

Mukti Site Visit December 2008

Summary of itinerary. We arrived at the Mukti office in Purba-Sridharpur in the afternoon on Tuesday, December 9th, 2008. We met with the father of a student, and a student being supported under the TSS (Talented Student Sponsorship) program. We saw the coconut saplings, stored in the Mukti office, for use in the coconut plantation project. We then visited two of Mukti's three pisciculture ponds. Next we visited the newly constructed library building and its adjoining horticulture grounds, before returning to the Mukti office around 6 pm. There, we talked with Mukti full-time workers, and had dinner cooked by them. Next morning, we left the island around 11 am. Before leaving, we visited two coaching centers, where we looked at record books, and talked to students and teachers.



On the way to the Mukti office by boat

Observations



A road between villages in the Purba-sridharpur area

NREGA. The central government guarantees 100 days employment per year to anyone living below the poverty line under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). While this is a landmark act with great potential, there have been widespread problems with its implementation. Funds allocated for NREGA are routinely reported to be pocketed by middlemen, while the target populations remain jobless. Also, there is often a lack of suitable projects that could provide employment. Mukti has coordinated with the Block Development Officer (BDO), such that Mukti is providing projects for NREGA, while the BDO's office is providing NREGA funds for the projects. The digging of Mukti's pisciculture ponds, and planting of coconut saplings for Mukti's coconut plantation project are being

done in this way. Thus, there is local employment generation, while Mukti is able to carry out larger scale projects than would have been otherwise possible for the betterment of the community. I am unaware of any other example of an NGO making use of the NREGA in this way, although admittedly I am not very well informed on this subject.

Pisciculture. We visited Mukti's pisciculture ponds, where spawn procured from Naihati are being grown. The fish from the ponds were served for dinner, and were very tasty! Pisciculture will be one of the modules taught at Mukti's vocational training institute.

Horticulture. Different species of flowering plants are being tested for compatibility with the local environment. This is being done on the land adjoining the newly completed Mukti

library, as well as other land owned by Mukti. This will also be one of the skills taught at the vocational training center.

Coconut Plantations. This is potentially Mukti's flagship project. The long-term aim of this project is to create coconut-based local industries, prevent soil erosion, contribute to further greening of the area, and promote tourism. Currently, around 8500



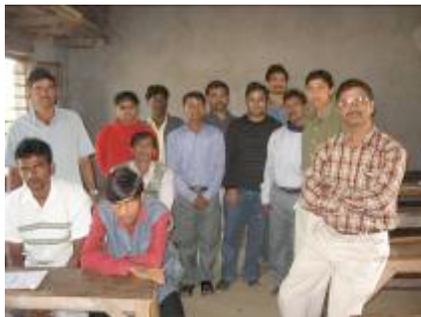
One of Mukti's pisciculture ponds

coconut saplings have been obtained from the government to be planted, and the ground has been prepared for the planting.

Library. The library building has been constructed with funds from Asha NYC-NJ, and is ready for use after some finishing touches. The circulating books for the book bank project will be stored here, as well as reference books, and other books of general interest. The library can seat ~40 people, and is constructed on 750 square feet of land, with an option of adding more floors in future.

Book bank. There has been a surprisingly high rate of book depreciation in the book bank project. Initially, it was expected that a given book could be circulated for three years. However, many books are being returned in unusable condition by the end of the second year. Moreover, the rate of collection has fallen short of expectations. There is ongoing discussion about the feasibility of continuing the book bank project. My personal feeling is that discontinuation of the book bank project would have a major negative effect on students. It would instead be good to come up with a way of continuing the project while addressing the current problems. One possible scenario would be to charge a small amount of money as deposit. Whole or part of the deposit could be returned upon surrender of the books. Both the deposit amount and the returned amount could be adjusted according to the condition of the books. This would lead to greater sense of ownership, and better treatment of the books.

Solar lights. The entire region in which Mukti is running its projects is devoid of electricity. Once darkness falls, it is very difficult for students to continue studying. In cases where students study at night by the light of kerosene lamps, eye problems and headaches are very common. Because of this, solar lights are considered an urgent requirement. Solar lights at the library will provide a place for students to study at night. Ideally, there also need to be additional points where solar lights are available, such that students from different areas can gather to study. The government has offered a 75% subsidy on solar lights for Mukti projects. **However, it is not clear how long the offer stands, so Mukti would like to purchase solar lights ASAP, and requests funds for the same.**



Teachers at a Mukti coaching center

Coaching Centers. Currently serving ~1100 students, there is growing demand for Mukti's coaching centers. They are running for ~2 - 3 years now, and record books are being maintained systematically for the past ~1 year. There are student and teacher attendance registers, and records of school examination scores of the students attending the centers. Most students show good attendance records, and an upward trend in their school test scores. It was pointed out that the students who are not improving should be given special attention.

Some challenges facing the coaching centers were identified as follows:

i) Students often have to travel long distances to the coaching centers, and then from the coaching center to their schools. This makes them late for school. Some students asked that they be given bicycles. While it is clearly not feasible at present for Mukti to provide bicycles to individual students, some ideas for common transportation arrangements (eg. cycle vans) were discussed.

ii) The coaching centers are being held on the premises of local schools. At one particular center, it is becoming very difficult to hold the coaching classes due to the lack of cooperation from the school. Because of the possibility of such situations, and also because of the demand for additional centers in places that are far away from existing centers, Mukti is considering building its own low-cost classrooms.



Students at a Mukti coaching center

iii) Teacher training camps have been arranged by Mukti in the past. There was a suggestion from one of the teachers to hold more such camps, as they were felt to be very beneficial. Mukti intends to keep on holding teacher training courses.

iv) Some teachers suggested an increase in the teacher salaries, as the present salaries were considered insufficient. Since the bulk of the budget for the coaching center project consists of teacher salaries, an increase in teacher salaries will involve a significant increase in the project budget. This aspect needs discussion by the Mukti board.

v) The coaching center is already running on a deficit with reserve and personal funds. Next installment of funds is required urgently.

Talented Student Sponsorships (TSS). Currently, 125 students are being supported under this program. However, due to some sponsors not continuing support, and due to requests from more students than planned, there is a funding shortfall in this program. One student reported not receiving funds on time.

It was noted that the funding allocated to students under the TSS program is sufficient for studies conducted in publicly funded institutions. It was decided that students studying at private institutions would not be supported in future, since the amount covered by TSS will be a small part of the total expenses in that case.

Mukti personnel. The Mukti team working on the ground appears very dedicated and motivated. They provided warm and sincere hospitality to the site visitors. Currently, there are 11 paid staff working full-time for Mukti, and they often work long hours with relatively low pay. Since their salaries constitute less than 1% of Mukti's working budget, my personal recommendation is to increase their remunerations, not only to sustain motivation and ability to concentrate on their work, but also as an acknowledgement of the excellent work that they are doing.



Mukti personnel cooking dinner for visitors



In front of the Mukti office