

The following is a report on the site visit for evaluating the NGO Mukti's Book Bank project being jointly funded for 2006 – 2007 by Asha-Yale and Asha – NYCNJ. Although the Book Bank project was the immediate reason for the visit, several Asha chapters are at this point forming an association with Mukti that is certain to go beyond the Book Bank project. Moreover, the Book Bank project, by its very nature, is not a stand-alone project. It would be hard to assess the failure or success of this project by itself, if not viewed in combination with other educational projects undertaken by Mukti. Therefore, this report actually has almost no discussion of the Book Bank project itself. Instead, a description has been attempted of Mukti's work in context of the condition of the local population, as gathered from the visit.

Mr. Somnath Mukherji, a volunteer for AID – Boston, has recently conducted a site visit to Mukti, and has written a report on his visit. His report is available at <http://www.somnathmona.com/aidboston/SomnathTripMar2006/RoyalBengal.pdf>. Repetition between Somnath's report and the present one has been avoided as far as possible.

From the southern part of Calcutta, an hour-long train ride brought us to Mothurapur station. From there, we took an auto-rickshaw (a motorized three-wheeler taxi) to Raidighi. At Raidighi, we boarded a motor-boat for another hour-long ride downstream to Nagendrapur GP (Gram-Panchayat, or Village Council). While on the boat, we saw people catching fish larvae. Earlier, we had seen these larvae being sold at the market at Raidighi. This is a major livelihood in the region, and Somnath has written about it in his report. We saw the electric line across the river at Raidighi, the only one that supplies electricity to the other side of the river. The bridge being built at Raidighi will hopefully provide better access to the mainland for the people living on the banks opposite to Raidighi.



Left: Boarding the motor-boat at Raidighi, bound for Purbasridharpur. Right: Bridge under construction at Raidighi.

Upon disembarking from the boat, we were greeted by a group of twenty or so, all wearing Mukti badges. Some of these people were from a part of the island under the Kankandighi GP, and are helping to enable Mukti gain a volunteer base at that GP. One of them was also a teacher at a local government primary school, and it was nice to see government schoolteachers taking an interest in Mukti. This is something we saw again when visiting the government secondary school at Nagendrapur. Mr. Sankar Halder,

president of Mukti, had accompanied us from Calcutta. Although he is a native of the region, and is in regular contact with the rest of the Mukti executive board from his current location in Connecticut, it had been about one and a half years since he had been to the project sites. The organization had grown considerably since then, thanks to the efforts of the local volunteer base, and the board members, including Mr. Bijoy Halder (Sankar's father), Mr. Madhusudan Bairagi, and Mr. Bishwanath Mandal. Thus, Sankar was himself eager to catch up with proceedings first-hand, and was asking more questions than I myself was. He also had to be introduced to many of the new people, a reflection of the fast-growing, decentralized set-up of Mukti.

After the embarrassingly conspicuous welcome, we boarded the motorized vehicle that would take us around the island on brick roads. At places, the bricks had not yet been laid, exposing soft muddy stretches where passengers had to get off the vehicle and push it in order to get it past the muddy stretch. We were told by the locals, that the contractor who was building the roads had lost a lot of bricks due to a recent flood, and had not come back to finish stretches of the road. There were a lot of brick kilns visible in the region, but these kilns were powered by burning wood, and did not achieve the high temperatures required to produce bricks of good enough quality to build these roads. This seemed to be a pity, since if the roads could be built with local materials, it would bring down the cost, and also bring in money to the region. However, the brick kiln workers, if I correctly remember what I was told, were mostly tribal workers from other states like Bihar. We have heard a lot from Asha's project partners about the inhuman conditions under which brick kiln laborers are often made to work. However, it did not occur to me to enquire about the situation at these kilns. While walking on these roads, human excrement could be seen at the sides of the road, underscoring the need for Mukti's low-cost sanitation project that AID is considering for funding (see Somnath's report for picture).



Left: Stretch of road not yet built up with bricks. Right, top: Typical scenery by the side of the roads. Right, bottom: Motor-van being pushed over muddy stretch of road.

We passed several villages on our way to our first scheduled stop, Nagendrapur government secondary school, from where Sankar had done his schooling. In each of the villages we passed, there were some residents who were members of Mukti, and in some cases, were wearing Mukti badges while waiting for us to pass by. After reaching Nagendrapur School, we talked with the teachers and Mukti members assembled there. The headmaster described to us difficulties faced by the students, as well as by teachers. The teachers, Mukti members, and the visitors all participated in discussing the problems. The teachers seemed to be looking to Mukti to effect some changes that they were hoping for. The headmaster expressed his wish for a more positive schooling environment where he would be able to teach to his own satisfaction, and the students would be able to achieve better learning levels. Details of the discussion at the school, along with the discussions with students being sponsored by Mukti, are given at the end of this report.

After leaving the school, we reached the site of the mud hut constructed recently by Mukti by the bank of the river 'Thakurain'. This two-roomed hut with a bathroom now serves as an office, guesthouse, meeting place, and storage facility for Mukti. It took about Rs. 20,000 to build. It consists of mud plastered on to a bamboo framework. The roof is made of thatched straw. The bathroom contains a hand-pumped tubewell for water. There is also a solar panel, which powers two lights in the hut for use at night. Upon reaching the site of the hut, we sat outside to meet with the village people, including Mukti members, non-members, and parents of schoolchildren. There were two of the three brothers who owned the land on which the Mukti hut stands. These brothers were themselves poor farmers, yet donated the land to Mukti, believing that it will be for the upliftment of the village.



Left: The Mukti office. Right: Sankar's parental home. Sankar's nephew can be seen in the picture, curious but shy.

Another inspiring story was that of Mrs. Radha Jana, mother of a student being sponsored by Mukti under the Talented Student Sponsorship (TSS) project. Being determined to provide education to her children in spite of grinding poverty, she made a trip to Calcutta upon hearing that someone was giving away old textbooks. She was confident that her efforts towards educating her children would be appreciated. However, after making the long and expensive trip to Calcutta, she was unable to get past the security guard who treated her with disrespect and told her to go away. In spite of this humiliation (it brought tears to her eyes while describing it), Mrs. Jana was undeterred from taking the next available opportunity to procure textbooks for her children.

Besides singular examples of this kind, the assembled people seemed to be appreciative of Mukti's work. They seemed to understand the value of good schooling, and there were also some discussions of possible income generating activities that Mukti could start. The concept of cooperatives, and microlending were brought up as examples.

The students sponsored under Mukti's TSS project and their parents assembled at the Mukti office in the evening. They had their recent report cards with them, and all of them showed improved performances in terms of percentage marks secured in any given subject. They were also asked about what they perceived as obstacles, what they valued in the TSS scheme, and what they would like to see the TSS project provide in addition to what was being provided.

After these meetings, there were a couple of hours to enjoy the soft murmur of the river under the moonless sky, and to have dinner. I had to leave early next morning, and so could not stay for the Mukti board meetings and workshops that were to take place over the next few days.

Overall, I came back with a sense of the harshness of the conditions the people of the region face. In particular, I was humbled by the resilience of the students who were sustaining their motivation for education in spite of tremendous odds, and the dedication of parents, who are making tremendous sacrifices every day to give their children a chance to break out of the cycle of poverty. I realized the helplessness of teachers who were struggling to do their job with sub-minimal facilities and incentives. I also formed a very positive impression of Mukti as an organization. It seemed to be transparent and democratic from what I could tell. Every village in the region had representation in Mukti through local members. Membership is open to anyone who is interested, and projects are implemented with input from every level of the organization. Importantly, the organization seemed to be integrated into the village society, rather than being a group disjointed from the rest of the villagers. Also significant is the fact that government officials, such as block-development officers and sub-divisional development officers, are on Mukti's board, while others serve as volunteers.

Issues discussed

Problem: Lack of schools, teachers, and government support. There is a shortage of schools in the region. This is evident from the fact that there are many out-of-school children in every village, but the existing schools hardly have enough classrooms to accommodate all enrolled students, and the student:teacher ratio is very high.

The headmaster of Nagendrapur School pointed out to us, that there are ~30 school weeks scheduled per year. That translates to ~60 classes per year per subject. There are ~145 students in the average section in the school. So even if the teacher were to interact personally with 2 students in every day of class, he/she would not have gotten to interact with every student even once during the entire year.

The Nagendrapur School is one of the big schools in the area, and currently has ~1300 students, 11 regular teachers (2 about to retire), 5 para-teachers, and 6 part-timers. Salaries for the para-teachers are being raised locally. This was contrasted to the situation in 1998, when there were ~100 students, and 8 teachers. Thus, demand for schooling has gone up rapidly, but the requirement for teachers has not been met proportionately.

The lack of schools becomes more acute students progress to higher classes. Primary schools far outnumber secondary schools, and secondary schools far outnumber higher-secondary schools. In fact, there are no higher-secondary schools on the island...students wanting to continue their education beyond class X must go to Raidighi or farther away from home. That implies that besides school fees, books, etc., their families must also provide for boarding.

Suggestions/discussion: There weren't too many suggestions. Building schools and appointing teachers can only be done adequately if the government does its part. This is not a problem that an NGO can tackle completely. However, Mukti is thinking about the possibility of building schools in the region, and is in discussion with Asha-NYCNJ.

Problem: Physical and economic obstacles to schooling. Due to the shortage of schools, the students attending Nagendrapur School typically walk ~5 kms or more to and from school every day. The trip becomes more difficult in rainy weather, when the roads become very muddy. Students often leave for school without a decent meal, and neither do they get to eat at school. Concentrating on studies becomes a problem due to hunger, and the students are eager to get back home to have their only proper meal at night.

Suggestions/discussion: The possibility of providing meals at school was brought up. Mukti will consider taking this up. The government currently isn't providing meals at secondary schools in the area. In the primary schools, the mid-day meal scheme has been implemented. However, there are issues with its implementation...teachers have to do a lot of book-keeping work, and the meal is cooked in the middle of the school day, causing considerable distraction from classes. It was felt that it would be better to move the meal timing to the start or end of the school day.

The possibility of finding low-cost but nutritious food was brought up. I seemed to recall that the algae *Spirulina* is a very nutrient-rich food, but wasn't sure of the cost. There needs to be some research on this.

Problem: Lack of motivation/awareness. This problem is generally applicable to students and teachers alike. However, the discussion with the teachers of Nagendrapur School, not surprisingly, focused on the lack of motivation amongst students. During the visit, we did not get any feed back on the teaching standards of the teachers, due to the sensitive nature of the issue. The headmaster impressed me as being dedicated to his work, and seemed genuinely disappointed at not having better conditions for teaching and learning.

The reasons for lack of motivation amongst students are rather obvious. They include the problems discussed above. The sheer difficulty of regularly attending school, and the poor quality of education available at school, is enough to de-motivate most students. On top of that, there often isn't much hope in the minds of the students of being able to go all the way required to effect an improvement in economic conditions through education. Cases of educated and unemployed youth are very common, and add reality to this feeling.

Suggestions/discussion: Sustained support should be given to promising students, till the time they place themselves in a secure financial position. That way, they will provide inspirational examples to other students from their locality. Mukti is seriously planning to build this approach into their TSS project.

Often, the village youth are unaware of new career directions that are emerging. Most of them think in terms of traditional career paths (doctor, engineer, government posts, etc.). Career guidance should be provided to rectify this, not only through Mukti, but also through the individual sponsor of the student.

Incentives could be given for good performance in school in the form of token prizes and recognition. There was some discussion on the need to balance rewards with inclusiveness...i.e., while good students should be rewarded in some way, the ones who are not doing well should not feel left out. They should be given proper attention.

Some common themes

a) Nutrition and health: Our discussions at the school, as well as with the TSS project students highlighted the need for proper nutrition and healthcare in improving educational performance. Many of the TSS students complained of weakness and other health problems that seriously hindered their efforts at studying hard. Many complained of headaches and eye problems brought on by studying under poor light conditions. It was suggested that Mukti should look into the possibility of providing more **solar lamps** in the village. **Vitamin A** supplements could be considered as a solution for preventable eye problems (I have heard that most cases of blindness in India are due to lack of proper nutrition).

b) Lack of guidance in english and mathematics: The teachers of Nagendrapur School has mentioned that a major problem was the lack of teachers for specific subjects. For this reason, teachers often have to teach subjects with which they are not comfortable, leading to a poor quality of instruction.

The TSS students re-iterated this, specifically, the lack of teachers proficient in English and mathematics. A common demand seemed to be for extra help in these subjects, which often meant looking for private tuitions. Students said that the provision of tuitions under the TSS scheme was very valuable to them.

c) Private tuitions as an interim measure. In the long run, Mukti aims to uplift the schooling system to the point where schools can take care of all formal-education related needs of students. However, as discussed above, this requires very large-scale and long-term changes of such magnitude as can only be affected through government help.

In the interim, both teachers and students are looking to private tutors as a necessary supplement to schooling. TSS students unanimously agreed that the provision of tuitions under TSS was of great help. Teachers at Nagendrapur school also acknowledged the necessity of tuitions while being aware that it is not an ideal solution.

In response to this fact, Mukti is presently considering starting a tuition program, initially for promising students. Local unemployed but educated youth will be targeted as tutors. Mukti is working on the details of the budget required to start this program for several hundred students, and it is estimated that this program will have substantial effect on a relatively low budget. However, in light of the possible negative effects of private tuitions on the educational system, discussions need to be kept alive to consider long-term solutions. As per my discussions with Ssankar, they are aware of this, and are proposing this program as an interim solution till the time that the educational scenario in the region can be improved.