

*A piece of vacant land has helped 20 HIV-positive women in Tamil Nadu get back their self-esteem*

Divya A | TNN

**I**n Radhapuram, a small village in Tamil Nadu's Tirunelveli district, a group of 20 HIV-positive women led the life of the destitute. Their crime? Contracting a "shameful disease" like AIDS. Most of them came from very poor families, they had no money for their treatment or even for daily expenses. Some were even not allowed to meet their children.

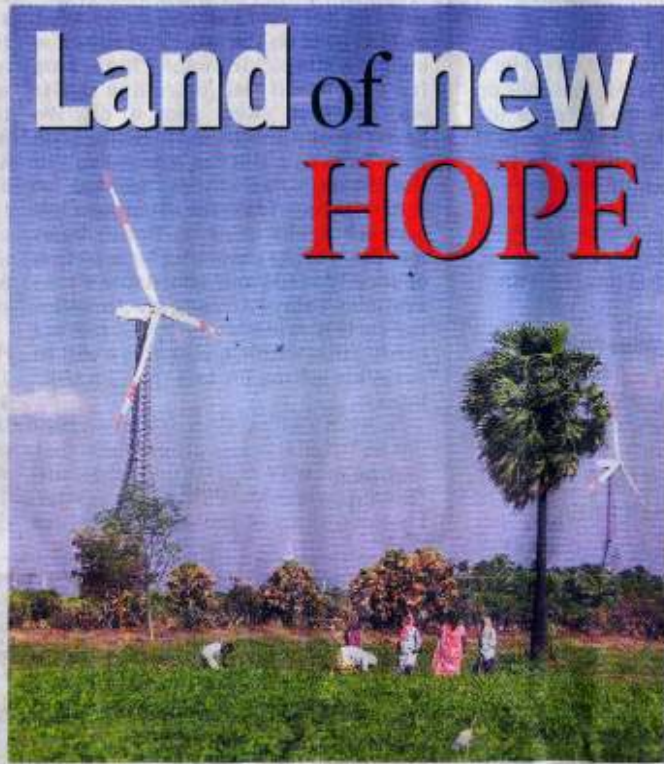
But that was till last year. Life changed for the better when they were given a hand-up rather than a hand-out. The women got their self-esteem back. And they are

now self-supporting members of the community.

It all started with a small piece of vacant land, earmarked for windmills by an energy company. Local activists approached Suzlon Energy, the company, through an NGO working in the area and requested it allow Radhapuram's 20 HIV-positive women to use it till windmills were erected.

"The idea clicked. And so, instead of keeping the 45-acre plot vacant, the land was given to local women for use for three years," says Seemantinee Khot, head of corporate social initiatives at Suzlon Foundation.

Today, the women grow vegetables on "their own land", eating some and selling the rest. Some of the money they earn is used for medical treatment; some women help pay for their children's education. Plans are afoot to "expand their business" and venture into



growing cereals, pulses and groundnut.

Khot says it's not the land per se, but "the responsibility. Their morale got a boost." But Shivani Bhardwaj, programme director at Sathi all for Partnerships, an NGO that promotes women's right to land, says what happened at Radhapuram was not unexpected. "It has been proven that access to natural resources is vital for the excluded sections of the society, including women, because in developing countries, the livelihoods are crucially dependent on them."

Internationally, gender equality in terms of access to natural re-

sources is considered a fundamental prerequisite of democracy, says Anne Stenhammer, South Asia programme director at the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

Radhapuram is already spawning clones. Suzlon is replicating the experiment in Udethur, a small village near Kanyakumari. The beneficiaries are 20-odd women from the socio-economically backward community of rat-catchers.

Khot says the 42 acre land in Udethur has a water-pump and several full-grown coconut and other trees. It represents "a platform and an opportunity" for them to take control of their lives, she says.



**WINDS OF CHANGE:** HIV-positive women in Radhapuram grow vegetables on the land and are now self-reliant