

Community kitchen eases dinner worries

Relieved Of Cooking, Bohra Women In Aurangabad Focus On Careers

Ranjana.Diggikar@timesgroup.com

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Munira Neelwal has finally managed to step out of her kitchen only after inhaling its smoke for over two decades. "Today, I have a shop of my own and also a home, which was successful only because I could devote my time to the business after coming out of the four walls four years ago," she says proudly.

Her sentiments are echoed in 34-year-old Alifiya Merchant's words. "Earlier, I could not devote time to anything else, except my children and the kitchen. This lasted for over 10 years. But since the past three years, I have started taking orders and have a roaring business. This is possible since I no longer have to worry about preparing dinner after coming back from work," says the interior designer.

These are two of the 325 Dawoodi Bohra women in Aurangabad who have gained a reprieve from the many hours of meal-making because of the ingenious idea of a community kitchen conceptualised by their late religious and spiritual leader Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin. It works as a dabba system of sorts: five cooks prepare the meals, seven others deliver it to the homes, and the community members have the provision of paying for their own family, and for sponsoring those who cannot afford it.

"The cost of one dabba, which suffices for four members in a family, comes to Rs.40,000 a year. People pay according to their capacity. Some families adopt two or three families and this is how the economics is matched, says dZoyab Yolawala, a senior member. "We serving dabbas to around 25 people from underprivileged families free of cost," he adds.

"Women spend most of their time cooking. Our religious head wanted to free us from the kitchens so that they could focus on more constructive work," says Samira Dhoondia, a dentist at a city-based super-specialty hospital. "My evenings have become hassle free. I do not have to worry rushing home to cook dinner for my family as the dabba is delivered at our doorstep. I give most of my appointments to the patients in the evenings only," she adds. "The community kitchen does not discriminate between the privileged and the underprivileged sections. We all get the same food, which is hygienically prepared," she says.

"The idea was the brain-child of our religious head Dr. Syedna Mohammed Burhanuddin, who wanted women to be free from kitchen chores to concentrate on other filial, social and religious obligations," said Syedna Mufaddal Saifuddin, who takes care of the community kitchen.

The meals are planned by two dieticians – Tahera Shaheen and Alifiya Baugwala, in the community. "The menu is planned one month in advance. Three days in a week, rice with different gravies are prepared while the rest of the three days, roti sabjis are served. Salads are a must every day and sweet is served once a week. The food also includes non-vegetarian delicacies two times in a week," said the dieticians.

The meals reach five colonies in the city including Sarafa, City Chowk and Savangi. The bell rings once every day, and the dabba is then at the doorstep.

"I have found freedom from the daily drudgery, thanks to the community kitchen that serves dinner every day right at our doorstep. This has helped me work as consultant dietician with four major hospitals. Many a time when I am busy consulting patients, I reach home late. But now I do not have to worry that my children would end up eating junk food or sleep hungry," says Rabab Bandukwala, a dietician.

"The community kitchen provides meal to many poor free of cost. It is a different kind of 'food security' where menu is the same for both the rich and poor. The menu is changed every day. All women from the community contribute to the initiative, said Shoeb Badiwala, who is in charge of the community kitchen in the city.

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