

HELEN KELLER DEAF SCHOOL

An Open Letter To The WB Education Minister

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AT ONE TIME I WAS A rikshapuller. Now I am a cook in the Helen Keller Deaf School (Helen Keller Badhir Vidyalaya) founded by West Bengal's former State Education Minister Kanti Ganguly. I joined this school in 1997. At that time I was told that I would be provided with a helper. One was to cook for 50 resident boys and girls. The school was a new born one and the residents were few in number. However, every year at least 25 to 30 people were newly entered and now the number is huge with only two persons in the kitchen.

At present there are about 150 deaf boy and girl residents. Moreover there are at least 40-50 heads permanently settled South-Bengal villagers loyal to the minister. Over and above, patients from Raydighi, Mathurapur areas are regularly coming and staying at the hostel for treatment at the 'Medica' hospital. People from villages flock here at the party-meetings or for legal suits or some such activities. We, the two, have to prepare, wash, cook and serve for all these persons day in and day out, for at least two major meals and one tiffin. The person I have been provided with as a 'help' is an old decrepit woman who had worked as a maid for Kantibabu's mother for 25-30 long years and after her death sent to assist me. In actuality, the old-maid has been provided with an old-age pension because she can neither cook nor help me in any way, as it is very difficult for her to rise and walk once she is seated or vice-versa.

A few days ago I came across a news item in a Bengali Daily that the Hon'ble High Court has ordered that at least eight persons are required to be employed per 100 resident children for cooking. Otherwise the children would be deprived of proper care. If that be case, at the least, 12 to 14 persons are required for preparing, cooking, serving and washing for the residents of the Helen Keller Deaf School. Instead, a lumpen group has been activated so as to create disturbances in my kitchen. They pour salt in the cooked food, or mix dirt and dust so that the deaf and mute children are disgusted with me. They are also used to breaking-up or dismantle some parts of my cycle so that I have to walk down 4-5 km after 10-30 at night to my home and walk up all the way to the school in the next morning. They use filthy and abusive language through the phone. I had to, perforce, handover twice a list of at least 30 cell phone, 30-32 land phone numbers to Kantibabu and also complained, in writing, to the Teacher-in-Charge of the School.

I reach my school at about 6-30 in the morning and return at about 11-30 AM. I come back at the school at 6' o'clock in the evening and reach my home after the day's work at 10-30 at night. Sundays, or for that matter, on scheduled holidays, the routine changes as I can reach my residence within 2-30-3-00 in the afternoon. Thus, the only time I am left with for writing or other creative activities is the summer and Puja vacations. The authorities and lumpens know it

very well. Once, during the summer holidays, I was not given any leave on the plea that a child named Soumendu Pradhan would stay at the hostel for undergoing Hydrocele operation. In fact, the operation took place about two months later. Otherwise also, my vacation could have been allowed because there were four/five persons who stayed the entire vacation at the school and they cooked their own food. The one child could easily have been accommodated with them.

The only reason for this blatant hostility towards me is that I am a person loved and nurtured by none other than the great writer Mahasweta Devi. Because they cannot face Mahasweta Devi, from 2000 onwards when they came to know about me through an interview broadcast by 'Khas Khabar' from the Kolkata Book Fair they started all these nefarious activities to thwart my anti-CPI(M) stand. Basically, the school has become a home away from home for CPI(M) goons who find out a pleasant hideout here. And most of the workers and teaching staffs are either relatives or near ones of the CPI(M) leaders.

There is a story that a king had a Minister for counting waves. Here, in this school, there is a post for the Minister's near one whose job is to count the heads of the children everyday. He comes at 10-30 in the morning, counts the children and send them to their classes after singing a prayer. That is his whole job and the post's name is a high-falutin one of WARDEN.

Many say that Kantibabu has done a great job. Many CPI(M) leaders' relatives have gotten jobs as teachers and earning quite a lot and are living happily. However, I was talking about the so-called WARDEN. This man has a family and family-owned businesses- such as Real Estate (in reality, promoting), Catering, providing Mobile phone services and CADBURY dealership. (But, he is a conscientious man). He comes back everyday, at the school at 8-30 pm and never forgets to count the children. It would be a misinformation if one does not mention the fact that he informs the police immediately if any child is missing and follows it up with filing a proper Diary.

A great wind of change has been blowing over the whole of West Bengal. I hope that the wave of change is sure to break in on the shores of Helen Keller Deaf School too. Labour and Talent will get their shares of those changes and be rewarded. Waiting for that day to usher in.
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[Extracted, edited and translated from Bengali by Tapan Bandyopadhyay]