

ANUSHREE JONKO

NEW MEDIA

I, The Pursuit of Identity: Royapuram Edition

“This is the second innings of my life”, beamed Rajeshwari, who is a member of the Avvai Kalai Kazhagam since 2015. These words reverberated through every brick of this tranquil, white and non-descript building situated in one of the narrow alleys of Royapuram, Chennai. The only male worker in this organisation was the watchman and the entire three storeyed building heavily resonated with the feeling of a certain kind of liberty. There was no sudden tidying of blouses, mallipoo, or the rapid covering up of oneself here, as women would normally do in a public place. This was a safe space. It was not mentioned anywhere but the essence of womanhood was so strong here, one could hard deny it.

Avvai Kalai Kazhagam was established in 1994 and since 25 years it has been celebrating women in all of their thick, innate individuality. This group of women believe in empowering each other and work efficiently to create an identity for themselves.

Empowerment and emancipation transgress class, caste and age here as women from 40 to 70, in cotton and Kanchipuram sarees, sit on the floor and make Golu or festive dolls that are especially put on display during Navratri. Contrary to what one expects of women, they are not chatting or gossiping but are immersed into their work. Amidst the acrylic paint, beads, thermocol, strewn everywhere on the floor, sat Kokila Amma, (as the women of AKK address her) the 70 year old president of the organisation. “This is my home. More than my home”, she peers through her rimless glasses with pride. The latter joined Avvai Kalai Kazhagam when she was only 40. Having been married off at an early age, she could not follow her life goals but after the wedding of her daughter, she pursued Bachelors in Arts in Psychology from the University of Madras and is well equipped to manage the organisation efficiently even at the age of 70. “I could not speak to five people, now I can address a gathering of 500.” That is what a little encouragement can bring about in a woman’s life.

Sugandhi, another member of the organisation, with her perfectly oiled and braided hair, sat around Kokila Amma coyly. According to her, she does not expect much from her disrespectful husband, but the unity of womanhood in AKK has accorded to her the power of taking a stand for herself. That itself proves as a huge step towards self-emancipation.

The women of AKK believe in community development through self-development, but they also extensively work for the environment. These housewives of Royapuram prove once again that women are the building blocks of society. One of their most notable works is the Seed ball Campaign. This is an innovative but simple initiative to conserve nature. A mixture of red soil and organic manure with seeds of wild trees and plants are prepared and thrown into any open field before monsoons. The favourable climate then results in the germination of these wild plants and trees. They made it a point to take these seed balls along to their ladies’ trip to Kashmir. Even the Golu dolls they make are completely organic in nature ensuring that no damage to nature is done. Sultan Ahmed Ismail, who has a PhD and a D. Sc.,

in Soil Ecology, says that this seed ball technique has been an ancient practice and the soil and environment both benefit from this unique technique. But there is a 50-50 chance of the seeds germinating.

These housewives of Royapuram are talented, smart and work oriented. They also organise summer camps where they encourage and teach illiterate women to read and write Tamil and English. This cycle of empowerment is unbelievable and its reassuring to know that such a change at this level is happening in a completely undeveloped part of north Chennai. Even if it is at the microcosmic level, women are becoming self-sufficient, are harbouring dreams of making it big in life and most importantly, just holding on to their identity. As Kokila Amma says, “Nan Kokila, mattum Kokila”, or “I am Kokila, only Kokila.”