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**STRENGTHENING DALIT COMMUNITIES
AND BUILDING INTER-COMMUNITY COOPERATION
In the Auroville Area, Tamil Nadu**

BACKGROUND

The Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) has been working since 1983 in some 70 villages neighbouring the international city project of Auroville. During this time, AVAG has concentrated on community building among the village people, with programmes aimed at capacity building among the groups usually left out of the community decision making (dalits, women, children, young men). Men's clubs, women's clubs and parent-teacher-associations have involved the traditional clan leaders, elected Panchayat members, teachers and other government-appointed persons in meetings and projects with these new and active groups of the disadvantaged.

Dalit communities have their own youth clubs and women's clubs where they develop their leadership abilities and take up responsibilities for their own community infrastructure. Their representatives attend local "cluster" meetings on a par with the caste communities' representatives. A number of "exchange" visits between caste and dalit clubs have been going on without incident for 7 years.

AIM

Based on AVAG's long-standing work in community development with the villages around the international city project of Auroville, AVAG carries out a number of programmes to strengthen the participation of dalits and women in the local planning process.

OBJECTIVES

1. To encourage meetings and projects involving both communities,
 - by having a Fund for inter-group projects for village improvement
 - by holding Women's Day, Youth Day, Children's Day festivals involving all the communities.
2. Provide possibility for improving the drinking water in dalit communities.
3. Facilitate government schemes for improved housing for dalit colonies.
4. Provide possibility for dalit communities to build community-meeting places.
5. To create among the youth a basis for inter-communal working together by developing a physical education training programme cutting across caste and communal lines.
6. To provide for a common training ground at Auroville's neutral training centre, and also for playing grounds in the villages serving both communities.

Capacity Building among Dalit Groups

In order to build capacity within the dalit community, community development projects are taken up on the AVAG Microproject model (participation by the people's

group in planning, execution and maintenance, plus contribution of 33% in cash, kind or labour)

- projects to improve drinking water supply to dalit colonies
- housing for dalits
- general projects to improve the infrastructure of the dalit colony
- building community centers in dalit villages which are lacking in meeting spaces
- IGPs with the poorest, mostly dalit, women

Children's Integrated Activities

At the government schools AVAG sends twice weekly one of its development workers to conduct special classes in environment, culture and to lead extracurricular activities such as one-day trip and annual performances. Classroom work can include discussion of the inappropriateness of caste discrimination and "exchange programmes" between village children are conducted, which bring the caste and dalit children together. One village school can host a group from another village, receive their guests into their houses, show them the village, share in games and performances and have a meal together. This experience is a strong antidote to caste feeling among the young.

Inter-Caste Physical Education Coaching Programme

At this time it is felt that a new step forward could be made, by combining the youth of the village and dalit colonies in an area-wide physical education training programme.

- Expert coaches could be brought to train the young people in sports and games at a well-equipped sports ground at the AVAG training centre. Youth would participate on an equal par with each other, regardless of caste.
- Girls would also be given special coaching at the Centre.
- Tournaments and festivals involving all communities would be arranged.
- At the same time, in the village clubs, groups would be encouraged to take up projects for the benefit of the whole community. A special fund could be available for projects that involve both communities. Such projects could include building sports ground on neutral land in between dalit and caste villages.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- A new generation of villagers with reduced caste prejudice.
- Improved physical fitness among the young men.
- More participation of young women in physical education, with more awareness of their bodies and physical fitness.
- Stronger dalit and women's groups, more participation of dalits and women in village decision making
- Children who have broken the caste barriers and feel free to meet and share with each other, regardless of caste.
- Villages where dalit and caste community young people play and celebrate together.
- Projects to improve the village habitat and environment, on which both dalit and caste communities have cooperated.

- Creation of community infrastructure in dalit communities, by their own participation.
- Development of sense of responsibility and capability towards supplying and maintaining community needs.
- Improved capacity to organise and plan for village development, including voices of all the sectors of the community.
- Increase in planning among clusters of villages for common projects.
- Increase in awareness among all villages of their common goals and challenges.

AVAG CONTRIBUTION TO THE PROJECT

AVAG brings a network of village organisations in both caste and dalit communities (40 youth clubs, 102 women's clubs, 9 Village Councils, 76 Savings Clubs, 25 Parent-Teacher Associations), mobilised by a team of 37 Development Workers for community organisation and self-help projects for village improvement. These people (development worker team and village groups) are aware of themselves as change agents, and are already active in planning and organising their own community projects. They will be able to carry out the proposed programmes in a spirit of people's participation.

Furthermore, AVAG, with the collaboration of the village groups has recently built a new Resource and Training Centre (AVARC) which is available for meetings of village groups and training of local people. It is here that the central sports ground will be made, and it is here that some of the larger meetings for combined dalit and caste groups can be held.

If you are interested in this project, contact avag@auroville.org.in