

# Functional Literacy in Rural India

by Robert Keener

Women in rural villages in India today tend to be treated as second class citizens. Their primary responsibilities are to look after the family and household and work in the rice fields. Little else is expected of them.

It is against this background that Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, partnered with Stella Maris College in Chennai, India, to develop a functional literacy program geared toward women in three rural villages outside Chennai, India, which ran from 1995 to 1999. Officials at Sinclair became aware of Stella Maris through a University Development Linkages Project managed by Sinclair in the early 1990s. The purpose of this project was to create a Centre for Vocational Education in Chennai to deliver short-term technical training to early school leavers. Stella Maris College was on the advisory board for this project.

At the time Stella Maris was active in the rural villages establishing self-help groups and conducting leadership and motivational workshops for women. Faculty and students would volunteer their time on weekends to accomplish these activities. The presence of Stella Maris in the villages enabled our two colleges to collaborate and take the village activities to a higher level.

This project was funded by a College and University Affiliations grant from the United States Information Agency which has now become part of the United States State Department. Building upon the work done by Stella Maris College in the villages, a functional literacy program was developed and targeted toward women in three rural villages.

The project involved instructing local elementary school teachers to deliver the functional literacy training. This functional literacy program was timed to run during those periods when the women were not needed in the rice fields. Two crops are planted and harvested annually. If just a basic literacy program were offered, participation tends to fade away in a relatively short period of time. The functional element was crucial as this was the key element in the program. As the literacy program progressed the women were also instructed in how to make products in their spare time to sell in the village market. The products were cleansing powder, tailoring and mat making.

The village program I observed taught the women how to make cleansing powder from ingredients available locally. Women could make this product at home and sell it in their local market. The income they made helped improve the quality of life for their families and elevated their status socially and economically.

A local bank was involved in the program to provide the women with small loans to enable them to make the initial purchase of ingredients to make their product.

A by-product of the project was that the women began to learn some basic personal finance and business skills through their dealings with the bank.

When this project was initially launched, the village men were very skeptical and they wondered what was happening to their women. At the program's inauguration only the women were permitted in the small village meeting hall. The men watched through open doors and windows. It was a curious beginning to a program that changed these women's lives. By the time this funded project ended, the word had spread and two more villages were asking to have this program run for them.

A video was made showing what life is like in these rural villages. Women who had participated in the functional literacy program spoke of how their lives have been changed by this program, and the literacy teachers spoke of the satisfaction they got by helping empower these village women.

Even though the grant ended several years ago, Stella Maris College is still active today in providing functional literacy training in rural villages surrounding Chennai.

For more information or networking contact [Bob.Keener@sinclair.edu](mailto:Bob.Keener@sinclair.edu)