

# A 'roti bank' comes up in Aurangabad for the poor

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AURANGABAD: A unique 'roti bank' has been launched in this city, famous for its Ajanta-Ellora caves, for the poor. People can 'deposit' rotis and the poor, aged, sick or the unemployed people can 'withdraw' a basic fare of freshly-cooked rotis and a vegetarian or non-vegetarian dish.

The roti bank — first of its kind in Maharashtra, and second in India after a similar venture in Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh — was launched on December 5 by Yusuf Mukati, the founder of Haroon Mukati Islamic Centre (HMIC), on the busy Jinsi-Baijipura Road in the heart of the city.

"Over the years, I saw many poor people, especially Muslims, who can't afford one square meal a day... The situation is pathetic in large families with just one bread-winner. But because they live a dignified life, they do not resort to begging," Mukati told IANS.

Targetting many such poor and deprived families, the idea of a 'Roti Bank' crystallized — and the 38-year-old Mukati made it clear that beggars would not be entertained here. After discussing with his wife Kauser, and his four married sisters - Seema Shalimar, Mumtaz Memon, Shehnaz Sabani, Huma Pariyani — the 'roti bank' finally went 'public' with a modest 250 'depositors' on December 5.

Initially, curious passers-by would stop to ask about it but feel delighted to see it was a noble initiative.

People have to fill up a form for Roti Bank's membership. "We allot them a specific code number. The request is simple — simply deliver us minimum freshly cooked two rotis and a plate of vegetarian or non-vegetarian food that they prepare for family at home daily," Mukati said.

The idea clicked and within a fortnight the membership shot up by nearly 25 percent, and Mukati — who runs a garment shop along with his realty consultancy — is optimistic it will double soon.

"The bank timings are 11am to 11pm. People can voluntarily 'deposit' their food, once a day or even more... Similarly, the poor people can come any time to collect the food as per their convenience and availability," Mukati said.

The unique bank provides special carry bags with a code number to each 'depositor' on receipt. It is checked for freshness and quality, and then disbursed to the lucky families daily.

"The membership is growing, and occasionally food deposits are also higher than expectations — So, on an average, we feed around 500 poor people daily," Mukati told IANS.

He emphasized that over one-third of the donors and beneficiaries are non-Muslims and want to increase their contribution gradually "since food is the right of all human beings, irrespective of religion or financial status".

As word spread about the noble venture wedding organisers started dispatching the extra food left over due to guest absenteeism.

"Since launch, at least six Hindu wedding organizers sent us 50-60 plates of excellent vegetarian food and another dozen Muslim marriage organizers also sent a similar quantity of non-vegetarian fare," he said.

"We store it separately in huge freezers with a capacity for 700 packets. The beneficiaries can take the food of their choice (veg/non-veg)," said Mukati while appealing to big restaurants, deluxe hotels, corporate and industrial canteens, flight kitchens and mega-event organizers to contribute their unconsumed, extra food for the Roti Bank.

He feels it will ensure there is "absolutely no wastage" of food anywhere any time in the city of 1.17 million population of which around 31 percent are Muslims.

Dwelling on the deplorable plight of Muslim women in the city, Kauser, his wife, said the divorce rates are very high, especially among young women.

She said the problem is acute...thousands of very young illiterate or semi-literate girls are pushed into marriage with much older men, and then divorced very soon... Their families borrow large amounts for marriages...

"These unfortunate girls, at times with tiny children, have no social security, nobody to house, feed or employ them," said Kauser, who helps her husband in the Roti Bank venture.

In its own way, the Haroon Mukati Islamic Centre is contributing to women's uplift with an academic centre for 2,000 girls in which they impart regular spiritual and vocational education in 15 different vocations, including yoga, fashion designing and computers.

"This equips the young girls with a capacity to earn a living and in case of any future problems, at least they will not starve or be driven to the road," Kauser pointed out.

Incidentally, around 100 girl students from middle or upper-middle-class families have become Roti Bank members and contribute daily. It is disbursed among their less fortunate classmates.

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