Notes from Sarmistha:

We reached Nishtha Asha on 21st December afternoon. We were greeted by Minadi, who runs the NGO here. She discussed some village related issues and events which enabled me to better appreciate the condition of the people here. On an abstract level, I realized that although just an hour away from main city Kolkata, this area is rife with challenges including but not limited to poverty, lack of education and opportunities to develop. This area is home to both Hindu and Muslim families, each community having on top of the common issues, their own challenges. I will note here some of the addressable issues and the way Nishtha is attending to these.

About the program: Spoken English Training

Jagaran program of Nishtha tends to the young girls in this area. There is one spoken English program for these girls. We talked with two teachers of this class. One of them also teaches English in a local school and another used to teach in a school but left now due to family related issues. They seemed to be good in English. We had a talk with the students here. Some of these students come from very far which shows that they really appreciate the program but interestingly many of the students expressed that they find it very difficult to grasp what is being taught. They seemed to have interesting ideas about the ways of teaching English which might benefit them. I will not say I understood them completely but I can appreciate the difficulty they might be facing in getting introduced to English for the first time in high school. I tried to think of the difficulties I might face trying to learn French or German in my high school and their issues about understanding grammar and style of English made more sense to me. However, the teachers seemed sincere too, just that the mode of teaching may not be the best for this population. One idea can be to collect the opinions of the students about the way of teaching they would like and if possible, evaluate them and add some interesting methods of teaching and try maybe.
**Vocational Training: Jagriti**  
Another program is vocational training. **This trains young girls for practical jobs.** We met some students who has benefitted from this program and also those who did not. One complaint was it was promised that they will be given job in nearby area but that was not fulfilled.

I am not very sure about the selection procedure of students for the programs of Jagriti and I forgot to ask about it.

We next went for site visit in various places in the village in auto.

**Skit performance by the girls:**  
First we went to a place where some young girls performed a skit for us which portrayed the plight of the women. Girls are married off at a very early age and stays at the mercy of the in laws and the experience does not always turn out to be very nice.
Sarmistha’s comments about the social relevance of Nishtha:

From my understanding this situation of women here can be attributed to three main factors –

- ignorance of their parents who believes marrying off the girls at a young age is the best way to secure their future;
- secondly, lack of education and working skills of the girl which renders them completely dependent on their in-laws;
- general lack of respect for women here.

Nishtha addresses the first issue by educating the village and the parents of the girls by various ways that early marriage is a crime and girls should be educated. They actively engage in reporting to police child marriages.

For the second issue, Nishtha as discussed is trying to give English training and vocational training to make the girls self-reliant.

For the third problem, Nishtha encourages the girls to performs skit in the villages portraying various social issues to create awareness. I was amazed at the challenges the girls face here and how Nishtha is trying to equip them from a very early age to fight these.
Our next visit was at a gathering of Nishtha girls. These were village school girls. I learnt there are groups of different ages of girls and leaders in those groups. Some of these girls talked to us and talked about what they want to become when they grow up and the various challenges they face. These groups sometimes have something named “youth fund” where they collect money from themselves and do small things for the village like repairing the water pump. This helps them to have a sense of belonging in the village which I learnt from Minadi is lacking for girls here. The idea seemed brilliant to me.
Focus points of the visit:
- Evaluating the newly started English lessons for the students
- Taking feedback about girls working in jobs after the previously deployed computer and soft skills training
- Discussion with Mina di about future of the girls for college education and jobs.

Summary of the visit:

1. College education and Self-sufficiency of the girls

- Reached Nishtha office on 21st December 2017, with Sarmistha, another Asha Atlanta volunteer. We travelled from Kolkata, taking train from Sealdah (Baruipur local), and then taking a rickshaw to Nishtha office.
- At the office, we first meet with Mina di (the coordinator or in-charge of Nishta). Mina di talks about English training first, she tells how there are 3 locations for the English lessons. There are 2 centers out inside the villages, and one center at the Nishta office (for the class 11-12).

She had asked some of the girls in the newly started English training to come to the center, along with their teachers. There are 3 teachers — for the 3 centers. 2 of them teach in the interior villages with students from class 4-7 or 8, and 1 teacher for girls of class 11-12, and those in college (1st/2nd years). Moreover, she also asked students who had taken the earlier job training to come and speak with us - some of them doing jobs and some are following college education.

While speaking about college education, Mina di mentions the 2 girls from the Nishta night shelter (who are children of sex workers) have now become nurses. She tells the story of how the decision to support these 2 girls to study nursing in a different district at Barasat (north of Kolkata) and far away from Baruipur was planned a few years ago by the Asha Atlanta volunteers Abhyuday Mandal (GT PhD student, now Professor at UGA), Padmanava Sen (then GT PhD student, worked at Broadcom, now taking a sabbatical and doing site visits across India), and Anuradha Bulusu (then GT research engineer, now works in consulting at Atlanta). After 2 years at Barasat, the girls got a chance to study nursing at Bankura government college, which is even far away from Baruipur. She told how they planned to keep the identity of these girls a secret from the local area of the nursing college, had them rent accommodation near the college, and give them a life and study environment as natural as possible. She mentions that one girl graduated and is waiting for the final deployment at a government hospital, and another got a job at the Bangur hospital which is in South Kolkata. One of the mothers of these girls had committed suicide few years back because she was suffering from depression. She was feeling sad as could not visit her daughter for extended periods of time, due to the stigma of being a former sex-worker. The other girl’s mother is the one who told in prior visit that she has helped to support the education of her daughter and she expects her daughter to take care of her in old age.

Mina di shares that her vision is to bring these 2 girls to mainstream life, and set examples of a future of the children of the sex workers. She considers it is a success story that even 2 girls make it to being a
nurse, it is a win – and sets precedent for future generations. Mina di says it is very difficult to get the children of sex workers away from the profession of prostitution. The boys become the ‘babu’ or the pimps or point of contact, and the girls are roped in the profession even by the mothers. She tells that the mothers there cannot think or aspire of anything else, because of the stigma attached with them, and they would be shunned by mainstream life.

Mina-di shares the story of another girl of a sex worker she had come across, who could speak English with her, and when asked she learned that she had taken lessons from sister Cyril of Loreto Sealdah, and she went to “Rainbow school”. Still she later married, and went to the profession (she meant sex-work). So these 2 students are an exception and success stories of Asha Atlanta supported program of Nishtha.

Mina di shared that in trafficking West Bengal is at number 1, and in domestic violence West Bengal is at number 6. Now trafficking has increased a lot, especially to Bihar and Delhi.

2. Interaction with girls and teachers – Aspirations of the Girls: (taking English training, and are in college, and the girls who had taken job training earlier)

We first talked with the English teacher, who teaches the girls at the Nishtha office. The teacher says she teaches a mixed group of class11, 12, and college students. There are few overlaps of girls who had taken the job training earlier, and now in English training. The teacher gives feedback about her experience that the main problem she faces is confidence of the girls in speaking or knowing English. She is teaching for last 6 months, and she think the girls are improving. She teaches the girls on Sat-Sunday, 2 hours on each day, number of students about 25-30 as some of the students dropped out.

When I asked the students about their reasons for taking this training they said they have known from their teachers, NGO staff and coordinator that knowledge of English is beneficial for them to work at a job at a mall.

There is one student Tanuja Khatoon, who had taken the job training at first and now she is taking the English training. I had met this student last December 2016, when I visited with Padmanava Sen. She tells that she was doing data entry job after the job training, and she was given the task to do data entry for hundreds of names/records, and she was given a target (around few hundred records per hour). She told she could not be up to speed, which was hindering her achieving the target. Hence, she thought she could do better with the new English training. She was also doing college part time, after doing the job. Being the eldest of the family of a single mother (her father had left the family and now the mother did not remarry, but worked to feed the children Tanuja and 3-4 siblings). Hence Tanuja felt she could work and help lessen the load of sustaining the family. However, she felt she could not do well in the college passing exams if she continued to split time between the job and college. The last time I met her (Dec 2016) she was doing the job, and now (Dec 2017) she has left it – going into her college examinations coming up in March 2018.

We asked several more girls about why they were taking the training and what they aspired to be. One of them told she wanted to be police, she had seen someone in the family being a police officer (a male cousin) and she felt inspired to become one. She felt she had become confident with the training from Nishtha earlier about self-defense, her rights as a child, and as a woman, and now she feel if she takes the English training she will be more confident of applying for jobs at retail stores, or shopping malls such as the ones at Kolkata, where a few of the girls from Nishtha’s earlier program are now working.

Another one said she wanted to be a teacher because she was inspired from the teachers at Nishtha and she wanted to give back to the same community by teaching. She felt that at schools the English learning is not enough, and hence she has not learned the subject well. She is studying in class 11 and would want to pursue college. Before starting college she wanted to be proficient in English so that she can start coaching center or tutoring students, earning money for her college studies.
Mina di added that many of them already are tutoring students to earn some money for their expenses like buying books and stationary (paper, pencil, pens, etc.). She explained that the NGO cannot provide for all the books and supplies.

I asked the girls to raise their hands if they are tutoring – and 10 hands (out of 25 students) went up. I now asked the students what subjects they teach now. They said they help with students of middle school classes (they are in high school class 11-12 or some of them are in college), so they teach almost all subjects. I asked curiously what they did with the money they earned. Some told they bought books and educational supplies. I asked what would they do with the money, they said they would contribute to the family, buy food for themselves, as sometimes they want to eat things which their family cannot afford (horlicks or complan for example). One girl (Tanuja) said she buys medicines. This struck me and I asked why does she need to buy medicines – and Mina di explained that this particular student suffers from fatigue and other malnutrition related problems, like low blood pressure. This student is the eldest daughter of her numerous siblings, to a single mother, so the student has to earn to feed her siblings. Her health was one more reason why she had to choose to let go of continuing in the job and also the college education.

**Girls who had taken job training - Aspirations**

Within this group there were 12 students who had taken the job training and had come to speak to me about their feedback. They were disappointed with the job training because it was promised that they would become proficient in computers, typing, MS Word, excel, etc which can hand them jobs later in data entry or retail malls, cinema halls, etc. However, they could not get much hands-on training on the computer, the computer class was once a week, and limited number of computers, so each computer was shared by 2-3 students (it was a class of 40 students to start with the training ended with about 20 students completed the training, because others had dropped out. They said they thought they might get jobs a call center or BPO, but the training did not adequately prepare them for it. They did not learn the computers as well. Further the spoken English training which came with the computer training was not effective, So they were disappointed with the training.

About half of the 20 students who completed the training got jobs. However they were concerned about the job location because it took long hours to commute, they have to go early in the morning, commuted for up to 2 hours, and then return around evening 8-9pm which is not taken well by the parents, because of the safety of the girls. They require about 100 Rs per day for transport cost and other costs associated with the commute, and that means their salary around 5000 Rs is inadequate for them. They think learning English would allow them to ask for better salary and ask for better jobs. They want to learn English as they think that would be required as the language for jobs in future. Moreover, they want money to support their own health, the family, they do tuitions on the side.

**Parents and their Aspirations**

On our way from one meeting spot at Damdama village, to another meeting with the girls, we stopped by the home of mother who is in the Matri-mandal (Matri-mandal is program of Nishtha which empowers mothers to be financially self-sufficient). This mother told that her daughter is now working after getting job training from Nishtha earlier. She asked us to come in for tea, as Mina di generally does not come to Damdama. She told her daughter is now working in Quest mall at Ballygunge phari. The girl works in the film theatre there, sometimes working to give tickets, or sometimes at the food counter. She told that Nishtha’s training has helped her daughter get the job (the computer training has likely helped get acquainted with the multiplex computer reservation system). The mother told she is happy that the girl is working, and even complained that the boy who is older than the daughter, and who has finished school, is not doing much. She told that she tells the son to get started with a small shop, or thinking about
driving auto-rickshaws like her husband. She mentioned there is another son who is smaller, and who is studying in school. This meeting with the parent indicated how Nishtha is shaping the aspirations of the parents, for their daughters and their sons.

**Aspirations of the girls who are in middle school**

At Damdama, we met another bigger group of girls, where the girls doing the streetplay joined too. Here there was the largest congregation of students. There the girls ranged from middle school (like class 5-6), to class 9-10, 11-12. The girls shared how they wanted to continue their education beyond school. Some of the girls in higher classes told they are taking technical education classes (which are like vocational training) – some in electronics, some in mechanics. They said mobile repairing is becoming one of the employment possibilities in those areas, with more smartphones being used (and getting repaired). Out of the group of about 30 girls studying in class 11-12 in this group, 3 students said they are taking the vocational training at Kalyanpur high school.

Another girl told that she wants to go into tailoring as that would never go out of need.

Another student told she wanted to be a teacher in the subject of Geography, as she liked the subject, and she can teach it well to future students. One of the students told she wants to be doctor, but she has not taken science in class 11 – so there seemed to be disconnect between what they knew could be possible as careers, and their aspirations.
3. Raising awareness of society by street play
We went to Damdama, one of the most remote villages that Nishtha has been working for last few years. The girls here enacted a street play about an incident which happened few years ago. A girl who had been very good in studies, went to school and completed class 12, she wanted to become Civil services examination. However, as soon as she wanted to start college her parents made her marry a groom in a nearby village. The groom’s family was against her studying and aspirations. She was ultimately tortured for more dowry money after the marriage, and she died because of a fire – and the villagers told that the girl was killed by the groom’s in-laws.

(End of the the visit – back at Nishtha office)

Comments from Arka and Sarmistha:

Overall, Nishtha does commendable work of the challenging job of bringing development in this society. It caters to what is actually needed to bring about change in the population here, especially the girls. I would imagine it is possible partly because the person who runs the NGO,
Minadi, is a resident of this place and is also a Jadavpur graduate. She has seen both the challenges this place face and the development that is present elsewhere (potential of a society) and is doing a commendable job of addressing the issues here.

(Sarmistha) My suggestions will be to talk to the girls in the absence of the NGO sometimes if possible about how they are benefitted or go to a surprise visit in the night shelters or talk randomly to the villagers sometimes about the impact Nishtha is bringing to them.