

Institute of Social Work

Ramya Narasimha and Anitha Swaminathan

Asha San Francisco Volunteer

March 18 - 20 2025

Asha for Education

Visit to ISW Barasat Center – March 18, 2025

On March 18, 2025, we visited the Barasat center run by the Institute of Social Work (ISW), located about an hour and a half from Kolkata. We were warmly received at the airport by **Prashant Ganguly**, and later joined at the center by **Nupur-di**, who guided us through the day's visit. Situated in a rural area where most of the population is engaged in agriculture or related work, the center has a longstanding history of community service and education.

Background and Evolution of the Center

The Barasat center was established in the 1980s, initially functioning as a dispensary and later launching a tailoring project. Over time, a school was started under a mango tree without any formal funding. With community support, this initiative evolved into a proper school. However, in 2017, the school could not secure government affiliation. As a result, the facility was transformed into an after-school education center, continuing its mission to support children's learning.

Structure and Programs

The main center—one of several subcenters—is built on land owned by ISW and consists of two buildings. It caters to two main age groups:

- **Pre-Kindergarten Program (Ages 3–6):**
This section offers early childhood education and nutrition to young children. During our visit, the children welcomed us warmly with songs and games. They appeared happy, confident, and comfortable in the presence of their teachers, who were attentive and nurturing.
- **After-School Program (Grades 1–10):**
The after-school sessions support children from primary to high school. The program covers the regular school curriculum, along with basic computer education and spoken English. A key focus is helping children who are lagging behind academically or who have previously dropped out of school to reintegrate into the education system.

Community Engagement

We had the opportunity to interact with several teachers and parents. The teaching staff expressed satisfaction with their work environment and showed deep commitment to their students' education. They also emphasized regular communication with parents as a core part of their approach.

An impromptu parent meeting took place during our visit. A major concern raised was the difficulty in obtaining transfer certificates for pre-K children, which hindered their admission into government schools. The Central Government's ICDS project required children to enroll in its

schools, but many parents voiced dissatisfaction with the quality of education provided there. They preferred the ISW center, citing its accessible location and stronger educational offerings.

Alumni and Local Impact

We met several parents who were themselves alumni of the center. For instance, Mali, who attended the school from nursery to Class 4 before transferring to a government school, now works as a technician in the Telecommunications Department. His 3-year-old daughter and niece currently attend the ISW center.

Another parent, Runjitha Haldar, shared that multiple members of her family have either graduated from or are currently enrolled in the center. The majority of families in the area work in agriculture, house painting, or run small businesses like tea shops.

Photos from Barasat





Visit to ISW Kidderepore Center – March 19, 2025

On March 19, 2025, we visited the Kidderepore center of the Institute of Social Work (ISW), located in the bustling docks area of Kolkata. This modest yet vibrant center is housed in a small building and serves children from economically underprivileged families, many of whom have limited or no access to quality educational resources.

A Warm Welcome

Our visit began with a warm welcome from the teachers, who treated us to delicious traditional Bengali sweets—**rasogulla** and **sandesh**. Their hospitality set the tone for a deeply engaging and inspiring day.

Center Background and Activities

Notably, the Kidderepore center was the **first center established by ISW**, making it a foundational site in the organization's journey. It runs a robust **after-school program** that not only covers the regular school curriculum but also incorporates **tailoring, computer training, and arts education**.

Our Host: Aarti Kurmi

Our host for the day was **Aarti Kurmi**, a former student of the center who now teaches all subjects except Math and Science. An English major, Aarti is currently preparing to pursue a PhD in English. Her dedication to the children and her teaching methods were truly impressive. She consistently encouraged students to speak in English, which was reflected in their confidence and fluency. It was clear she was beloved by her students and played a key role in creating a positive learning environment.

Tailoring Program for Adolescent Girls

A significant part of the center's offering is the **tailoring program for adolescent girls**, led by **Khadija Yasmin**. With around 12 students enrolled, she teaches them to create items such as **petticoats, aprons, tote bags, and purses**. The program not only equips the girls with valuable skills but also provides them with a sense of purpose and confidence. During our visit, we were delighted to learn that they had an **exhibition of their tailoring products**, and most of their items had already been sold. As a thoughtful gesture, we were gifted beautifully made **aprons and tea towels** by the class.

Engaging with the Students

The center serves students from **Grades 1 to 12**, and our interaction with them was a highlight of the visit. The students were eager, confident, and curious—asking many questions and enthusiastically engaging with us in English. It was deeply heartwarming to witness their energy, openness, and genuine excitement about learning.

We also had the pleasure of meeting other dedicated staff members who contribute greatly to the center's operations:

- **Umai Salma**, who teaches **Bengali and Urdu**
- **Radha Kurmi**, who teaches **Hindi**
- **Rita Guha**, who handles **Mathematics**
- **Chandan Chakravarty**, the **Office Coordinator**

Their collaborative effort has created a nurturing and dynamic environment for learning and growth.

Photos from Kidderpore







Visit to ISW Chella and Purbapally Centers – March 20, 2025

On March 20, 2025, we visited the **Chella** and **Purbapally** centers of the Institute of Social Work (ISW), located in the **Shantiniketan region of West Bengal**, an area with a significant tribal population. The journey took approximately four and a half hours, as we departed early at 7:00 AM and reached the centers around noon.

Chella Center

At the Chella center, we received a warm and thoughtful welcome. The students had organized a small cultural program in a **gazebo on the school premises**, showcasing local talent and creativity. The children performed **Rabindra Sangeet**, sang songs, and recited **Bengali poetry** with enthusiasm and pride. It was heartening to see how excited the children were to perform, and they were visibly delighted to have an audience.

As a token of appreciation, the children were given **small rewards**, and we distributed **chocolates**, which brought great joy to the group. The students ranged from **Grades 1 to 10**, all hailing from nearby tribal villages. Their families mostly depend on **vegetable selling, masonry work, or domestic labor** for their livelihood.

Purbapally Center

Our next stop was the **Purbapally center**, which lies deeper in the tribal area and was slightly more challenging to access. Despite this, the center was full of activity and had strong attendance from the local children.

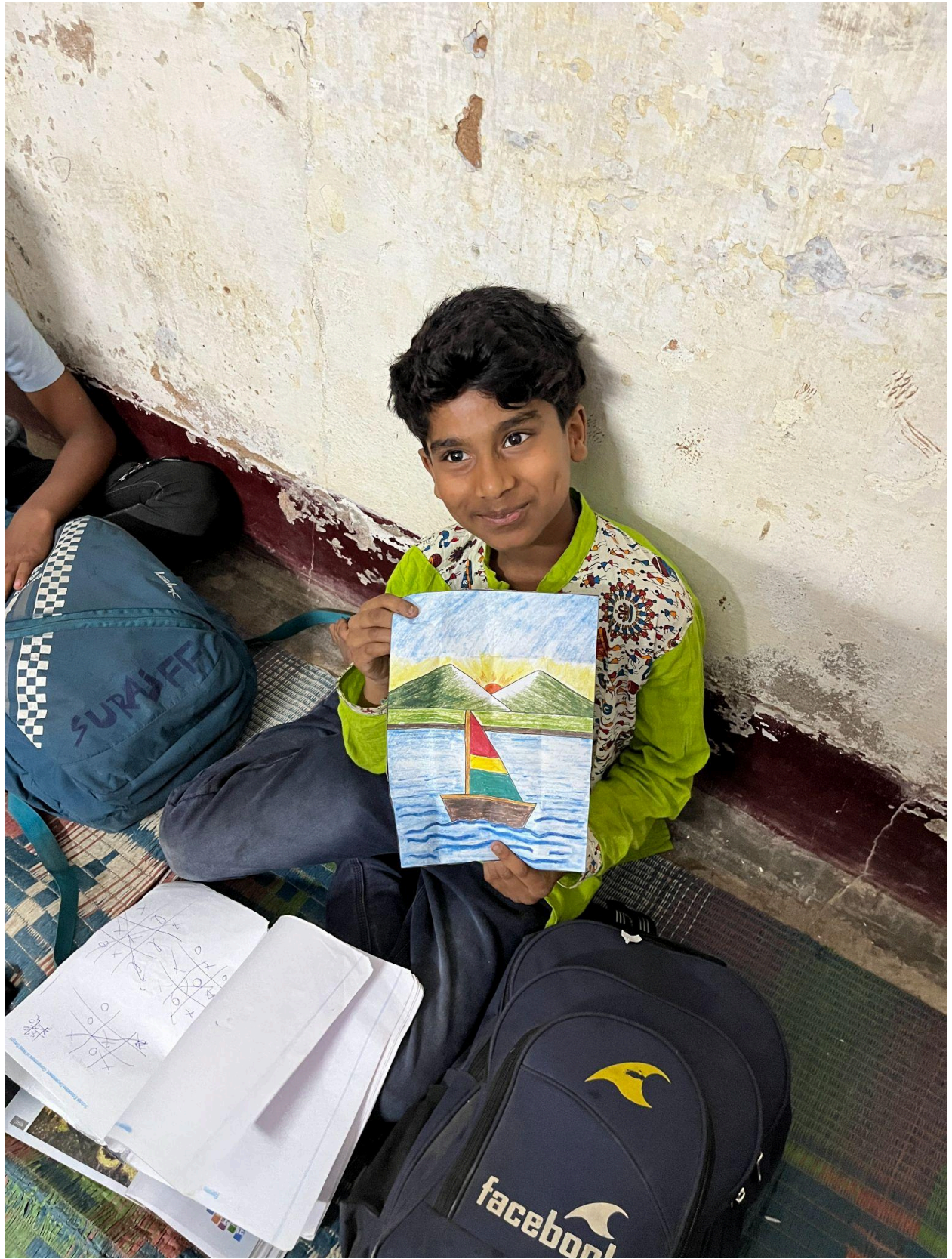
During our visit, we observed **ongoing art classes**, and the children proudly presented us with samples of their artwork. Their creativity and dedication were evident in the work they shared. We also had the opportunity to meet several **parents who had come to pick up their children**. They expressed genuine gratitude for the center, emphasizing that it instilled **structure and discipline** in their children—something they found difficult to maintain consistently due to their demanding work schedules.

Photos from Chella and Purbapally















Follow-up Observations and Feedback

While the impact of ISW's work is evident and admirable, we would like to share a few observations and suggestions that may help strengthen the programs further:

1. Need for English Language Training

We observed that teachers at the Barasat, Chella, and Purbapally centers could benefit from English language training. Strengthening their English proficiency is essential to help students become confident and competent in the language, which is increasingly important for their academic and professional future.

2. English as a Foundation for Computer Education

While the computer training programs are a valuable part of the curriculum, we feel that their long-term benefit is limited without a strong foundation in English. For this reason, we encourage ISW to prioritize English language education in parallel with digital skills.

Here are a few ideas that might support this goal:

- **Explore Collaborations:** The **Digambarpur project in Kolkata**, which we visited after ISW, offers a teacher training program that may be relevant and helpful for your educators.
- **Engage Volunteer Teachers:** Consider connecting with **Shantiniketan** to find volunteer teachers or students who can dedicate a few hours weekly to teach English.
- **Corporate Partnerships:** Reach out to **companies with CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives** that may be willing to provide volunteers for short-term English teaching sessions or sponsor training modules.

3. Teacher Salaries at Chella Center

It was brought to our attention that teacher salaries at the **Chella center** are a concern. We would appreciate it if you could provide us with a comparison of the **budget impact** if salaries were to be increased this year compared to last year. Understanding this would help us assess how best to support or advocate for fair compensation for your dedicated staff.