Paalaguttapalle bags a future

Dalit women have crafted a hit

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E. Paalaguttapalle can’t be found on Google Maps even after zooming into its nearest village, Pakala, in Andhra Pradesh’s Chittoor district. But the women of the Dalitwada, who faced extreme poverty after drought in parts of Rayalseema from 2010-15, are now flooded with orders for their cloth bags.

It all began with a lucky conversation. Aparna Krishnan, a software engineer who moved to Paalaguttapalle to become an organic farmer, was asked by one of her dealers if someone could supply cotton bags to Hyderabad. Ms. Krishnan contacted N. Annapurna, who did tailoring jobs to support her family, and gave her ₹1,000 to buy cloth. Once the bags were done, she had them delivered to Hyderabad. Ms. Annapurna earned ₹1,000 for the order.

Soon, more orders arrived, and the team grew to 10. Ms. Krishnan helped the group with the initial finance, sourcing material, and marketing via the Paalaguttapalle Bags website and Facebook page. Everything else is done by the women themselves.

A bagful of luck

Their first big order arrived in 2017 – the women made 1,700 bags for the Organic World Congress in Noida and generated revenue of ₹5 lakh. In February 2018, they turned a profit of ₹25,000 at a handloom expo in Goa. More recently, a large consignment went to an organic firm in the U.S. They have also taken orders from several engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu.

“We are able to earn a decent living now,” Ms. Annapurna says. Their hectic order schedule is met by roping in women from surrounding villages.

The Paalaguttapalle Bags’ customisable range now includes grocery bags, totes, conference bags with logos, tiffin carry bags, jewellery pouches and fancy gift bags, Ms. Annapurna says. “We want to make Paalaguttapalle Bags famous, for which we must make high-quality, good-looking bags. We are approaching banks for finance to buy more equipment.”

Their latest innovation is a strong, canvas vegetable bag with compartments to keep tomatoes, say, from being squished by heavier potatoes. Ms. Krishnan’s Facebook post on the bag has fetched an overwhelming response – the women will deliver 2,000 bags priced at ₹350 each over the next couple of months.