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BEAUTY WITH A PURPOSE

24 'barefoot beauticians' from Bengal's back of beyond are headed for a bright future, courtesy a govt initiative to train them in the service

Ajanta Chakraborty | TNN

Haringhata (Nadia): The glow on their faces is unmistakable. Is it the pride of being 'empowered', or, is it the rigorous facial sessions for three months? It must be the pride — laced with grit.

Meet the "barefoot beauticians" of Bengal, who the TOI caught up with on Friday. But the 22 women barely have the time to chat or pose for pictures, busy as they are making the most of their last day of training. There are two absentees — Padma Das (28), whose was widowed two days ago, and Lakshmi Dewan (23), who is about to deliver a baby.

Since March-end, an ordinary household at Ray Para, 50km from the district headquarters of Krishnagore, had doubled up as the classroom for the Bengal government's unique "ethnic beauty care" project. And it has given wings to the dreams

of these tribal and backward classes women from far-flung panchayats of Kasthadanga, Naganukhna, Mollabeliya and Ghola, turning them into professional makeup artistes, nail-art technicians and hair stylists.

The project is the brainchild of backward classes welfare department minister Upen Biswas. The idea struck him last year when he was passing through Bagda, his constituency in North 24 Parganas. "I noticed this ramshackle beauty parlour in a tribal village and decided to tap the booming beauty business in rural Bengal. Our state has 341 blocks with 40,000 villages. So, there is scope for grooming one tribal woman per village into a barefoot beautician," he says.

To back his proposal, Biswas studied the 2012 PriceWaterhouseCoopers-Ficci report which revealed that India's beauty market is worth between Rs 230-Rs 245 billion and is growing at 20-25% annually. "Since the training doesn't have a standing format, we needed a brand. We approached the big ones first. But they were reluctant to travel to the rural areas. Finally, we zeroed in on Flora's," the min-



Panchi Sardar, who travels three hours on a bicycle and two buses to reach the centre from Ghola village. Her mother, a farm labourer, goads Panchi, the eldest of three siblings, to come here every day. "My mother feared I would end up like her, uneducated. She did not marry me off young, lest I became a mother too young and ended up being a khet majur (farm labourer) to make ends meet. Luckily we learnt about this training from the local panchayat and I was selected at the interview," says the 26-year-old.

"I can make a decent living out of threading and hair-cutting," says a confident Laxmi Soren, 22, who lives in the remote Kapuleswar village. "The authorities were kind enough to change the training hours from 11am-3pm to 12-4 pm because we had to complete our household chores," she says. The training, which began on March 26, was conducted four days a week. Depending on its success, the pilot project will be replicated in 100 centres across the state.

The department has spent Rs 20,000 on each candidate, including the tool kit. That's peanuts compared to market rates. "Beautician training courses cost anything between Rs 40,000 and Rs 1 lakh in a city parlour. No wonder the girls are so thrilled," said IIML director Anindita Maitra, who has been personally supervising the course.

"I can't help admiring their determination and sincerity. Thank God Padma could complete her training; she'll need a job badly," muses Maitra, adding, "A good beautician is much valued because clients know them by name and insist on being served by them. If they leave, often clients follow." Salaries can vary between Rs 2,500 and Rs 15,000-plus a month, depending on the experience and where the parlour is located.

ister says. The beauty parlour is conducting the training at the behest of soft skill development agency, Indus Integrated Information Management Ltd (IIIML).

Come August and the West Bengal Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Finance Development Corporation (WBSCSTFDC) will provide the women with tool kits and loans for their own set-ups. They may also opt for placements with beauty parlour in towns. "In fact, most of them have started bagging home assignments," the minister smiled. The women's USP — subsidised home beauty care (Rs 10 for threading, Rs 50 for hair-cuts, Rs 100 for facial and Rs 1,000 for bridal grooming) and word-of-mouth reputation.

"I'll probably opt for a parlour job," says

EMPOWERING WOMEN

SITTING PRETTY: In August, the women will be provided with tool kits and loans for their own set-ups. They may also opt for placements with beauty parlour in towns