

UP teachers find SC order on meal for students unpalatable

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Lucknow: Kitchen or classroom? Teachers working for government-run primary schools in Uttar Pradesh face this peculiar dilemma in the wake of the supreme court's order making it mandatory for the government to serve meals to children at schools. As officials put their heads together to work out the modalities of the scheme, well past the court's deadline, the uncertainty is causing confusion, and even panic, among the teaching fraternity. And weighing down heavily on the minds of the already overworked lot is the fear of being dragged into the kitchen.

In fact, the UP Primary School Teachers' Association has already passed a resolution to preempt any such move. "On August 10, the body unanimously decided that teachers would not undertake any non-teaching assignment, barring those related to census and elections," association president Abhimanyu Tiwari told Times News Network. "Cooking is a definite no. Will we cook or teach?" he seethed.

Just a day before the apex court order came, Mr Tiwari had publicly exhorted his colleagues, to "throw into the dustbin any directive from the government calling for non-teaching support". He said teachers must preserve whatever dignity the profession was left with.

The resolution has found resounding support from the three-lakh-strong teach-

ing community, known to double up as errand boys for the distribution of ration cards, identity cards, compiling voter lists, keeping animal count, helping in construction work on campus and a host of other "extra curricular" activities. "On as many as 125 out of the 220 teaching days during the last academic session, primary teachers found themselves engaged in non-teaching activities. Now, doubling-up as cooks will be the proverbial last straw on the camel's back," Mr Tiwari said.

Vice president of the teachers' association Ved Pal Singh dubbed the order the "ultimate indignity" heaped on the teaching community Uttar Pradesh has a record number of single-teacher schools. "Districts like Siddharthnagar, Azamgarh, Bahraich, Sonbhadra, Azamgarh, Sitapur and Shahjehanpur have such schools in the hundreds," he pointed out, adding that in Kalan Shahjehanpur, there were 113 schools and only 93 teachers. "With the schoolmaster expected to look after the kitchen, cook, serve and clean up too, where will there be time to teach the students," he asked.

"The solution," said education activist Raresh Chandra, "lies in taking the community's assistance like in the southern states or enlisting the support of the village pradhans." Mr Chandra hoped that a positive decision would be taken on November 11 when a delegation led by noted developmental economist Jean Dreze will meet chief minister Mayawati to discuss the issue.