

# THE CASE OF WOMEN LABOUR COLLECTIVES IN CHITTOOR DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH

The Emergence of Saraswathi Labour Collective as an Innovative Response to the Disruption Caused by COVID-19

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## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, farmers in the united Chittoor district of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh employ local women labour for carrying out of weeding and crop cutting operations manually. There is a traditional system of arrangement of labor in this region. Such a traditional labour group arrangement system is known locally as **“Oppandam Paddhati”** (agreement system). Similarly, this system is called locally as **“Gutthala Paddhati”** (contract arrangement), in the Indian state of Telangana.

The traditional women labour group system has one or two leaders, usually women, who arrange women labour for farmers and labour contractors associated with construction and infrastructure development industry. These leaders manage 10 – 15 other women labour and act as the interface/crossing point between labour and the potential employer, usually a farmer or a mason. Usually, the leader of the women’s labour group visits the work site for inspection and assessment of the nature of work and negotiates the service charges with the potential employer on

behalf of the other women of the group and takes the call.

Local farmers and masons in need of labour services usually contact the group leader and cease the contract upon a mutual agreement. The local labour charges are between INR 200 – 250 per day. However, employment as an agriculture labour is available for only 3–4 months a year. The women depend on unskilled daily wage or construction labour for the remaining part (8–9 months) of the year.



The COVID-19 induced lockdown brought the whole world to a screeching halt. Although agriculture and allied sectors were allowed to function almost normally but the other sectors have borne the brunt. The infrastructure and construction industry was marred by the lockdown due to its sensitivity to economic cycles (ILO, 2021; Biswas, et al 2021). With the infrastructure and construction industry coming to a standstill, the local women labour lost the primary source of employment, which sustains their income for 8-9 months of a year. Despite the thriving agriculture sector, many women labour were pushed into financial crisis due to lack of employment due to non-function of the other sectors, especially the infrastructure and construction industry during the lockdown.

## The Emergence of Organized Local Women Labour Collectives / Associations

In addition to many disaster relief activities and schemes rolled out by both the central and state governments of India to counteract the pandemic; many civil society organizations and volunteers too have contributed massively to COVID-19 disaster relief funds and activities. The Watershed Support Services and Activities Network (WASSAN), a non-profit organization based out of Hyderabad, Telangana has also conducted COVID-19 disaster relief activities in Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and Telangana. As a part of the disaster relief and community rebuilding activities, WASSAN has organized a series of consultations with local farming communities to identify the issues and challenges and find potential solutions for the same. Such consultations were organized by strictly adhering to the safety protocols issued by the government during that time.

Besides many other pressing issues, one of the issues that stood out was the loss of employment and income generation opportunities of women belonging to the landless HHs, especially due to collapse of the infrastructure and construction industry.

Following a few more consultations and discussions with women and their groups involved in agriculture and wage labour, WASSAN has designed a framework for generation of continuous employment for women and their groups engaged in labour work, during the year 2020.

WASSAN has formalized a total of 22 such labour collectives / associations in three clusters of Ayyavaripalli, Bommanacheruvu, and Kanduru of the united Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh in the year 2020.

**198**

A total members have been enrolled among the 22 labour collectives / associations.

**9**

The average size of the labour collective / association

**73%**

The labour collectives / associations have 100% women members and men accounts to only 20-25% among those which have men as members (see table)

**91%**

Members are women of the labour collective / association

**100%**

All of the labour collectives / associations have women as the president/leader, which is similar to the labour groups managed under the traditional "Oppandam paddathi".



Table-1| Details of the Labour Collectives Streamlined by WASSAN in Three Clusters of Chittoor District, Andhra Pradesh

S. No	Collective Name	Village Name	Cluster Name	Total Members	No. of Women	No. of Men	% of women
1	Vinayaka	Ayyavaripalli	Ayyavaripalli	20	12	8	60
2	Venkateswara	Pathakotapalli	Ayyavaripalli	10	7	3	70
3	Saraswathi	Boyapalli	Ayyavaripalli	10	10	0	100
4	Varalakshmi	Velagapalli	Kanduru	10	10	0	100
5	Sri Parvathi	Pagadalavaripalle	Kanduru	6	6	0	100
6	Sri Bhavani	Pagadalavaripalle	Kanduru	6	6	0	100
7	Sri Lakshmi	Pagadalavaripalle	Kanduru	6	6	0	100
8	Vinayaka	Chinthapartivaripalle	Kanduru	8	8	0	100
9	Sri Venkateswara	Thappannagaripalli	Kanduru	8	8	0	100
10	Archana	Samadiguttapalli	Kanduru	7	7	0	100
11	Tulasi	Samadiguttapalli	Kanduru	7	7	0	100
12	Manikanta	Mittapalle	Kanduru	6	6	0	100
13	Sri Gayatri	P. Cherukuvaripalle	Kanduru	8	8	0	100
14	Sri Lakshmi	Bommanacheruvu	Bommanacheruvu	13	13	0	100
15	Sri Vinayaka	Sandhireddipalle	Bommanacheruvu	10	10	0	100
16	Sri Venkateswara	Maddurivaripalle	Bommanacheruvu	10	10	0	100
17	Sri Ramachandra	Danduvaripalle	Bommanacheruvu	11	11	0	100
18	Venkatannagaripalle	Malepadu	Bommanacheruvu	8	7	1	88
19	Sreerama	Thamballapalle	Bommanacheruvu	9	9	0	100
20	Paletamma	Gollapallivaripalle	Bommanacheruvu	8	7	1	88
21	Reddemma	Jennevaripalli	Bommanacheruvu	9	7	2	78
22	Malleswari	Kummarapalli	Bommanacheruvu	8	6	2	75
	<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>198</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>17</b>	

The new organization framework was built on the existing traditional labour arrangement system, "Oppandam paddhati". It is just an improved version of the traditional system, where women are more organized, and formed a collective/association, which can be identified by a name. For instance, one of the traditional women labour group was named as "Saraswathi Labour Collective / Association". WASSAN, under the project support helped the labour collective/association to purchase their own implements used for different agriculture and construction operations. The labour collective/

association now has designated group of members enrolled with it.

Saraswathi labour collective/association belongs to Boyapalli village, Ayyavaripalli cluster, Vayalpaadu mandal, of Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, India. The collective/association has a total 10 members and majority of them are landless and primarily depend on wage labour for a living. It is an all women members (100%) team and Smt. Obulamma C., is the president / leader of the labour collective/ association.

There are a total 130 households (HH) in Boyapalli, out of which 30 (23%) HHs are landless. The remaining 100 HHs are of small and marginal farmers with an acreage between 1 – 5 acres. Tractors are primarily used for carrying out almost all the agricultural operations, from land preparation to sowing seeds, at the village. However, manual labour is used for weeding and crop cutting due to the small land parcels.

Under the COVID-19 disaster relief fund, an amount of INR 750 was provided by WASSAN to local farmers towards purchasing of seeds for agriculture during the Kharif season of the year 2020. In return farmers were encouraged to get into an informal agreement with the local women labour collectives/associations for hiring their services for weeding and crop cutting at their farms. Local farmers welcomed this proposition and went into a formal agreement with the local women labour collectives/associations immediately.

*Table-2 | Economic Activities of Saraswathi Labour Collective During Kharif Season 2020*

1	Agreement with the number of farmers for weeding operations	32
2	Total acreage agreed for weeding (in acres)	40
3	Total man-days generated for weeding of 40 acres	20
4	Total amount (in INR) farmers paid to the collective towards weeding services provided for 40 acres	80000
5	Total amount (in INR) each member of the collective earned for 20 days	8000
6	Total amount (in INR) each member of the collective earned per day	400
7	Financial support (in INR) extended by WASSAN for procurement of equipment/implements for the collective	6600

## Impact of Streamlining the Local Traditional Women Labour Groups

There was more than optimum rainfall during monsoon season of the year 2020, so as prolific growth of weeds, and plethora of work opportunities on local farms for weeding. The Saraswathi labour collective/association provided services for 32

farmers and carried out weeding operations at 40 acres. Although there was enough demand for labour the collective/association could not capitalize on the opportunities due to lack of time.

The collective/association charges INR 2000 – 2500 for weeding an acre of land. Women could perform weeding operations for two acres of land per day, earning a total wage of INR 4000 – 5000 per day. The Saraswathi labour collective/association performed weeding operations for 40 acres in 20 days, at a rate of 2 acres per day. The total earnings of the collective / association in 20 days was INR 80000. Each member of the collective/association made INR 8000 in 20 days, earning about INR 400 per day.

## Conclusion

In conclusion women belonging to the landless households and engaged in a predominantly unorganized agriculture and wage labour sector as unskilled labour were caught in the midst of the COVID-19 induced lockdown. The shutting down of the infrastructure and construction industry, the mainstay of women labour in the three clusters of Ayyavaripalli, Kanduru and Bommanacheruvu clusters of the united Chittoor district blew a huge dent into the job prospects and income of such women.

Streamlining of the traditional labour groups through intervention of external agents (here WASSAN), proved beneficial for women involved in the informal agriculture and wage labour sector. For instance, local women are paid INR 200-250 per day towards wages for unskilled labour. Since the women organized themselves into a collective/association, with an identifiable name for the collective / association, designated members and possession of a few basic implements/equipment necessary for performing labour tasks, positioned them in a more professional way in the local labour market. The new found identity also improved their employment and wage prospects, women associated with the labour collective/association earned INR 400 per day, which is double the wage amount which they earned before joining together into a labour collective/association.



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Farmers and labour contractors have found the new organization arrangement convenient. Contacting and assembling of relatively unorganized labour in the traditional labour group setting has its own benefits and challenges for farmers and contractors

seeking labour services. The streamlining of traditional labour groups made communication and work agreements relatively convenient for everyone involved. After observing the performance of the organized labour collectives/associations, few other women in the region have organized themselves into organized labour collectives / associations in a neighbourhood effect.

Although such labour collectives/associations performed and flourished during the COVID-19 induced pandemic, it is necessary however, to conduct a detailed study on the performance of such labour collectives/associations during the post COVID-19 scenario to gain insights into their sustainability. ■

