

# Site Visit Report

Agniva Roy

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I visited Nishtha twice this summer, once towards the end of May, and the second time early June. The second time my mother accompanied me; Minadi had requested me to bring her along, and she was also keen on learning about the project. The report will follow the temporal order of the visits.

## 1 First visit: 26th May

### 1.1 Summary and highlights

- Discussion with Minadi about upcoming gender sensitivity training in schools – vocational training programs being taken up by Nishtha for girls, funded by WeTrust and the government – deteriorating conditions for women and worse is feared – updates about court cases and state of attacked girl
- Meeting members of Mahila Mandal and listening to first hand stories from them about how their daughters are harassed – slain girls’ mothers recount their stories – Nishtha coordinator Monami discusses how cases are progressing and the apathy of police and authorities
- Talking to girls of Jagaran – streetplay about a girl who suffered marital abuse, inspired by true events – they talk about the attack on their friend and threats/warnings they receive – talk about injustices
- A discussion between elder men and youths about treating genders equally and fairly

### 1.2 The journey and welcome

The journey to Nishtha’s office in Baruipur was facilitated by a short 45 minute train ride from Ballygunge station in South Kolkata. Once there, a short auto ride takes one to the office. A large yellow building, bustling with life and activity, and the eager faces of children and their teachers greet me as I walk in. In their office, I am welcomed with a large plate of fruits (Baruipur is famous for its delicious fruits – sadly, a dying prospect now due to the farmers not being able to market their produce and often failing to even break even) and I delve into conversation with Mina Das, our project partner and the director of Nishtha. Various points come up and Minadi discusses in depth some well-known social workers and icons of social change and how she envisions her daughters (the girls that Nishtha works for) leading a revolution and claiming their human rights. The key points that were brought up are:

#### 1. Vocational training opportunities and plans for girls

Paul foundation has assisted in setting up grooming courses for the girls, as well as spoken English and computer training. There are talks in progress with FabIndia regarding workshops and recruitment. Wetrust foundation has provided funds for a computer training course that is currently running.

#### 2. Gender sensitivity training in schools

Minadi spoke about their long-term plan to combat gender inequality – an issue that seems to be woven into the social fabric of rural Bengal. The plan is to engage schoolchildren and make mingling between the genders a more natural process. Currently, even though schools are co-educational, girls and boys sit in separate halves of the rooms. If a girl is seen speaking to a boy, her teachers will report to her parents. Girls are expected to keep to themselves, pass their 10th standard tests, and then be married off. Speaking to boys is a sin that is believed to corrupt her character. These practises cause a serious chasm between the genders; boys grow up

seeing girls, and women, as something other than merely another human being. This orthodox setup, and the mindset that the teachers carry with them, form a great obstacle to any talk of gender sensitivity or equality training in schools.

However, Minadi is hopeful. The principals of some of the schools, mired as they are in their own traditional beliefs, hold her and Nishtha in high esteem and at least one of them has agreed to support this program.

### **3. Political scenario and anxiety**

A fear that Minadi expressed is that there seems to be a trend in politics to revert to traditional oppressive sensibilities, and oppose any programs that push the tide in the other direction. Several women's rights groups have seen increasing difficulty in procuring funds, while politicians have gone on record saying that they want to reintroduce child marriage and dowry and such. While some of this is hyperbole geared towards gathering votes, it makes the job of the people who try to change society's mindset towards these evils much harder. Also, political parties tend to hand cash and motorbikes to unemployed youth, employing them as cadres and such – this emboldens these boys who feel no fear in harassing girls.

### **4. Attack on S and Nishtha's response**

In a spate of recent incidents, 3 girls formerly with Nishtha lost their lives – allegedly in the hands of their in-laws. Nishtha has now gone to court over these incidents. However, as none of the girls were underage, they are unable to fast-track the cases. Even filing FIRs and getting the police to do their due diligence has been a huge task. One of the girls was practically abducted off and married before she was 18, but despite the insistence of Minadi and other Nishtha seniors, her parents refused to file an FIR. Their reasoning was that their daughter had been seen talking to the boy before the incident, and hence deserved this. However, had they made the FIR, their daughter might have been spared the fate. In all the cases, they believe the police has been paid off.

Another girl, S, was attacked by the son of the local political honcho. Her friends rescued her in a pool of blood, then chased after the man and tied him up. The police rescued him from the mob of girls who rained down blows on him. The girls have since received threats and warnings. Minadi, while proud that the girls stood up for themselves and sent a message, also mentions that perhaps the girls acted rashly. Violence is not one of the principles they try to uphold. Even in this, they believe that the police was paid off and have been uncooperative in the progress of the case. S, who is underage, should receive fast-track trials and be given special privileges as a child victim of abuse. However, despite their best efforts, the proper conditions have not been provided. They have hired some good lawyers for these cases and hope for a quick and favourable solution.

*One thing that Minadi spoke of in a rather disappointed tone is how the family of the girl has been behaving with her post the incident. They visit her in the hospital and keep telling her how she has been tainted and her life has been destroyed. This has really affected the girl's morale, despite the best efforts of her friends and the Nishtha group at large.*

## **1.3 Visit to South Kalyanpur, and meeting members of Mahila Mandal**

I was then introduced to Monami, a Nishtha worker who oversees many of their educational programs. Her current responsibilities also encompass the whole legal process, from accompanying S to the police station, to keeping a tab of the court dates and arguing with the police about following proper procedures. Despite this sounding rather partisan, the spirit of Nishtha truly amazes me. It is never about the workers and the beneficiaries. It is always one large family, working towards a common goal. There is a system and a hierarchy, yet there is this thread of love tying all these people together that is infectious and sparks hope, even in the direst of circumstances, in the face of grim reality. Monamidi accompanied me to South Kalyanpur, where a large group of members of the Mahila Mandal (Women's Association) had gathered to express themselves to me.



The members are middle-aged women, many of whose daughters are part of Nishtha's programs. Most of them have grown up regarded as the "weaker" sex, having always been at the mercy of their fathers, then their husbands. Nishtha has given them a voice to stand up for themselves, and hope to dream of a better world for their daughters and also their sons. As they have realised through their lives, the inequality hurts both genders. Boys grow up to be entitled men who cannot take up responsibilities, while girls are subjected to disrespect and neglect every step of the way, yet growing up to be well-rounded individuals who can succeed anywhere if the right opportunity were to present itself.

However, this time around, hope was not a dominant emotion. The horror of the recent attacks hung heavy in the air. Many of them recounted stories of domestic violence, faced either by them, or their daughter, or a loved one. Many victims have lost their lives. They spoke of the apathy at large of the men in the community. While the mothers have banded behind their daughters in demanding justice and better conditions, the men have not got involved. Mostly. Monamidi also mentions how poorly the police treat women and their complaints. The women all express their hope for justice. That the wrongdoers be punished.

#### 1.4 Visit to Shikhalbali, meeting Jagaran girls

**1. Streetplay** The girls first perform a streetplay. The play follows the story of one of their friends, who was seduced by a boy she knew, and married, but was then subjected to severe abuse and almost took her own life. They perform such plays across villages, imparting lessons to girls everywhere about the need to be more diligent, to be more careful, and to stand up for one's rights.





Glimpses

**of the streetplay: A story of a girl exploited and abused by her husband and his friend. It ends with a message of the girls standing up for each other, and taking an oath to put an end to these injustices.**

**2. Discussion** This is followed by a discussion. The girls talk about the attacks on their friends, and how they forced the reluctant police to register the FIR. They have been following up on the police, as they claim that the police are purposefully being tardy. Most of these girls are Kishori Vahini leaders. What comes across is how self-assured and outspoken these girls are, not afraid to stand up for their rights. Yet there is the wry acknowledgement of reality, when they say that most of their parents are trying to get them married. Earlier, they say, girls would be married off before finishing their schooling. Now, because of a *demand* for educated brides, parents are pushing their children to be educated till 10th standard, and then marrying them off. It remains an uphill battle. The overbearing aim, still, is to get girls married and then tied up in her nuptial role – an independent career, or her dreams, are not considered viable. When I try to turn the discussion towards their hopes or vocational training or their studies, this is what comes up. Vitriol towards the existing situation, and how, despite the best intentions, the status quo remains.

### 1.5 Discussion between elder men and boys

Nishtha, despite having worked primarily for girls, have always welcomed boys in their programs. However, they have not pursued education and engagement of boys as aggressively as they have tried to bring girls into the mainstream. Primarily, because girls have been aggressively barred from opportunities. But now, having ensured a little bit more opportunity for girls, Nishtha now appreciate the need for a holistic approach. They are creating programs to ensure boys finish their education, and become gender sensitive responsible humans who can serve as role models for their peers and also spread these lessons among larger and larger groups, enabling this sensibility to reach far beyond the scope of a training program. I was taken to a meeting between some of the boys Nishtha have been working with, where they engage in discussion with some older men of the community, about gender roles. While this was mostly orchestrated for my benefit, it was clear that this is part of a larger process. Some interesting points did come up, where the men said that most of their actions towards their daughters come from a concern for their safety. An unmarried girl is more prone to be harrassed.

Further, they said that educating girls beyond school makes it harder to find suitable grooms. In a country where unemployment is rife, a girl with a college degree needs a groom who is in a corporate or government job, in their words. And this corresponds to higher dowry.

One thing is clear, this is a long discussion and change can happen only with utmost patience. A nuanced approach is needed.



This was where my visit concluded, with me proceeding to the Night shelter for children, details of which are included in that report. On the auto ride back, we were joined by two girls of the Jagaran group who I had been speaking to before. One of them is a trained dancer who works at the Night Shelter, teaching the children there to dance. Her friend is aspiring to be a policewoman.

## 1.6 Return to office, another conversation with Minadi

I returned to the office and spoke to Minadi about their program with the boys, and also adult community members. She hopes to emulate the model they have followed for the girls. Essentially, train a core group of boys and adults in values and responsibilities. Then encourage them to lead groups where they act as role models, and also ensure these values are inculcated in their own families.

This visit left me with a sense that a really long road lies ahead. Despite all the work that has been done, the education of girls and their vocational training and such, the opportunities are still far away; society keeps trying to make them fit the narrative of the obedient helpless housewife whose sole purpose is to bear children and take care of her in-laws – noble pursuits no doubt, but stifling the dreams of those who aspire to be something else. They are defiant, and have almost managed to convince their immediate families of their higher aspirations; yet their relatives and neighbours continuously harrass them.

## 2 Second visit: June 4

The second visit was made two weeks later, with my mother accompanying me this time. The visit followed a similar pattern, with us first taking a train and then a short auto ride to Nishtha's office, then visiting a few different villages and culminating in the Night shelter. To our regret, we were short on time and were unable to meet some of the members of *Mahila Mandal* who had gathered in a meeting to speak to us. These are women who really look forward to being heard, and we were heartbroken to learn that some of them had travelled for hours. We ran into some of them in the course of the visit and they were truly gracious and understanding, though they expressed their regret in not being able to talk to us. I shall detail two parts of the visit that were markedly different from the first one.

## 2.1 Kishori Vahini Group Learning

We had the good fortune of witnessing first hand a group learning session of the Kishor-Kishori Vahini (Boy-Girl Squad) program. The model is such: Kishor-Kishori Vahini leaders, about 300 boys and girls, primarily girls, are trained by Nishtha employed social workers and volunteers in life skills and social values, addressing issues ranging from teamwork to gender equality, from family values to domestic violence, and such. Their training is not so much in lectures as in activities and games. Then, these trainees each lead a group of their peers, who they pass on the training to. The session we were a part of had activities highlighting the concept of unity and teamwork.



*A big part of Nishtha's work has been this model, that has given these girls a peer group and friends and lifted them out of social isolation. The work of many womens' groups in India have found this to be the primary step in the emancipation of women. Women are oppressed through isolation. Traditionally, their upbringing isolated their hobbies and likes from them, so that they grow up geared solely towards their socially mandated purpose.*

## 2.2 Women's working groups; micro-financing

An interesting part of Nishtha's work is their *microfinancing model*, which has enabled older married women to become independent earning members with a supportive peer group. This program groups together women in numbers who each contribute a small amount and open bank accounts; in their group's names. Most women in rural Bengal have no bank accounts. Their whole identity is dependent on their husband. This model frees them from that bind and gives them a respectable status. These groups work on projects, usually creating handcrafted materials that they sell in local markets. They take small loans from Nishtha as capital and pay it back as a group, and then they keep all the profits. The group we spoke to told us they now have 60,000 INR (about USD 900) as the savings for the whole group. It may not seem like a whole lot, but this is money these women have earned for themselves. In an emergency, one of them can borrow from here, and they're not indebted to their husbands anymore. It changes the power dynamic significantly. The ladies told us how their husbands and in-laws, after an initial period of aggressive opposition, have now begun respecting them in their homes. A few of them said that they came to this meeting leaving their husbands in charge of the cooking. This represents a profound change in the usual social dynamic of the region.



*The above picture shows me with Monami and another Nishtha worker, in conversation with the group of women employed via the microfinance model. A rather embarrassing reality is how there is a sense of deference of these women towards me and the Nishtha seniors; we are given chairs to sit while they insist on sitting on the ground. Their discomfort is palpable if we wish to sit on the ground with them. This is a reality across India, class (and also caste, gender) divides that have seeped across generations and manifest themselves both externally, and internally, and dictate what aspirations a person can or can not have, and who they can regard as peers. With increasing familiarity, some of these divides can be overcome, as despite these overt shows of respect, Minadi, Monami and other Nishtha workers are accepted mostly as one of their own.*

### **3 Conclusion**

Interacting with the Jagaran girls, and talking about their dreams, gave us a good sense of what stands in the way. My mother was especially moved by many of the stories, and she connected with them and their struggles. Despite their unwavering optimism and spirit, many of them kept saying that society is not willing to let them realise their aspirations. I asked them what kind of vocational training or course they felt could help their chances, and one of them replied, (I paraphrase) - If we are tainted, ridiculed, and shamed simply for being out of our homes after dark, what kind of jobs are we allowed to aspire for? They have not been stopped, these girls, but this constant barrage of attacks, both verbal and physical, has left a mark upon them.

Visits to Nishtha are always bittersweet in a way. It's an amazing family; their drive, their hopes, and their dedication, are inspiring. Yet the daily injustices, the horrors and the discrimination that is but a part of their life saddens me. And it saddens me further that I have the luxury of stepping away, and trying to do my bit in the cocoon of my safe happy life in civilised understanding society. It makes me aware of the challenges faced by someone with similar dreams to mine, but growing up in a situation such as this.



*Jagaran girls working on and putting up posters in their localities. These carry simple messages against discrimination. For example, the poster pictured above says: Father, I promise I shall study and get a job and look after you (in your old age). Typically, the overwhelming belief is that sons are the ones who are worth educating, as they can work jobs and look after their parents. Daughters are meant to be married off and will only look after their in-laws. These posters challenge that notion. Jagaran girls also carry out demonstrations and streetplays to educate the general populace and bring about a change in their mindsets.*