

LETTER

**MIDDAY MEAL SCHEME**

West Bengal Government has once again shown its ability to turn women into slave labour. With 1 crore 21 lakh children being covered under the Midday Meal Scheme (MDMS) in West Bengal, the Scheme has become a large provider of new jobs for poor women in rural and urban areas. It has thus provided more than 1.5 lakh women with work in their own villages and communities and at their own skill levels. In a labour surplus market, where poor women are desperately looking for work, the Government breaks its own Minimum Wages Act to give a subsistence wage of Rs 1000 per month to cooks. Most often, even this is not paid regularly and women (for example from Uttar Dinajpur district) have reported non-payment for 6-8 months.

With increasing costs of cooking, groups of women who have formed self-help groups and are given the responsibility of the cooking and purchasing find themselves unable to give good food to children. On top of this is the boss-ism of school teachers, many of whom, despite clear orders otherwise, have kept the management of the MDMS to themselves, with many finding in it an easy way of making money. Some cooks have also become involved in this, willy-nilly.

A statement by the West Bengal Education Secretary a few weeks ago showed that the Government was thinking of taking away even this meagrely paid work from self-help groups, and of handing these over to mainly male controlled NGOs, clubs etc. The new Food Security Bill by the Central Government goes a step further and is paving the way for the entry of large corporate companies by allowing for ready-to-eat meals or packaged food instead of cooked meals.

Women from self-help groups who are responsible for the Midday Meal Scheme are also charged exorbitant interest rates for funds provided to them as bank loans, despite many of them being BPL card holders. They are deprived of suitable jobs (such as supervision of NREGA, supply of food to ICDS centres, cooking in hospitals etc.), many of which have been reserved for them by court orders and Government policy for self-help groups.

**Shramajivi Mahila Samity**