

## **Asha Site Visit to Nishtha:**

**Visited by:** Padmanava Sen (Asha Bangalore/Atlanta Volunteer and Ashawide project partner coordinator) – [padmanava.sen@gmail.com](mailto:padmanava.sen@gmail.com)

Date: January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015

### **Summary of the visit:**

- Reached Baruipur Station around 9 am in the morning and met Mina Das from Nishtha.
- First discussed with Mina di the status of the existing projects and any impending issues. The questions from Atlanta and additional queries regarding the self-defense training are discussed. Fortunately, the self-defense trainers were visiting same day and had more interactions with them later in that day.
- Collected annual report and the audit report.
- Visited the Night shelter. Kids performed a small cultural program with music and dances. Then, some recent issues are discussed with Government ruling that compelled Nishtha to maintain two separate centers for boys and girls. Took few photos for younger kids. Older kids posed for pictures but those pictures are deleted for safety issues.
- Checked the night shelter for boys they selected for rent and may work well to meet the requirements.
- Went back to Nishtha office, the self-defense training was just started. Talked to the girls who are being trained. The session being their last session they merged all 3 groups. (70% of the girls attended are under Jagaran program as well). Also later talked to Kasturi and Anindita - the trainers
- Went to Damdama, the Jagaran kids started telling the tragic stories of violence that happened to their friends/relatives and how they are trying to raise awareness, more performance from them (took a video).
- Talked to the girls about spoken English and computer classes conducted by Don Bosco Tech. They were telling their experiences and it was all good.
- I went to see some of their homes in the villages. Some of the homes are badly damaged after floods and Minadi shows how they survive out of the new embroidery work. It pays really less (around <2000/month) with full family effort.

- Attended a Matri dal meeting. They enacted a drama on women torture. I was spellbound and people started crying after it ended. I did not take any photos there.
- Had some detailed discussions with mothers and discussed why they should let their daughters dream beyond marriages.
- Came back and had detailed discussions about the training to the trainers. They were really worried about the night shelter kids' vulnerability. Also, one of them runs a Government home in Liluah. They gave some private home contact which can help Nishtha for some extremely marginalized kids they want to move out the night shelter area.
- More discussion en-route home in the car with the trainers affiliated to INSPIRATION.
- Got back to Kolkata with nice memories of rural West Bengal

### **More Details:**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> January, I have traveled from Kolkata to Baruipur and received by Minadi around 9 am. Nishtha office is 10-15 minute auto drive from the station. We discussed the current projects and site visit agenda for some time, and then we went to the Night shelter area. This is my third visit to Nishtha, so I could notice the children growing up in Nishtha Night shelters. I can confidently say that the conditions have significantly improved after Nishtha got its own building to run the Night shelter (Asha WAH funds used to build it). Most of the children go to local schools and the shelter is used as a residential home. The mothers can visit them here but the goal is to separate out children from the horrific environment of Brothel. Before Nishtha took charge, the children were usually thrown out of the rooms at nights and they have to sleep on the road. Also, given the anti-social activities around Brothels, they were more vulnerable. Now that they have a home to sleep, study and live their lives, they are much happier. However, as they reach teenage years, Nishtha started taking special precautions to make sure the children can continue their studies and live a respectful life. Already two of the girls are receiving Govt job training for nursing and are role models of the children.

I discussed different issues with the caretakers and teachers in the centers. Children performed some dances and I tried to get a sense about their academic standards. I talked to their mothers regarding any issues they are facing. Then I took some photos near the Night shelter for Girls. Later Minadi took me to the new center for boys and the new center is quite close to the main center that Nishtha has been running for last 3 years in the new building.



Key Members of Nishtha Night Shelter



Minadi finally made the little girl smile



Minadi with the new center for Boys

After visiting the Night shelter, we went back to Nishtha office. I had some delicious sweets and then went upstairs to check the self-defense training that was already started for that day. It is one of the last classes and everyone was beaming with energy. The center had around 50 girls as they combined multiple batches for the last class. Kasturi-di mentioned about how the girls opened up over last few months. They used to be very shy and won't say a word, now they can talk about their problems and can express themselves in a much better fashion. The students showed some self-defense skills as well that they learned as an integral part of the program. Minadi also expressed a very positive feedback regarding the training as it helped so many girls in remote rural areas.



Girls seating during the training and some demonstrations

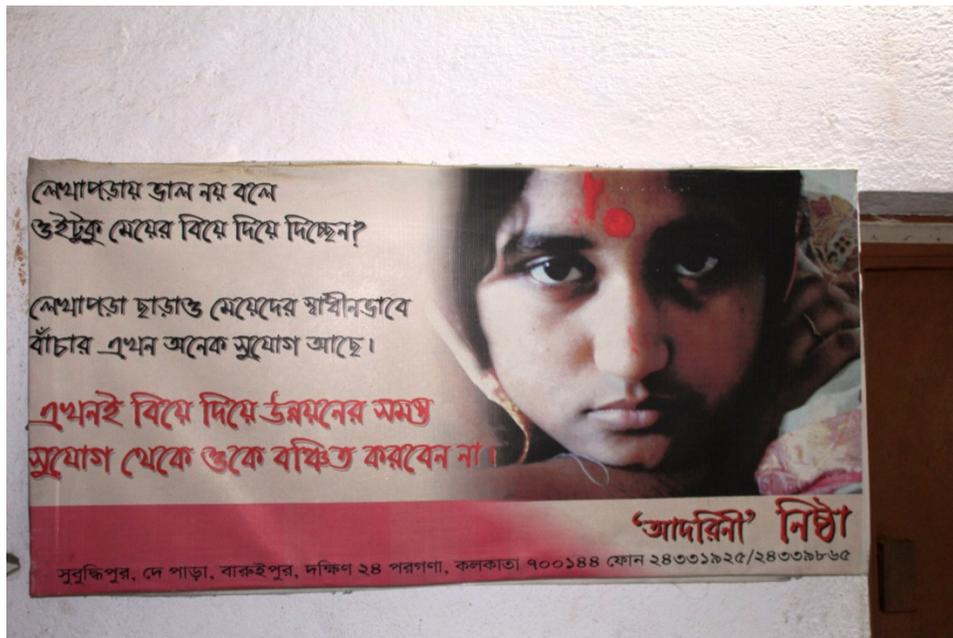


Some candid moment with a super kick



Trainees and Trainers for the self-defense program

The following poster drew my attention that signifies the role Nishtha plays in the lives of so many girls in rural west Bengal. The poster states clearly the false notion that haunts many families in villages. When a girl does not do well in exams, parents try to marry them off as there is no other alternative future they can see. This leads to early age marriages, domestic violence and in many cases, tragic endings for many girls. Justice is not served like in cities for violence against women as the law and order is not strict in remote villages when it comes to women abuse. The poster states, there are many ways a girl can live independently beyond degrees and make the parents aware not to get their daughter married off at early ages thus ruining all future possibilities.



Poster from Nishtha to give girls a chance to live an independent life

My next stop was Jagaran centers. I had a good conversation with different age groups. We had very frank discussions since they have been seeing me for last 3 years. Jagaran is a little far from the main office of Nishtha and we crossed many paddy fields. In January, it is the start of new paddy cultivation. Minadi also showed me some destruction in remote villages that happened due to floods in 2014. Many people lost everything and many fields are devastated. So they need to change their profession to survive.



Fields en-route Jagaran Centers

I spent some time with the girls under Jagaran program. Since most of them attended the self-defense training, computer and spoken English workshops, I collected some feedbacks. Their English speaking skills have definitely improved. They also started learning computers which is like a luxury in remote village in sharp contrast to cities. However, the job placements demand them to be proficient in computers. The girls also started sharing different stories from their friends/seniors who got married and faced domestic violence. Also, some of them shared their horrific eve-teasing stories and how they are tackling them as a group with the help of Nishtha. They presented a short cultural program mostly involving dances. I took photos and videos.



Activity in Jagaran Center



Girls in Jagaran Center



Girls dancing in Tagore songs



Me with Girls from Nishtha Project Jagaran



Minadi with Jagaran Girls

After that I attended a Matri-dal meeting which is a self-help group for adult women, most of them mothers of Jagaran Girls. They enacted a drama which is based on a real story of their village where the in-laws burned the girl alive. The domestic violence and women abuse cases are very common in these areas and Nishtha is doing marvelous job to bring unity among the women and girls. A lady raised questions the group about a dilemma she has been facing given her daughter was 18 yrs old and she got a good family to get her married off. The group explained why her daughter should continue studies and why 23-yr old independent women can be more successful in life compared to 18-yr old school drop-out. Every meeting, there are one or two such cases discussed. This also reminds me about the importance of tuition support for girls at higher classes so that they do not drop out and their parents see potential in their academics. There were around 60 women in the meeting and Nishtha has many such groups across villages impacting almost a lakh population.

I came back to Nishtha office after that and had detailed discussions with Ms Kasturi Mukherjee who was leading the self-defense and self-development training. She had shared concern regarding Night Shelter children who are exposed to the dark sides of lives too early and are extremely vulnerable. Over years, things have improved but we have to take utmost care of them. In some cases, Nishtha is trying to put the older girls in a boarding school but it is difficult to find good Government boarding schools and there is a dearth of hostel facilities for teenagers at low-cost/mid-cost sectors.

To summarize, this is my third visit to Nishtha. As always, the dedication of grass root workers, the compassion in the eyes of youth groups, the determination among their mothers, the positive changes brought in the lives of marginalized communities moved me a lot. In a society, where girls are dominated, side-lined, abused and killed every day, when I look at the young girls beaming with energy, strength and hope, I salute them and Nishtha's efforts. I came back home with their smiles in my mind.



To know more about Nishtha projects,

Night Shelter: <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=756>

Jagaran: <https://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=1018>