

## **Visit to Nishtha Night Shelter:**

After that, we visited the Night Shelter. It houses around 25 children, I forgot to get an exact count. Their ages range from the absolute toddlers to young teenagers. The night shelter is the ground floor of a dwelling; two rooms, one large, and one small one, where the children stay with their caretakers. Before the night shelter, their children would have to live mostly on the streets while the mothers worked. Also, even during the day, they were constantly exposed to an unhealthy environment and the most vile language. They grew up with a skewed sense of morality, no sense of hygiene, a vicious uncouth language, and getting into the trade was inevitable. The boys grew up into pimps, and the girls were put to work. The night shelter gives these children a better environment. There are 5 teachers engaged in teaching them beyond school and giving them a different set of role models to look up to. They now go to school during the day, then return to their mothers and eat food there.

Earlier, the children used to come directly from school to the shelter, and have lunch there. According to Minadi, the new system was implemented to let their mothers spend some time with and for their children. Tied down to their hapless existence and profession, this is the only opportunity they have to indulge with their children. Then, the children come to the shelter in the afternoon. They used to go to the playground occasionally but were relentlessly picked on and bullied by the children of the locality, and that was damaging. So they now occasionally play in the school premises after hours.

When we arrived, a few children in the smaller room were drawing, or listening to a story from one of their teachers. There are two male teachers, both working on getting Masters degrees. They were part of Nishtha's various programs for youth, and wanting to contribute, they work as teachers here. The children were conversant, and gave me their names, which class they are studying in, and when I asked, enthusiastically showed me what they were drawing. Some of the children in the other room were preparing for a song-dance performance that they would put on just for us. One of them, Bikram, who is one of three brothers, was pointed out to me by his teacher as specially talented. At his teacher's encouragement, he brought me some of the paintings he had done. I have taken photos of the same, as I thought they were quite remarkable. Bikram also sings and dances, and he did dance for us. The children seemed to interact freely with me, and were happy to sing and dance for us, with the usual awkwardness and shyness that any child would show when performing.

We also met their mothers. We had arrived right before they typically start working; one of them sent in her apologies that she could not meet us, as she had already put on her make-up

and was now ashamed to meet us. That was heartbreaking to hear, but such is their daily reality; a life of shame. They spoke to us about how the night shelter meant they could hope for their children to have better lives. They also had specific comments about school being closed on some flimsy pretext of a festival, and how some of their children had now graduated to Class XI, which meant they were going to the bigger government school in the area.

### **Insights about the brothel:**

Minadi shared with me some insights on the social setup within the brothel; how women are roped in and kept chained to the system that exploits them. She also expressed the difficulties in getting teachers for the night shelter; educated men or women do not want to be seen frequenting a locality neighbouring a brothel. Further, she expressed her concern that the brothel seemed to be expanding. She said that when we visited, she saw some new women there. In general, she said she has observed this trend; that the brothel is growing in numbers.

Sex-workers in the brothel live and work in extremely tiny huts, often without windows. Many of them are heavy drug users. The whole place is a racket and they simply cannot escape. Nishtha has tried to preach safe sex and use of condoms. Two women were found to be HIV positive, but Minadi mentions that they vanished from the area after a while. She is apprehensive that they were taken to somewhere else where their status is not known, so that the business is not affected.

Women are often lured in by youths posing as their lovers. They promise marriage and then bring them here. Then they become part of the trade, and the “lover” vanishes for a while. A few months later, he returns and becomes her “babu”, or primary client. This “babu” takes most of the lady’s earnings, and uses that for his own wife and family, who will be blissfully unaware of these activities. He will just about leave enough for her to barely sustain herself.

Minadi also talks of a peculiar custom, that of “marriage”. A sex-worker is said to be “married” on the day she receives her first client. There is a huge festivity and celebration for this event. Minadi says that she has also gradually figured out how they use euphemisms to talk of trafficking. When they say that a married woman is visiting her “in-laws in Bihar”, they really mean that she has been trafficked to some colony in Bihar, and is being made to work in the flesh trade there.

## **Impression and thoughts:**

Visiting the night shelter was a memorable experience. On the way there and back, Minadi narrated to me how the drive and insistence of Asha Atlanta seniors Anu, Abhyuday and Padmanava led to the construction of a separate building for the shelter. She mentioned that earlier, the children born in the brothel grew up in an extremely unhealthy atmosphere. Their mothers inhabit tiny shelters; small dark dingy structures masquerading as cottages, where they live and ply their trade. The children would be thrown out in the streets when their mothers had to work. They had no sense of hygiene, they would not wash, and their language was filthy. Meeting these children now, I can see for myself the difference the shelter has made. If I had not known, I would have never have thought these children have had an abnormal upbringing in any way. They spoke to me, showed me their paintings and craftwork, showed me the books they were reading, and came across as a bunch of normal children. That is, I think, really the point that comes across. The children, despite their unfortunate origins, can shine in life, if only they are given the opportunities and not shunned. Looking at them, and hearing about the challenges they face if their identity gets known, one realizes how damaging social taboos can be. The people of the locality are happy to let the brothel exist and function; yet they will not think twice about cruelly branding these children, full of life and potential, as *bad* and *disgusting*, and teach their children to ostracise them. A little bit of care from the night shelter, and the results speak for themselves.

***This brings me to a great success story from the night shelter. Two girls, born in the brothels, were part of Nishtha since 2008, before the conception of the Night Shelter. They grew up under Nishtha's tutelage and attended school. Thereafter, they attended college, and earned professional nursing degrees. They are now nurses, one of them is employed with Baruipur Hospital, and the other is just finishing up and will be employed soon.***

Speaking to their mothers was also enlightening. They expressed their gratitude, rather formally, as I was the 'representative' of Asha there. They spoke to Minadi and me about the dreams they have for their children. Identifying themselves as 'noshto', or *spoiled*, they conveyed to me their hope that their children would grow up to have better lives. It was heartbreaking to hear such words, but this was the reality of their existence. Only, they now dared to dream of a different reality for their children. Some of them discussed with Minadi that school was closed, or had little attendance on some festival day, and Minadi commended them for having sent their children to school. It is heartening, to see these ladies share simple motherly concerns. One of the ladies expressed her pride that her daughter was now in Class 11, and hence was now attending the "big school". Of all the things Nishtha has achieved, the

fact that it offers these destitute women an opportunity to dream about their offsprings, is possibly what moved me the most.



Some of the paintings by the Night Shelter children. They clearly have a talent of expression, so a program to use these photographs in greetings cards could be used for fundraising as well as getting these children some earnings through their creativity. This artistic corner of their personality, untainted by their origins, has been nurtured by the night shelter's care. It is up to Nishtha to ensure this corner is allowed to flourish and influence their personality.