

## SELF RELIANCE

Fly ash, a waste by-product emerging from the captive power plant, lies in abundance on the periphery around Dahej industrial area near Bharuch (Gujarat). Identifying ways in which this waste could be put to better use was one of the challenges faced by the concerned industries. After a careful analysis and study of the construction industry, it was discovered that an optimal usage of this material could be the manufacturing of fly-ash bricks, the demand for which is on a constant rise for both commercial and domestic purposes. The bricks made from a mixture of fly ash, gypsum, copper slag, lime and clay powder are proven to be a robust support in creating infrastructural facilities. Construction industry is one of the biggest consumers of the bricks, which are used for varying purposes of canal building, road building, building construction, and compound wall construction among others.

The requirement of fly-ash bricks is on the rise for the extension of the Industries. Several government agencies regularly avail of fly ash bricks for creating infrastructural facilities in the rural interiors. Production of fly-ash bricks is considered cheaper and eco-friendly, as against the clay bricks production done through chimneys. The beginning of this success story dates back to GVT being nominated by the District Rural Development Agency as one of the NGOs to implement the Swarnajayanti Gram Swaraj Yojna (SGSY, a government employment opportunity project) in Vagra block of Bharuch district. On being bequeathed with this responsibility, GVT first set out to form self-help groups (SHGs) of rural women in the neighbouring 28 villages.

Through baseline surveys and participatory rural appraisal techniques, a total of 67 below poverty line families were identified. A systematic plan was formulated starting with promoting the concept of SHGs and their awareness creation through the means of video film shows organised in the villages. The films focussed on the benefits accruing from self-help groups and showcasing similar success stories of NGOs operating in other regions of Gujarat. This was followed by one-on-one interactions with the prospective beneficiaries and their families. A list of 20 women who were selected for this project was finalised and, at the initial stage, focus on rapport building was ensured. The SHG was then registered and named as Kasturba Swa Shakti Mahila Bachat Mandal. It started with an initial saving of Rs. 20 per month per member. The 20 woman members were then sent for practical exposure and knowledge to neighbouring areas where the concept of SHG had been successful. GVT played the role of acquiring linkages with the bank for this group's microfinance activity. After successful savings for a period of 6 months, the SHG started an internal loaning scheme, which was extended for the purpose of agriculture, education and health related activities. After a year of successful operation, the group got its first loan from the bank for an amount of Rs. 45,000, which was given to four members for setting up small scale businesses.

Since the demand for the traditional field of woodcutting that provided most of these families' daily wages seemed to be waning, rendering the husbands jobless, the SHG repeatedly discussed with the representative of GVT on the possibility of exploring the fly ash brick-making project. An exposure visit of the SHG members was organised to visit the fly ash brick-making unit located at Kamrej in Surat district. On seeing the confidence and enthusiasm of these women, GVT set forth organising a meeting with the District Development Officer, wherein a proposal for the fly ash bricks manufacturing unit was submitted under the SGSY Scheme. The proposal was accepted by the district SGSY committee and the government on its part decided to sanction the machinery for this project to a tune of Rs. 3.11 lakhs.

The commitment undertaken by GVT was to support in arranging the supply of raw materials like fly ash, gypsum and copper slag free of cost to the SHG. The members of this group approached the Panchayat and met the Sarpanch along with the GVT team to get a sanction for the piece of land with water and electricity supply for the project. Finally the Gram Panchayat conceded in allotting a plot of land in village Bhensali, in close proximity to the main road. This was granted on a commitment by the women to pay a monthly rent of Rs. 1,000 to the Gram Panchayat. A wise and respectful business move. Thus began the journey of transformation of this highly charged and motivated group of village entrepreneurs. The equipment was installed on 6th December, 2004, and alongside training, the production commenced on 8th December, 2004. Each one an entrepreneur in her own right, with a never-to-give-up attitude, toiled endlessly facing the hardships of learning on the job and initial teething problems. The initial output was a daily production of 400 bricks, which increased to 2,500 bricks a day after the elapse of the first 15 days. The month of January 2005 was witness to still a

further increase in production to 3,000 bricks per day and to date the record has been bettered to 3,500 bricks per day. The entire produce of bricks is collected twice a week by the government contractors who have been making extensive use of the same for the construction of 36 Sardar Awas (housing construction under a government program).

Road contractors, canal construction contractors, masons requiring bricks for school repair work, villagers needing bricks for the repairs of their homes as well as the contractors for the Dahej industrial area are the listed customers that Kasturba Swa Shakti Mahila Bachat Mandal has managed to create in a record time of three months. The business is run on similar lines as any professional outfit, where job rotation, on the job training and division of labour are some of the management concepts adopted for better productivity.

The project site has had several visitors of repute ranging from important government officials such as Bharuch and Navsari District Rural Development Agencies' Directors along with their teams and Deputy District Development Officer, and Taluka Development officer; representatives from the NGOs such as Jan Shikshan Sansthan's Director with his team of 50; electronic media such as Star Plus, Door Darshan as well as local newspapers such as Sandesh, Gramya Suhas; and executives of various industries. Besides the list of eminent visitors, the project has created an attraction value for several SHGs who now wish to replicate the same in their areas. The project has become a pilot case study in showing the involvement of the community for its betterment through its own efforts. The outcome has been overwhelming with each woman now earning daily wage to the tune of Rs. 90 per day. Besides this, there have been several intangible benefits as well.

These women are now viewed in their village with greater respect. The village elders route all village related issues through this group and consult them on various issues of significant. The spill over effect of this has been the improvement in the status of women at the micro level within the family and at the macro level within society, increase in the education level of their children and the members of Kasturba Swa Shakti Mahila Bachat Mandal playing the role of motivators and acting as role models to women of other SHGs. In celebration of International Women's Day (March 8th), these women ambassadors were specially invited by the district authorities of Bharuch to address an audience of more than 2,000 women at Pandit Omkarnath Thakur Hall, wherein they shared their trial and success stories. Ploughing back a part of their earnings to the society is something that these women are conscious and passionate about. It is indeed a touching gesture when these women contributed a part of their earning to help the community.

On one occasion, they paid for the entire treatment of Lakshman Bhai Vasava, a tribal villager who was inflicted with a severe infection in his foot, rendering him unable to walk. Similarly, Kanchanben, again a tribal villager, was given financial and moral support by these women in conducting the final rites of her deceased husband. Donation of a cupboard to the primary school on request by the teachers is yet another of their noble initiatives. Every journey ends when the destination is reached. But for these women of Kasturba Swa Shakti Mahila Bachat Mandal, the journey is endless, the destination is upliftment and progress of their counterparts. The fire in their bellies to do well and better with each day is something that we all need to learn from. They have a vision to impart to their fellow womenfolk the training required to start similar set-ups. Their desire to utilize the site for continuous commercial production as well as to provide a training ground for more women is an initiative that will hold them in good stead. We toast a beautiful life as a tribute to the dedicated lady entrepreneurs!