

## **Mukti Site Visit (April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013)**

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We visited Mukti on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Mukti is located in the Sunderbans, South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. Raghunath Bairagi from Mukti received us at the railway station. From the station we travelled to a coaching center supported by Mukti by auto rickshaw at around 10:30 am. It is called Babujan Sipahi Coaching Center. Several students were waiting there to meet us, along with the Mukti teachers. We interacted with the students for some time, and then left with the teachers for additional discussions about the centers. The students told us that the coaching center had been a great help to them as far as studies are concerned.



About 10-15 teachers discussed their activities, and proposed new ideas to improve the education quality at Mukti. One concern they have is that Mukti is currently running the coaching center inside a formal school during after school hours. The center is run till 10:30 am in the morning and then again in the evening.

The management committees for the school and the coaching centers are different, and Mukti authorities said that they are finding it hard to run the center because of conflict of ideas among the members from either group regarding usage of toilets by coaching center students etc.

They thought that having their own building can resolve much of the concerns that they have at present, and had requested financial support from Asha for the building. Apparently, the idea of having their own land and building have been going on for quite some time and part of it is being implemented recently with Work-An-Hour funds. With Asha's support, Mukti acquired a land in the vicinity of the formal school to set up the coaching center (picture below). The next step is to construct teaching rooms. Asha needs to arrange finances for the building.



From the coaching center Ragunath took us to see the solar lantern project at Nagendrapur and Damkal villages. Asha provided some solar lanterns to Mukti. Some of the villages where Mukti is working do not have access to

electricity. Mukti is renting these lights to the villagers at a nominal charge of INR 2.00 (or so) per night per lantern. During the day, the solar lights are recharged using sunlight. A few villagers are appointed by Mukti to maintain the solar light business.

Next we visited Mukti main office at Purba Sridharpur, met with several committee members and well-wishers, and had lunch. The office area is prone to flooding during rainy season. Hence, the office is a makeshift mud house, which gets swept away every year by the floods and needs to be rebuilt from scratch.



After a visit to the office, we headed toward the Mukti library. The library has lots of books, mostly text books that can be used by students at the coaching center. We have been told that the library is very useful to underprivileged students studying upto class X. While visiting the library, two girl students approached us and requested text books for XI-XII

classes. The West Bengal Government provides free text books for students upto VIII. Note that these resources, however, dry up for students studying in higher classes (VIII-XII). It will be useful to Mukti students, studying in classes VIII and above to get some funds for buying text books.

Inside the library we had a meeting with the Mukti teachers who got training from Shikshamitra on English and Maths. The overall feedback that we obtained from the teachers about the training was positive. It seemed that the teachers benefited from the yearlong program, which was administered in three phases, there being a gap of 2-3 months between two consecutive phases. The teachers mentioned several aspects of the teacher-training program that were particularly useful to them. For example, the use of pictures in the blackboard to demonstrate concepts, usefulness of using colored chalks in class, animated playacting to illustrate the usage of English words, wherever required. Animeshbabu, one of the English teachers at Mukti, requested a chart from Shikshamitra with outline drawings of common objects and everyday work activities that can be a useful help to the teachers as far as drawing on the blackboard for better illustration of concepts to students is concerned.

At the very end we had a meeting with the Mukti self-help group (SHG) members. The SHG members are involved with several small scale businesses like organic farming, fishery etc.

We met one SHG member who has initiated a small scale business to produce Spirulina algae, a medicinal plant, by organic farming with financial support from the SHG group. Spirulina is a type of blue-green algae that is rich in protein, vitamins, minerals, and carotenoids, antioxidants that can help protect cells from damage. It contains nutrients, including B complex vitamins, beta-carotene, vitamin E, manganese, zinc, copper, iron, selenium, and gamma linolenic acid (an essential fatty acid). The business at the time of our visit was less than six-months old, and the owner seemed hopeful that her business should show some profit within a few more months.

A group of SHG women approached us and requested funds to start small tailoring units at their homes. If possible Asha volunteers should think about providing financial support for buying these machines. This will permit these SHG women to earn some money and help their family.



The village women insisted that the money earned from tailoring will be useful for household maintenance and make them less dependent on their husband's income.

Overall, it was a great learning experience for us to visit Mukti and see their involvement in varied activities. The center coordinators, teachers and others associated with Mukti seemed genuinely interested in bringing a lasting change to the area. The students at the coaching center said that the center had been a great help to their education.