

## SITE VISIT JANUARY 2023

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### SUMMARY OF VISIT

- (1) Meeting with Mina Das
- (2) Meeting with Jagaran girls
- (3) Attending Mahila Mandal meeting
- (4) Attending Jagaran training session at Tongtala center
- (5) Attending Mahila Mandal awareness building session
- (6) Night shelter visit (to be covered in Site visit report for Night Shelter)

#### General update on Nishtha's work, conversation with Mina Das

Social issues faced in 2021-22 due to COVID-19, Amphan, Yaas: Due to COVID-19 lockdowns and trains being suspended, locals have largely lost their livelihoods. On top of that, the cyclones Amphan and Yaas have caused widespread destruction, loss of property, lives, and damage to agricultural fields. A lot of people had lost major documents, such as birth certificates and ration cards, which makes it difficult for them to obtain government relief and rehabilitation funds. The floods caused by the cyclones also displaced many girls who had been working in households, and they had been recorded as missing for months before they were tracked down. Due to the panic of COVID-19, people were ostracizing those suspected of being infected, and isolating the families completely. Families of sufferers were often not allowed to use the public wells to get water. These were relayed to us by Minadi, as well as the Jagaran programme leaders, who see such issues firsthand in their own communities.

#### **The Special Education Unit:**

We were shown a Special Education Unit in the main Nishtha office. The unit consists of a room where special-needs children (such as physical disabilities) and Intellectually Disabled children (typically diagnosed with Down's Syndrome), average age from 2-6, are brought in by parents to receive sessions of physiotherapy, basic childcare, and special-education. Activities include drawing, collage, art and craft, to help deliver hands-on education to kids and prepare them to be able to earn a living by using the handicraft they create. Some equipment noticed in the unit consist of two exercise chairs, used for physiotherapy, mattresses for the caretakers to provide for the children and physiotherapists to help the children exercise.

#### Meeting with Jagaran girls and Tongtala daycare center attendees, Update on Tongtala Center:

#### **The All-Faith Prayer Hall:**

Nishtha believes in the appreciation of differences in culture and identity of its students and faculty. They have constructed an all-faith prayer hall to serve as a sanctum for anyone who wishes to take a moment of respite and immerse themselves in their faith.

#### **Committee Meeting:**

Nishtha organizes committee meetings with its girls from Class 9 to 3rd year of college. These girls form a part of the 'Kishori Bahini' a group of girl leaders who work to help girls in over sixty villages in rural West Bengal gain the skills and confidence that enable them to claim community roles equal to those of their male counterparts. A crucial part of the meeting was comprised by the girls openly discussing the problems they face in their villages, which include: domestic violence which they see at home; parents, especially male figures such as their fathers, discouraging girls from pursuing the education that they personally feel that they deserve; fake tutoring centers that reach out to high-school children in villages, asking them to give a down-payment in return for classes that "they need" in order to make a living in the future (The problem in this case is that underprivileged children, due to a combination of their desire to earn a better living to support themselves and their family, as well as lack of resources which guide them to spot out fake from genuine tutoring centers, fall for this scam).

#### **Night-Home for women-in-need:**

Nishtha is currently building a dorm-style living quarters, consisting of 3(?) rooms with beds and a bathroom facility, for girls and women who believe that they feel unsafe at night, to live in, free of cost. The feeling of lack of security is explained by the fact that in remote communities around Baruipur, which itself is on the outskirts of Kolkata, are not safe for women at night due to fear of sexual assault and rape.

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Date: 24 February 2023.

### **Sanitary Napkin Production House:**

In order to better provide for the menstrual needs of girls who are part of Nishtha as well as in schools in and around Baruipur, Nishtha has started an in-house Sanitary Napkin Production facility. 60-800 sanitary napkins are produced in a day. The cost of a pack of 6 napkins is 24 INR. Nishtha plans to shift sourcing of materials for the sanitary napkins to local vendors in West Bengal. With this, the workers (who are all women) in the production line will be able to earn 8-10 INR per packet sold.

### **New Toilet Block:**

The funds from Amphan R& R have been used to repair and construct new toilets for the Center. This ensures that the girls have a separate toilet.

### Attending Mahila Mandal meeting

Nishtha has focused on building similar groups of adult women in the area, who stay in touch with each other, discuss personal issues, and stand by each other in times of need. Between groups in various villages, Nishtha's influence has helped nearly 10,000 women become part of a group. Every week or every other week, a section of them meet to discuss their issues, and meet with Nishtha facilitators who advise them or help them escalate their issues, as needed.

The primary focus of the meeting I was part of was the financial situation of women. A number of them remarked that despite contributing significantly to the family's earning or functioning, they have little to no money or property to call their own. A major point of discussion was Nishtha workers encouraging the attendees to start convincing their spouses to put their names on property deeds, and ensuring that such is done for their daughters too. They also spoke about domestic violence and dowry harrasment issues that continue to happen, but in some cases the Mahila Mandal groups have been able to step in and help the victims. Some of them have stepped away from their abusive in-laws and spouses with the support of these groups, and have now started work to support themselves and their parents. Another story of strength was a lady who spoke of how she had started her own business to support her family and the treatment of her husband who had fallen ill to a major disease.

### Jagaran training session

The Jagaran training sessions aim to address deep rooted concepts of gender roles, domestic issues, and team building. Nishtha trains about 130 - 150 girls, studying in classes 6 - 9, in 4 sessions that happen every weekend, through various games and activities. The girls trained here come from villages spread over a vast area around Baruipur. They lead smaller groups in their own localities where they go on to impart the same training. There are events every few months where the Nishtha trainers and workers visit the girls and ensure that they are able to convey the message through their training appropriately. With this "tree - like" structure of imparting training, Nishtha is able to impact the lives of several thousand children over a large area, despite their limited capacity.

In the training I attended, I saw two training activites. The trainer was Papri, a girl who has grown up as a member of the Jagaran group and who now helps in various programs of Nishtha, including Jagaran and night shelter, besides pursuing a Masters degree.

In the first, it was a game of tag, where one girl is chosen randomly to chase the others and "tag" them; anyone tagged loses. They played the game with great enthusiasm for about a minute before their trainer asked them to stop. About 15 of the 40 girls were tagged. Then, she changed up the format. In this game, one girl chases the others to "tag" them as before. However, once someone is tagged, they can now chase the others and tag them too. Once this game started, within a few seconds everyone was tagged.

Once the enthusiasm from the running around subsided a little, Papri spoke to the girls about the lessons one learns from this game. The point was to highlight how one person alone against a large number of people can bring about limited change, but recruiting people in the mission can help achieve a lot more in a much shorter time. She went on to say how this is seen in various campaigns and activites, and that it is important to involve friends and other people in any objective, especially if it relates to changing society's viewpoint of something - relating specifically to a lot of the girls' experiences in their family opposing their wish to study further, or have hobbies or dreams of their own.

The second activity was an exercise in gender roles, but that was revealed later. The trainer divided up the attendees into 6 groups, and then distributed paper and colour pencils. She then asked them to draw a picture of "a boy and a girl". She gave no other information or directive, but told them to finish drawing in 15 minutes. The groups took up all the available time, deliberating and discussing fiercely throughout, and then produced 6 excellent pictures.

### Awareness building session for adult women

The session was conducted by girls of the Jagaran programme. Through the use of props, games, and simple household items, they try to build awareness on deep social issues. In the session I visited, the main theme was financial rights and financial independence of women. The session leaders laid out a number of items on a

table, including utensils, cleaning supplies, houseplants, cash, a toy house, among others. When asked which items they think are most useful for them, most women pointed at the utensils or supplies, only one person said cash, and no one said house. The session leaders then went on to discuss further, that it was important for women to own property, to ensure their daughters have property. Some of the women then spoke about how they, or women they knew, had no place to go if their in-laws tortured them. The Jagaran girls emphasised that domestic violence and inequity relies heavily on denying women property rights and financial independence.



FIGURE 1. Construction of new floors at Tongtala Center



FIGURE 2. Ved and Agniva with Jagaran students



FIGURE 3. Sanitary napkins production unit



FIGURE 4. Asha volunteers Ved and Agniva with Nishtha Program Director Monami and Secretary Mina Das



FIGURE 5. Special education unit for special-needs children



FIGURE 6. Musical performances by Jagaran students



FIGURE 7. Jagaran training session





FIGURE 8. Teaching materials on the wall at Tongtala center



FIGURE 9. Jagaran training session



FIGURE 10. Newly constructed toilet block