

**Report on Visit to Nishtha:
Education Program for a Thousand Girls**

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Remark: For a summary, proceed directly to Item 9 below, titled ["Overall Impressions."](#)

I spent a day with Mina Das, the chief of Nishtha, visiting the program that they run for educating a thousand rural girls for the next five years. (This program was initiated by us at Child Vikas International, and is being funded with the help of a small group of very committed donors, each of whom contributes a substantial sum of money.) I was assisted in the visit by Ms. Sujatha of CINI Asha, who herself works with education issues in the slums of Calcutta; she helped me not only by translating the Bengali but also by pointing out many relevant issues to me and by suggesting the right questions for Mina Das and the various players (the teachers, the parents, the tutors, the social workers). What follows is a point-by-point report.

1. The project covers a thousand girls in 17 villages in the Bishnupur block, which is about a two hour drive south of Calcutta. Nishtha has been working in this area for several years now, mostly with women's issues. They work in about forty villages (although this program itself only covers 17 villages), and have created women's self-help organizations ("Mahila Mandals") that take on various issues at the local level. Through these Mahila Mandals, much awareness, confidence, and drive has already been created among many of the women in the region. Nishtha has also created a large volunteer brigade of teenage girls and boys ("kishori bahinis" and "kishor bahinis") that have been given leadership training. These teenage boys and girls have been sensitized to various gender and other social issues (such as the need for education) and act as change agents. They are expected to be the leaders of the next generation. (See my [article about Nishtha](#)) The various Mahila Mandals, and the two teen brigades form the core of Nishtha's strategy for effecting change.
2. The heart of the program for bringing a thousand girls to school and keeping them there is to create a strong *social* infrastructure. There are several components to this: increase awareness among parents about the need to send their girls to school and keep them there despite economic hardship, teach the girls to get into a routine of going to school and learning from books, provide crucial after-hours tuition to the girls, both because of weak teaching in the schools and because of the lack of a suitable atmosphere at their homes that would be conducive to learning, and finally, help create a sense of professionalism among the government teachers themselves.
3. This being the first academic year of the program, a great deal of effort had to be spent in making sure that the parents were sending the children to school every day, no matter what crisis at home, and in making sure that each child had a tutor nearby that she could go to every evening. At the beginning of the year there had been some problems, but the situation has stabilized now, and the parents seem to have gotten the idea, and the children seem to have gotten into the habit of attending school and then going to their tutors in the evening. Finding tutors in every area so that each girl had a tutor nearby took major effort, but this problem has since been solved. (Each tutor has typically at least passed the Madhyamic exam, which is the 10th grade exam in West Bengal...many though are going to local colleges for their plus 2 or even for their degrees.)
4. About a 100 to 200 (I didn't get an exact number) of these 1000 girls are from the Muslim community. Of the remaining, about 95% are Scheduled Caste girls. Most of these children come from parents who are either landless, or at best, marginal farmers.
5. This is the network of people who are involved in the education of these thousand girls: Nishtha has to interact with the panchayats in each village, as well as the village education committees, so that with their cooperation, the schools could be persuaded to accommodate a sudden surge of girl students. Also, their cooperation is essential to help motivate the teachers themselves. Next, the school principals and teachers must be roped in and made to feel that they are contributing to something big...traditionally, village level school teachers are not typically very committed to their teaching jobs and are often absent. Next Nishtha has two full time social workers devoted solely to this project who visit all the schools and all the tutors regularly. Also, Nishtha depends heavily on the teen brigade and various members of Mahila Mandals, who

volunteer with this program---they help monitor each child and report on absences, progress through school, and so forth. Finally, of course, the parents need to be brought into the fold and convinced that they should be sending their children to school regularly and that they should be providing a supportive atmosphere at home.

6. I visited two of their schools and spent some time with the teachers and one of the principals. Also, I spent quite some time with the tutors in the program. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I got to meet various students in the program---I must have met at least about a hundred of them. I tested some of the students myself, both in reading and in mathematics(!). I had various third grade kids read out loud from their Bengali history books. They were quite good at reading out the lessons that they had already covered in class. Next, I had them read out some new lessons from the back of the book, that was obviously new to them. Some of the students struggled a bit, but essentially, were able to read just fine. They could definitely decode and read aloud new words (even compound words). Next, I tested them on mathematics. I was quite pleased---the kids were in the 4th grade, and I picked them at random and gave them various problems...they could essentially do them, although they struggled a bit in long division. For instance, they could factor 480 into prime factors, they could multiply 13 and 16, they could also multiply 271 and 17. One girls struggled for a bit when I asked them to divide 235 by 12 (essentially, she wasn't comfortable with her 12 times tables, so I asked another girls to recite the 12 times table, and this girl recited the tables just fine!). Another girl---obviously very bright, when asked to divide 155 by 13, didn't stop at the remainder stage, but went to give the decimal expansion! They'd also started fractions, and were able to add simple fractions like $1/3$ and $1/4$. I was quite impressed by all this---many of my college students here at Cal State Northridge would struggle with some of these problems!
7. However, these students above may have been some brighter students. As part of their follow-up strategy, Nistha's volunteers administer a quick test to each student every month. It is a test of Bengali, and a test of mathematics. (For instance, here is a typical test for a class 3 student: the Bengali test would be to write out 8 lines of some poem, and the math test would be a multiplication problem given as a "word problem", such as if you buy 45 fishes at Rs. 24 per fish, how much did you spend.) They keep records for every student, and I picked two records from each village and totaled up their scores to get a rough sense of where the cohort as a whole stood: of the 36 records I studied, about 12 got less than 40% (so about a third are failing these tests). On the other hand, 9 out of these 36 records showed an average of at least 65%. This may be a better indication of how the students are doing than my own random testing of the students that I reported above.
8. Based on their own test data, I told Mina Das that while I appreciate the *enormous* effort that has gone into this whole program, and while I recognize all the teething problems that they have had to overcome, the bottom line has to be how much the kids are learning. I told her that a failure rate of 33% is simply not acceptable. (To be fair, I studied the data for Sept through December of 2001, and during this time, the girls were still getting accustomed to the idea of coming to school regularly and learning regularly, and the tutoring system was still getting set up and was not completely there.) I told her that most of the donors who are financing this program are very successful business people, who, while they know all about setting up and establishing new companies, also recognize that the final yardstick for all their efforts is whether the company makes a profit! I told her that these donors, similarly, would recognize and appreciate all her efforts at getting her venture off the ground, but in the end, would be most concerned about whether the girls are actually learning. Mina Das has promised to pay a lot more attention to her testing data and to track and try to improve the passing rates. She's also promised to work more actively with the government school teacher and her tutors to help improve pass rates.
9. **Overall impressions:**
 - An enormous social network has first been put into place. This has taken tremendous work, but is the bedrock on which this program has been built. Key players in this network are the various Mahila Mandals, social workers, the teen brigades, the tutors, the village panchayats, the village education committees, the government school principals, the school teachers, and finally, the parents themselves. This network is now strongly established, and will be indispensable to the success of this program.
 - The girls seem to have been acculturated into the process of coming to school regularly and into the process of learning. All the same, their cultural background is very poor (their parents are almost all illiterate), and many of them are therefore slow to learn. This will take some time to change...although, the most important thing here is they are coming to school regularly and going to their tutors regularly.

- The failure rate right now is relatively high (based on my study of a sample of their test scores). About 33% of the girls are scoring less than 40% on their monthly tests. (About 25% are scoring at 65% or more.) A lot of this can be ascribed to the fact that the girls are still relatively new to the education process and do not have the proper cultural baggage at home. Still, 33% is a very high failure rate, and not very acceptable in my opinion. Mina Das has promised to track weaker students better and to work on this figure.
- The follow-up program is very strong. Every month, Nishtha's social workers and volunteers visit every school and every tutor, they track the attendance of every child, they visit every home. In addition, they gather all students every month and give them a quick test on Bengali and math to test their progress. All their impressions from all these monthly visits and tests are recorded: a separate record is maintained for each student. Also, every month, Nishtha organizes a meeting of all the mothers to both keep up their motivation and to report on progress.
- A major chunk of the operating expenses for the program goes for after hours tutoring. It costs Rs. 50 per month for each child, so that is Rs. 600 per year. (Mina Das assures me that tutoring is provided year round.) Multiplied by a 1000 girls, that is Rs. 6 lakhs that goes into paying these tutors. Since the annual budget for the program is Rs. 9 lakhs, the tutoring takes two-third of the budget. However, the tutoring is an essential component of this program---the teaching is not strong enough in the schools, even for the brightest of the children, and in addition, because of their special backgrounds, they all need a lot of near-personal attention. (In one sense, our pumping Rs. 6 lakhs each year into 17 villages creates a tutoring industry, and this is not really such a bad thing---it encourages the few who have managed to procure some education to help spread that education to their less fortunate neighbors, and they get paid for it in the process.)
- The Future: The program is very strong and has taken off to a very good start. There are still problems to be worked out (such as the low pass rate), but if this effort is sustained over the next five years, the problems can be ironed out, and a *critical mass* of girls with a decent primary education will be built up in these 17 villages. Since girls education has such a strong multiplier effort ("educate a girl, and you will educate her whole family"), this is a program that should definitely be sustained for at least the next five years, if not longer. I will continue to be visiting this program regularly and monitoring its progress.

Parents with girl (in orange dress) who is enrolled in Nishtha's education program.

Women from a Mahila Mandal---these women serve to motivate other women.