

# Some Superheroes Wear Caps

*From delivering mail to being the breadwinner, Elizabeth Charles is not just a postwoman but a hero for her family as well as for many others in Triplicane*

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Snaking her way through autos and bikes, Elizabeth Charles looks at the address on the envelope in her hand and looks up at the board of the Madrasa, on Pycrofts road at Triplicane, Chennai. In a bright orange cotton saree, worn-out cap and toting a *jholna* bag, like only someone on a mission could wear, she glances at the number of mails she would have to drop here. An employee at the post office for the past 23 years, she has been working as a full-time postwoman for the last four years.

After dropping off the deliverables, she maps the streets of Zam bazaar for her next delivery. “Everyone around Triplicane knows me on a first-name basis.” Elizabeth got into post office work only as a helper to the clerk there, but now she is keen on fieldwork. “Had it not been for the outdoor job, I would have been like the frog in a well. It completely changed my perspective on life.” Sweat trickles from her tan forehead, as she compares her desk job to the scores of kilometres she has to cover every day to deliver mail. She looks down upon her dusty toes and says, “It is a physical plight for us. Sometimes, it does take a toll on our body. Nevertheless, I love my job.”

Like many other working women, Elizabeth's day starts as early as five in the morning. She prepares food for two of her sons and her husband Charles, who works in a private company before she leaves home at eight for work. Only if she works, do they make ends meet for the day. Above all, she does not want her children to suffer without proper education as she did. This keeps her going more than anything else. Speaking about her sons, her face beams with pride, "Akash, my elder son, is studying engineering, and Andrews the younger one, who is aspiring to be a doctor, is in high school."

Starting her journey as an office-assistant at Thiyyagaraya Nagar post office in 1993, soon after she completed high school, Elizabeth got the job by the courtesy of her mother Agnes Mary, who was working there. "Back then, there were as few as 50 postwomen across the state," she says.

Recruited as a temporary staff due to lack of human resources, Elizabeth continues to be one even after 27 years of service. "Though we are temporary workers, we are treated as permanent staff when it comes to the quantity and quality of work. Although we do all the

work, there is a huge wage gap between us and the other staff,” she says, describing the way they were treated with slavery.

After a couple of decades of struggle, a group of temporary staff members, along with Elizabeth, have filed a complaint regarding their jobs. They did not have a choice but to move to court, as they were not getting any benefits of a government employee. "In these times, what can one do with only Rs. 10,000? The plight of our lives has been the same for years," she says. Elizabeth does not want to comment on the case as the matter is still in court.

When she was changed to the delivery department, Elizabeth was not sure how it would pan out for her. On the contrary, she has seen the sorry condition of people, who are marginalised in society. Understanding their struggles has given her a new lease on life. She says it could not have gotten any better for her.

Elizabeth claims that she gained a lot just by interacting with people. “A lot of my personal issues have been resolved through conversations. Although we live in a permanent house, we did not have the documents for it. I got to know details such as whom to approach, what to do, not through the officers I worked with for 23 years, but through the people I met on the streets,” she says.

The best part about her job is to try and create awareness among people, who are struggling and unaware of the means to fulfil their needs. For Elizabeth, the overwhelming moment in her career so far would be, when she educated the old residents of Bakkir Sahib street about the Old Age Pension scheme by the government. "Though it is just Rs. 1,000, it is a big thing for them. When I explained the procedure and eventually they got their pensions, they were all in tears, thanking me." Despite not being sure about the future, it is for these kinds of moments Elizabeth lives for and is the reason behind why she loves doing what she does.