

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 25

Once while I was working in the rural poverty elimination project in Guntur district, I had been sent to Srikakulam district for a study on livelihoods programs conducted by the project staff there. As a part of the study, the staff there told me that they will take me to the newly-started turmeric procurement centre in the Seethampeta agency area.

This agency area was inhabited by the Savara tribe. Turmeric happened to be one of the crops that was cultivated by them.

Keeping some turmeric for personal consumption and selling the rest to middlemen or at the weekly shandy, was what these tribals did here. Apart from that, they just didn't have a clue about the right market for turmeric, which has so many valuable medicinal properties, nor did they know where to go to sell it or even how much price it could fetch.

Since the turmeric grown in India has more percentage of curcumin that is used in medicines for cancer, arthritis, skin diseases, Alzheimer's, cardiovascular diseases, etc., it is very valuable and has a great demand in international markets. Having even more percentage of curcumin than the average Indian variety, Seethampet turmeric has even greater demand and, therefore, fetches even more price.

But not knowing this, the tribes here sell the turmeric at dirt cheap prices to middlemen. Identifying this scenario, the project officials there went in search of the right market and found a beauty product manufacturing company that was ready to buy the turmeric at remunerative prices.

Because the farmers had land holdings of around 1 or half acre, it was impossible to procure turmeric from each and every one of them. Therefore, the project officials had set-up procurement centres in turmeric producing villages. The women Self Help Group (SHG) members were trained to run these centres.

Ever since the turmeric farmers started selling their produce at the centres, they began getting three times more price than what they used to get earlier for the same.

The project staff there took me to one such procurement centre situated in a remote hamlet in the agency area. Upon asking the women SHG members running the centre some questions, such as how much turmeric did the centre procure since inception, how many farmers benefited from it, how much turnover took place, they answered all my questions immediately without breaking into a sweat. Imagine, these women didn't even have a high school education.

The project officials in the area managed to improve the income levels of these minor producers through integrating them directly with the market. On the other hand, by facilitating the running of the centres by women SHG members, they have managed to increase the self-esteem, leadership skills, and decision-making skills of the members.

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