

In Bengal, a reality show for entrepreneurs ideated by Mamata

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Chief minister Mamata Banerjee addresses a function in Kolkata. (Subhendu Ghosh /HT Photo)

A mechanism to clean rivers and mobile apps for ordering lip-smacking home-cooked food and tailor-made handicraft items — a variety of innovative ideas will contest for the top prize when 40 entrepreneurs appear in a TV reality show in West Bengal.

Conceived by chief minister Mamata Banerjee to boost entrepreneurship in the state, the show will be broadcast every Sunday evening with former cricketer Sourav Ganguly as anchor. The winner's purse: Rs 1 crore from the state's venture capital fund, besides other assistance.

When a private channel beams the first episode, Egiye Bangla (Bengal stays ahead), on December 6, it will become the first government-funded business reality show in the country. The programme has nine episodes, including the grand finale.

The Mamata government believes the show will have a positive effect on the not-so-enviable entrepreneurship culture in the state, which is hard-pressed to attract investments.

The first phase of the show will feature 40 entrepreneurs in eight episodes. A panel of three judges — Bandhan Bank founder Chandra Sekhar Ghosh, restaurateur Anjan Chatterjee and IIM Calcutta professor Ashok Banerjee — will choose a winner from every episode.

The eight winners will appear in the grand finale.

“Earlier, we had a misconception that Bengal’s small enterprises meant handicraft. It is through this programme that we got to know about a wide range of unique ideas that bright, young minds were exploring,” said professor Banerjee, the director of IIM’s innovations section.

The show should be continued for at least five years to inculcate entrepreneurship among local youth, he suggested.

Project head Suman Mukhopadhyay, who left his job abroad to join a social enterprise in Kolkata a few years ago, was optimistic that the show would be a morale booster for young entrepreneurs across the state. “It is important to note that almost all the contestants had the opportunity of going to high-paying jobs but they preferred to make their own way.”

Among the 40 contestants are a group of young graduates from the Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology in Shibpur, across the Hooghly in Howrah. They have invented a mechanism to clean the surface of rivers and other water bodies using an inflatable technology. Simply put, a balloon sucks in the garbage floating in rivers.

A young man from Bankura’s Bikna village, known for the Dokra craft, has come up with an app that helps craftsmen improve their designs and deliver bespoke products to customers, who can connect with the artisans through their cell phones.

He is getting advice from professors at IIT Kharagpur to make Dokra crafts free of lead, a drawback that stops artisans from exporting items.

A group of Kolkata-based youth has come up with a mobile app to connect homemakers and foodies who want to avoid street food or items from restaurants. In this app, homemakers will announce what they will cook for the day and for how many individuals. The food will be delivered at the customer’s doorstep by those who launched the app.

Another young man in the show will offer to install solar panels at homes and offices with the promise of realising the cost over a period of time — the benefit reflecting on power bills. He is looking for deep-pocket financiers to kick off the project as the high initial cost of installing panels stands in the way.