

Let us pay heed to nurses nursing grievances



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For the past few days, the nurses in hospitals and rural and urban primary health centres in Tamil Nadu have been agitating, observing fast and picketing. Though in government service, they have been working as contract workers for low wages, having no job security. Why this raw deal for the nurses dedicated to the job of ensuring physical health and life security to the general people?

Disparity of salary

Tamil Nadu, by and large, stands front and centre in medical services, endowed with more excellent facilities in general medicine and private medical sector. Though the state tops in

providing standard medical treatment, it holds only the 28th slot in management of nurses' work. So, naturally the question arises if the nurses are exploited.

Only 55 per cent of nurses working in the primary health centres are permanent employees. The rest are temporary and contract workers getting only consolidated pay. Around 10,000 nurses have been selected through exams by the Medical Services Recruitment Board and posted in various government hospitals and primary health centres. They were given appointment order with the promise that their job would be made permanent within two years. But the promise has not yet been kept.

Some nurses whose services have been made permanent are getting a pay of Rs.48,000 a month and the temporary nurses Rs.18,000 only. It is quite unethical that though the two sections of the nurses are doing the same work, there is a pay disparity between them. Hearing their case, the High Court in 2018 ordered 'equal pay for equal work.' But the court order is yet to be implemented.

Continuing woes

During the time of corona, 2,500 nurses were appointed for emergency work. But after two years of work, they were terminated. The fact is that they too got the job only after writing the exam conducted by the recruitment board. There are 17,000 permanent jobs and 13,000 jobs with consolidated pay, which are still vacant in Tamil Nadu.

The nurses, who have joined as temporary workers, have to sweat it out in the same cadre and finally retire, getting aged. After superannuation, they have to go back home empty-handed, not

given any retirement benefit and so, they are forced to lead a life of woes and mental depression.

In Tamil Nadu, the number of nurses is not in proportion to that of patients, according to the stipulations made by the National Medical Commission and by the Indian public health organizations. A primary health centre should have at least four nurses so that they work by turns in order to ensure a 24/7 functioning of the centre. But the centre has only one or two nurses. When one of them goes on leave, the other nurse has to get burdened with additional work and thus work for 12 to 18 hours a day. Therefore, they cannot enjoy the weekly holiday, medical leave and maternity leave because the service to patients cannot be put off and has to be provided on the spot instantly.

Woeful private life

The government employees in other departments are getting maternity leave with pay. But the nurses, who play midwife during several deliveries, do not get the facility when they themselves have to be away from work for delivering their own baby. So, they face several ordeals in their private life. After delivery, they have to come back to workplace with their newborn infants. How woeful is the situation wherein they have to juggle their time, managing their kids and the patients as well!

No counseling for transfer is conducted annually for the nurses getting consolidated pay. For the nurses working in far-off primary health centers, their home life becomes quite tough. Working away from husband and children, they have been waiting for transfer. When they don't get transfer, the marital discord is likely to arise. In fact, there are several families torn apart because of this problem.

Lack of security

There is also the question of lack of security for the nurses working alone in PHCs. There have been instances wherein some men fully drunk quarreled with the nurses in the PHCs in remote areas. There are other threats too.

In a PHC in Kanyakumari district, a man intoxicated feigned sickness and sexually abused a nurse. Similarly, a nurse in a PHC in Trichy was threatened at knife-point by some miscreants and robbed of her gold chain.

Taking into account all these problems that the nurses are confronted with, the government and the society as well should view them as human rights problems.

The medical service will be of good quality only if the nurses working for others' welfare at the cost of their own self are content with their job.

The Tamil Nadu government, which is providing a Dravidian model of governance, which insists on equal opportunity and equal rights, must honour its ruling party's electoral promise No. 356 and regularize the services of all nurses posted through the Medical Services Recruitment Board. Let the lamp of happiness be lit in the lives of the nurses!

Translated by V. Mariappan.