

EMPOWERMENT

**A**BYLANE stokes up to one of the ground floor Janata flats at Sarita Vihar adjoining the Badarpur and Okhla industrial areas in South Delhi. It is around 10 am in the morning. A small group of women is busy — dicing vegetables, kneading dough, all the chores that go into the making of a meal. No, they are not members of a joint family. They prepare the meals and pack and deliver them at lunch hour to several offices and industrial units around. The process is repeated in the evening.

The women are all members of the Satwik (Sahas-trained women

# WIELDING A LADLE OF POWER

SOMETIMES, ALL IT TAKES IS THE BELIEF THAT ONE HELPING HAND WILL AUTOMATICALLY BE CLASPED BY SEVERAL OTHER HELPING ONES. SATWIK SHOWS THE WAY.  
BY PURABI SHRIDHAR



in the kitchen) catering unit, which came into operation on March 8, 2000. The members are women in need from less privileged backgrounds, now tasting 'empowerment' for the first time in their life and, above all, taking home a pay packet.

#### THE COURAGE TO STAND ALONE

Satwik came out of Sahas-Neev (NEEV stands for a Novel Endeavour in Education Venture), which arose from Sahas, which owes its existence to Sunita Palita, an anthropologist-cum-social development consultant. It struck Sunita, who has been associated with UNICEF and World Food Programmes, that soliciting international funds was not the correct approach to social development. "Development is possible without money," she avers. "We are not poor in resource or intellect."

And it is this resource and intellect that she sought to garner. Thus was Sahas born seven years ago with one guiding principle: "We will not accept money from anyone. If you want to do something for us, volunteer or donate something in kind."

The Palita family pooled in their resources and the ground floor Janata flat was set aside for Sahas activities. Rajinder

Singh of the Delhi School of Planning & Architecture, two Delhi University professors, and others contributed their time and skills to set up Neev, the school for underprivileged children. The teachers, led by Swati, a gold medalist from Delhi University, are all volunteers, trained in child development at Lady Irwin College. Sunita has also managed to secure 'freeships', free transport, books and uniforms for her children in some of the leading schools in South Delhi; Tagore International School having taken the lead in welcoming them.

It was the mothers of these children who sowed the seed of Satwik.

#### RECIPE FOR EMPOWERMENT

Munni Jha, a veiled, 'inter' pass, mother-

of-two from Bhagalpur, Bihar, approached Sunita for work—any work.

So did 50-year-old Sharda Roy, a widow who had been working for more than 20 years as a domestic cook.

Yashodhara Chauhan, deserted by her husband who took away her eight-year-old son as well, came in desperation.

They were poor, semi-educated or totally illiterate; they wanted a way, a financial path especially, out of the daily morass that life had become.

They were not trained for anything, but yes, everybody could cook. Working on her policy of 'marrying the professional with the traditional', Sunita decided to start a small catering unit. The office room adjoining the classroom was cleared out. Friends, well-wishers and corporate houses donated the gas stove, utensils, dining-table-converted-into-a-work-table and refrigerator. Recalls Sunita, "I told them I would provide the pulses and wheat free for a year; the rest they had to organise. They had to make the venture viable within a year."

#### MEETING ORDERS

Sunita tapped the adjoining industrial areas for orders, and the response was overwhelming. She also sought help for training from the Institute of Hotel Management, Pusa, which immediately despatched an executive to do the needful.

At Rs 30 a plate, a Satwik meal consists of a vegetable dish, 'dal', rice and 'roti', salad and a sweet dish, on request. Currently, there are 20 women, in two batches, working two shifts. Sunita ultimately plans to take the number up to 50. She also plans to send some of them on a month-long training stint to the Institute of Hotel Technology.

The women, who, upto a few months ago were caught in poverty and illiteracy, today hold their heads high. Each woman earns anything from Rs 1,000 to Rs 3,000 every month, on an average. They have learnt to share the responsibilities, to shop from the wholesale market, and above all, to take their place in society. They want more bulk orders and are also planning to make, packet and sell snacks.

Munni Jha speaks for all when she says, "I came here a timid, scared, poor woman. Today I am confident, I'm proud of my own achievements and I have friends for life." Adds Sharda Roy, shyly, "Satwik is my home, my life."

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