

WHAT PEOPLE SAID

A DOSSIER OF EXPERIENCE





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How Government's Grievance Cell saved a family

Chandan Maity – Pashkura, East Medinipur

There never was a more battered beginning to a Bengali new year in the April of 2017 for the Maity family of Bijayramchowk village in Purba (east) Medinipur district in south of West Bengal, with a population of over 90 million, little more than that of Germany.

"I applied for the assistance in 2019 and was told that I am eligible to get about Rs 1500 (\$ 20), every alternate month. It could have taken care of my medical expenses, at least partially. But over the next months, we received nothing and my medication was stopped," said Chandan.

On the 10th day of the Bengali New Year the breadwinner of the seven member family – Chandan Maity, 35, fell from an electricity-carrying pole to severely damage the lumbar spine. Chandan, earning about \$250 a month, was working between two transformers –

20 feet above the ground – at the edge of Bijayramchowk.

"Usually when we work in one transformer, the electricity is snapped in the other. In this case, the other transformer wasn't disconnected and a live wire carrying 440 volts hit me like an overloaded truck. I fell from the pole," said Chandan, a professional electrician.

"Overnight our life was impacted – we had to reduce our food intake to buy medicine," said Ms Maity. Meanwhile, Chandan heard about Yuvasree, a financial assistance scheme of the West Bengal government for the unemployed.

"I applied for the assistance in 2019 and was told that I am eligible to get about Rs 1500 (\$ 20), every alternate month. It could have taken care of my medical expenses, at least partially. But over the next months, we received nothing and my medication was stopped," said Chandan.

His little farm land, attached to his mud-thatched house – meanwhile – was inundated by water snapping the tiny supply of farm produce as Bijayramchowk is located on a flood plain bounded on all sides by a river Kanshabati and its two canals.

"One winter evening, sitting in my farm land, I was wondering what I should do now to save the family who ran out of steam. They could neither foot the medical bills nor pay the fee to send my nine year old son Subhojit to school," said Chandan.

The Turning Point

It was then he saw on video-blogging and sharing site, You Tube, the advertisement of the Grievance Cell in Bengal Chief Minister's office. It was flashing a number on the screen.

"Within days I received a call from the local administrative office. I was assured that I am going to get the unemployment subsidy."

From the month of March (2020) Chandan started receiving an allowance of Rs 1500, paid once in two months.

"Please write, I am ... we are ... grateful to the government," Chandan said.

The campaign has found a permanent place in the heart of the Maity household.



We are happy, says the Entally family

Md. Rafiqul Islam, Entally, Kolkata

For Md Rafiqul Islam, a resident of Entally in east-central Kolkata, the main east-Indian metropolis, the third week of November of 2021 was filled with anxiety laced with fear. So much so that he was hesitant to receive your correspondent's call.

"I paid nearly Rs 16 lakh (\$22000) to the builder who had an agreement with the land owners to construct the apartment building," said Mr Islam. But for over a year he was "not allowed" to take possession of his Entally flat, despite running from pillar to post trying to either recover the money or to get the possession of his two bedroom apartment.

Born in a nondescript village – Nagar – of Murshidabad district in central Bengal, Mr Islam's life is no different from that of an average Indian. Following his graduation in a local college, the suburban boy shifted to Kolkata, in search of a job and spent his initial years as an accountant maintaining books for commercial establishments. Eventually he shifted to trading, got married and sent two daughters to school and – like most middle class Indians – purchased a 650 square feet flat in the east-central part of the metropolis.

It was in the winter of 2020, when the family finalized the modest apartment triggering a nightmare.

"I paid nearly Rs 16 lakh (\$22000) to the builder who had an agreement with the land owners to construct the apartment building," said Mr Islam. But for over a year he was "not allowed" to take possession of his Entally flat, despite running from pillar to post trying to either recover the money or to get the possession of his two bedroom apartment.

"As I was paying a monthly rent of Rs 13,000 (\$175) over and above the money I paid to the promoter, I was nearly broke," he said.

The problem – they all said – is simple: Muslims can't stay in the building block.

"They should have told me about their decision to not let a Muslim purchase a flat in the building inhabited by the Hindus before I paid the advance, but they did not," said Islam. Finally on August 6, he collapsed.

A month later, Islam's younger daughter – Zahin Bilkis – tried a solution; the seventh standard student wrote a letter to the Grievance Cell of the Chief Minister, narrating about their trauma. The letter was signed by Mr Islam.

"Within 72 hours, I received a call from the Entally police station and within days the problem was resolved," said Mr Islam.

The family of four – Mr Islam, his wife and the daughters, Zahin and Tasnim, said they are "overwhelmed" by the action of the Grievance Cell. They profusely thanked the government, the officers of the Grievance Cell and the Chief Minister for resolving the crisis in matter of days.



It all runs in the family, says Waddedars.

Gaurangaprasad Waddedar, Hooghly

Following a failed mission in Bangladesh' main port city of Chattogram in 1932, Pritilata Waddedar killed herself swallowing a cyanide capsule. A decade later Gaurangaprasad Waddedar, Pritilata's first cousin, was born in Chattogram and he – as one of his neighbors argued – "inherited the integrity of Pritilata." Perhaps the neighbor is right.

"Sometime in the summer of 2018, my pension jumped from something like Rs 3000 (\$40) to 12000 (\$160), I was shocked. My friends told me to keep shut but I told them that I have worked as a vigilance officer in the government (and) I cannot entertain such a bizarre increment as someone is making a mistake somewhere," said 77 year old Gaurangaprasad.

Otherwise why would Gaurangaprasad, a resident of Howrah district in south Bengal, register a complaint after his retirement, insisting that he was paid more than the specified sum as his pension?

"Sometime in the summer of 2018, my pension jumped from something like Rs 3000 (\$40) to 12000 (\$160), I was shocked. My friends told me to keep shut but I told them that I have worked as a vigilance officer in the government (and) I cannot entertain such a bizarre increment as someone is making a mistake somewhere," said 77 year old Gaurangaprasad.

"I went to the local pension court to complain about the unexplained hike and they were not ready to reduce it. After some persuasion I managed to convince them that I should only get what I am entitled for." Gaurangaprasad sounded relieved.

"I am quite impressed by the promptness of the Grievance Cell."

"Soon after I called, the ball started rolling and they worked out the problem within a month. I have always argued that the efficiency level of the government has dropped since our time in the office. I have changed my opinion."



It is a film story for Shyamali Manna of Hooghly

Shyamali Manna, Hooghly

The story of Shyamali Manna, a physical education teacher in south Bengal's Hooghly district, is unusually similar to the plot of an award winning Kannada film, Act-1978.

Ms Manna, a mother of two in her middle thirties, narrated a story sitting in her rented accommodation in Hooghly's Seakhala village. Ms Manna's life was at stake owing to the apathy of a handful of officials.

The officials plainly refused to hand over her service book – with 16 years of career record – to the teacher when she was transferred from a government-run high school in south-central Bengal's Birbhum district to Hooghly in the south in 2017.

"Sometime in the middle of 2017, the service record was sent from my previous school to the Suri DI office as I was transferred from Birbhum to Hooghly. I was told, my record will reach the Hooghly school in due process," said Ms Manna

But the service book never reached the Hooghly school.

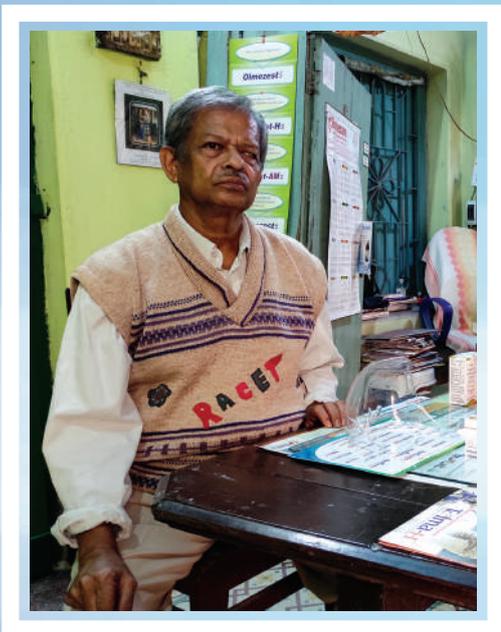
"I was heavily pregnant, yet I was routinely visiting the DI office by train, covering nearly 200 kilometres," said Ms Manna. The two words – "service book" – still traumatize the family, said her elder brother Tapan Manna, a fish trader.

"Then the pandemic exploded; offices were shut. Intermittently when the DI office was opened, Shyamali used to go there from Hooghly hiring private vehicles which used to charge 7500 rupees (₹100), each time. **She spent quite a few thousands travelling to and from Birbhum for her service record,**" said Mr Manna. Meanwhile a new service book was issued and sent to the DI office which too "disappeared mysteriously."

"At this point, I was told that this is a planned manipulation to extract money – in plain terms, a bribe – which is expected by particular staff of the DI office and many told me that they have had similar experiences across the state. They paid handsomely to get their service book," said Ms Manna.

But she neither paid the bribe nor strapped an explosive device like the protagonist of Act 1978 and called the Chief Minister's Grievance Cell sometime in the middle of 2021.

"In matter of a week or two I received a call from the DI office and the new record book was handed over to me...it was such a relief." Ms Manna's voice choked.



A doctor's dilemma

Asit Ghosh, Hooghly

For the 70 year old doctor Asit Ghosh life has largely been sailing smoothly since he did his MBBS as a student in the first batch of North Bengal Medical College and Hospital in 1973. He and his friends had to travel all the way back to Kolkata in deep south Bengal from the north to do their practical and internship, as his college was lacking in facilities.

"It was difficult but we managed," said the doctor sitting in the home chamber in Baidyabati in historic Hooghly district where all communities from Parses and Jews, Dutch and Armenians to British arrived over centuries to do business.

"Hooghly had an advanced architecture for many centuries and roads and sewerage systems were developed over the time, other than in our municipal ward number 18," quipped a neighbor of Dr Ghosh. He refused to share his name being a government employee but pointed at the spacious house of Dr Ghosh.

Dr Ghosh reiterated what his neighbor said.

"Look at this ..."

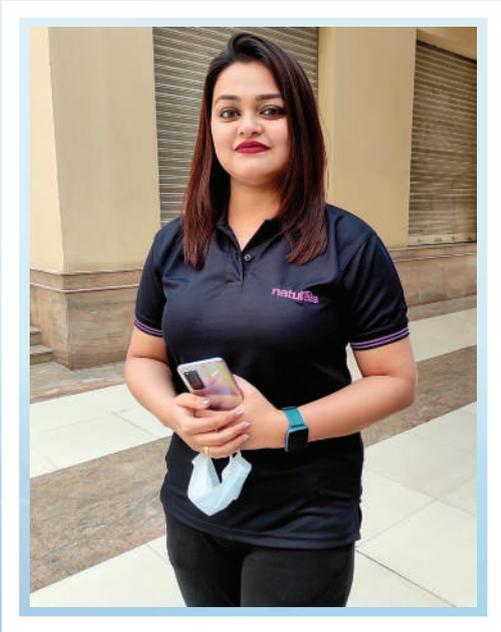
He took us to the southern section of his house facing a gigantic vacant plot, partly turned into a forest. The land belongs to one of his neighbors who refused to clean it and the rest of the residents suffered.

"All kinds of insects and reptiles – even large snakes – were settling in my chamber, pushing me and my family out," said Dr Ghosh. The doctor argued, he and his neighbors were afflicted with a variety of vector-borne diseases like malaria or dengue.

The general physician's smooth sailing life was clearly disturbed and he bombed the local civic body with letters.

"But no one responded. Finally, I had to post a complaint at the Chief Minister's Grievance Cell. The action was prompt. The forest was cleared in a matter of days." Dr Ghosh stopped to listen to a couple of medical representatives who were making a presentation on the latest drugs to target viral diseases.

"I hope malaria would not re-surface this year as the municipality cleared the shrubs. I am indeed grateful to the Grievance Cell and you may write that," he told the duo.



I changed my opinion about government services, says a hair specialist

Arpita Hari, Rajarhat

As one step in the new city – Rajarhat – on the eastern fringe of Kolkata, the main metropolis in east India, the mega buildings hit the eye. In one of these malls works Arpita Hari, a wide-eyed young woman, in a unisex parlour as the ‘salon manager’.

“Following Covid, the business is fast picking up. We have way more footfalls in this mall and our parlour than in the beginning of the year.” The trained and successful hair and skin specialist admitted that she is far less gloomy now than in early 2021.

“We have reasons to rejoice,” she said.

Her personal problem – incidentally – was solved too.

“But then one cropped up – suddenly – last year. For reasons completely unknown to me (and) I am sure it is one of those proverbial technical glitches which refused to let me register for Swasthya Sathi,” said Ms Hari.

Ms Hari was repeatedly applying for the card “and repeatedly denied the URN (Unique Verification Number); finally I gave up. It was in the winter of 2020. It was a bad time as the sales were not picking up either.”

Ms Hari was aware about the benefits of the health insurance scheme and was “too keen” to have one for herself as the rest of her family members had benefitted.

A friend, eventually, suggested Ms Hari to dial the Grievance Cell in the Chief Minister’s office, sometime in the middle of 2021.

“I did and to my extreme surprise within days I received a call from Swasthya Bhavan in Salt Lake and they gave me my URN number. People like us – who have always worked in the private sector – often complained against services provided by the government. But from the middle of October – when I got the card – I changed my opinion,” said a grinning Ms Hari,



Call to Grievance Cell saved Alamin's children

Alamin Gayen, South 24 Parganas

Alamin Gayen, 33, is a typical example of multiple Indian economic tragedies over the last half of the last decade.

A receding Indian economy hit by demonetization (2016) and imposition of Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 threw him out of his job, while outbreak of the pandemic compelled Mr Gayen to change his profession.

"I was a tailor before Covid and now I sell Phuchka," – an Indian snack – said Mr Gayen.

In addition, the super cyclone Amphan (2020) hit Mr Gayen's district South 24 Parganas – on the edge of Bay of Bengal – so hard that overnight he turned from a lower income dressmaker to "a nowhere man", to quote British band Beatles.

"The master tailor went out of business towards the end of 2019; a couple of years after GST was imposed as he could not handle the new tax regime. I lost my job," said Alamin.

Mr Gayen tried desperately for a job in and around the administrative block – Bhangar II – where he resides but failed to get a response as the local tailoring business, part of a massive medium and small scale industry in Bengal, slipped into coma, following two successive economic actions – demonetization and GST imposition.

As Alamin was searching – literally – from door to door for a job, Amphan blew off the temporary bamboo-tin roof of his house, exposing three children to the traumatic monsoon of 2020.

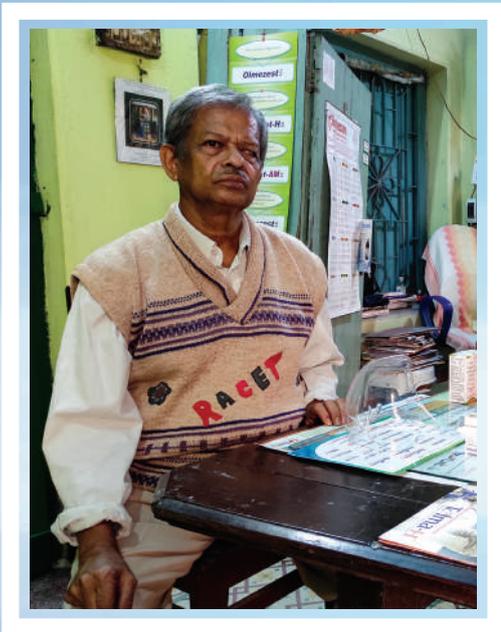
"It is then that I sought alms for the first time in my life."

Alamin approached the local village council which in turn connected him to the Chief Minister's Grievance Cell where Alamin registered a request to re-build the roof of his one-room house.

"I received financial assistance of Rs 5000 (S70) from the local administrative office," said Alamin, an unusually docile man.

"It is a very tiny amount but it arrived promptly. I could buy giant plastic sheets and thin bamboo shrubs to reconstruct the room. It was of immense help."

"My children and wife were safe," said Alamin. He looks forward to getting back to his trade – tailoring.



Grievance Cell's effort to correct names relieved Gazis of Sunderbans

Sajahan Gazi, South 24 Parganas

The Gazi family of Hatpukuria in South 24 Parganas district can be cited as one case study, in case a book is penned on how inadvertent spelling mistakes in birth certificates trouble parents in India each year.

"My name was spelt as Sahajan, while it is Sajahan," said the father.

The mother added, "I was spelt as Rafiza Bibi, while my identity card spells it as, Rafiza Khatun Gazi." Ideally it is an open and shut case and the new certificate should have been issued from the local subdivision hospital but it wasn't.

"We were rather advised to go to the main office of the Health Department in Kolkata's Salt Lake city to get the amended certificate. We were confused," said Sajahan.

Meanwhile, Covid arrived in early 2020 shutting all the health centers and hospitals – which were solely engaged in combating the corona virus – and the names of the bewildered parents could not be revised. The marathon ordeal of the family to replace 'h' with 'j' in father's name and change Ms Gazi's name altogether started.

The family visited the local hospital thrice, made attempts to meet the hospital's chief and even spent money to obtain a notarized affidavit to facilitate the correction but in vain.

"We were told by the staff that the names cannot be corrected and they suggested an impossible action. We have to obtain an affidavit in place of the birth certificate each time when we needed to produce the certificate. I was shocked, it would have been a lifelong trial,"
said Ms Gazi.

Meanwhile, the second disaster that befell the Gazi family was Sajahan's illness; he contracted tuberculosis which is still considered an odious ailment in rural India.

"The local hospital refused to take calls regarding the spelling correction as Covid cases spiked," the mother said.

Realising that they are endlessly moving around the problem in a loop, Mr and Ms Gazi decided to call the Grievance Cell in the Chief Minister's office.

Within a week or so, the hospital staff called Sajahan to say that his case had been resolved. "I am sure that the hospital authority opened my case after they received a call from the Grievance Cell, following my complaint," said Mr Gazi.

"But this time the process was completed in under a month and soon we got the new certificate. It was a major relief and it would not have been possible without a clear push from the Grievance Cell," said a relieved Sajahan.



The phone call to Grievance Cell bought Swapan back on time

Swapan Dhara, South 24 Parganas

Swapan Dhara, is one of many millions of West Bengal's migrant workers in north Kerala whose life collapsed with the advent of Covid pandemic. Firstly, he lost his job as a construction worker which used to deliver about Rs 15000 (\$ 200) each month and secondly, he got stuck in Kerala's Kuppam town, in the extreme south of the country.

"He was running out of money and in a horrible state. We were terribly upset and nearly stopped cooking at our place too," said Swapan's mother Sumata Dhara.

Pandemic accentuated his stress. On one hand his source of income choked and on the other he could not leave Kerala as the train services were suspended; Swapan continued to pay through nose for meals and lodging as costs escalated.

"Moreover, the pressure of not sending my monthly contribution to the family in South 24 Parganas was distressing as I have a daughter, wife and parents to support."

Said the 28-year-old Swapan. His brother too was stuck in Maharashtra, the west Indian state, where he was engaged in similar trade.

It is around this time, middle of 2020, his colleagues at the construction site informed him about West Bengal Chief Minister's Grievance Cell. "Call them, they are facilitating returns," a friend from our village told me as he handed over the number which was sent to him from Bengal," said Swapan.

At the peak of India-wide lockdown of 2020, it was difficult to organize a train easily by both the Kerala and the Bengal government. It was explained to Swapan while he was assured that the West Bengal government is "aware about its responsibility to bring its residents back."

"About a month later, the police informed us that our train had been arranged and it was sometime during the mid-monsoon, we were bused to the station; we boarded a Bengal bound train," said Swapan.

The train loaded with workers took two days to reach Howrah, the key railway station in Bengal, and everyone was "treated with care."

The mother said that they are grateful to the Chief Minister and the state government for getting her son back; his wife nodded in agreement.



The family's experience with grievance cell

Sheikh Haider Ali, East Bardhaman

Sheikh Haider Ali, a thirty-one-year-old paddy farmer from Shargram, in the district of East Bardhaman – often described as West Bengal's rice bowl – has just won a personal battle.

There is a government of West Bengal programme, all land deeds should be computerized and each Block Land Record Office (BLRO) must hand over a digitally generated slip to land owners. A landowner must have only one such slip for his or her entire landholding.

Haider's father and two uncles had inherited about twenty thousand square yards of land from his grandfather. However, when digital land slips were generated, his father got two slips for his land parcel and – to his extreme surprise – it was in two different names.

To correct the mistake Haider approached the local BLRO. But the record office refused to cooperate. It made him run from pillar to post for almost a year. The apathy on part of the local land office was “terribly frustrating” – to use Haider's words.

One winter morning in December 2019, Haider came across an advertisement in a Bengali newspaper; it said, Bengal's residents may call the Chief Minister's Grievance Cell in case of any personal or societal dispute; a telephone number was provided.

His call went unanswered and Haider assumed it is one of the routine helpline numbers which never works. He was pleasantly surprised as his phone rang under a week. It was from the Chief Minister's office.

“When they learnt about the case from me,” says Haider, “[I] already felt assured.” Within a week, he again got a call from BLRO, indicating that the snag has been removed.

“I am grateful to Mamata-di, our Chief Minister and her office for helping us to get our clean papers without paying a penny”, says an elated Haider, who even spread the news of his “victory” against the local land records office. “I told my friends that the Grievance Cell helpline number is not a hoax, it works and I am a beneficiary.”

The family has since also received help from the Chief Minister's Krishan Bandhu scheme, a programme to support farmers in case of crop failure. Haider's family – especially his mother Laila sheikh – is now confident of providing quality education to her granddaughter Nusrat.

END.



How Grievance Cell's action inspired a teenager

Chapa Ghosh, Howrah

In February 2020 Chapa Ghosh, a homemaker in her mid-forties, her husband Shyamal and teenage daughter Shilpa were away in South India, to treat Shyamal's injured legs. Mr. Ghosh met with an accident years before his marriage in 1984. Of late his both legs were troubling him, said Mr. Ghosh, from his Bagnan home.

"We were all quite happy following my surgery and eventually booked ourselves to travel back to Kolkata in the first week of April," said Ms. Ghosh.

But the pandemic exploded only days before the family's return. India went into an unplanned shutdown on March, 2020, escalating trouble for millions of stranded families across the country.

"After two weeks we ran out of money," said Mrs Ghosh. Staying in decent hotels was "financially difficult", the husband said.

One evening, the family – confused and somewhat direction-less – was watching one of the Bengali television news channels, sitting in their hotel's room. Shilpa, quite by chance, identified an advertisement; it was a campaign to bring residents of Bengal back to the state by the Grievance Cell of West Bengal Chief Minister's office.

"I appealed to the government and particularly to the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee seeking her help; requesting to facilitate our return. Within a week of my call, the Chief Minister's office called us; they assured us and said that arrangements will be made."

"Many other families stranded in Vellore [in north Tamil Nadu] and in parts of the southern state, boarded the special train for Howrah."

Chapa pointed out that all the expenses were borne by the state government. Following a home-based quarantine of two weeks, life for the Bagnan family returned to its former and normal cycle.

She noted the stress experienced by the government, its officials and the health professionals. "While I thank the Chief Minister and her team for bringing us back, I wish at some point I can volunteer for her teams in times of crisis," said Shilpa, giggling.



A Family of four gets digital ration cards

Bishav Paul, Nadia

About ten kilometers from the town of Krishnanagar, headquarters of the Nadia district, there is a quaint country village, Khapur, known for a locally acclaimed school named after 19th century Indian mystic Ramakrishna.

Bishav Paul – our protagonist – is an alumnus of the school and resides about a furlong north of the premises, with his family.

Bishav never quite landed a job since completing his Masters in Commerce, despite being a good student. However, over the last few years Bishav joined a pharmaceutical company as a sales person.

It improved their living standard marginally, yet Bishav decided to avail benefits of deeply subsidized food programmes implemented through neighbourhood ration shops for economically depressed classes.

But his application to the Krishnanagar I Block Development Office (BDO), which administers Khapur village and adjacent hamlets, failed to provide food cards for the family. He kept visiting the block office but was always asked to come back after a fortnight.

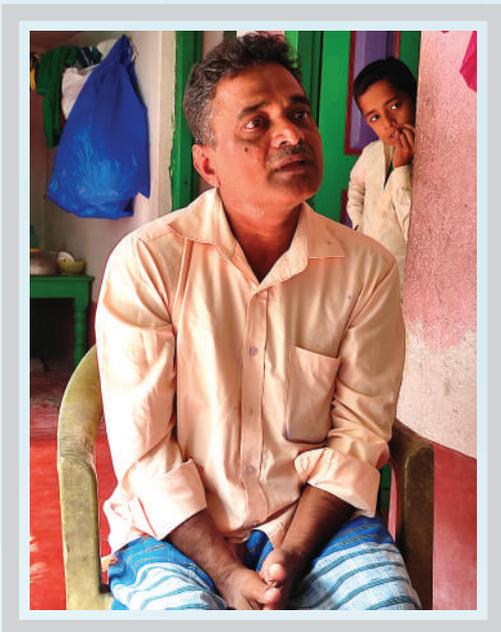
His friends suggested he call the Chief Minister's Grievance Cell; he did. He followed it up with a crisp electronic mail to the Chief Minister's office.

Within 100 hours of his calling the Grievance Cell, a caller from the Cell called to say that his job had been done. He can go as per his convenience to the block office and collect his cards.

"It was truly amazing. I have heard about such promptness in services in Europe or China but never ever in rural India especially Bengal. Honestly, if this was not my case, I would not have believed that a key problem can be solved in four days' time, over a phone call." said Bishav who is still somewhat in a state of shock following the wartime promptness of grievance redressal.

As he visited the BDO, he was handed over not only his card but three more for each adult member of the family – his wife and parents.

"I was truly relieved. As you know, with a salary of eight thousand rupees (\$770) it is so difficult to manage a household. To get rice and wheat for the entire family at two rupees a kilogram is godsend gift for us. I can only thank the system and the government which we usually routinely abuse," says Bishav.



A small allowance is a big one for me, said Asad

Shaikh Asad Hosain, Hooghly

Life has never been kind to Shaikh Asad Hosain, a resident of Jagatballabhpur town in Howrah district. He was born in middle income household forty-seven winters ago with a one leg six inches shorter than the other, he could never manage a proper job; his wife left him – possibly failing to cope with circumstances – leaving the younger son, Imam with Asad, while the elder one works in central India.

He used to receive a disability allowance of one thousand rupees per month (\$15) prior to pandemic-induced lockdown. "I was receiving it for the last four years. I was somewhat dependent on it when it suddenly stopped," said Asad.

He lodged complaint after complaint at the local Block Development Office (BDO) which was not answered. After few months, when he was almost entirely dependent on alms from the local mosque, Asad called Chief Minister's Grievance Cell. The person who answered his call told Asad – who was severely depressed by then – that the problem is pretty "straightforward."

A week later, Asad received a message from the bank indicating that the sum has been credited. Arrears of seven or eight months had also been deposited.

"I was so relieved. It is a small amount of money but a big one for me and my son." said Asad who receives a subsidized ration given to the low-income household said that the cash allowance and the basic ration help him "to scrape through."

Asad is physically and emotionally prepared to engage in any kind of work and applied for a "job card few years back." The card guarantees limited income for menial work. But he neither got a card, nor a response.

"I think, I will be writing to the Grievance Cell soon. I know they respond and they do it fast," said Asad, while he dressed up in a bright ochre shirt and a clean lungi. It was Friday, time for him to go for the prayer at the mosque. His face wasn't gloomy anymore.



Didi ke bolo helps a factory worker to build his pucca house.

Sheikh Shafique, West Bardhaman

Many of West Bengal's respondents were unsure if calls to Chief Minister's Grievance Cell would ever yield any result or not and Sheikh Shafique, a worker in a fertilizer factory, was one of them.

Outbreak of the pandemic decelerated production and business, affecting lives. Shafique has had to do for months without pay.

Shafiq's present home in the Anandapur village of Kanksha development block in West Bardhaman district is a mud house. Shafique's plans to shift to a pucca house of his own with his family remained a story of unfulfilled dream.

Mr. Shafique is someone who has a deep pride in his work and refused to appeal for a subsidy to build his house. As he went out of work last year, Shafique realised that while he may earn enough to run the household, he would never be able to accumulate enough to build the house.

He decided to call Chief Minister's Grievance Cell early in 2021 for house building grant of the state government, despite being apprehensive about such subsidies.

"Within a month an official from the Chief Minister's office came to visit my home," said Shafique.

"The officer saw our dilapidated mud house and inspected the surroundings. In another two months, I got a call asking for my bank details and within days I received Rs 60,000 (\$800) to build a pucca house."

Over the years Shafique had saved up some money. "It is added to the governments' assistance (Rs 60,000) and [I] started building the house, few months back."

Shafique still needs few thousand bucks more to finish it, but he has returned to work and as he was hatching a savings plan to finish the house, he received another call; this time from the local Block Development Office (BDO).

"The officer told me to go ahead, further help will arrive soon," said an elated Sheikh Shafique.

"In the process, I have completely changed my opinion about the government's help line numbers – especially the ones run by the Grievance Cell," said Shafique.



A father's woes addressed by Grievance Cell

Rabindranath Biswas, North 24 Parganas

Fifty-year-old Rabindranath Biswas, referred as Rabi-da in his village Ronghat in North 24 Parganas, has an above average interest in politics and runs a shop to repair cycles for living. The worldly-wise man however had a difficult time, about two and half years ago.

The reason, he said, was his younger daughter Monmita's marriage.

"I borrowed quite a few thousand rupees to meet the expenses but I could not repay the loan on time and friends were slightly annoyed with me, which in turn was annoying me," said Mr Biswas.

Realizing that the pressure of usual and monthly household expenses would never let him repay the loan, Mr Biswas approached the Block Development Office (BDO) in Bagda to avail the Rupasree scheme of the West Bengal government; the scheme provides a one-time grant of Rs. 25,000 (\$350) for economically depressed families at the time of their adult daughters' marriage.

"The BDO office was singularly of no help," said Mr Biswas. Owing to two successive marriages in the family, as he had to arrange for his elder daughter's too in 2009, the house of Mr Biswas confronted significant economic stress.

"In addition, prices of daily consumables to even cooking gas are escalating by the week and his (Mr Biswas) ability to shoulder pressure is also reducing with age," said Chandana Biswas, wife of Mr Biswas.

Meanwhile, Rabi-da noticed an advertisement of the Chief Minister's Grievance Cell sometime in the spring of 2020. He did not waste time and called the number. But no one answered.

He kept trying over the next days. One evening as he was closing his shop, he called again and a person answered. Mr. Biswas narrated his ordeal. The official asked for certain documents like the invitation card of the marriage, his identity documents and bank account details. He promptly mailed all to the Grievance Cell in Chief Minister's office.

Within a fortnight, Mr Biswas received a sum of twenty-five thousand rupees. He could immediately pay off nearly half of his loan amount.

"It was such a relief for me," exclaims Rabi-da, to which Ms Biswas added: "It is because of Mamata-di that families like ours got some respite."

Monmita's elder sister Rupa had come visiting her parents. She too nods, saying, "I feel, the help was Chief Minister's gift to my dear sister."



A job on a phone call bowled an IT professional

Sourav Chakraborty, Howrah

"We service over a hundred beneficiaries each day. Answer questions, correct minor errors in certificates and assist to obtain cash incentives," said Sourav. He is one of 7120 contractual operators.

"Our family with two uncles, an aunt and my mother did not have a steady income," said Sourav, 21. He thus felt an acute need to earn at the beginning of first phase of Covid outbreak in early 2020, "I just called and told the Grievance Cell of the Chief Minister that I desperately need a job."

Though, at the time of making the call, Sourav was not sure if such cold calls can create an opportunity. But it did.

"I received a call which guided me to apply through Karma Bhumi, an app to connect people with diploma in information technology (IT) with employer," he said.

"Eventually – after a gap of about two months – I was told that I am selected to work as a Data Entry Operator in a

government department." Initially the appointment was for six months but the job – which pays him about Rs 10000 (\$135) per month – is continuing after a year.

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Sourav is both elated and grateful to the Chief Minister's Grievance Cell for helping him to land a job especially when the economy was at its lowest ebb due to pandemic.



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