

SPECIAL experiences DURING LOCKDOWN and massive damage caused by Amphan

The pandemic wreaked havoc in these areas. Villagers lost their jobs, girl children could not attend schools due to the lockdown. People were hunger-stricken for days together. During this turbulent and tormenting time, violence against girls and women saw a sharp rise. Frustrated male members poured forth their ire on the women and little girls. They became prey to the wrath of the drunken men. At this juncture child marriage, trafficking and early marriage of girls (before 21 years) became a common phenomenon. In most cases these young girls were married off to strangers. Often the impoverished fathers were paid a handsome amount by the groom's side. This way the hapless fathers could shrug off the responsibilities of their daughters in lieu of some money.

The dry ration relief distribution started on 20th April and was complete by 18th of July including Namkhana block, since monsoon is wreaking havoc in these areas and it is very difficult and dangerous to cross the swollen rivers on boats. Moreover, boats and other modes of vehicles are quite expensive at this time. We also felt that if the starving villagers are given some food then they could be calmed down.

Various other problems emerged at this juncture. Innumerable migrant labours were stuck in other states. They were contacted and requested to keep poise and return back gradually. Their families were upset about them. Moreover the Government ration was not enough for the big rural families, so thousands starved for days together during the pandemic. The private tutors also could not take classes due to lockdown and the children lagged far behind in studies. These tutors stay in far flung areas and since public vehicles were unavailable, the classes were hampered.

It is true that Nishtha has a vast network in 300 villages. Leaders and deputy leaders of Mahila Bahinia and Kishori Bahini work relentlessly to save young girls from false traps. Youth groups are there where young boys are involved in various social works. These leaders and members of youth groups including male members were contacted by Nishtha workers to conduct meetings. Subsequently permission was sought from SDO Office and DM Office to organise meetings with Mahila Mandal, youth group leaders and other community members in any nook or corner of the villages. These small 4-5 member team meetings emphasised on healthy habits and maintaining health protocol during this pandemic situation and aided in sensitizing the villagers about the behavioural patterns during this hard time.

Moreover Nishtha's young and undaunted little girl leaders have proved their mettle in front of the ration shop during this turmoil so that the same gets distributed equally amongst all. These brave hearts compelled the ration shop owner to provide equal ration to all the families but without any conflict or confrontation. With smiles all over the face, these skilled and able leaders advocated strongly for equal distribution and showed documents to the owners for following the same. In a week's time wonders happened. Everybody got the same amount of ration; the villagers blessed these resolute girls for their zeal to make

positive things happen. The local leaders praised their valour. At present follow up is done but once in a fortnight.

The brave warriors have not only advocated for equal ration distribution but also negotiated with the local authorities to bring back 1,000 plus migrant labours from other states. Their advocacy has yielded positive results, almost all have returned back except 121 labours who wish to stay there and continue working once the dust settles down. These gallant souls have calmed the family members of the labours and personally talked to them for restricting their sudden movements like walking back to Bengal from Mumbai, Kerala or Gujarat or eternally waiting for justice in the stations. These labours confessed that they were eating only one square meal a day and some urgently needed of some medicines. Nishtha contacted known circles in the other states and implored people to help these distressed labours by providing them some food and medicines. The labours still in other states have been connected to their families through whatsapp call for assuring assistance any time they require.

Subsequent to this assistance, the young girl leaders have created an innovative protection circle to stop child marriage, trafficking and immense atrocity against women. Already, 2 suicides, 2 murders, 8 child marriages, 4 cases of trafficking have taken place during this turbulent time. Therefore our zealous warriors raised their campaign to stop all these social menace and make life easier and dignified. Local police has been taken in the loop. The undaunted spirits of these adolescent girls have taken them to so many houses to make the parents aware about their daughters' susceptible condition. If the fathers pour forth their unnecessary wrath upon the adolescent home bound children then it could yield harrowing results. The parents and other family members have been cautioned about their disposition particularly during this sensitive time.

Leaders of girls groups created a **'Protection Circle'** encompass police, local Panchayat, group leaders and Nishtha social workers and Nishtha Management. It will function thus that if any untoward happening occurs in any family, group member along with her family members will shout at the top of their voice going to the roof of their home so as to make other neighbours alerted and all the families in that hamlet will shout jointly. This way their message will spread to the neighbouring hamlets hence, all the community people will be alert and take immediate step to protect the affected girls or woman/ family. Then the group leaders of the affected hamlet will contact the social workers of Nishtha and Nishtha will contact the local police station at once to take effective step to catch the culprit and provide necessary protection to the victims.

Just when the villagers were getting used to the ill-will of the pandemic another calamity struck us hard—Amphan. Just at this critical juncture, the abominable clutches of Amphan set everything haywire. Life went upside down. Amphan has ruined the houses here. Villagers were roofless, starved, surviving literally with snakes and other poisonous insects. Their houses have been blown away like toys and thousands of trees have been flung aside like light weight materials. Their life has also collapsed with their houses. These miserable villagers neither have utensils to cook nor beds to lie down. The preserved relief food items have been brutally blown away. Moreover the incessant monsoon rain has made their life

further precarious. The fields have been damaged by the saline water of the sea and it is estimated that for the next four years cultivation cannot take place due to the presence of salt in the fields. So already the villagers who were jobless due to the lockdown have been once again hit hard by the terrible cyclone. Now this incessant rainfall has compelled the villagers to repair their ruined houses. This is an uphill task since they have no work; chill penury has shrouded their future. The children, aged and the cattle are literally living out in the open.

Experience of working in Namkhana block:

In Namkhana block we had very good experiences. The local villagers specially the women who took leadership role in selection process helped Nishtha in smooth distribution and the programme was quite well-managed. The women of these villages felt gleeful to be involved in such a noble work. They requested Panchayat to feed the Nishtha workers who went for distribution. They also pleaded with the Panchayat to provide temporary shelters to these workers since it was raining heavily for few days. Most of these works were done by women and we felt proud as a women's' organisation. They have shown their mettle in organising a smooth distribution programme and proved to be able leaders and managers.

Counselling of the villagers was done, administration was sensitised. This time too we are repeating the same work along with relief distribution. Our workers have noticed that the women and young girls have come forth to aid us and took leadership in every way. Women here are looking for alternative livelihood since their men go to the mid-sea for fishing and stay there for months. Therefore running the big rural family falls upon the shoulders of the women. Little girls need to fetch clean water in big buckets from distant sources as the scarcity of clean water is common in these parts. Ponds are infested with small insects but the villagers are using this water for all household chores. They are washing themselves and the clothes in the same water. This is a sorry picture and needs urgent redress. Moreover school dropouts are in thousands here; little girls are either married off or trafficked as poverty lurks like a demon above their heads. The parents discourage them from going to school and force them into various labours.

In Namkhana there are high rate of child marriages and school dropouts among girls. They need to walk two and half hours to reach school everyday. Post independence only one girl has reached up to the college level in this area. Her mother has supported her education but unfortunately she could do nothing more. Her mother herself is a HS pass out but now gathers shrimps standing in the water for hours. This girl is tormented at her in-laws place which forced her to come back. Now her brother was studying in school but due to family pressure he has left as a migrant labour to Kerala. His school teacher has assured that he can write the exam from distance. Now in such a pathetic scenario another problem lurks behind--- scarcity of clean water for drinking and household uses.

Domestic violence is rampant here. Women and young girls suffer humiliation day in day out. Moreover another problem which hovers around is the drinking habit of small boys. They live outside the periphery for earning bread and butter for their families and as a dire

outcome get engaged in drinking with their adult colleagues. Furthermore fishing is the only livelihood in these parts and the waters are filled with poisonous snakes, crocodiles etc.

Furthermore the immense problem of clean drinking water needs urgent solution. The women should be engaged in this water management and preservation work with their enormous experience and expertise handed down through generations about nature and water. They can enrich the administration with their age-old knowledge and seek technological help to preserve rain water. BDO and APO of Namkhana block has promised aid in ground water recharge, installing tube wells with overhead reservoir to reach each and every household. More mangroves need to be planted to resist inundation of fields and block administration promised to plant 5000 mangroves through these women under MGNREGA. More water sources would be dug which would not dry up during summer. Block, GP and District Administration have been sensitized to be involved in this long drawn process so that the problem of clean drinking and household needs water is solved in the near future. Asha for Education has given us a golden opportunity to get acquainted with the villagers and welcome the female warriors in their fight for their rights.

Leadership of Nishtha girls groups:

Now the little girls have aided the villagers under 3 blocks Magrahat-II, Bishnupur-I and Baruipur by preparing lists of the most vulnerable families and submitting them to the authorities for financial assistance. Nishtha youth group leaders helped to set up the ruined houses of those families who did not receive any kind of support from the government to rebuild their houses. The boys laboured hard to set up the dilapidated structures with the locally available materials like bamboos, sticks etc. once the work is done, the leaders have urged their teachers to take online classes (specially class VIII, IX & X). Presently Geography, English and Maths classes are being taken. Small groups are being formed for these classes since everybody do not have android or smart phones. Private tutors are taking classes of Class V to VII. Nishtha targeted 21 schools for online classes but only 5 schools have responded till now which is quite a success. Classes are taken in small groups for the fear of pandemic and in neighbourhoods where smart phones are available. Often the net connections are disrupted post Amphan so in that case the students are just listening to the teachers instead of conducting video classes.

There is no problem with the college and higher secondary students since they are grown up. These girls are riding to the neighbourhoods where net connection is working well and forming small groups to attend the classes. Often they are going to ICDS office or a friend's place maintaining all health protocol to take classes. The students are definitely maintaining social distancing while the classes are on.

The efforts of the brave warriors paid off

- Our real unsung heroes could manage to bring about 70% students together for attending online classes which deserves kudos.
- These skilful leaders with unflinching spirits have succeeded in stopping atrocity against girls and women. They fought fiercely against child marriage and trafficking

which reduced at an alarming rate. Their innovative strategy of protection circle worked wonders to save innocent lives.

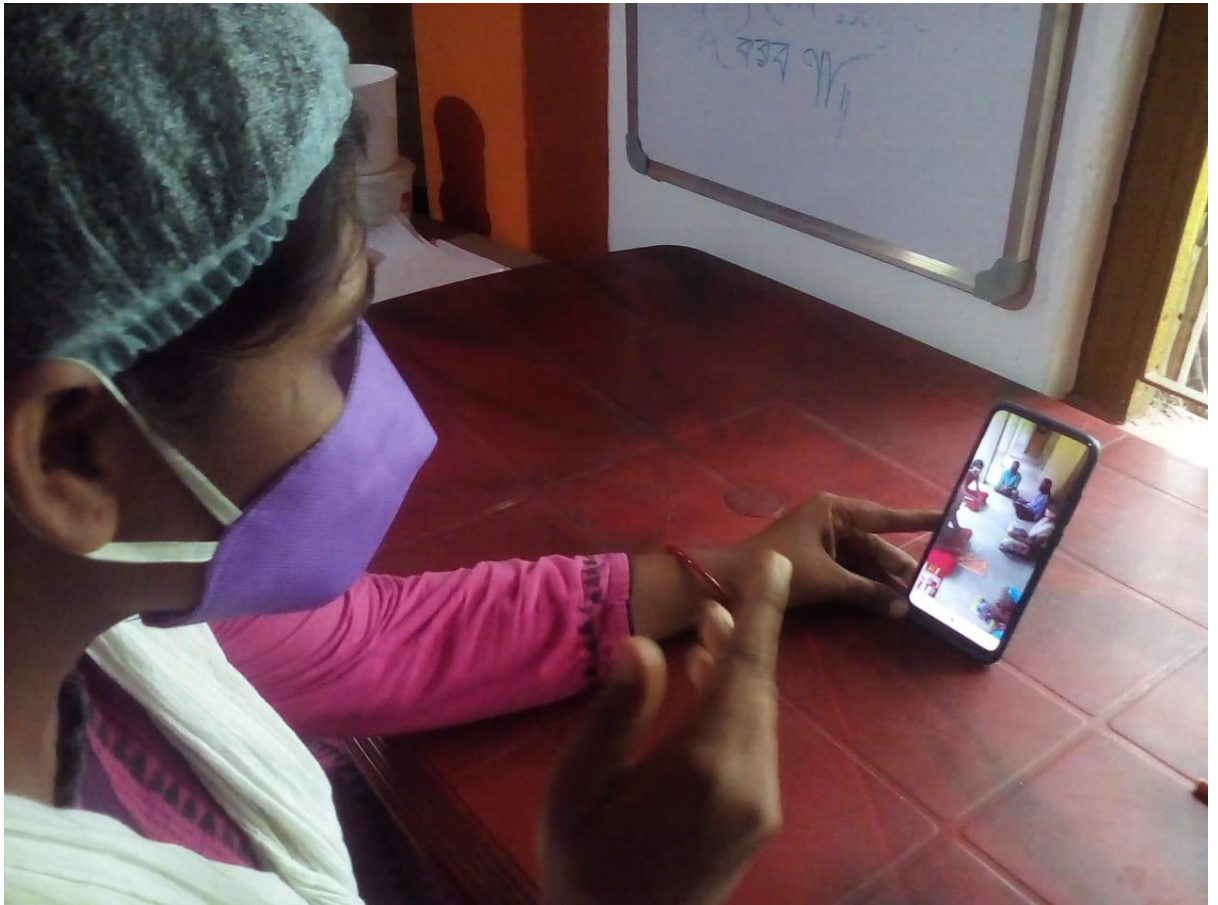
- These brave hearts advocated for the migrant labours with determination. At present they are campaigning to raise awareness about the pandemic and restricting the movement of the labours for their safety. These girls are imploring and pleading the labours to stay back and look for alternative livelihood instead of returning back as migrant workers.
- Last but not the least, these young leaders proved their valour in making lists of the Amphan afflicted families to distribute relief. The neighbourhood women were requested to mark the families with three colours, red, yellow and blue- signifying abject poverty, slightly better condition and far better condition consecutively. This innovative strategy made the women feel dignified and proud to be involved in the relief work without any grudge of being left out.
- Therefore it is well understood that the leaders have shown a strong determination and able leadership to combat any odd situation. They have the potential to be the front runners of our society. The girls have the capacity to manage any situation with meagre supply. While solving one problem they found tailor made solutions for others. Such is their zeal and vitality to work for their fellow sisters. This kind of a calamity or a phenomenal experience is very new to them but they are our brave warriors.
- Nishtha is grateful to Asha for Education to give us an opportunity to bring out the marvellous leadership quality of these strife-torn adolescent girls. Therefore, the unabashed spirit and the unshrinking confidence of the young warriors have surfaced during this unrest. This progress of the young girls has astounded us.

Nishtha's SPECIAL INITIATIVES

- Our leaders advocated equal distribution of ration amongst all and aided in relief distribution
- These young women emphasised on stopping violence against girls, child trafficking and early marriage
- Leaders urged the private tutors to take online classes for the students of class V to V11 and high school teachers to take classes for the students of VIII to class X.
- They negotiated with the local administration to bring back the migrant labours from other states and prepared a full list with present whereabouts to make the task easier. They also talked to the distressed families of these labours and assured them protection and support with food stuff.
- These young women and girls played the role of a watch dog and promptly contacted the police if any untoward incident or strangers was spotted

These young girls are our brave warriors. They have worked unabated to save the lives of thousands. The young girls advocated with the administration for equal distribution of ration amongst all. They fought with the authorities with strong hearts to bring back the migrant labours from other states. These resolute girls created and maintained an innovative protection circle to save women/girls from violence and campaigned hard to stop child marriage and violence against girls/women. During the worst hit days of pandemic and Amphan, these brave warriors, our real heroes cycled then entire length and breadth of the villages and dedicated themselves to serve the destitute. They provided the mouthful to the aged, morsels of food to the starving children and the disabled. These adolescent girls worked unflagging to help those in dire need but they had not a morsel to eat. Amphan devastated their houses, belongings and their life but no power could stop our real heroes from combating the invisible foes. They are the real Heroes to us and to these distressed people. We salute them from the core of our heart.

We are ardently thankful to all of you for your kind support to train up them which groomed these gallant girls to lead the way forward. Your wisdom, love and support worked wonders for these young undaunted leaders whose expertise in handling rough situations dazed us. The prying eyes of the pandemic and Amphan drew out the valour of these brave hearts, extracted the vitality from within.



















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