

India: Here's Why Anganwadi Protesters in Delhi Insist Their Fight Will Go On

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The disparity between the hours they work and the honorariums they take home is the least of the problems faced by these frontline welfare workers.

New Delhi: Since January 31, policy makers in the Delhi government have had no way to avoid listening to the demands of the anganwadi (local welfare) workers that the government employs on contract.

January 31 was the date that more than 22,000 anganwadi workers and helpers from all over the national capital territory of Delhi gathered at the gates of Vikas Bhawan-II at Civil Lines to demand better pay and working conditions. They have returned every morning since to chant their slogans of resistance and solidarity: '*Awaaz do hum ek hain* (listen to us, we are one), '*Ladenge, Jeetenge* (We will fight and we will win)', '*Nahi darenge dhamki se, Kheech lenge kursi se* (We won't be scared by your threats, we will take what we came for)'.

The anganwadi workers and helpers have several demands. They want their monthly honorariums to be increased from Rs 9,678 to Rs 25,000 for workers and from Rs 4,839 to Rs 20,000 for helpers. They want the status of government employees and hence facilities like retirement benefits, pensions, medical benefits, paid leave, travel allowances etc. that adhere to the labour laws. Since they are frontline workers in the pandemic, they demand that the government ensures their safety and bears the medical expenses if any of them tests positive for COVID-19. And above all, they call for an end to what they call "the ongoing *begari* (forced labour)" where they are treated as slaves and threatened with the termination of their jobs at the whims of the officials of their department.

Behind these demands are very real, very unfair working conditions that four of the 22,000 workers at the protest site explain.

'If we did not have to feed our children, we would never work here'

Meenu, an anganwadi helper from the Haiderpur Anganwadi Centre, is haunted by the deadly stink emanating from the huge dump of garbage standing right in front of the centre.

"We have to work here. We have to smell that. It feels as if the stench of rot crawls all the way into my brain and poisons it. Even when I go home, I am not able to forget it as though the smell is part of my person. I sit down for dinner and smell it in my food. Nothing would make me work there except for my desperation for a livelihood. I continue to suffer just to feed my daughter," she says.

Meenu's 25-year-old daughter has been receiving treatment for blood cancer since 2020. After exhausting all her savings on her daughter's operation, Meenu had no money left to feed her.

"I had to stand in the long queues of *bhandaras* (stalls for free meals usually provided on religious occasions by private individuals) just to get her one meal. There were days when I ate just a roti

myself, a roti that I somehow arranged because I had to give myself the energy to support my ailing daughter," Meenu says.

When Meenu's daughter was in hospital and could not finish the meals the hospital provided her, Meenu ate her leftover food. "My diet was two spoons of khichdi," she says. "I could not sleep because of the burning hunger. My body was so starved that I used to faint and fall from the stairs of the hospital."

But when Meenu asked the department for a day off, it was not possible without a pay cut. When she asked her department for medical help, they suggested that she use her anganwadi card to get hospital admission for her daughter. And when she tried to do what they had suggested, the staff at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences said, "This identity card is useless. Tear it up and throw it away."

If Meenu's work came with health benefits, she would not be in such a bad situation, she says. But even when the COVID-19 pandemic was at its peak, the administration did nothing for the welfare workers who were deployed to deliver rations door to door. They did not receive even masks and sanitisers, leave alone personal protection equipment.

Many of the anganwadi workers tested positive for COVID-19 at the time. None were granted leave or compensation. "In Centre No. 1 of Ekta Vihar, a worker named Shakila died due to COVID which she caught when we were asked to deliver food even in the red zone (complete lockdown) areas. Her family has not yet received the compensation that was promised to them," says Meenu.

Today, Meenu questions all the statements made by politicians who claim to support the poor.

"Modi ji (Prime Minister Narendra Modi) says, '*Beti bachao beti padhao*'. How should we do that?" she asks. "My poverty gave me a difficult choice: to save my daughter's life or give her education. She had to sit at home after Class 10 because I couldn't afford her books since I had to buy vials and vials of medicines for her. Just one of her medicines cost me Rs 1.5 lakhs. I earn Rs 4,500 a month! If my friends, my coworkers didn't collect their savings to help me, my daughter would not be alive today."

In 2015, the anganwadi workers were asked to carry out the census for the Aadhaar for a fee of Rs 1,500. It is now 2022 and there has been no sign of this money. Meenu has gone to the sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) of Kanjhawala, the SDM of Saraswati Vihar, the SDMs of Rampur and Alipur, to ask for her due. This has cost her more than the Rs 1,500 she is owed. And there is still no sign of that Rs 1,500.

This is not the only sum that the administration owes Meenu and the other anganwadi workers. Every time the anganwadi centres celebrate *Poshan* (nutrition) Month, the workers and helpers are asked to make all the arrangements and create the charts, banners and so on. The money that goes into these celebrations comes from the workers' own pockets. But the government later uses the images of these celebrations to boast about the work it has done for the nutrition of the people.

"There must be some funds given to the department in the name of Poshan Month," says Meenu. "Why have they never reached us?"

Meenu alleges that the anganwadi uniforms which were to be distributed among the workers and helpers were packed up by the supervisor and given to child development project officers as "a gift from all the anganwadi workers and helpers". She says that the anganwadi workers have to bear the expenses of bringing the packets of Take Home Rations to the centres.

“When we demand help, we are either threatened with the termination of our jobs or told that we are doing social work and cannot ask for money,” says Meenu. “Our officials can fire us for any reason. If we did not have to feed our children, we would never return to work.”

‘They say they are digitising everything, but at the expense of whom?’

A graduate of Delhi University, Neelam is an anganwadi worker at Centre No. 82, Paschim Vihar.

“My husband has a master’s degree in political science and today he sells momos. If we eat today, we wonder if we’ll be able to eat tomorrow,” says Neelam. “My son was forced to drop out of school after Class 9 because we could not afford his education.”

Neelam’s colleagues at anganwadi centres around Delhi include graduates, people with master’s degrees, people who have trained as teachers, and so on. But since their qualifications have not got them the work they qualified for, they have accepted anganwadi work. Even this, though, does nothing to help them climb out of poverty.

During the pandemic, the workers and helpers were asked to buy masks and sanitisers with their own money and distribute them as a welfare measure among the people they cater to, says Neelam.

“If we reach arrive at work 15 minutes late, our officials make us work the whole day but on a half-day wage. I have neurological disorders due to which the left half of my body was beginning to go into paralysis. Regardless of that, I wasn’t given a single holiday without a pay cut. I was so badly pressured that I would come straight from the hospital to the office,” says Neelam.

Neelam calls out the government for its hypocrisy. “They say that they are digitising everything, but at the expense of whom?” she asks. “The department has given us mobile phones and whatever we do on the phone has to be replicated on the register, but for the past two years, we have had to pay the bills or recharge the phones with our own money. So the government gets to show off its ‘Digital India’ but at the expense of its labour. Our work is doubled, but our pay remains the same.”

‘Not eating for two or three days is not new for my family’

Shikha is a helper at the Anganwadi Centre in the Sadar Bazaar area. She is physically challenged: her left arm has no elbow joint, due to which her forearm and hand are nearly useless. In spite of this, she is asked to pick up sacks full of rations and carry them on her shoulders. When she complains about the difficulty, the officials shout, “If you can’t work, go sit at home. There are many people ready to work in your place.”

“With the Rs 4,000 that I earn, I can either pay the rent or eat. Not eating for two or three days is no longer something new for my family. When I had surgery for my arm, we had not a single morsel to eat. At that time, I just wanted to die and kill my family as well,” says Shikha.

If Shikha had taken leave, the department would have cut her pay. “In fact, we are never paid our salaries on time and every single day, we are made to work overtime,” Shikha alleges. “There are times when we cannot even afford a rickshaw to get to the centre. And when we share problems like these with others, we are insulted.”

In 2018, Modi promised a hike of Rs 1,500 and Rs 700 in the honorariums of anganwadi workers and helpers respectively. Shikha shakes her head. “We haven’t got a single rupee of this pay raise as yet,” she says.

According to Shikha, the centre where she works is in a neighbourhood where women feel unsafe.

“It is full of drunkards due to which it isn’t safe for women to travel late at night,” she explains. “Many times I have been asked to work at night, but when I told my seniors about the problem, they yelled, ‘Go, sit at home.’”

But Shikha needs the money, as little as it is, so she has no option but to face the sexual harassment she suffers on the way to and from her centre.

“One night, I was pinched on my thigh and held by the collar of my kurta. When I called my department for help, nobody picked up. I was sobbing hard as I left voice notes for my boss, but I still got no reply. When I went to my seniors the next day, they shouted at me in front of everyone. ‘Leave your job if you can’t do it,’ they said. ‘Learn to cooperate.’”

She sits back, exhausted by the memory of that trauma. “Does learning to cooperate mean allow yourself to be raped?” she asks.

‘Our officers would never step into the areas they send us to’

One of the worst parts of Lalita’s job as an anganwadi worker in Ambedkar Nagar is the disparity between the hours she puts in and the wage she gets for it.

“We are made to work more than 12 hours a day. Our supervisors call us at two in the morning and demand that we work immediately. This means we have to update apps, approve updates from users on the apps and provide OTPs (one-time passwords). If we fail to do that or even utter a word against it, we are given a memo. Many of us have even had our jobs terminated,” she says.

Anganwadi workers receive a monthly honorarium of Rs 9,678 and the helpers get Rs 4,839. “Daily wage workers earn Rs 800-900 per day,” says Lalita. “If you calculate our daily pay from our monthly honorariums, the daily wage of an anganwadi worker is Rs 320 and that of a helper is Rs 160. Does the government expect us to live on this?”

Anganwadi workers and helpers have been involved in everything from the polio campaign to census taking to the delivery of rations to vaccinations. They maintain welfare logs of the people they take care of in their centres and neighbourhoods and take care of the nutrition of pregnant women and children.

“We were asked to deliver food even to COVID patients. And all of this without masks and sanitisers from the government,” says Lalita. “Every morning, we stepped out fearfully thinking that we were going to die and nobody would come to our rescue.”

The working environment for anganwadi workers and helpers is far from salubrious. “The air is filled with the pungent reek of rotten garbage and the land is a bog because of the clogged drains,” says Lalita. “Our officers would never even step in the areas they send us to. And today, when we protest for our rights, the department has issued a threat: ‘If you don’t come to the office tomorrow, you will be terminated.’”

Threatening notices or not, the anganwadi workers and helpers say they will not stop their protest. “It’s now or never,” says Meenu.

Shikha points to the red band on her forehead: *‘Hum ghar se ye lal kafan baandh kar nikale hain. Ab maut bhi humein nhi rok sakti* (We tied these red shrouds on our heads before stepping out of the house. Now even death can’t stop us),” she says.

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