

Jananeethi



Development Starts From Fearlessness

By LATHA ANANTHARAMAN



In the town of Thrissur in central Kerala, a group of lawyers and activists is at work on a radical old idea: a crime-free society. The practical attempt to put together a holistic, harmonious community may sound like a utopian movement out of the 19th century, but this NGO has set goals and a schedule for the project.

Jananeethi—People's Initiative for Human Rights—focuses on redressing wrongs as a way to transform human lives. Its members run a wide range of programs for legal counseling and aid, promotion of legal literacy, human rights education, public interest litigation, dispute negotiation and settlement, consumer education, anti-corruption measures, and public participation in making and reforming laws.

Much of Jananeethi's legal help is given to women who have been neglected, abused, kicked out of their homes or forced to run away. At Jananeethi's office in Thrissur, law officer Faritha Ansari and program officer K.K. Radhamani introduce me to Mary, whose husband used to get drunk and beat her up. Mary first met Radhamani at an *anganwadi* class. The government's *anganwadis* provide day-care for preschool children and help mothers improve the overall health of their families. They hold classes about health, hygiene, consumer awareness and other topics. The classes are an effective way for organizations to reach out to women, and for women to ask for help from a sympathetic and well-informed outsider. Mary wanted to know how she could divorce her husband. He had stabbed her in front of their three-year-old daughter, left her (as he thought) for dead, and turned himself in to the police. Jananeethi helped her get her divorce.

Mary still has deep scars on her face, neck and ribs from the attack eight years ago. She now runs her own tailoring shop, supports her two daughters and has refused alimony from her ex-husband. How

Illustration by K.M. MADHUSUDHANAN



Photographs by LATHA ANANTHARAMAN

has the divorce changed her life? "I was always afraid before. Now I'm not afraid." Her husband sometimes asks her to come home again. "He just wants to live on my money. I plan to work, live a little better, get my daughters educated."

Last year, Jananeethi completed a comprehensive study on dowry, a rapidly growing social evil in Kerala society. The study, funded by a federal grant from the American Embassy's Public Affairs Section, was carried out in three stages: surveys on why dowry is still demanded and paid despite legal safeguards and public awareness campaigns; debates and discussions among people affected by dowry customs; and workshops for academics, social workers, human rights lawyers and activists, government officials and media persons on better ways to fight dowry.

Many women ask Jananeethi to help them get the life insurance, accident compensation, or widows' pensions they are entitled to. Thangam's husband served in the army for 21 years, was discharged because he suffered from mental depression, and died a year later. For decades the army refused to pay the widow's pension she was entitled to. Jananeethi filed and won her case and, when the army still delayed payment, filed for contempt of court. Thangam has now been receiving her pension for a year. Her face shines when she tells me how the lawyers at Jananeethi made this possible.

Jananeethi's most ambitious endeavor is the transformation of Ward 12 of Thrissur Corporation into a crime-free community by the end of this year. The American Embassy's Public Affairs Section also provided funds for this project.

Ward 12 has a population of over 5,000, mostly daily wage laborers and a small group of university employees. In each of its five zones, a member of the staff and a team of facilitators from the neighborhood gather people together to find out why crimes are committed. They talk about incomplete land deeds, land disputes between family members and neighbors, domestic abuse, work-site accident compensation, taxes, rent control, consumer grievances and red tape. These problems often drive them to borrow from loan sharks or commit crimes such as bribing, encroaching on others' land, stealing or demanding dowry. The lawyers aim to settle every dispute, either out of court or in court, pay back every

loan, get every household a valid title deed, and make every member of the community legally literate, all by December 2004.

At the same time, the community will work to prevent gambling, addiction, unhygienic environmental conditions, pollution and unemployment. According to advocate George Pulikuthiyil, director of Jananeethi, community councils for environment, health, employment, child welfare, care of elderly, and so on will take up the baton at the end of the year so that the improvements are sustained and taken further. He feels that if people know their legal rights and responsibilities, they will be able to better their lives in every way.

Faritha says people in Ward 12 were distrustful at first. "Some of them would say, first get me my *pattayam* [land deed], then I'll come to your meeting. But now they all talk to each other and even stop us in the street to ask what the next meeting is about."

They are also using the meetings to share information and skills. Shali, mother of four, found out why her toddler bruised so badly each time she fell. The child is now being treated for her condition. Mercy asked the staff to help her find someone to teach her bookbinding. She and other mothers were paying a high price for their children's notebooks and she felt she could produce cheaper ones on her own.

And what lies beyond this program? Jananeethi's ultimate objective, according to Pulikuthiyil, is nothing less than to create a society without fear. "We hear about the high indices of well-being in Kerala, but if you ask a woman a question she looks around to see if anyone might overhear. Development starts from fearlessness. It arises from the feeling, 'my life is secure.' That means freedom from fear in the home, on the streets, in custody—a society in which every member has his or her human rights." □

About the Author: Latha Anantharaman is a freelance writer based in Pallakkad, Kerala.

From left to right: Mary (center) got legal help from K.K. Radhamani (left) and Faritha Ansari to get a divorce and start a new life; George Pulikuthiyil talks to women in Ward 12 about their legal rights; and Jananeethi workers survey households in Ward 12.