

**THE HINDU**  
**Saturday, MARCH 8, 2008.**

### **A MODEL IN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

The federation of Agarbathi producers, Edayansathu (FAPE) formed by federating 18 existing women's self-help groups (SHGs) in Edayansathu village in kaniyambadi panchayat union in Vellore district, stands today as a model in women's empowerment.

The FAPE was formed about five months ago under the Vazhdhu Kattuvom Scheme (VKS), a project being implemented by the department of Rural development in 2,300 village panchayats in 70 panchayat unions in 15 districts in Tamil Nadu from 2005-06 onwards. Though Kaniyambadi union has not been selected under the scheme, Edayansathu was selected as a Pilot village for the implementation of the scheme since it has many women's SHGs, which were functioning well.

The FAPE has been formed by bringing together all SHGs which were engaged in the manufacture of agarbathis (incense sticks), in order to enable them to market them in a profitable manner, S.Rajeswari President of FAPE, who has been helping her parents in making agarbathis right from childhood, said that the SHGs were previously marketing the agarbathis through middlemen, who supplied the raw materials to them and paid the wages of Rs.9 to Rs.12/- for making one bundle containing 1000 sticks. The SHGs were now running the business of manufacturing the agarbathis through the federation, which was registered under the Societies Registration Act in October 2007. Now the members get Rs.15 per bundle. The office bearers of the federation themselves went to Mysore and procured the raw materials. They made the agarbahtis and supplied them directly to a trademark company in Mysore.

According to Ms. Rajeswari, the first consignment of three tones of agarbathis was supplied to the Mysore company, which fetched the federartion a profit of Rs.12,000/-. M.Selvarani, treasurer of the FAPE said that the first consignment fetched a total amount of Rs.1.16 lakh, which worked out to Rs.40 per bundle. The net profit is Rs.5 per bundle, she said. Out of total project cost of Rs.4.10 lakh, the Village Poverty Reduction Committee (VPRC) which implements the VKS gave a grant of Rs.1.5 lakh and an interest – free loan of Rs.1.5 lakh (The VPRC gets the funds from the District Vazhdhu Kattuvom Committee)

The FAPE got an additional loan of Rs.60,000/- at 12% interest from VPRC, while the members contributed Rs.50,000/- at the rate of Rs.500 per head. She said that the federation was planning to expand its business gradually so as to increase the profits. One of the measures it proposes is to apply the scent to the agarbathis at Edayansathu itself and supply scented agarbathis to the Mysore company.

G.Kumaran, District Project Managaer, VKS said that while the federation manages the business the District Vazhdhu Kattuvom Society made the initial marketing arrangements for the federation. One of the tangible benefits of forming the federation was that the VKS has managed to eliminate the middlemen, who were earlier paid only Rs.9 to Rs.12 per bundle for the members. The success of the federation lies in the fact that they now come forward to pay Rs.15 per bundle, he said.