

## Community organisation

The villagers are encouraged to form village "self-help groups" (SHGs) which look at the problems in each village and take action to remedy them. Men's SHGs (formerly Youth Clubs) and Women's SHGs provide a venue for people to come together; to learn how to organise themselves; and to discuss needs (starting first with the most basic material ones, such as leveling the streets which are muddy and rutted, deepening the common well, whitewashing the school, getting the street lights fixed, etc.) and then working together to improve things.

## Microprojects

To address these problems, the village groups go to the government offices when they can help, and where they cannot, they draw up their own plan of action with an estimate and submit it to Village Action. The very act of planning and making an estimate is often an awakening experience.

The estimate has to show that the group will cover one third of the cost of the project themselves, either by raising money or by contributing labour or goods. And it has to say how it will be maintained afterwards.

The whole process is an educative one for the village group - they learn how to bring a project through, and when it's finished, not only is the new facility there, but the group has increased self-confidence and is ready for the next one. Little by little the sense of community is growing. **(SEE Village Action Newsletter No. 3 for details)**

The traditional clan leaders, and the elected leaders, are included in the process as "consultants", thereby gaining their support and leading to strengthening of a whole community feeling.

AVAG also has made government as well as international contacts which are a source of funds for village development, and village assets such as overhead water tanks, borewells and handpumps, housing projects and income generation schemes have been implemented in the villages, with Village Action organising the participation of the people.

## Dalit Development

Early in AVAG's history, the team considered how to deal with the Dalit "colonies" which are located beside every village. These colonies exist as separate communities, and the people of these colonies, the former "untouchables," despite government laws to the contrary, are still excluded from most of the facilities of the village, and face strong prejudice and disadvantages. For administrative purposes, the Government gives only one name to a village and its colony or colonies, but the result is that the facilities meant for the whole population are enjoyed only by the village, not the colonies.

The question that faced early AVAG was, shall we insist that the men's and women's self-help groups (SHGs) that we set up in the villages include Dalits, or shall we treat the Dalit settlement as a village itself. Although it meant more work, we decided to work with the Dalits separately. This has proved excellent. For one thing, rather than being the underdogs in a mixed SHG, they have developed their own leadership. At the monthly meetings of representatives of all the SHGs, they come as equals, sit and eat together with the caste groups (a significant accomplishment in traditional India) and report on their accomplishments. Furthermore, they have been inspired to work hard to bring assets to their villages, and have installed overhead water tanks, night school buildings, and hand pumps for which they take both pride and responsibility. Also, as time goes on, many of the Dalit clubs are the oldest and best functioning, and they become the models and advisors for the newer caste clubs. A programme of "exchange visits" has brought Dalit and caste groups together for this sort educative interaction.

Furthermore, as the programme expands and we begin to work in “clusters” of 7-8 neighbouring villages, the colony SHGs are able to represent their community's needs on a par with the others.