



Archana women's centre at Vettimukal near Kottayam in Central Kerala is creating history of sorts. The centre trains women in masonry and other trades related to house construction. There are now over two thousand trained women masons in different districts of Kerala trained by the Archana Centre Over 2000 masons, 200 carpenters, 100 electricians and 50 plumbers trained by the Archana Women's Centre are today involved in various construction-related work in different districts of Kerala.

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Homemakers become House builders

Reji Joseph

It is everyone's dream to have a house of one's own, and that too, a safe one. But there are many who have to keep this wish as an unfulfilled dream. Among the women who got trained in masonry at Archana women's centre, there are very few who belong to this category. This is because they now possess their own houses. And the beauty of it is that the women masons come together to build houses for one another. In this way they recapture one of the long-lost social virtues of Kerala - that of caring for and helping one's neighbor. In less than three months they are able to finish a small house with two rooms and a kitchen. This is possible because the building team consists of not only masons, but also plumbers, carpenters and electricians. A truly self-sufficient, self-confident building team!

The Archana women's centre's mission in this sector is not merely to enable women masons to have their own houses but to help make them skilled labourers who make a livelihood through masonry and other related trades. The trained women were once in the role of assisting male masons and earning less than half of the wages of men. Now they have developed in to masons themselves. Over 2000 masons, 200 carpenters, 100 electricians and 50 plumbers trained by the Archana Women's Centre are today involved in various construction-related work in different districts of Kerala.

Kerala is a state where skilled workers are in short supply today. For a long time we have by and large been depending on masons from Kanyakumari and other districts of Tamil Nadu for our masonry needs. The inflow of native women masons into this sector is indeed a great relief. What is remarkable about it is the fact that this has not been a "smooth inflow" for the women. It was in fact a sort of gate-crashing into areas of male monopoly. Today these women earn the same wages as their male counterparts. Why not? Same work, same wages and same quality - sometimes even better! They have become admirable wage earners for their families.

Bringing unemployed and underemployed women together to make this breakthrough was not at all an easy task. It is not only called for training in technical skills, but an immense investment in enhancing their natural prowess and this is the core of the Archana achievement and its uncompromising leader, Thresiamma Mathew. The Archana - trained women are today admirably scaling new heights.

What Archana women's centre has launched is in effect a new labour movement. Women in their blue uniforms, caps and the tools of their trade, have a discipline which goes quite beyond their attire. It was in 1989 that Thresiamma Mathew, a nun belonging to the secular Institute of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, started this innovative training movement. For Thresiamma, who hails from the Puzhakkunil family of Uthukunnam

in Kerala's Kottayam District - "Manava seva i.e. Service to Humanity is Service to God."

The training of women masons first started in Thiruvananthapuram and The Jesuapurna Women Masons Society was formed to bring together all the women masons under one umbrella. The training soon spread to Kollam, Alleppey and Kottayam (Thellakom) - before establishing the centre at Vettimukal near Ettumanoor. What Archana women's centre offers is a three months training programme in Masonry, carpentry, wiring and plumbing with stipend, followed by six months integrated training in these trades.

-2- The target group of women often consists of those with below - matriculation education and the challenge consists in taking them to levels above mere brick-laying. They get trained in preparing plans and estimates for the buildings that they are going to construct. This involves challenges and leads to their getting to enhance their self-esteem, developing a sense of pride in their new found skills etc. It involves attention to personality development, behaviour, communication, group dynamics, managerial skills, physical exercises, yoga, meditation etc. All this is wrapped together in the "Social Training" that Thresiamma advocates as a "Must" for the women to undergo before and along with their skill training. No loose talk is permitted at the worksite. Nobody talks ill of anybody either. They all learn to respect each other. They also never stand or sit idle once at the worksite. These are some of the elements of the work culture which Thresiamma has inculcated in to the Archana Women's brigade. No wonder these hard working, disciplined women get wide acceptance wherever they go for work.

No trained worker should remain idle at home either. Thresiamma is very particular about this. On account of the commitment and competence of these women workers, they are in high demand - even among major builders. Most of them however choose to work in or close to their own villages, earning good wages. In this way, they are able to take care of their homes too. The work hours are from 9.30 a.m. to 5 p.m. with a half-hour break for lunch. This schedule also vastly helps them do justice to their household chores.

In addition to masonry work, the women of Archana women's centre produce cement bricks, door frames and window frames, all of which are in high demand. The beautiful double-storied head office of the centre was constructed by Archana



Women from 'A to Z'. The centre is now the authorized agency to give training to Kudumbasree personnel in construction related works. The Housing Board also seeks their services occasionally. With all these innovations, there is a change in the old social perception that women are not reliable as workers in the building sector, which has for long been almost exclusively a male bastion.

What the Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate have done through this pioneering efforts is to ensure equality for women in competence as well as in wages and also make them self-dependent. Working with people in communities and living with them in the villages as ordinary villagers, they are well aware of the diverse hardships faced by women. It is this awareness coupled with their commitment that made them start Archana as an innovative centre for sustainable development of women. Many families which were at the brink of falling apart because of alcoholism, domestic quarrels and other such problems have now been restored to peace and decent living, as a result of Thresiamma's persevering efforts.

A new dawn

Women labourers who until recently used to be seen in shabby, loose worn out shirts and torn lungies with a bathing towel covering their heads is now a thing of the past. This typical image is being changed by Archana women's centre today. What is happening through Archana is a new dawn. If women like Bindu Sebastian can pilot aircraft like

Air India Express, why can't others do smaller things like building houses? Why can't they earn as much as men do? In fact women generally do more work than men and are more committed in their work. Why should they earn less? Thresiamma questions this state of affairs and wants to ensure women's dignity in sectors where they are ignored and looked down upon. It is this vision of hers that we see reflected in the attitudes and standards of the life of the women masons.

-3- How should women see themselves? How should they manage their homes? How should they bring up their children? How should they keep themselves safe? All these are aspects of the integrated training which the women of Archana get. Many eminent persons from different parts of the world have visited the Archana women's centre and admired the formation programmes and performance of those imparted training. Several of the women of Archana even had opportunity to travel by Air and go on several study trips too. These excursions and exposures are part of the integrated training package which helps makes them more confident and capable. The progress from the passive role of support workers on work site to that of a skilled worker equipped with engineering skills is a quantum jump.

The tough journey

Obviously it was not easy when women started replacing men and started laying bricks standing on tall scaffolding. There were many to criticize and laugh at them. Most people were reluctant to call women for hard masonry work because they were used to seeing them as the "weaker sex". Gradually they came to realize the quality and commitment of the work undertaken by these women and the stability of the products they produced. Today, among the women of Archana, there are mothers who educate their children in professional courses like engineering, nursing, MBA etc. Every one of them has a bank account and insurance cover as well.

From breaking rubble for the foundation to related earth works, mixing of mortar, plastering of walls, concreting of roofs - all such work is undertaken by these women. When Tsunami destroyed several houses in Alappad panchayat in Kollam Dt, Archana women went there to extend a helping hand and constructed as many as 42 houses for them.

Archana skilled work force has received

training not only from local experts, but also from experts from abroad. It was Mauro Peppolino from Luxembourg who led the training in house wiring. Wout Strallman from Holland gave advanced training in interior designing. New technology and modern machinery have added elegance and speed to the carpentry division of Archana. Naturally there is high demand for these products. Good quality timber is directly purchased from Kerala Forest department.

Archana's project coordinator, Shalby Kuruvilla, is a civil engineer and therefore quality assurance is a built in factor at Archana. The master trainers include Radhika Prasad, Valsala Thomas, Maya Kochumanoon and Indhira. Archana's office building is their achievement as well as a demonstration of their competence and reliability.

Some of the subsidiary programmes at Archana include making of solar lamps, waste management control, organic farming and tailoring. Mind power before hand power - this is part of Thresiamma's vision. Previously the workers uniform was a chudidar with red check design; now it is pants and shirts, which is more conducive to climbing scaffolding and doing hard physical labour.

A new face for Christian commitment

Thresiamma belongs to the Canada-based Secular religious order known as the Oblate Missionaries Of Mary Immaculate. This committed group of women does not have any specific congregational attire or symbols to wear. They dedicate themselves to service by living among the people, merging with them, and at the same time maintaining their identity. They are engaged in all walks of life. Thus today there are among them - teachers, Government servants, Advocates, community organizers, skilled trainers, office managers, post mistresses and many others. They have totally surrendered their lives to God giving up family life, but they don't use the title "Sister".

Thresiamma, who leads Archana, had her higher training in community development at Coady International Institute (Canada). In 1988 she joined the water and sanitation project of Socio-Economic units from where in fact that the Archana vision evolved. At Archana now we see ambitious women queuing up to join training and on the other side we see trained women moving out to start an empowered career, which in turn leads to an empowered life. This is the Archana Model of Empowerment.



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