

## **Asha Site Visit to Mukti:**

**Visited by:** Padmanava Sen (Asha Bangalore Volunteer and Ashawide project partner coordinator) – padmanava.sen@gmail.com

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### **Summary of the visit:**

- Visited Mukti with Sankar Halder and Debabrata Halder
- Started the visit in the newly built Mukti coaching center (with the help of Asha for Education funds)
- Interacted with the parents, students and teachers
- Separately talked to the students in the coaching center
- Separately talked to the teachers and understand the challenges
- Late afternoon, visited the library and the Mukti campus
- Talked to Mukti employees and discussed a few things about other projects run by Mukti and their expansion plans in the agriculture and vocational training sector
- Next Morning, met the HMs of the schools where temporary teacher program is running
- Got back with nice memories of the untainted rural west bengal

### **More Details:**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> January, I have traveled from Kolkata to Sundarbans with Sankar Halder (president) and Debabrata Halder (board member). Before leaving Kolkata, I also took snapshots of the Mukti organic store set up in the apartment complex where they stay. It is a unique setup with phone numbers of farmers given inside the stores so that the buyers can call and confirm the sanctity of the organic vegetables.

En-route to Mukti project site, we discussed the history of Mukti, Asha's involvement from the early days, the organic growth of different projects, the dynamics of the area where they work, the people involved and the current challenges. It looks almost 5 hours to reach Kankondighi area.



### Farmers' commitments and Mukti Organic initiative at Sherwood Estate, Kolkata

We met Students, parents and teachers in the newly built coaching center at Kankon dighi. First the students introduced them; the parents explained the help they got from the Mukti coaching center. Then Sankar acknowledged the local farmers who helped them to bring this small campus alive. Parents and teachers introduced them as well. The coaching center consists of multiple rooms with some flexibility of combining few rooms to make a bigger room.

I had separate 30 min session with Students where I tried to understand their difficulties and the help they get from Mukti teachers. As always English and Math are the biggest bottleneck and Mukti teachers focus on them more. I asked more specific problems and their comfort levels in different things. Mentioned to them how English and math are not only subjects but they can open up new opportunities in their future as well. After taking photos with students, I met Teachers of coaching center. I tried to understand the dynamics of selection process, the challenges they face in their teaching methods, the need for setting up own centers compared to renting school space after regular school hours. They used to utilize the school space but sometimes they were made responsible for the damage. At the same time, not having own space for coaching, make schedules very constrained. They always have more interest from students than they have space. During their selection process, they give preference to old coaching center students. I had more detailed discussion about memorizing things vs alternative teaching methods as well as phonics based on my teaching experiences. I have noticed a collection of books in the coaching center that fall under the book bank project. A generic concern is the poor quality of pages in new books and hence their longevity being reduced from 3 to 2 yrs. All total I spent 2 hours in the coaching center from 2 pm to 3 pm on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015.



**Students in Coaching Center and Me (Padmanava)**



**Students with and without Teachers and Parents around**



**Smiling faces during interaction with students**



**Coaching center building and separate restroom facilities for male & female students**



**Coaching Center Board and the old books collected via Book Bank**



**Coaching Center Teachers**

Then we had some food and went to see the Library setup in Nagendrapur and the main campus of Mukti. They demonstrated the barcoding system and the manual system. Also, we met teachers from a local school and discussed about their challenges to improve QED in their private school setup over over-crowded Government school. This private school does not get temporary teacher salaries now from Asha-Mukti partnership.

Mukti campus has changed quite a bit in last 18 months and it looks well landscaped with garden, sitting places now. Also, given Government has put electric lines now in this area, every place will have electricity soon. The electric lines are placed under Government rural electrification scheme and they have started getting electric meters. Till now, solar power and generators were the only options for the people in this area. We spent some time to understand the organic farming process as well. I spent the night in Nagendrapur (Sankar's place) and in the morning, I went back to campus to take some snaps.



**Sankar, Debabrata and Me (Padmanava) in book bank; Books in book bank**



**More books and me in Book bank**



**Mukti camps in the dark and with Hajak light**



**Mukti campus in the morning**



**Beautiful campus and flower gardens in a foggy morning**

In the morning, I have to get a 9-30 am Train. Before that, Mr Raghunath Bairagi and I went to see the other coaching center built from WAH funds. It should be ready soon. In the way, I met 4-5 teachers from 2 junior high schools. **Asha Sheffield** funds are utilized in these schools for providing teacher salaries. I tried to understand the need of temporary teachers. The problem is that, after a big SSC exam scam reports, no exams are currently being taken in west Bengal and as a result, no new teachers are being produced for last 2 yrs. Specially, in rural areas of West Bengal, the schools are in urgent need of Government-placed teachers. They have 100-130 students in 4 classes and 2 teachers cannot manage that. The high schools in the vicinity are over-crowded and not commutable for kids in the 10-14 years age group. So these junior high schools need continued support to function properly till the problem is resolved from Government side. After that, I quickly visited the under construction 2<sup>nd</sup> coaching center from WAH funds and left for Kolkata.



**Under construction Coaching Center and mr Raghunath Bairagi**

To summarize, this is my second visit to Mukti and I was very impressed to see improvements in multiple fronts. The coaching center is functioning much more efficiently with the new buildings in place. The bookbank projects need continuous support since it benefits the students. However, the cost-longivity analysis and the increasing prices of book, may need additional funds. The temporary teacher placements are extremely important in the surrounding areas. Mukti has done marvelous job to connect the very remote section of the rural West Bengal in sundarbans.