



Jyoti Reddy alias Jyotamma could have been just another struggling farm hand who resigned herself to fate, but she chose to be the change she wanted to see. The story of the meteoric rise of a hapless mother of two who was on the verge of suicide to a go-getting CEO in the US, is an inspiration to every woman

## Tale of sweat, blood and toil

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Jyoti Reddy  
Pic: Ravi Giragani

RAJESHWARI KALYANAM

**W**hen sixteen-year-old Jyotamma came to Mylaram, a sleepy village in Warangal, as a new bride, life did not change much, except that her troubles were of a different kind. As a child, although her parents were alive, her father put her in an orphanage, lying to the officials that her mother was dead as he was not able to support her. She lived the life of an orphan deprive of simple pleasures like eating a puri from the road-side hotel, a dream she hoped to fulfill. She studied till SSC and just when she enrolled herself in college, she was forced to join a tailoring course, as it seemed like a fetching job. Her marriage put an end to her education. After she was married off to Sammi Reddy, her distant cousin, she had to live in a joint family that was struggling to make ends meet. The five acres of land they owned was used to cultivate cotton and groundnut - very unreliable crops - and like many of their ilk, the amount of hard work never equalled the produce. Many a time, rains and famine played havoc.

Married life was not much different, and her education did not help. Every day she would finish her household chores and go to work in the fields. The work was new, she made many mistakes and by the end of the day, she developed sores on her palms. But she was persevering and learnt the tricks from farm labourers who came to help her with work. She also worked in others' fields to earn some extra money. Soon she was pregnant and a baby girl was born. The happiness was short-lived as now she had an extra mouth to feed. The older child was not even a year old when Jyotamma realised that she was pregnant again. She gave birth to a girl and situation turned from bad to worse. The family could not afford to buy extra milk for the baby. Holding the younger baby in one hand, Jyotamma sat helplessly watching the older one cry herself to exhaustion for want of milk. When she tried to tell her husband the problem, all she received was a thrashing in return (the not-so-unusual behaviour in rural India, where a husband is considered infidel if he does not beat his wife as he considers it the solution to all problems).

She was told that since they lived in a joint family, she had no other option but to ad-

just. Not one day went by when the thought of suicide did not cross her mind.

Many years later, as she sits in her plush Keys Software Solutions' office in Phoenix, USA, she cannot help but reflect on her trouble-filled past. "I do not even want to forget my past. That helps me to be on my guard and stay motivated," shares Jyoti Reddy alias Jyotamma, CEO of a million dollar recruitment firm, whose burning desire is to make a difference.

She recalls that her story is the same as that of almost all women belonging to rural India, where a woman not only takes care of the house and the kids, but helps the man and in many cases, takes his place in earning a living. Yet she gets no respect and is subjected to an assault on dignity invariably. The story of Jyotamma, who is today known as Jyoti Reddy, however, takes a different course from here on. She refused to get bogged down with the grimness surrounding her. She motivated herself constantly and hoped for a change and decided to 'be' the change she wanted to see. The story of her rise and success stands out as an inspiration to all the women especially Indian rural women, who, either blame the system or fate, or resign themselves to the life of misery.

"Women have to constantly motivate themselves. Any amount of external help in terms of money or opportunity will not help if the woman herself does not seek the inner strength to deal with life," shares Jyoti, who is on a visit to India with an agenda. "I am here to visit 25 educational institutions where I will talk to the students. I think that it is the youth that has to change their outlook towards life. My talk is not a sweet one; I usually prefer to talk straight and blunt. Truth hurts, but unless a person hurts, there is no chance to heal him. I also want to change the mindset of as many women as I can. Even if I am able to help one of the ten people I speak to, I would think I have accomplished a lot."

A visit to Mylaram was indeed an eye-opener. The villagers are eye-witnesses to her life of struggle and are happy to see her rise to the echelons of success. "She had learnt everything from sowing to pulling weeds, from putting water to the fields to operating the water engines, and she never hesitated asking for help. One lady, Lakshmamma, used to teach her work. She never shied away from hard work. She took good care of us when we worked in her fields," shares Maska Ilaiyah.

"Despite her work, she used to find time to teach me English when I was in Class X. She has been an inspiration to all of us. It was because of her that I ensured my sister studied MA, before getting her married," shares Vadla Ravinder, a Vastu expert from the village. Another old man shares on how she was selected as a teacher for the night school and how she



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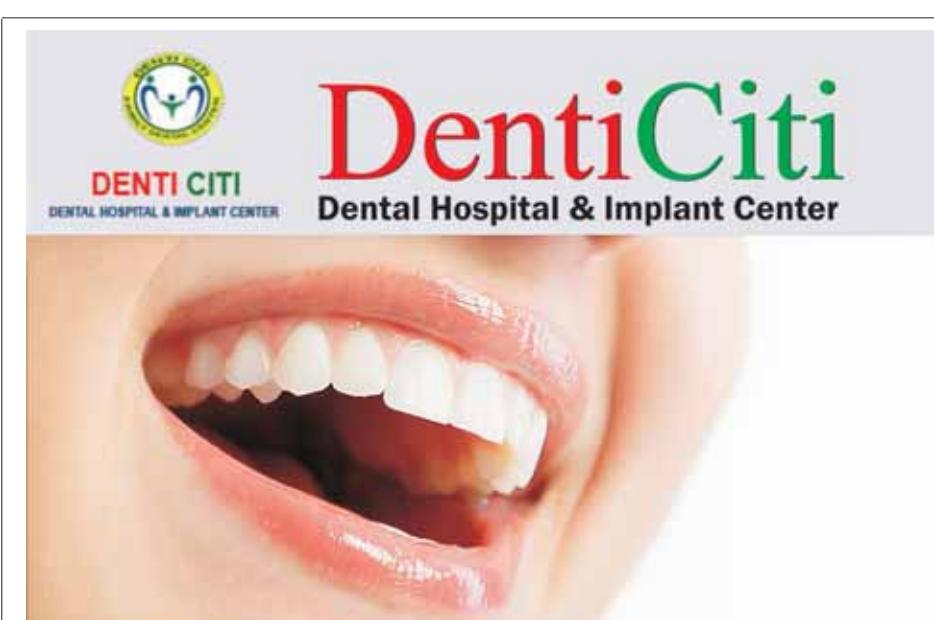
took the additional responsibility of going personally to the dalit basti to persuade women to come and learn the basics of reading and writing. She taught many of them to sign their name. But her family, an upper caste Patel family, did not like her mingling with people of lower caste. And the men whose wives went to her night school used to create a ruckus in front of her house, but nothing dissuaded her."

"I always did what I felt was right. I used to eat from their lunch boxes and worked with them. I never felt it was wrong," shares Jyoti.

After she proved herself at the night school, she was promoted as National Service Volunteer. She had to travel to Hanumakonda on a

daily basis and from there to neighbourhood villages on work. It would be late in the night by the time she returned. But Jyoti converted the problem into an opportunity to come out of her house and live in Hanumakonda with her daughters. She put them in a school and went about her work. Her constant efforts brought in other opportunities, but not without hurdles. Her perseverance, courage and never-say-die attitude helped her through her life in overcoming obstacles and making the best of her opportunities. During the time she completed her B.A through Open University and did M.A in Sociology.

*Continued on page II*



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