

Project Report: Mukti

Date of visit: 5th January 2007

Chapter visiting: Asha –Cornell

Names and contacts of volunteers visiting:

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Background information about the project leading to the visit: Asha Cornell volunteers, in the summer of 2006 decided to individually donate \$100 for sponsoring 13 children for the year 2006 as a part of the TSS (Talented student sponsorship) venture undertaken by Mukti (www.muktiweb.org). The sponsorship programme was designed to find talented students in the Nagendrapur, Sunderban region, and to find a sponsor for each one of them in order to help out in their education by providing, books, tuition fee, schooling materials, daily lunch as required, to the individual. Asha Cornell volunteers after being contacted by Mr. Sankar Halder (founder, Mukti) decided to sponsor individually (not as a Asha-Cornell project venture), 13 out of the 82 students selected for TSS. In order to get feedback and detailed organizational procedure of the sponsorship programme for continuing with the sponsorship, Asha Cornell volunteers visited Mukti after their visit to nearby BTS in January 07.

Project visit location: Nagendrapur, Sunderban. The Asha Cornell volunteers reached the bank on the other side of the village by a speed boat from Baikunthapur, Sunderban. From there, it was one hour ride in local transport (machine van) to the other bank of the river where Mukti Karyasamiti office is situated. The one hour ride can be avoided by going directly to the Mukti ghat which then had a jetty under construction.

Site visit experience and comments: Due to some mis-communication, the Mukti volunteers in the village were not aware of the exact date and time of the Asha Cornell project visit. So on reaching the Mukti office, the person in charge (Mr. Madhusan Bairagi, Secretary, Mukti) was fetched by local village men to open the office. He was very helpful and tried to accommodate the volunteers as much as possible in spite of the very short notice. He took the volunteers to visit the guardians of few of the students receiving the sponsorship who lived nearby. All the guardians spoken too were very thankful of Mukti for arranging for this sponsorship. They said Mukti has provided school uniform, and books to their children and had even organized in the past week a visit to Kolkata for medical check-up of the students (The nearest hospital in the region being in Raidighi, 3 hrs by road and an hr by boat, healthcare is a privilege enjoyed only by those who are seriously ill. Health complaints like frequent headaches or eye sight problems are often left untreated). Following visiting the guardians, the volunteers were taken to one of the two local high schools (Hemantkumari and Jatanagari). On reaching the **Nagendrapur Hemanta Kumari High School**, Mr Bairagi talked to the school teachers to let a few TSS sponsored students out of the classes to talk to the volunteers. The teachers were more than happy to accommodate Mukti needs and everyone around

seemed to be familiar of TSS and Mukti, although, the no of sponsored children is a small fraction of the around 1200 high school students. The high school teachers admitted the problem common to village high schools – **too few students for too many students (1300/1450 students, 15/16 permanent teachers, 20-22 part time teachers)**. They also mentioned that a lot of students commute 1 to 1.5 hrs on feet everyday to attend school (the high school does have a residential facility but with only 170 seats),and the school timings are 11 pm to 4 pm, making the afternoon tiffin provided by Mukti to some students an extremely necessary step. **However, it was mentioned by Mr. Bairagi, that owing to the problem of not getting a sponsor for each child selected, they were having to manage resources for around 82 students from funds for around 15 and hence they are not being able to yet provide tiffin to all the sponsored students.** Also, the Asha volunteers were tolde of a coaching class that was organized by Mukti the previous week for students appearing for the coming Board exam, Std X. The coaching class reportedly had 6 subject teachers, 1 Mathematics teacher and 1 psychologist for speaking to the student and offering help. The students (the volunteers spoke to three students in total), were shy but at the same time very appreciative of Mukti. One of them mentioned ‘age porasuno korte bhalo lagto na, ekhon lage’, Did not like studying before, but now I do (after getting help from Mukti).When asked of their major concern, **they expressed the need for a common reading room with light, since electricity has still not reached the villages**, hence, there’s no way a child can study after school (kerosene for the lamps locally used, are often expensive for a family which is fighting to feed it’s members). This was a concern in all the villages in neighboring area that the Asha volunteers visited for BTS too. Importantly, one of the students mentioned that he suffers from mental depression (‘mon kharap lage’) and would like to see some doctor(Mental health, is almost a luxury to worry about in this region, but nevertheless is necessary. **Mukti’s organizing a psychologist to talk to Std X students can be considered a welcome step in this direction**). Mr. Bairagi said that Mukti will try to address these issues as par their capacity in the future. Another problem seems to be commuting to school in rainy season, since village roads are risky and inaccessible in those times. Of the resources being provided to the sponsored students, they mentioned exam fee of Rs 301 (\$ 7 approximately), tuition fees, exam forms, horlicks (a nutrition supplement), tiffin (Kichudi/ bread vegetable on schooldays except on Saturdays). Again, the volunteers had reason to think that owing to shortage of funds, resources provided are individual need based and not same for everyone. Mr. Bairagi mentioned their goal is to provide everything (mainly daily tiffin) to every one of the students selected for TSS. Mr Bairagi was not familiar with the exact disbursement of the funds, since he was concerned only with the grass root level implementation of the programme.

Other Mukti ventures: Mr Bairagi mentioned a book donation that was organized by Mukti the previous year giving 6 to 7 syllabus books (all syllabus books were given to sponsored students) to 1700 students. He also mentioned four free coaching centers (of 125 students attending each) that are being run by Mukti. He mentioned that Mukti has 8 teachers (Teachers salary Rs 1000 – approximately \$ 24 per month) for teaching in these coaching classes. He also mentioned that last year, the students selected for TSS were all sponsored individually, and hence, each of them received Books, Reference books,

notebooks, school uniform, horlicks (every month), a school bag, an umbrella and a geometry box along with any exam fees etc which they might have needed.

Mukti Organizational Structure and policies as described during the project visit:

Co-ordinator: Raghunath Bairagi
Secretary: Madhusudan Bairagi

5 Board members (in Kolkata and Subhasgram) including Mr Sankar Haldar(USA) who meet every month by e-conference.

Mukti account (Probably in Subhasgram) is where funds donated to Mukti goes to and are distributed from. The board members and the co-ordinator deals with the fund disbursement and Mr. Raghunath Bairagi deals with village level execution.

Overall evaluation: Mukti is trying to make a difference in a very difficult situation. The village, and the region in whole, is one of the most neglected regions in India. There's no health facility, transportation, pukka roads and electricity. Too many students crowd the high schools making education and individual attention a privilege a very few manages to get. Lack of nutrition and poverty are conditions the students are fighting constantly, more than coursework pressures. In the rainy seasons, going to school is unthinkable (snake bites are frequent, and other diseases also prevail). Thus, even a single umbrella provided makes a difference to a student walking for 1 hr drenched and sitting through school whole day. Coaching classes with solar light where they can study, daily tiffin, and visit to a physician in Kolkata might be little but at the same time very vital things some of them can be provided with. Again, the number needed to be helped and the resources available vary hugely, making helping everyone impossible. Asha Cornell volunteers recognize the little but very very significant difference that Mukti has managed to bring into life of few students and guardians in the region through its efforts even at it's very initial stage. At the same time, it advices Mukti to keep village level accounts available onsite to visitors along with audits maintained with the Board members.

'If you cannot feed a hundred people, then feed just one' – Mother Teresa