

## CHARITY

# Sisters are doing it for themselves

It is a story of hope and triumph – 5,000 women from the poorest section of Indian society have transformed once barren land into fertile farms to provide food for 50,000 people. To celebrate Christian Aid Week, Tara Greaves travelled to India with the charity to see the amazing work of its partner organisation, the Deccan Development Society.

Sitting cross-legged under the welcome shade of her porch, Laxmamma looks so content as she deftly arranges different types of seeds into colourfully painted pots that is it impossible to imagine her any other way.

Occasionally her flow is interrupted by a neighbour from her small rural village in drought-prone Andhra Pradesh, part of the vast Deccan Plateau which dominates central and southern India, calling out a greeting – a sign of the respect the 45 year old now commands as a seed keeper, teacher and landowner.

But, 25 years ago, life was very different for the mother of two and without the aid of a then fledgling organisation called the Deccan Development Society (DDS).

“In those days I was just an agricultural labourer. I was poor, I had no house. I was a

single woman returned to my mother’s place.”

Adding to her hardship was the fact that Laxmamma is a Dalit, also known as “untouchable” and, despite the complex Indian caste system being abolished in 1950, old prejudices remained.

## Lowest point

Just when Laxmamma was at her lowest point, she signed up to a women’s sangham, a voluntary group for the poor, which DDS has now set up in more than 100 villages.

Initially DDS’s work was empowering women to take wasted land – some of which they were given by the government but had abandoned because of its barren state – and transform it using entirely natural methods.

They were also given grants for tools and labour, which

they had to repay when they could.

Nowadays there is also a college managed by DDS where women go to attend courses, learning about sustainable farming, together with a Green School where younger generations are supported.

But DDS members have also developed balwadies (crèches) for the children of women working in the fields, a home for Dalit women who suffer abuse and violence and even a Community Media Trust with its own radio station and award winning film-makers.

For Laxmamma, belonging to DDS helped her to develop the skills she already had and learn new ones.

The inspiring women of DDS are now strong, caring and knowledgeable – and all because they were given a chance.



■ Bidakanne village. Harvesting sugar cane



■ Sooremma Bollaradu with camera



■ Sugar cane harvest Didgi village

## Working in Partnership

Regardless of religion, ethnicity or nationality, Christian Aid works with and through partners, such as the Deccan Development Society (DDS), to become a leading force in helping to wipe out global poverty.

For more than 60 years the charity has been turning hope into action but the world is not getting any fairer and during this year’s Christian Aid Week, which runs until May 21, it needs your help more than ever.

In 2010/2011, it funded DDS with a £45,000 grant to help aid this life-changing work and expand the number of women, children and families it can help.

Celebrating its 25th birthday this year, DDS works now works with 5,000 women, many of them from the poorest section of Indian society.

The programmes it runs, including a college, school and media trust, have evolved to give the women a powerful voice in the areas of agriculture, sustainability and education.

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