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Last December (2010), when I went to India I had planned to visit a few places in West Bengal where some of the well known NGOs are working. At the top of the list was Nishtha. I came to know about Nishtha through Asha for Education, Birmingham.

Nishtha started their work in 1975 and now Ms. Mina Das has taken the leadership from her mother to guide this organization. I contacted Ms. Das from here to make a tentative plan for my visit and then after reaching Kolkata almost imposed myself on her so that I could accommodate my other plans. I must say that Ms. Das was very gracious about it.

We went to Baruipur, in a car which took about one hour from South Kolkata. I was accompanied by my sister, Shikharini, and one of my childhood friends, Satyapriya. After reaching there we spent some time in Nishtha's office where we learned about their activities. Their main emphasis is on empowerment of women. It is very worrisome that there has been a trend of increasing domestic violence for the last 15-20 years. The reason is not apparent. Nishtha is also working in village level awareness program like child marriage, girl's education.

From the office we went to villages where they are working, and it was about 30-40 minutes by car. And that experience is very difficult to express in words.

- i) We saw how Nishtha is trying to help local kids to grasp study material through 'private group coaching' in a very practical way. Mathematics is taught through real life experience. Geography of India was revealed in front those kids through relief maps, which was made by them.
- ii) We saw how the kids are making real life decision of placing water sources in a village based on practical use of that water source. They are trying to learn group work as well as cultivating decision making abilities.
- iii) We participated in a mock debate where the youth of the villages tried to hash out the pros and cons of child marriage. We learned that it is done regularly in different villages. Very surprisingly we saw that some of the girls who are already married participating in that debate and defending child marriage.
- iv) We had an informal discussion about what the villagers can do and what we can do to help them. Those were very productive discussion and made me think that only financial help is not enough. We should participate in these to come up with ideas. I know that it is neither wise nor very productive to give them advice based on 3-4 hours' interaction, but as we are out of the "box" we may bring something new to them, and most definitely we can learn about their problems from them.

After that we had our lunch and one has to be there to experience their hospitality. When we are eating we found that at least 150-200 women of the village are patiently waiting for us. They just wanted to meet us and liked to know how we can give them slight support in their struggle. It is a

heartwarming experience that so many people just want some help and they think that somehow we do have that magic wand which will change their life.

We went on to see some of the projects sponsored by Nishtha, like a poultry farm, some hand crafts etc. We know that Nishtha is active in organic agriculture although we didn't have the opportunity to see their work. But they are working in various areas simultaneously for a sustainable improvement of people's life.

I'll say that it was a very enlightening and humbling experience. We all need to go and visit them and make a commitment to help their cause.