

# FROM RESCUED TO RESCUERS

If you lived in India around 2017, you would have definitely heard the names Arul and Pachayamma. Between newspapers, television, and radio, this duo's story was unmissable. We begin in their hometown, Chennai.

When you notice your neighbors disappearing one-by-one, you have to ask why. But for Arul and Pachayamma, **it wasn't enough to simply ask**. They needed to find the answer for themselves—then stop it at the source. What they would soon discover is that their community was being forced into bonded labor, enslaved by debts they could never repay.

Arul and Pachayamma couldn't live with this reality. Instead, they decided to go on a mission to rescue them, not resting until they helped each neighbor return home.



How could these two people, youthful and poor, possibly help? With a simple, yet undervalued ability that we all have: **our voices**.

They used their voices to build meaningful relationships with their government officials. They lobbied for their neighbors to have food, land, and everything they needed to live in freedom. Any way that they could bring freedom to these hidden families, they demanded it—loudly.

Their passion for justice only grew along with their voices. Local leaders and neighbors alike began to take notice of how powerful this couple was becoming. So, when word spread of a survivor-led advocacy group forming, Arul's and Pachayamma's names immediately came to mind.

The question on everyone's mind was, who would rise up to become the group's courageous leaders? The answer was obvious and unanimous: Arul and Pachayamma. With this empowered couple leading their mission, the rescue operations could finally begin.

Together, they started searching for the hidden and rallying for their rescue. Because of them, hundreds once trapped in slavery are now walking in freedom.

But they weren't always this power duo. In fact, these rescuers were once the rescued. *"I never had an idea that in my life I would come out of bondage,"* Arul said.



## ORIGIN STORY

While most children spend their days in school learning how to read and write, Arul and Pachayamma were forced to spend their childhood breaking rocks with sticks of dynamite. If they ended their day with only a few scrapes and scars, it was considered a victory.

As lifelong friends, they worked together to pay off each of their families' debt. This generational debt started out as small loans, taken by each of their respective fathers, from a local rock quarry owner. They took them out in hopes of saving their families from dire poverty.

Instead, they were tricked into slavery, working off an amount of money that couldn't be paid in any person's lifetime.

Even as Arul and Pachayamma grew older, fell in love, and eventually married, it looked like the family they would build together would never leave the quarry. There would only be

the work. What Arul and Pachayamma couldn't have imagined was that they were destined for something greater.

*"When I was in bondage, I couldn't do anything.... I felt freedom only when I came out of bondage. When I was in bondage I couldn't dream of my life. I always wanted to help somebody. Now my dream came true."* Arul said.

## DISCOVERING THEIR DESTINY

Their bold voices once suppressed by years of slavery finally emerged when IJM investigated the rock quarry and found Arul and Pachayamma along with 10 other families.

While many around them were afraid to speak up against the quarry owner, Arul and Pachayamma would not keep silent. They bravely testified about the owner's abuse and advocated for their own rescue. And it worked.

*"Somehow I got courage. I thought, 'So many officials came and rescued us. They are here—what can the owner do to us?' Then we slowly started talking boldly. Then they gave us the release certificates,"* Pachayamma said.

With their days of breaking rocks behind them and freedom in front of them, suddenly, their world looked a lot bigger. A fair wage, rights to healthcare and an education.

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## THE POWER OF WORDS

On that day at the rock quarry, Arul and Pachayamma discovered for the first time how truly powerful their voices can be. Now, they could be advocates not just for their own freedom, but for those hidden around the world..

They took every opportunity IJM aftercare offered them to acquaint themselves with the world. They eagerly took advantage of the resources available to them—including various trainings on building life skills and accessing government benefits—learned about their citizenship rights, and began to develop a vision of how they'd use their voices to bring freedom to those who lived without hope.

*"We have learned so much from IJM.... They taught us not to care only about ourselves, but to think of other bonded laborers and help them, live in harmony with them, and support each other,"* Pachayamma said. But their fight didn't come without its own set of challenges.

They weren't paid for their advocacy. They lost a whole day's wages when they went on rescue operations. And even if they did find people trapped in slavery, it wasn't guaranteed that local authorities would do anything to free them.

The adventure that Arul and Pachayamma were on would propel them to use their voices in ways they never thought possible. For one rescue operation in particular, the lives of those enslaved hung on Pachayamma's every word.

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## THE RESCUE

Light was dwindling when the rescue operation began. Then darkness settled in as it continued deep into the night.

Pachayamma was at the rock quarry while local police questioned each of the laborers trapped there. Hour after hour passed while they listened to their stories of their time in slavery and horrible living conditions. Finally, one of the officials delivered their verdict.

They would not send for government assistance; they would not rescue them.

The laborers braced themselves as the news sunk in. It looked like their days of slavery were not over. And if it wasn't for one young woman with a very powerful voice, this would have been the case.

Pachayamma bravely approached the official and confronted him with bold words.

"If you had witnessed the condition in which they were working, you wouldn't be questioning the genuineness of this case," she said.

The official was taken aback, surprised and awe-struck that this young woman had the courage to speak up to him.

Instead of reprimanding or punishing her for her protest, his heart opened as the truth of the situation hit him. Suddenly, her deep desire for these laborers' to be set free infected him as well. He promised to rescue them.

As he delivered the news that they were about to leave the rock quarry forever, he made sure to speak of Pachayamma's bravery. To him, this was a woman to watch. While the laborers celebrated, he encouraged them to look to Pachayamma as a role model in their newfound freedom.

## FREEDOM FIGHTERS

**Arul and Pachayamma went on to lead nine rescue operations that have freed more than 100 people trapped in slavery.** Soon, it wasn't just their community and local officials admiring their leadership, but people all around the world.

They started traveling far and wide to share their story, spread awareness about slavery, and ask people to join them in the fight.

**People like you.**



# THE FIGHT CONTINUES

IJM was able to find survivors like Arul and Pachayamma who have now not only become survivors, but real-life heroes who have joined us to find those still hidden.

**Together, we can use the power of our voices too—and make freedom a reality for every person trapped in slavery.**

You have shown bravery like Pachayamma. You have cared for the vulnerable like Arul. Thank you for summoning all of your courage along with us in this fight!

Now, would you use your voice to share about Arul and Pachayamma's journey and the journeys of so many others who are still waiting to be found?

With Arul and Pachayamma leading the way, join us as we press on in the fight to end slavery in our lifetime.

