

# THE WOMEN'S SELF-EMPLOYMENT CENTRE: INITIATIVE AT WORK

Shahin Rana Sahri

Nestled amongst the slums of Achanak Colony, Andheri, is an unostentatious set-up, the Women's Self-Employment Centre, working zealously to better the living conditions of the economically backward women in the locality.

Here, creativity unfolds before your eyes as a group of women, belonging to different communities and age groups, sit together on the floor dexterously working on their handicrafts. The results of their work are exquisite soft toys, delightful puppets, charming decorative pieces, beautiful bags, attractive aprons, wonderful wall-hangings, etc.

The ambience is hospitable, friendly and peaceful. It is a workplace with a difference. There is no supervisor breathing down the neck or keeping a hawk's eye to ensure quality. The onus of creating quality products lies on each craftswoman. And she is happy to carry it responsibly.

Started in May 1984, The Women's Self-Employment Centre "is the brain-child of Sister Isabel, of The Missionaries of Christ Jesus," says Sister Regina of the Centre.

Sister Isabel hails from Spain but has been residing in India for the past 35 years, devotedly working amongst the poor and deprived of our country. During the course of her work, Sister Isabel observed that Mahakali Caves Road, "is characterised by a core of middle class prosperity encircled by many, many slums — Gautam Nagar, Azad Nagar, Sunder Nagar, Govind Nagar, etc. In these slums the people who suffer the most are undoubtedly the women."

With husbands often



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jobless or drinking away their wages, the women were earlier left with hardly any choice but to take up some kind of employment. A majority of them became part-time maids in a couple of houses in neighbouring well-off areas. Others tried their luck in the factories nearby.

However, the chances of a woman who is not for-

mally educated finding a suitable job are very bleak. If such women do find employment in a factory, more often than not, they have to be satisfied with a pittance for daily wages and they are engaged as and when their employers need them with not much hope of ever being made permanent workers.

There were no job op-

portunities which promised a sense of dignity and a new meaning to life for these women. So, Sister Isabel along with other dedicated persons from Jeevan Nirwaha Niketan started an additional department — The Women's Self-Employment Centre.

The Centre aims at educating poor women of the community through a self-

she says. She uses her money to help her mother run the house.

13 year old Antimia Dhadij and 15 year old Vinita are sisters who work at the Centre from 8.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. and attend school in the afternoon. Their mother too is attached to the Centre on a fulltime basis.

"My husband does not have a permanent job. Often he has no work at all. I tried many jobs to meet household expenses and finally settled for this. Such set-ups are a blessing for us because the Centre teaches us a skill and makes us self-reliant. Moreover, in the beginning, we get paid to learn! Tell me could we poor people afford to join a class to learn a skill?"

"What option would we have had but to wash someone's clothes or vessels? Over here, we work for ourselves, not for someone else. It is good work. My daughters too work here in the mornings instead of wasting their time in useless chatter, acquiring a skill which will benefit them in

the future."

Kalpana Murkar from Kanjur Marg is the most educated of the young girls. This 17 year old is an SSC certificate holder. She lost her father some time ago. Her mother works in a factory and her siblings are studying. With job opportunities scarce in Kanjur Marg, Kalpana followed her aunt's advice and came to stay with her near the Centre and joined it. Today, she has completed 6 months with the Centre and exhibits a professional touch in her work.

Almost every young girl and woman of the Centre has her own special story to tell. But the underlying message is the same — that the Centre which maintains a low profile had touched their lives and made it better.

Briefly explaining to us the *modus operandi*, Sister Regina says, "When a young girl or woman comes to join our Centre, we first screen her thoroughly because our aim is to cater to the very needy women of society. After we are satisfied that she really belongs to our target group, she is taken on as a trainee. We have teachers who come to teach our trainees sewing, embroidery, fabric painting, applique work and how to make soft toys. Initially they are paid a stipend of Rs 200 per month. Yes, it is a kind of earn-while-you learn programme. When they make a toy, they earn extra

Sister Isable (in green), the driving force behind the Self-Employment Centre.



Deft fingers at work, creating eye-catching stuffed toys.

money for that.

"After gaining sufficient experience and expertise, the women are encouraged to form their own co-operative centre. Each centre can have a maximum of 5 women. These co-operatives, under the guidance and supervision of the Centre, work as independent units. They have to acquire sewing machines, materials, make toys, etc by themselves."

In 3 places in the slums, the women have organised themselves into such co-operatives.

Sushila Rajan, a middle-aged housewife, lives with her husband and son in Govind Nagar. 5 years ago her husband lost his job and Sushila was desperately trying to find one for herself. A social worker from Holy Spirit Hospital suggested that she pay a visit to the Centre. Sushila did. Today she heads one of the co-operatives.

Speaking forthrightly she states, "I find this work of making toys very interesting. Of course, remuneration-wise you do not get all the benefits you would get if you were employed in some factory. But then over

here you are self-employed, you earn money and also have a creative outlet. So it is good."

How do the women sell their handicrafts? Well, sale of the Centre's handicrafts is done through a shop on wheels. A Maruti van has been converted into a delightful mobile shop with rolled up windows with an exciting display of a fascinating range of soft toys, handbags, decoration pieces, coasters, aprons, dolls, puppets, mobiles, etc. The shop is parked at selected outlets to effect sales. At present you may spot the van (from 4 p.m. — 7 p.m.) on Fridays at Bandra's Hill Road, on Mondays at Vile Parle and Tuesdays at Lokhandwala Complex, Andheri (West).

"We are scouting for more sales-effective spots and hope to take our toys to other areas in the near future," says Sister Regina.

Lastly, the price tags on the Centre's products are reasonable, especially if you bear in mind the purpose behind it all. After all the dolls and puppets you buy for your children, you buy daal and rice for many, many other children. ■■

WOMAN'S ERA (Bombay Edition)

**Among the unsung heroines of our times are people like Sister Isabel who came from Spain to help the poor in India and set up the Women's Self-Employment Centre. The Centre is doing yeoman service in the slums of Bombay.**

employment scheme which at present, develops their skills and talents by teaching them how to make clothes, soft toys and other articles of daily use.

Since its inception, a lot of women from the lower income group have benefited in different ways from the Centre. "Some of our women, who have acquired tailoring skills, have gone

back to their villages to start a new life," states Sister Isabel and hopes, "the training given to the women at the Centre will enable them to play a leading role in the upliftment of other women in their neighbourhood and in other similar community projects."

"Today we have about a 100 or so women," says Sister Regina, "and the in-

come these women earn, contributes a lot to improvement in the living conditions of their families."

A series of impromptu interviews conducted with some young girls and women of the Centre bears out sister Regina's statement.

17 year old Tabassum Khan has been with the Centre for 5 years now. A class 5 drop-out, she heard of the Centre and decided to join it on a part-time basis.

Her father, a watch mechanic, and her mother, who stitches clothes to supplement the family income, unhesitatingly gave her the green signal to join the Centre. "Because it is an all-woman enterprise," says Tabassum candidly, "Moreover you learn a nice skill and the remuneration is not bad."

Totally unskilled at the beginning, today Tabassum is a skilled toy-maker. "We get a fixed salary every month plus Rs 5 per toy that we make. The number of toys I make per month varies and so does my income," she tells us and adds, "my mother puts all my earnings in the bank."

However many of Tabassum's friends at the Centre don't get to save their incomes. But the young girls are not sorry. In fact, they feel proud and satisfied to be able to contribute to the family kitty.

Chanda R. Jaswant dropped out of 7th standard. Her father lost his job after lock-out was declared in the factory in which he worked. Her mother sells vegetables. Chanda came to the Centre in search of a decent job one year ago. "I'm happy I came here,"