

And Then There was LIGHT! Micro-Hydel Project at Bilgaon.

On the holy day of Sankranti (January 14, 2003), the efforts of over 2000 person days of voluntary work bore fruit when a swift movement of a hand transformed the future of over 300 households from darkness into a bright and promising one. Over four thousand people gathered in Bilgaon as the minister for rural development of Maharashtra government inaugurated the 15KW Micro-hydel project. Sitting in the same valley as Sardar Sarovar Project, this alternative to huge dams stands as a shining example of a sustainable path to development.

Bilgaon is a tribal community comprising about 12 hamlets spread over several kilometers in the Satpura range of the Narmada valley in Nandurbar District, Maharashtra. So close to Mumbai, and yet electricity would have continued to elude Bilgaon for at least 10 more years had people waited for the National Grid to supply them with power. However, the determination, faith and enthusiasm of the villagers, dispelled darkness from their nights for all times to come.

The Sarvodaya Friendship Center implemented the project, which was designed by Anil and Madhu, engineers from the People's School of Energy, Kerala. The two engineers worked in Bilgaon from May 2002- Jan 2003, alongside the villagers, with support from local activists. Volunteers from Dhule and Mumbai helped in laying pipes and 13.5 km of wires to every house in Bilgaon.

Shramdaan (voluntary labor) from families from every hamlet of Bilgaon went into completing the project. A 2 m



Village volunteers construct the check-dam in Bilgaon.

high, 70 m long weir/check dam, canal, penstock and turbine to tap the potential energy of a waterfall that drops 9m on the Udhai river were built. This project provides electricity to 306 Adivasi households in Bilgaon and Maal villages and to a school of 300 students. It also provides restricted irrigation to at least 80 acres, thus ensuring that there are no adverse effects on ecology due to the check-dam. Bringing drinking water to the villages relieved the village women from the laborious daily task of fetching water. Additional electricity is also available to livelihood generation from grinding mills, extraction of oil from

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Sivakasi – The Block making WAVES

The people of Sivakasi town in Tamil Nadu are not new to matches, fireworks and explosions. It is a part and parcel of their everyday life. But these days they are witnessing a different kind of explosion, the silent kind that doesn't kill but heals. Spearheading this silent revolution is Rajeshwari, a health volunteer of the Tamil Nadu Science Forum (TNSF), who has lit a spark in the hearts of hundreds of women of Sivakasi.

A young widow and a struggling single mother, Rajeshwari has been in the eye of the storm many times in her village simply because she refuses to mourn the loss of her husband with the "right" symbols (or lack of them). Instead, she goes about changing lives simply by example. When asked about how she derives her strength, she says that she has her bad days too, but on seeing some other widows in her village following her footsteps and refusing to bow down to the social pressures, she gets the courage to move on. Some of the other women have even remarried. Saving malnourished babies, bringing improved health facilities to her town and fighting for women's rights all encourage her to march on.

Rajeshwari is not alone in bringing about these changes. Her efforts are strongly supported by the empowered women of Thuligal - the women's savings groups of Sivakasi constituted as part of the Hundred Block Plan. When the women of Thuligal found out that the local health center was re-using needles, they protested outside the health center demanding better practices. On realizing that the health center had inadequate funds, the women decided to buy syringes from their own savings for the health center. These are women who have never spoken a word in public before and had to get their husband's permission to step out of their homes! On another occasion, the women from these savings groups met the Collector to submit a petition to get a powerful illegal occupant evicted from the land belonging to their community center. These Thuligal (drops) are fast turning into Alaigal (waves).

The Hundred Block Plan has a simple idea – organize women together in small groups, give them tools to save money every month, and expose them to events outside the confines of their home – women's empowerment and hence rural development will follow.

-- Padampriya Jagannathan (AID, San Diego)

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mahua seeds and for community agriculture such as nursery to help afforestation and grain bank for food security. Community Recreation Centers that have facilities like radio, TV, etc. also benefit from the new source of energy. In addition, the project provides direct employment opportunities to around 10 people and encourages small-scale entrepreneur opportunities.

AID Chapters of Maryland, San Diego, Austin, Ann Arbor and College Station, Texas jointly supported this Bilgaon Micro-Hydel project. A unique aspect of the project is that the benefiting community owns the execution, operation and maintenance of the project. This is done through three locally formed committees - financial, technical and administrative. Further, each house hold will contribute Rs. 30 per month to the village electricity committee, for maintenance as well as future livelihood generation, and about half this money may even be used as Bilgaon's contribution for electricity generation in a new village in future.

- Ravi (AID-Mumbai)



Anil, from People's School of Energy that designed the microhydel project brings on the first lights to Bilgaon village using the Cross-Flow Turbine designed by a professor from IISc, Bangalore.

Congratulations to AID-Minnesota on being recognized by the local community and providing inspiration to other chapters. In its annual dinner on Feb 9th, 2003, the India Association of Minnesota (IAM) presented AID-MN an "achievement award in appreciation and recognition of its accomplishments and devoted service to the community". India Association of Minnesota seeks to build a sense of identity and community among people who are of Indian origin or who have an interest in India. Every year, it recognizes contributions by individuals and organizations to the community at its annual dinner.

Mark your calendars!

**AID Atlanta presents a Bharatanatyam Performance by
Padmashri Alarmel Valli**

Date: May 4, 2003.
Time: 4:00pm
Venue : Roswell Cultural Arts Center
 950 Forest Street,
 Roswell GA 30075
Tickets: \$15, \$25, \$50

"... Alarmel Valli is a paragon... the solo performer who puts all others out of mind". - *John Russel of The New York Times.*

For more information on this fund-raiser program, tickets, and directions to the venue, please send email to Atlanta@aidindia.org or please visit the web-site <http://www.aidindia.org/atlanta/index.shtml>.



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