

CHITTIAMMA –A PROFILE IN COURAGE

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For Chittiamma the journey from Katuru village in Ganjam district to New York to receive, the Equator Prize 2010, has been long and arduous. The journey began in 1980-81 as a young wife of a fish worker, struggling to make ends meet, determined that her children would have access to education and health facilities.

For this class three drop out her greatest achievement is not the international recognition but the increase in the number of girls in her village going to school. Her one regret not surprisingly is her lack of formal education. All her six children are educated and she takes great pride in the education of her 27 grandchildren

A visit to her village by the members of United Artists Association laid the spark for the formation of a twenty women' self help group led by her. The group's first efforts were directed towards getting education and health facilities and were soon able to get a doctor as well as set up a small school in the village. This spurred her to tackle aggressively the menace of alcoholism which more often than not saw their paltry earnings wiped out. Groups of women removed the illegal liquor brewing units in the village.

She faced opposition at home, with her husband, asked her to stop her work with the group. Her response was simple, she would continue her work as she wasn't doing anything wrong.

She persevered with her increasing group of women from the fish workers community. With the support of UAA and external agency funding under the aegis of their Samudram federation set up in 1993, they were able to remove the middle men who often exploited the fish workers. They set up procurement units where fish was procured directly from the fish workers, stored in deep freeze and transported to markets in the state and other parts of the country. Samudram was able to successfully develop marketing and financial linkages which soon saw an increase in the income of the fish workers.

The women with the support of the UAA were trained in producing value added products from the fish. Today the group produces prawn and fish pickle, prawn papads, fish jhuri bhujia. Chittiamma's pride is palpable as she displays these products, " we decided that instead of going out to work (in the non fishing season) we will generate income within the village."

A meeting with marine conservationists put the Samudram federation on the path of conservation of the Olive Ridleys. The turtles had always been revered by her fishermen community but now she was able to understand the turtles relevance in their lives. The turtles helped boost fish breeding by preying on jelly fish which ate the fish larvae. To her the turtles were as she says truly worthy of reverence

This motivated her to intensify the group's efforts at saving the turtles. They built awareness among the community on the issue. With great pride she lists the measures that have been taken to conserve the turtle. The breeding areas are fenced and community monitors the safety of the turtle eggs and hatchlings. children who carry astray hatchlings back to the sea are often rewarded by her with a little gift. The group was also involved in creating an artificial reef to protect and promote fish habitats.

Her family has been long won over and today this proud matriarch commands respect not only among her community but also in national and international fora.

With her determination and dedication she is an inspiration for the young women in the group but Chittiamma is quick to give credit where it is due "the group gives me courage, I could not have done it alone"