

"WHY are you people crying foul for Cauvery water? Even if the entire water flows through Tamil Nadu, dalits like me are not going to get a drop of it."

This is not an anti-Tamil Nadu propaganda, but the statement of a dalit woman in a Tamil village, pouring her heart out in a cartoon drawn by her. She is one of those hundreds of rural illiterate women who are being taught to wield the power of pencil to focus on their forgotten rights and untapped might.

The project, initiated by a young cartoonist Sharad Sharma and supported by a Finnish organisation called 'World Comics', is aimed at empowering rural women by teaching them the art of cartooning. Through week-long workshops conducted in the villages of Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan,

Pencil power

Illiterate women from rural areas were taught to express their feelings through cartoons! SHRUBA MUKHERJEE reports on cartoon workshops held to empower such women

Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Mizoram, Sharma seeks to help them in proving their thinking prowess and expressing their feelings through comic characters.

But why cartoons? Cartoons and comics have the potential to be used as an effective means of social communication and may be employed as powerful tools for sensitising the masses to a cause, or mobilising public opinion on

an issue. Comics are fun, thought-provoking and have an intrinsic energy of their own, having the power to stimulate, provoke and urge one to action. They can also become effective weapons in the hands of creative artists with a social bent of mind, if they chooses to use them to provoke mass action.

Inspiration towards 'social cartooning' came from World Comics which lent its innovative

comic formats and technical inputs for the cartoon camps. World Comics has done some pioneering work in this area by organising numerous special workshops to popularise social cartooning in third world countries. These workshops, intended to train communities, particularly those without much means, to articulate themselves through the medium of cartoon, have had reasonable success in many countries of Latin America and Africa. In these countries, village people are creating comics that focus on local issues and serve to mobilise opinion on the issues that concern them.

Explaining how he went about teaching cartoons to women, Sharma said he began with simple illustrations - a few straight lines on paper which took shape into a small hut. Step by step, participants were then taught to add on a horizon, a simple background, a tree and a few birds in the sky.

The next session was also with lines viz, a large rectangle, two legs and some embellishments. Then Sharma took up the task of drawing a character. Using straight lines and a bend here, a curve there, a "3" for an ear, a face in profile of a man was now ready.

Faces and expressions were the next items the participants learnt. Three, four, five circles positioned properly give us a face. And then add in an up-turned or a down-turned lip to make the face either smile or scowl. It was shown to the participants how to add dialogues to a character and make it clear if he/she was talking aloud, whispering or thinking. The different balloons were drawn out with the faces, and the concepts were explained to the participants.

While conducting workshops, particularly in tribal villages,

one major problem faced by Sharma was illiteracy. "For instance, 80 per cent of the participants in the far-flung regions of MP like Jhabua, Dhar and Khandwa, have never held a pencil in their hands. How to initiate them into sketching? Moreover, since 90 per cent participation was tribal, there was language problem also," says Sharma.

But he tried to solve the problem by using more visuals which were self-explanatory and thus there was no need of writing on panels. He tried to utilise the skills of tribal women in putting rangoli in their thatched huts.

"It was the participants who decided on the subjects and a great deal of variety could be noticed in issues picked up by women coming from different states. While women from Rajasthan or Tamil Nadu focused more on issues concerning water, those from Jharkhand picked up social evils like burning of women branded as witches, and tribal participants brought out issues like forest resources and eviction," says Sharma.

"Even women in Bikaner, Rajasthan, created cartoons on politically sensitive subjects like booth-capturing. But we generally do not take up controversial issues as that might hurt local political sentiments and we might be asked to close down the camps," he said.

Thus, the issue of child marriage was never taken up in the camps in Rajasthan.

While the follow up camps, organised once every three months, reflect a certain improvement in awareness levels, the cartooning camps do provide a great service to the 'silent majority' of population by giving them an opportunity to speak out their mind.