Be That Change

Changing Lives – Partnerships at the Grassroots

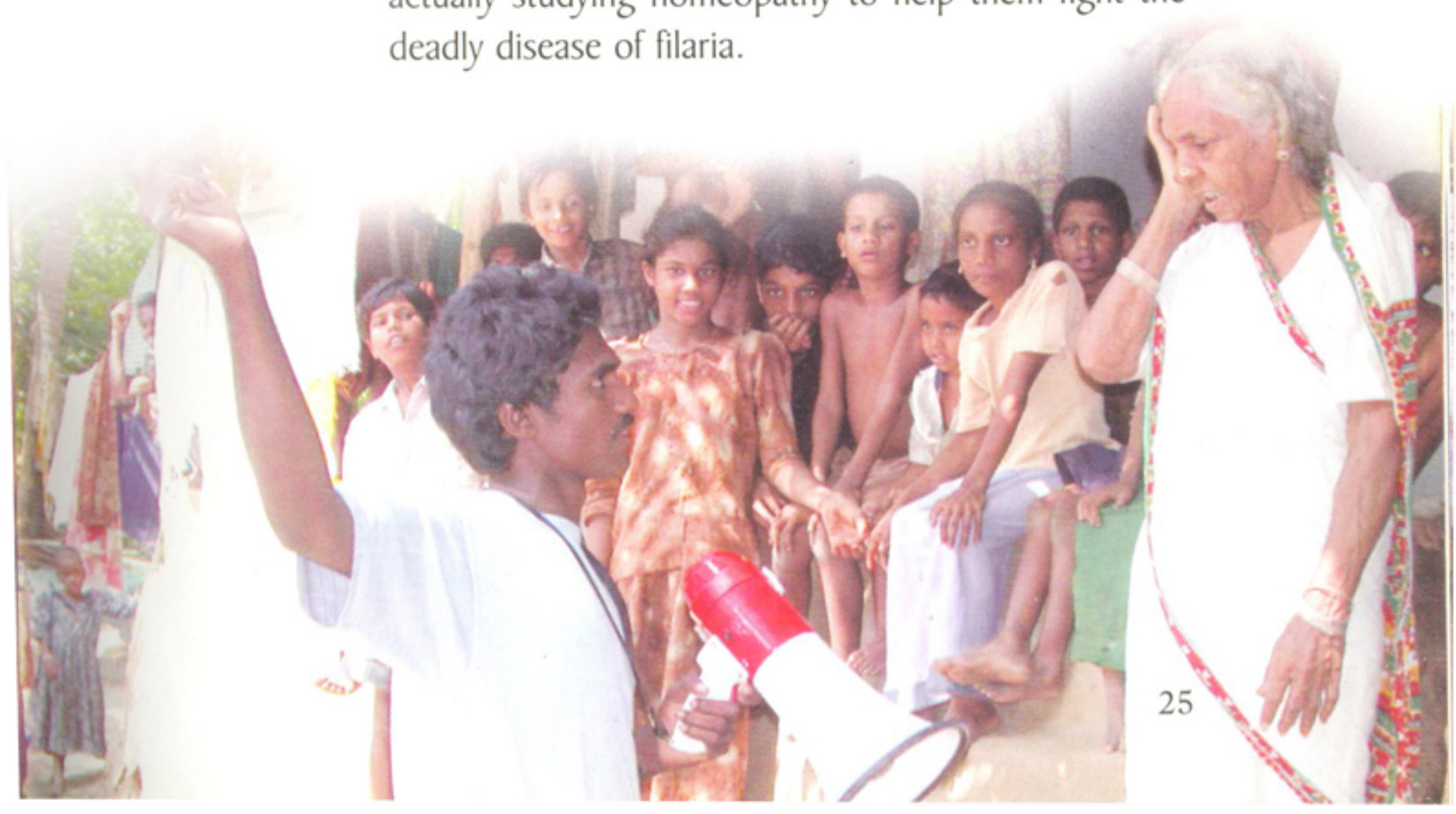
Oxfam

LIVELIHOODS

SURVIVING DISASTERS

As you wind your way between low coconut palm fronds towards Vilasavalli, it is difficult to keep your eyes on the narrow elevated path. Myriad colours of the saris drying in the sun are a distraction. Vilasavalli is a village of 150 artisan families, whose survival and livelihoods are threatened by floods and cyclones that strike the east Godavari Delta of Andhra Pradesh almost every monsoon

M. Jogarao has made himself indispensable to the weaver community here, ever since he came to do relief work after the devastating cyclone of 1996. An unassuming young man, he has endeared himself to people by his sincerity and passion for the relief and rehabilitation work he does. He has strengthened their livelihoods, providing looms, helping them access larger and better markets for their products and also by actually studying homeopathy to help them fight the deadly disease of filaria.



enough. Poverty and deprivation are perpetuated in a vicious cycle."

Oxfam was keen to involve women in addressing this issue. To break the dependence on their menfolk, women were given their very own looms. Today, women weave their own products and even market these independently. Traders are happy because they don't have to invest in them by way of providing raw material and loans. In the bargain they get quality finished products. For the first time, women have enough money to send their children to school and to attend to the health needs of the family.

"I too belong to a weaver's village though I do not come from a weaver community," says Jogarao. Perhaps, because of an early exposure to their lives and needs, I have always been concerned about their living and working conditions. For example, take this issue of looms. Pit looms are the traditional looms here. The weaver sits in a slide-in pit in the ground under his loom to work it. But since this is a coastal area, there is often water logging, extreme humidity – all this encourages the breeding of mosquitoes. Filaria, a mosquito-borne disease, is common among the people here. You will find at least one affected person in every family. This disease is debilitating and it can hit you at any age. You can see the filaria affected people hobbling around with swollen limbs. It is a very painful disease. There is no cure, only prevention. Despite all claims by the government, it has not really been eradicated. It burdens the people here by chewing away at their resources. It prevents them from working, and, with hardly any money for medication, families are often reduced to destitution."

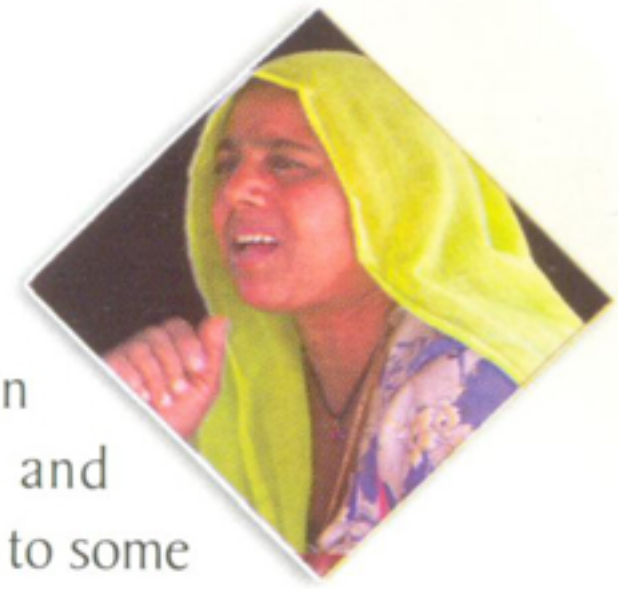
has shown that governments take very long to declare a disaster and till such time, insurances are not disbursed. Since they cannot access cash when they need it the most, there is no confidence in the system."

Traditionally, women assist their husbands by making bobbins, spinning the yarn, starching, ironing and packaging the finished products. Men do the actual weaving. Yet, the men earn but a pittance because the main 'master weaver' gives yarn and loans for family expenses. These loans are adjusted against the wages to be paid for the finished product. Despite long hours of work, they never seemed to have

The devastating flood of 1996 left most of the families here homeless and helpless. Their only source of income, the pit-looms for weaving *saris*, were all crushed under the collapsed roofs. "In the first year after the disaster, some organisations helped these people repair their looms and in the second year they got help for rebuilding their homes. It was in the third year that we requested Sakti, a Hyderabad-based NGO which works with Oxfam GB, to provide looms and a small working capital to buy yarn," says Jogarao.

"I came and lived in the village to understand the peculiar problems of weavers and to help them to re-establish themselves. Floods and cyclones are a frequent phenomenon because this region is very close to river Godavari, which becomes full and turbulent during the monsoons. After interacting with the locals, we were convinced that long-term support was needed in order to reduce the vulnerability of people to the risk of recurring disasters. Subsequently, Oxfam and Sakti began a disaster preparedness programme which included training the village community in early warning systems. Villagers formed action groups to perform special tasks such as first aid, rescue, relief, etc. Oxfam also equipped all of us with basic equipment such as transistor radios, megaphones, torches, helmets, raincoats and boots."

"Oxfam and Sakti also focused on helping us improve our basic amenities and our living standards. We began to save in small groups and used this capital to increase our income. We also got help to repair our houses and repair our traditional water sources. Houses have been reinforced to withstand cyclones. Insurance cover is now available with a one time premium of Rs. 5,000, but this is not proving very successful. Past experience



"About two years ago I decided to explore the possibility of a cure in homeopathy. I read up about it and administered homeopathic medicines to some of the affected people. To my amazement, there were spectacular results. In seven months, Velsamma, a 30 year old mother of three girls, was completely cured. There are others in various stages of recovery. However, not everyone has responded to the treatment. But I am working on it and I hope some day, this health burden too can be completely eradicated."

"It is a complex situation here but people's courage in the face of such adversity is amazing. A few days ago was *Makkar Sankranti*, a major local festival. Everyone wore new clothes, cooked special food and celebrated as if this was the most prosperous place on earth."

"I draw my strength from them because with an attitude like theirs, no situation is insurmountable. 'This too will pass' is their resilient answer to any problem"