

VIRTUAL SITE VISIT OCTOBER 2021

REPORT BY AGNIVA ROY

ATTENDEES

From Asha for Education, Sruti Bheri, Deepali Kundnani, Manisha Natarajan, Girish Ramaswamy, Agniva Roy, Padmanava Sen, Prasoon Suchandra, and Shyam Venkateswaran were present. We spoke to Mina Das (Secretary - Nishtha), Manami Das, Srabani (coordinators - Nishtha), and several girls who are part of the Jagaran programme with Nishtha. The meeting was conducted over Zoom on Oct 31 2021, from 8 to 9.30 am EST.

SUMMARY OF TOPICS DISCUSSED

- (1) Social issues faced in 2020-21 due to COVID-19, Amphan, Yaas
- (2) Increase in violence and offences against women
- (3) Work done by Nishtha and Kishor-Kishori Bahini Leaders
- (4) The state of online education
- (5) Status of vaccination in the area
- (6) Update on Night Shelter
- (7) Update regarding work on Sikkha Sathi proposal

Social issues faced in 2020-21 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 have **lost major documents**, such as birth certificates and ration cards, which makes it difficult for them to obtain government relief and rehabilitation funds. These major blows have caused a near breakdown in society and **damaged connections between people**, and has also reversed a lot of the work Nishtha had done towards people's attitude to their daughters. Society in rural India is largely dependent on people helping each other. However, due to the panic of COVID-19, people are ostracising those suspected of being infected, and isolating the families completely. Families of sufferers are 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.

Increase in violence and offences against women

Desperation due to such situation is leading families to try to marry off daughters. Despite Nishtha's advocacy over the last few decades, they are now back to thinking of girls as a burden. **Traffickers** are also taking advantage of the situation. Usually, the Jagaran girls can keep tabs on their friends through school and prevent possible **child marriages** (if someone is suddenly absent, they get in touch to see if their parents are trying to marry them off). With the lockdown, girls are isolated, which makes them vulnerable. Reports of domestic violence and various offences have increased manifold in this period. Particularly distressing is the fact that there has been a marked increase in the reported numbers of rapes, murders, and suicides.

Work done by Nishtha and Kishor-Kishori Bahini Leaders

Nishtha and the girls within the Jagaran programme, who are leaders of youth groups known as Kishori Bahini, have **distributed relief**, led advocacy and **awareness campaigns**, and also worked to provide **health support** in remote areas. A lot of their work was supported by Asha for Education from its COVID-19 and Amphan relief funds. The relief food kits supplemented the government rations which were often not enough. They also helped a number of families who had lost official documents procure government rations.

The leaders were especially innovative in their response to protecting women from violence. They started a **shout out campaign**, wherein if anyone suspected an offence in the area they would raise an alarm over Whatsapp and also cry out, and whenever someone heard a cry they would cry out, thus amplifying the call and alerting the community. They were able to intervene in 151 cases and catch the perpetrators. In cases where the accused were seeking early bail, lawyers were able to intervene and support the victims. 11 such court cases are currently in progress.

Nishtha set up 2 health camps with oxygen concentrators to provide treatment to COVID-19 sufferers in the midst of the second wave. The nearest government hospital at Baruipur was overloaded and this saved a lot of lives as people could get preliminary relief. They also set up a number of awareness campaigns, informing people about health protocols, while also advocating for people to help sufferers and not isolate them completely. With medical kits containing oxymeters, thermometers, and basic medicines, the youth group leaders travelled to remote villages, on foot and on bicycles, dressed in PPE, to monitor people's health, provide them medicines if needed, and identify COVID-19 infected patients. The girls reached out to nearly 300 villages, to form groups and involve more people in their work.

For their work, the youth group leaders have been lauded by local councillors and MLAs. They have called them "COVID-19 warriors" and remarked that they have done more for the community than the government or party workers could have done.

The state of online education

Schools and colleges have been closed to in-person instruction from April 2020. There are talks of reopening them from November 16 2021. A number of the girls report that where they live and the **infrastructure** they have, online education has not been successful. There are no online classes happening in govt schools from class 1 to 8, only sometimes activity tasks are given. For classes 9-12, recently classes have started once a week. Two subjects are taught per day. **Network connectivity** is a problem, and the costs of paying for data is also significant. Nishtha has subsidised the cost of internet plans for a number of children. There has also been the issue that families of many children are pushing them to do housework or go out and earn, because they now see education, especially girls' education, as a waste of time. A number of children reported that though some of their teachers try, most have not adapted to online teaching well. Classes are still not scheduled properly.

There are certain **apps and TV programs** that have helped some section of the students. But the general feeling is that of dissatisfaction towards the current state of education. Nishtha has worked towards organising **groups of students** with one smartphone or laptop, and pairing them with teachers from schools in the area. Some of the older children mention that they help their friends in lower classes with their study. Several children are preparing for their boards, in 10th and 12th standards. The 12th state boards have been announced, to be held in April, with half the regular syllabus. The dates for the 10th have not yet been announced.

Status of vaccination in the area

The youth leaders and Nishtha, through their home visits, have found that a lot of villagers are reluctant to take the vaccine. On an unofficial survey carried out by them, they have found that **only about 10% of women** in the area are vaccinated, while about 45% of men are. The main reasons that they found for this are:

- General **suspicion and fear** of vaccines and side effects
- Loss of a day's work and earning if they go to get vaccines, and even more if side effects happen
- Vaccine camps are often **understocked**, to the tune of having only 100 doses a day. So there are long wait times and some people have to come back multiple days before finally getting the vaccine
- Women are told that since they will mostly stay at home while the men go out to work, they do not have to get vaccinated
- Women are also told that if they leave for a day, **no one will be there to look after the children**

Nishtha is currently campaigning with the government to do more **advocacy and outreach** to women and minorities in remote areas. A number of the Asha volunteers present at the meeting expressed concern that the youth leaders should get vaccinated, even those under 18, as the government's emergency approval system allows that. Nishtha coordinators said they are looking into it. All the children above 18 have received one dose. Some of them who are in college can avail vaccines from their college, but transport is an issue as their colleges are far. Local trains are only open to government staff and essential healthcare workers.

Update on Night Shelter

Srabani, who is the coordinator of the Night Shelter, spoke about the operations of the project over the past year and a half. Initially when the lockdown was put in place, the government had announced that all congregations were illegal, even educational ones. The shelter thus could not accept children. However, the state of the children and their mothers was not good as they were no longer earning, and they could not afford food or upkeep of their homes. The cyclone also damaged their houses. They gave food relief and started the shelter's activities, with classes and games, in an open space in a nearby park. After a few weeks of this, the local councillor, sympathetic to the plight of the children, was able to work with the police and allow them to reopen the shelter, with health protocols in place. The shelter has been operational and the children, who suffered greatly in the first few weeks, are now doing better. Nishtha is also providing support to the mothers. They have been able to get official IDs so that they can avail rations and benefits from the government.

Update on Sikkha Sathi Proposal

The Sikkha Sathi proposal is to work for rehabilitation and help in girls' education in the wake of Amphan. They have identified ~400 girls who are at risk, and need urgent support for sustenance, and to be able to continue their education. All of them lost their educational materials and almost all personal belongings, including their clothes, to the cyclone Amphan. Their families, in the desperation to find livelihoods, would marry them off if Nishtha had not intervened. With funds from Asha, Nishtha has arranged for educational materials, school bags, clothes, and a trunk and lock for these girls.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

Even while facing bleak prospects, it is inspiring that the children and the Nishtha family maintain a positive outlook, always looking for solutions. Their enthusiasm, their bond, their strength, and their eagerness to serve the community is something everyone can learn from. It is disheartening that in the face of these calamities, a lot of people have abandoned the values of society and gender equality Nishtha has worked tirelessly to inculcate over decades.

In the short term, we need to encourage and fund vaccination awareness programs, and ensure all the children are vaccinated and protected. In the longer term, there needs to be directed thought towards the inequalities in society that online education have exposed. While children who can afford have been able to keep up with schoolwork, a substantial chunk of students have been deprived the same opportunities.

SNAPSHOTS FROM THE MEETING

