

THE POWER WOMEN - 5

# Her tryst with change

*International Women's Day* CELEBRATING 100 YEARS

**C**all it tough love. Members of the Working Women's Forum get a clear, unambiguous edict from founder Jaya Arunachalam. "Your poverty, the number of kids you have and the treatment you get at home and workplace are of your own making. Fight your way out. Swim or sink." Invariably they sail, using the training, orientation and knowledge they get from trainers — women once like them. "Do it yourself," Jaya tells them. "Bring change in your life."

Just what Amulu Subramanian, a masala peanut vendor did. Fifteen years ago she knocked at WWF hoping for a small loan. Her unsettled husband wasn't making enough to feed the three young kids. "I got more than the Rs. 200 I wanted to expand the business," she says. "Jaya madam asked, 'Why don't you do the selling?' She told me to work, trust in myself, stand on my feet." Since then Amulu has taken several loans from the women's co-operative, educated the kids and bought a piece of land. "Without madam we don't exist," she says.

Once a stalwart of the Indian National Congress, Jaya Arunachalam quit politics to start a movement of her own. She started a co-operative bank, and also taught women to fight for reproductive and labour rights. Today, a million women are part of a changing scenario.

**GEETA PADMANABHAN**

A product of three generations in the women's movement, Jaya "was groomed in the Gandhian mould". Once a stalwart of the Indian National Congress, she quit party politics to start a movement of her own in 1978 with 800 women, which now has more than a million. "The women I gathered for party rallies taught me that top-down speeches had no meaning," she says. "Public meetings simply disrupted their work. They needed vital services to make life easier."

## Welfare targets

In the 1960s and 70s, leaders — even progressive ones — saw women as welfare targets. Women were given grants, free rations and then forgotten. Unbelievably, lace-makers and silk weavers of Narasapur and Kancheepuram and matchstick makers of Vellore were contributing substantially to the economy. They didn't need crumbs; they needed empathy in the form of micro-loan programmes, vocational training, entrepreneurship support. They wanted relief

from middlemen. "The Forum paid Rs. 3,000 each and asked them to join a weaving/marketing society," says Jaya.

With a friend, she did the rounds of slums. She talked of child labour, about shaking off poverty. "In the aftermath of the family planning fiasco, we had cadres from slums going door-to-door in villages in three states advising women on reproductive rights. With support from the Dutch government and funds from friends, we extended health, nutrition and hygiene care. Gandhigram University's orientation helped us."

After a five-week training course in development programme in Washing-

ton, Jaya started a co-operative bank in 1981 with a seed capital of Rs. five lakh. Apart from credit and a marketing outlet, the forum would provide a platform to fight for labour rights. "In that sense we are a trade union," she says. "Here pavement vendors become empowered entrepreneurs. Their position in the organisation gives them status." Trainer Parvathi's gender-based training using visual charts helps illiterate women talk authoritatively on women's rights, law and methods to manage recalcitrant husbands.

It is mass leadership. Groups of ten in urban, semi-urban slums and rural areas choose an area leader. All leaders are members of the governing body. They meet, discuss, exchange notes, solve their problems. There are two VPs, a secretary, an advisory committee, and the president. Being share-holders in the co-operative, they have authority to question its workings. The WWF hand-out lists lakhs as beneficiaries of the movement.

Mageswari Vellachami, who once didn't know how to take a bus, sells Burmese noodles, employs two women and has earned the respect of the husband who waits to pick her up outside the office. Mageswari has been an organiser

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**JAYA ARUNACHALAM** PHOTO: V. GANESAN

for 15 years. "Getting trained in crafts like embroidery prevents women being married off early," she says.

Poongodi blinks back tears saying, "Banks gave loans to married women. Amma gives it on faith." It is a chorus. "She gave me courage. Without being able to sign my name, I earn, have an FD, a passbook."

Anyone with a genuine grievance can call on the forum. "My poor women are showing the way to others," says Jaya proudly. "The organisation is a model for elite, educated women. It attracts

researchers and interns from India and abroad."

Still, all is not well, Jaya concedes. There is workplace harassment, honour killing. She organised a rally against petrol/diesel hike, collected one lakh signatures for the Women's Reservation Bill. Think, she says pointedly, who enacts the law? Who executes decision, enforces law and order? Who is the protector of justice? For us, religious personal laws are more important than gender justice. "Gender equality, for our women, is a struggle for survival."