

## Independence through “Awareness”

—Supporting Women in India—

Years of drought have worn out the land in Hospet in the state of Karnataka, Southern India, limiting its agriculture to cereal crops such as maize, pearl millet, and foxtail millet, while entrapping its people in a cycle of poverty. The status of women in this region has been traditionally low. They perform back-breaking labor in fields and mines, just like men, for contributing to their struggling household incomes.

Since October 2006 Live with Friends on the Earth (LIFE), a Japanese NGO, has been working to improve the status of women in such villages with financial assistance from the Government of Japan\*. Reflecting back on the implementation of these activities, Mr. Hiroshi Bingo, a LIFE member stationed in India, said, “In societies where the status of women has traditionally been low, there is strong resistance to the prospect of women’s active roles in society. As such, we began by engaging in trust building activities with villagers.” LIFE formed Self-Help Groups (SHGs), which resembled the women’s groups in Japan. SHGs are mutual assistance organizations, usually made up of around 20 women, and the number of such groups in India has been steadily increasing since the 1990s.

Mr. Bingo and other LIFE members believed that, in order for women to become more independent, it was essential to hold meetings regularly and to gain awareness of the issues facing women. In order to promote women’s participation in SHGs, LIFE staff members moved into various villages to stay. While engaging in work such as the repair of drinking water facilities, the staff encouraged women to take part in the groups. “At first, there was a lot of opposition even from the women themselves or their families who asked who would take care of the housework while the women were out. However, as people began to realize that the SHG’s activities would help women become more independent and also contribute to the household income, they began to accept the idea of women’s participation in SHGs,” recalls Mr. Bingo.

After electing a chairperson to ensure that the meetings were being held regularly, SHG members set out rules such as starting the meetings on time and engaged in discussions for leading a better life. Being in a female-only environment allows women in this male-dominated society to confide in each other and speak freely about their concerns. Understandably, money is the biggest concern for them. In these impoverished villages, some lack even the basic necessities for survival, while others, aiming at improving their lifestyles, seek advice about their financial plans. With an ultimate goal of economic self-sufficiency, the LIFE program includes technical guidance on matters such as bookkeeping skills, which would enable them to utilize microloans from SHGs and Indian financial institutions, account settlement methods, and actual work for which funds will be disbursed such as manufacturing incense sticks and tailoring. The loans have provided start-up funding for vegetable stores and even tea shops.

Ms. Annapoorna installed a public telephone in her tea shop in a village where telephone access was rare, and using the revenues she earned from the telephone, she was able to expand her business. She now owns a restaurant, which she manages together with the rest of her family. Ms. Annapoorna is extremely grateful for all that the SHG has provided her, in addition to financial assistance, remarking, “For us, the SHG is like a family.”

The results of the LIFE efforts, which place a strong emphasis on ownership, have given a fresh impetus to the SHGs to try to overcome a variety of issues through their own efforts and aim towards better lives. Furthermore, cooperation among SHGs has begun on activities to improve the people’s quality of life, such as the introduction of improved stoves requiring less firewood as well as the installation and use of toilets and drainage facilities.

“‘Awareness’ is essential for people to become independent. Everyone wants to make improvements to

their lives, but sometimes they lack the ‘awareness’ that is necessary to translate such ambitions into action. We believe in the latent strength that exists in us all,” stresses Mr. Bingo.



Women being trained in the manufacture of incense sticks (Source: LIFE)



Lively discussions taking place at an SHG meeting (Source: LIFE)



\* JICA Partnership Program (Partner Type)