Snapshot:

Nishtha’s main office is located in Barui pur. The organization works towards empowerment of women and girls, and towards educating the local youth and training them for job opportunities. Asha Atlanta funds the Jagaran program, the spoken English training and the Night Shelter run by Nishtha.

Visit summary:

- Reached Nishtha office at around 10.30 am via train from Ballygunge Station to Baruipur (a 30 minute journey), and then a short rickshaw ride.
- Mina di talks about background for Nishtha, and highlights plight of women by citing a few examples of child marriage, domestic abuse and misogyny, and mentions that they have to deal with quite serious cases almost daily.
- She mentions how Nishtha tries to fight social evils by encouraging women at different levels to bond together and stand up for themselves. Mentions Kishori Bahini, Mahila Mandal and also an example where tribal women got together to solve water problem.
- Minadi mentions survey with 300 girls and 300 women. She also talks about how some villagers have banded together against Nishtha for breaking up marriages.
- Talking to Jagaran girls: they mention their problems: gender inequality, abusive fathers, eve-teasing, and child marriage. One girl also mentions that while spoken English program, and recently introduced computer classes, do give them some exposure to work culture, they lack grooming and fail to clear interviews. Mention other problems. They mention barriers of social stigma for educating daughters that both they and their parents face.
- Looking at computer training, spoken English training. 3 teachers, one in Nishtha main office, two further interior.
- Visiting village Nihati, talking to members of Mahila Mandal, their issues, some issues they have managed to solve.
- Visiting Night Shelter, talking to children, their mothers and teachers.

Details:

In conversation with Mina Das:

In this section, I shall talk about some of the stories Mina di told me about the challenges the local populace, especially the women, face, and also barriers to Nishtha’s work. A hardened social warrior, she narrates her experiences with candor and levity, even though the stories she narrated were bone-chilling.

1. Water crisis has plagued the villages in this area for a while. A water line runs parallel to the main highway and branches from it reach into the villages that sit along the highway, and a bit into
the interior. These branches end in taps that serve different villages. The issue was that low caste people inhabit villages far in the interior, and the water line does not reach in that far. As women are the primary water users, they led the agitation and forced the government to rewrite laws and make provisions for taps in their villages. This was a small victory. Nishtha in general works towards unifying the women, so they can fight the forces of tradition and prejudice together.

2. She talks of a situation that arose recently, where they were alerted that a 13 year old girl had been married off. The groom was 21. Mina di spoke of new stricter regulations against child marriage, and how they have cracked down hard on perpetrators of child marriage. She said that the father of the bride is punished by the law, as well as the groom, and the latter will be tried for rape. Such cases happen with an alarming regularity. The lack of education and sense, or in other words, the strength of their conviction and faith in archaic and barbaric traditions, is explicit in how families persist in trying to marry off underage daughter despite the law.

Child marriage is a burning issue here. An archaic train of thought is prevalent, and families hold on to the idea that a girl’s place in the house is only to take care of the household and cook, and then be married off. Thereafter she is someone else’s problem. This leads them to think that from birth, the girl child is a burden, as she will never earn for the family and her dowry is a burden. Daughters are thus treated as a low priority; after all, they are “someone else’s property” soon. Daughters are rarely educated, or given the love a child deserves; all the care, gifts and wishes belong to the boy child. Families want to marry off the girl as soon as possible. So child marriage is rampant. Even after marriage, the sorrows of a girl do not end, they compound. They are tortured for the flimsiest of reasons as their husbands will stop at nothing to establish themselves as dominant. The irony is that in many cases, the women of the family are complicit in the undermining of other women.

This is where Nishtha tries to intervene. They bring young girls into the fold under the JAGARAN program, where they provide education for girls whose families are unwilling to spend on a daughter’s education. These girls are given formal education as well as education in relevant social issues like gender sensitivity, patriarchy and domestic violence. This makes the girls aware of the injustices in society, in an attempt to break the vicious cycle where girls are oppressed, then they grow up accepting the oppression as the truth and then assisting in oppressing a future generation of women. The girls go out in their localities and talk about the same issues, trying to make villagers aware that they are perpetrating veritable crimes against the women in their house.

3. The stories she narrated spoke of the tremendous challenges girls face in the locality. They also highlight the sheer jealousy and hate that rains down upon them for simply trying to live life on their own terms. She spoke of a girl who was being trained by Jagaran program. She lived with her sister and mother in uncle’s house. They were thrown out, as the family did not approve of the girl studying. They owned a small plot of land, that had belonged to her father. There they built a plastic shelter, grew some crops, and managed to survive. Despite these hardships, the girl aced her boards, and got a job. But her uncles were opposed to such independence and success. They destroyed their house multiple times, and beat her up mercilessly. Nishtha intervened, with the help of the police, who arrested the uncles and their henchmen. The girl kept working; she sells machines designed to relieve muscle pain, and Minadi says that her boss is mightily impressed with her work.
4. **Nishtha faces opposition for their role in stopping marriages.** Above, I spoke of how victims of child marriage come to Nishtha for protection, or inform Nishtha that they are being subjected to this. Sometimes, they will alert fellow members of the Kishori Vahini who will then, under the guidance of people at Nishtha, inform the police. Minadi mentioned that a section of the populace is irked by these instances. They complain that Nishtha’s act of stopping marriages that were already underway is causing huge losses to families, who spend their savings in organizing these weddings. Recently, villagers from 10 villages had come together to protest Nishtha’s role in this. Minadi said that these challenges are part of trying to bring about change; she expressed her thankfulness to the police who have usually helped Nishtha.

**In conversation with Jagaran girls:**

In this section, I shall talk about some of the specific stories that the Jagaran girls spoke of, illustrating the discrimination, challenges and pressure family or society throws at them every day:

a. **One girl saw her elder sister vanish.** She says they used to go to school together. She saw her sister get involved with a local boy. Then one day, while on the way to school, her sister told her to go on to school and that she would meet her later. She never saw her sister again. Minadi that this was a common occurrence, and the girl had likely been trafficked.

b. **Many girls spoke out about not having experienced love from parents.** They have grown up in a society that fosters this backward way of thinking, that girls are the property of their future in-laws and should be regarded as the lower gender. Multiple girls brought up this point. They are aware of the disparity in how they were raised versus how their brothers were. They mention their daily struggles against prejudice, and their despair at how boys were allowed to get away with things girls would not even dream of. If an adolescent girl talks to a boy, she is regarded as “noshto”, which loosely translates to contaminated. Her parents will try to marry her off then.

c. **The girls often have to travel far to obtain quality tuition that will coach them for good jobs.** But if they are late in returning, eve-teasing is a problem. Girls live practically in terror of harassment from men. They will pass filthy comments and make unseemly gestures. If the girls talk back and respond, sometimes that is the end of that. But as highlighted in the above point, even talking to a boy is regarded as a transgression. If they ignore and keep walking, the boys will go further, pull on their clothes and insult them further. This point also serves to illustrate a strange hypocrisy in society. As mentioned above, for the girls, even verbally protesting against harassment could brand her as “noshto”, as she has spoken to a male stranger. But for the men, who make these filthy remarks, society holds no judgement.
d. One girl talks about her ailing mother. Her mother is suffering from heart ailments but her father has made no effort to contribute to her treatment. Her mother and her have moved to her uncle’s place and with guidance from the people at Nishtha, she has placed her mother in a treatment program. Besides her studying and other training, she tutors local children and also does other odd jobs to the best of her ability to sustain herself and her family.

e. The girls are all members of **Kishori Vahini (Girl Squad)**. They are taught to become self aware and independent, via self defence training, and also learning about social problems like domestic violence, patriarchy and child marriage and how they are barriers to a healthy society. The girls are grouped into smaller squads, and they are taught to stand by their group members in life’s adversities. This system achieves a great victory in the battle against social injustice: it sows in these girls, the targets and victims of injustices, the conviction that they are not alone. This model has served marvelously. Firstly, it has brought the girls together, and it has encouraged them to speak out more, and also try to include their other friends in these programs. One of the girls above, who mentioned that her sister was trafficked, said that her schooling was stopped by her parents when her sister vanished. They said that it was too risky for her to go out, as she might be convinced by some “boy” to run away as well. This girl, who wanted to go to school desperately, had no way to do so for more than a year. Then she was brought into Nishtha’s fold by some of her friends, and she could go to school again. Also, the squad model has saved some of the girls from being married off. If a family tries to marry off a girl against her wish, she will alert her friends, and suddenly 60 or so girls appear to protect their friend. This has made families wary of sneakily trying any such manoeuvre.

f. One girl talks about how they need more training in soft skills and grooming so they can compete with job applicants who have grown up in a more ‘sophisticated environment’. Minadi mentions that an ongoing computer training program has plans to conduct grooming sessions for the trainees in future.

g. Some of the most prominent barriers in their way are beliefs and prejudices of their relatives and people in their locality. Even though these girls fight everyday against their parents’ prejudices and come to Nishtha for training and learning, they are jeered on the streets for “dreaming too big”. They have to face comments every day that their sole purpose in life is to get married and manage the household and the kitchen; why, then, are they wasting time learning computers and spoken English. These people try to poison their parents’ minds, saying that their daughters are going rogue. That they are making too much of a show of themselves and their education and freedom, stopping child marriages and going against society. They warn their parents that they will never find husbands for such girls. Such talk undermines the battle the girls wage everyday to step out and dream. It is one added evil to the mountain they, and their parents, have to climb.

h. The girls talk about a fund they have created. They all teach tuition to smaller children in the locality to earn some pocket money and to help their households. The girls all donate Rs 5-10 to the fund regularly. They use this fund to address problems they identify as a group. For example, their might be children whose families cannot afford to educate them. The girls will use this fund to
supplement some of the expenses to ensure these children get access to schooling. They have identified education as the only way to address the problems they face, as girls and as a society. Hence they are determined to do their best to spread education.

The following is a transcription of a conversation with Tanuja Khatoon, where she talks about the specific challenges she has faced. Minadi weigh in with her thoughts and places Tanuja’s struggle in the context of what all the girls face:

Tanuja: I am one of 3 children; I have a sister and a brother. My father has another marriage, and does not live with us, or support us in any way. We stay in my mother’s parents’ house. Growing up, we have always faced taunts and jibes of neighbours for not living in our father’s house. My grandfather is old, hence mother has to support everyone. She has faced insults and abuse from neighbours and relatives, but she has persisted and taken on her responsibilities. She used to sell vegetables, and now works in a plastic factory. Her iron will and meager earnings have kept the family afloat, with Nishtha’s support. I have been with Nishtha from Class 5, and their guidance and my mother’s hard work has brought me now to 3rd year of college. Mother has suffered a lot to give us an education, without any acknowledgement or support from our neighbours, who taunt and insult her at every turn.

Minadi: Her mother earns very little. Works throughout the month, 12-13 hours a day, earned around 2000 rs per month. Had to feed her children, plus her own parents. It was very rare, that Tanuja, or her siblings, would have a single full meal in a day, growing up. A simple meal of potato and rice, even that was something they could not afford. When Tanuja grew a bit older, from Nishtha, we wanted her to study and start earning, so she could shoulder some of her household’s responsibilities. As a Muslim girl, it would be a real boost for other girls in the community if she managed that. It would show people of the community, and locality, that girls can be as responsible and contribute as much, if not more, to a household. Girls can work both outside the house, earning their livelihood, as well as inside, taking care of the household, and if a woman is the head of a household, it is much more peaceful. It was our belief that Tanuja would prove our point. But as she grew older, we started facing resistance. Up until Class 7, we had had no issue – but then problems started. Not just Tanuja, there were around 300-400 girls from the Muslim community, who were being trained under the Jagaran program, funded by Asha Atlanta. All of them showed promise in their academic pursuits. Some of these girls, with Tanuja, were part of a job training program that was also organized by Asha. Some of them had even got placed in jobs, but could not accept as it would involve a long commute.

Tanuja: For some of these girls, family came in the way. They would not let the girls leave the house. They would be barred from leaving, and their families would say: “Why should girls leave the house? What work will they do outside?”

Minadi: This is something we face regularly. The moment Tanuja and some of the other girls crossed Class 9, their neighbours and relatives started castigating them. They would be insulted regularly, and everyone started saying that these girls should be married off. However, we are fortunate that in this scenario, the girls themselves have found a voice for themselves. With our help and their own
determination, they now dream that they can lead a respectable life, unlike their own mothers. They have stood up against society. There was a directive issued by the elders of the village that this education of girls cannot continue. They must get married. The girls, by themselves, found the strength to ignore these forces, and have continued their own studies. They have found great support in their mothers; they tell us that we do not have the money to feed ourselves or them, but they should keep studying. They can make a better life for themselves than mine. They request us, Nishtha, to take up the responsibility and see their daughters through.

The girls are not engaged in just their own studies. All of them are part of squads. These squads involve more girls from the locality, not all of whom have had the opportunity to go to school. Tanuja is the leader for her squad. The leaders disseminate the information and training they get from Nishtha among their own squads. They talk to their squads and serve as role models, and try to inspire them to go to school, and enforce change in their own lives, families and in society. They try to make their squads realize that “We will have to be the ones to enforce change, no one will do it for us”. A lot of the credit for Nishtha’s impact goes to these girls, and the work they do in their squads. We are after all limited in our resources, and the few employees we have could not possibly reach across hundreds of villages. We are inundated with our work, as well as cases of child marriage, domestic violence and abuse that we have to deal with daily. That requires running to and fro from the police station and courts. We lack both the human as well as financial resources to have an impact across such a vast area. That is where these squads and their leaders come in. They spread across the villages and talk about the changes that society needs. To me, they are the backbone of Nishtha. These squads have developed a beautiful camaraderie, and other girls, who may have been brought under Nishtha’s fold yet, know that they can count on these squads to stand for them. A girl knows that one cry for help, and atleast 200 girls will gather in her support. And these girls will protest whatever wrong that was being committed. They will not stand down or be silenced. This has had a positive impact. In a society where girls have long been regarded as second grade citizens and mistreated and abused, people know have to think twice before misbehaving with a girl. Because they know they are not alone.

The following is a transcription of Nilofer, another Jagaran trainee, talking about her own life’s struggles:

I am a member of Nishtha’s Kishori Vahini (Girl Squad). The story of my past is rather dark; and it makes me shudder to think of those days even now. My family’s situation was so grave, that coming out of it, to where I stand now, was a dream far beyond my imagination. My father has always been unemployed; he suffers from a mental affliction. My mother is a vegetable-seller in Jadavpur (locality in Kolkata, West Bengal’s capital and largest city). All of our family’s responsibilities were on her, and she had to work so hard that she could hardly look after us. Me, being the eldest of 3 sisters, had to look after the household. I was completely overwhelmed by the situation. I was faced with a choice: to either try to continue my own education and stand on my own feet, or take up all the household’s responsibilities and look after my sisters. Our father was completely incapable of taking up any responsibility, and would never contribute any of his own money for his daughters. He never looked after us and things had once come to such a tipping point that we had to inform the police on him. He
was arrested and the police tried to make him understand. Things have improved; however, he still does not really care for us at all.

I was always looking for some support, so I could further my own education and become self-reliant. I was inspired by my grandmother, who had taken up the mantle of heading her family. As a girl, it is always a challenge. I wanted to become capable of taking on all the responsibilities of the household, and bring up my two sisters to be responsible, capable women, in their own right. I was not worried about how to arrange for their marriages and mine; I wanted them, and me, to study and stand on our own feet in life. But these were mere dreams at that point; I had no idea where I would find that support.

Then I came in contact with the Didis (elder sisters; an affectionate term for teachers) at Nishtha. With their support, I can now dream of taking on my family’s responsibilities. There is not a single person who can contribute even a single rupee to our struggles. But with Nishtha’s training and support, I am trying to bring about a healthier atmosphere at home. It is unlikely that my father will ever take up any responsibility. But I will continue my fight, and I hope that more girls like me, hailing from poor households like mine, will become a part of Nishtha and this fight. It is my ambition to make girls self-reliant, and show the world that like boys, girls can shoulder the responsibilities of a household.

In conversation with members of Mahila Mandal:

From the Nishtha office, we visited the village Nihati. It was a 15 minute ride on an autorickshaw. We met with members of the Mahila Mandal here. These are women with families, many of whose daughters are enrolled in the Jagaran program. They spoke to me of challenges faced from their perspective. Some of their stories of domestic violence and torture were heart wrenching. These women are guided by Nishta in various ways: becoming self aware, learning what domestic violence is and how to help themselves and each other, given vocational training, taught good farming habits et al. These women have faced misogyny and discrimination all their lives, and some of them mentioned how they had been perpetrating the same on their daughters and daughters-in-law. For most of them, realization that they were complicit in this wrong was brought upon by their daughters, who, having been trained by Nishtha, called them out on their discriminatory attitudes. The teaching of Nishtha helped them realize their mistakes, and try to correct them. Like the Jagaran girls, these women have also realized how their contribution to their families is in no way inferior, and is in many ways superior, to the contribution of their husbands. Why then, they ask, do the men get to strut about and inflict torture on their wives? How do they have the gall to ask explanations of their wives if they are so much as a few minutes late from an errand, when they themselves will often vanish for hours on a drinking spree with friends? Not only the husbands, the in-laws often enforce this kind of strict rules on the women, and if she veers from the directive even a little, the horrors she might face are unimaginable; she may be even be beaten to death. The women of Mahila Mandal meet with their groups twice a week to discuss problems in their locality or in each other’s lives, and try to get together and solve them. The following points talk about some things that they mentioned to me, or to Minadi, which talk about their lives, and the challenges they face.
1. One lady talks about her sister being murdered by her husband. It was something seemingly trivial: the victim had visited her parents' house for a festival, and returned a little later than her mother-in-law had instructed. When her husband returned, her mother-in-law reported this transgression, and in heat the ensuing argument, the lady lost her life. This is one of many cases that illustrates how women contribute to the crimes against their own kind.

2. A lady speaks about how she has been working throughout to help her family as her husband is practically an invalid. He was stricken a year after their marriage and she has been regarded as a 'bad luck omen'. Even though it has been her efforts keeping the family afloat, this perception still has not changed. She still takes the time to participate with the Mahila Mandal as she understands how they are a force to change society.

3. As mentioned above, the women speak about how they have realized their own complicity in treating genders unfairly. They used to discriminate between daughters and sons, treat the formers poorly. But Nishtha training has made them realize their mistakes. They sincerely said that they are trying to change. But even then, there was a despair in their tone, noting that their society is so skewed that perhaps this discrimination will always be there. This torture, violence, and unfairness: this will never end.

4. Another lady, who was quite distraught, told Minadi of how her wayward husband had destroyed her hopes of raising a family. She was married, with a child, when she realized that her husband was having an affair. A rather simple woman, she had tried to bring it to the notice of her in-laws when she realized that they were complicit; in fact, they mistreated her and would keep her occupied while her husband would speak on the phone to his lover. The man then went on and married the other woman, with dowry, no less, and started living elsewhere. This lady, being rather simple, did not have the courage or the sense to take it up with any authorities, and meanwhile she was also being regularly mistreated, almost tortured, by her in-laws. She managed to run away with her child, and now supports herself, her child and her own ailing mother on a paltry salary of Rs 500 a month. She also said that she waited for a year for her husband to return (possibly on the advice of some “well meaning” relatives), but she now wants to complain to authorities, and for him to be punished. The women around her said that they had tried to reason with the in-laws but had been turned away by their cursing and swearing. Minadi chided her, and the other women, for not having filed an FIR with the police, and urged them to be more pro-active. She promised that Nishtha’s lawyer would be available for advice and guidance on how to proceed. This habit of tolerance and waiting fuels the false sense of superiority these men hold, and they believe they can get away with anything.

Thoughts: This is an important initiative in the local context, to encourage women to bond together and draw strength from one another. There is still a long way to go but isolated events of success instill hope. There is an overwhelming sense of despair against societal traditions, but still it is heartening to see that instead of breaking down in the face of adversity, women are thinking of
ways to retaliate and stand up for their own rights. Their group gives them strength. But even if they get the wrongdoers arrested, slow judicial process means they are out on bail in a few months.

Impression

- Nishtha works in an area where the challenges are multifaceted. Even more than poverty, the mentality and the status quo can be identified as the main barriers to development. Women are fighting against archaic beliefs and a people that put their faith in these beliefs. These ideas are so deep rooted that girls grow up believing themselves to be “weaker”, unimportant and basically, the lesser gender. These ideas are often reinforced by their isolation and lack of a peer group, and then they themselves contribute to propagating this vile treatment of women, and become complicit in the same. This is seen in how women treat their daughters and daughters-in-law, as I will highlight in a couple examples that follow.

- The training given by “Jagaran” has literally contributed to an “awakening” in the newer generations of girls. They are aware of issues of domestic violence, patriarchy, gender bias, child marriage and dowry and can speak out against injustice. They identify when they are mistreated, and instead of tolerating the bias towards men and their brothers, they have learned to protest. When the Jagaran girls spoke to me, a sense of anger was palpable in their tone against their abusive fathers, their relatives and neighbours, and the men and boys of poor character who harass them. They have identified that women often suffer in isolation, and hence have banded together under Nishtha’s Kishori Bahini squads. They get together to help each other during problems, e.g. harassment by a man, or pressure from parents to marry off an underage girl etc. Talking to them, one gets the impression that they are sorted positive looking individuals, despite their everyday struggles. They are articulate, focused and despite their troubles, afford their parents, who might have treated them poorly, the benefit of understanding that their thinking is warped due to social pressures. They reveal their honest attempts to teach their parents the right from the wrong. I came away with the feeling that Nishtha’s care has not only given them opportunities to learn, but is equipping them with the tools to effect real change at a grassroots level. I shall mention more about their issues in detail later.

- The English teacher I met seemed to share an easy rapport with her students, despite having been teaching only 3 months. Regarding the spoken English program, the girls introduced themselves to me in English, with varying degrees of difficulty. Barring one or two, none of them could carry on a conversation in English. I mentioned to Mina Di that watching English movies and listening to recordings also inculcates a knowledge of the language. A part of their difficulty in learning the language is perhaps that it forms no part of their culture. It is completely artificial.

- The job training programs have had a varied degree of success. The training program that had been initiated by Asha Atlanta with Don Bosco had worked with 20 girls, and 7-8 of them had got employment. But due to long commute, and family issues, only 3 of the girls could continue. Two of them now work in the city, and Mina di mentioned that they are doing well. The third, Tanuja, had been employed with Baruipur data centre but it was a temporary position so she has been laid off at the moment. She is currently working on her spoken English and finishing her degree, and works with them when there is a vacancy. The girls are aware of their deficiencies in terms of what the market needs from them. This is heartening to see. They are aware that they need grooming for soft skills and
need to be able to measure up to job candidates from the city, who are usually proficient in English and communication skills. Their dedication towards making it in life needs to be backed with training programs.

• Talking to the women of the Mahila Mandal one can understand why the problems of gender bias and patriarchy are so deep rooted in society. There is a vicious cycle in women being mistreated, abused, then beaten into submission into accepting her role as a lesser individual and subservient to men, and then growing up and inflicting the same treatment to their daughters and daughters-in-law. These women also band together and try to help each other. Almost everyone is a victim of abusive husbands and have little to no freedom of spending time outside home and household duties. But they are aware that it is wrong, and do not try to placate themselves and each other by saying this is correct. They mention that they realize that they had been complicit in mistreating their daughters but talking to Nishtha has ‘opened their eyes’. I shall elaborate on some points of this conversation later. The impression I got is that whoever has been brought under the fold of Nishtha has realized the things that are wrong in society. Even though the women here do not dream for themselves as the Jagaran girls do, from what I gathered, they hope that their children will live in a world without these injustices. Mina di and other Nishtha staff know them personally and try to urge them into action on certain issues.

After speaking to the members of Mahila Mandal at Nihati, we were offered refreshments. The women of the village took great pride and care in showing us around their gardens, and I was treated to some delicious homegrown fruits. Baruipur’s soil is exceptionally fertile; some fruits that grow here are of a standard that could rival produce from anywhere in the world. There is an indigenous variety of mango that grows here and nowhere else; but a lack of publicity about these means farmers here are considering abandoning the cultivation of these fruits and moving to more mainstream crops. Minadi comments that if that happens, that would be a great tragedy. Nishtha, in their education programmes for adults, has spread awareness about healthy and eco-friendly farming practices. They have tried to organize programmes to make the urban population interested in this produce, but not with much success.
Nishtha spreads awareness on social as well as environmental issues, as well as teaching locals sustainable and healthy methods of growing crops. The above is a message painted by their trainees, which asks people to take care of the soil and the earth.

Me, with the members of the Mahila Mandal.
The Jagaran trainees and Kishori Vahini leaders, shouting their slogans, that demand equality, fairness and justice.

Nishtha’s main office building.