

Delicacies At Your Service

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A survivor who works at the canteen at Kolkata police HQ. Subham Dutta

Girls rescued while being trafficked have now reasons to smile. Sreecheta Das finds out more...

As you enter Lalbazar police station you cannot miss “Rannabati,” the canteen just on the right side of the gate. With uniform-clad girls taking orders, serving food and keeping accounts, this canteen is much more than what it appears to be on the first glance. Yes, it’s an all-women’s canteen.

A unique initiative of Kolkata Police and Jabala, an NGO dedicated to trafficking victims and survivors, this canteen has given survivors like Monica, Sabeya and Dimpi, along with many others with similar pasts, a reason to smile albeit after a long time.

Ten girls attend to the hungry constables and visitors at Lalbazar with all kinds of delicacies ranging from chowmein, sandwiches, chapati and chicken curry to biriyani and sweets. There is a separate tea-canteen on the first floor of the C P Building run by the same girls.

Abject poverty and lack of proper education made these hapless girls an easy prey to traffickers who lured them into darker alleys with promises of marriage or better employment. After being rescued, they were completely wrecked — both physically and mentally.

Jabala, the NGO, has been guiding them since then and helping them get over the trauma by imparting basic literacy and excellent vocational training, teaching self-defence mechanisms like karate and sports like football. “We basically try to teach them skills which they can use independently and earn,” says Baitali Ganguli, secretary of Jabala.

Duty hours start from 7 am and goes on till 9 pm with the girls working in shifts. They take turns in washing utensils, taking orders and serving and everyone receives the same salary from Jabala, irrespective of the work they do.

Says Tina Akhtar, a smiling teenager with a terrible past, “I was so scared and I thought that I wouldn’t be able to do it. But, now I have learnt to cook and am not dependent on anybody.”

Independence is the keyword. Monica puts beautifully what almost all the other girls tried to convey. “I know I am helpless, and I can’t leave this job at the moment. But, you know what? I don’t want to, also. I love the independence I enjoy here,” she says. Doesn’t travelling daily from Madhyamgram and taking care of her little daughter, along with the job get hectic at times? It does, she replies, but “Didira ache kono shomoshya hole dekhari jonnye (if there is a problem the sisters from Jabala manage it).”

Dimpy is on leave now, as she has appeared for the Madhyamik examination, and desires to study more. Monica, who studied till class X, says, “Even I feel like completing my studies now.” It is a delight to see them all working together and chatting. “We don’t want to leave. We are each other’s sisters, friends... and everything,” a beaming Mina says.

Everyday a counsellor or a programme executive or somebody from Jabala stays back to ensure that these vulnerable girls are safe. Also Assistant Commissioner (HQ) Bagchi looks after such problems. Still, in a place like this, “one has to keep oneself right,” opines a matured-looking Shyamasree. When a girl’s behaviour or attitude is not what is expected of her, Jabala is informed immediately and she is counselled. “Aparnadi is like a mother figure to us,” says Shyamasree. “We keep telling them that bad and opportunist people are everywhere in this world. So they ought to be careful and ought not trust strangers when they go out in their off-days,” says Ganguly. “However, if any unwanted situation arises, the girls are trained to tackle them — they have the necessary police and other emergency phone numbers,” she adds.

Infrastructure of the canteen, which is under the Kolkata Police, faces some problems, admitted Banibrata Basu, Special CP (II). “We are trying to arrange for a larger place where they can get all the facilities,” he said.