds for planting in project areas in Andhra Pradesh. CIBART/INBAR has recently completed a technical evaluation of the production system used by the VSSs/CFCs under APCFM, examining the quality system in place and the hand tools and machines used.