Report on Visit to Nishtha 1999

Transformations in Rural Bengal

by Bharath Sethuraman

Mina Das is a powerhouse, but to look at her, you wouldn't think so. Shy, dressed in a traditional Bengali white cotton saree with a red border, she hardly gives the impression of a revolutionary. But in twenty years, a revolution is precisely what she has accomplished, in some sixty villages in the 24 Parganas (S) district of West Bengal.

On a recent trip to India, I'd gone to visit Nishtha, the organization that Mina-*di* (as I soon found myself calling her) heads. It has its main offices in Baruipur, a small town about two hours drive from Calcutta. Nishtha, whose motto is sisterhood, started as a political movement to empower the women of Baruipur and some adjacent blocks, one of whose villages Mina herself grew up in. Tired of the oppression that they faced in these villages, Mina, who first went to college in Calcutta, returned to organize the women of her villages into women's societies. Since then, her activities have spread to include the education of children, with special focus on the girl child. "In this region, girls are deprived of education, nutrition, food...they have no scope of getting training for self-employment…they get married at the age of 13 or 14…" she says.

The area around Baruipur is simply breathtaking. It is low-lying and lush. Jackfruit, guava, mango, neem, creepers, supari, coconut, banana, all combine to make this region appear a sea of green. The vegetation is interspersed by large numbers of ponds, a prominent feature of the Bengal countryside. It is monsoon season, and the ponds are full. Yet, with all this water around, the region is economically backwards. There are no irrigation canals to carry the water to the fields. It is therefore a mono-cropped region, which means that the landless laborers of the area (who form eighty percent of the population) only have work for six months of the year. In such economic circumstances, it is no surprise that children are viewed as extra hands: they are employed in a variety of small jobs, chief among them being tin-cutting and embroidery. *Zari* work is prevalent here; it is backbreaking work, as children have to stoop over their work to stitch gold threads onto cloth.

I first spent an hour with Mina and her administrator Dr. Raha at the Nishtha headquarters. They explained

the demographics of the area she was working in, and listed off the many problems that the women and children of the area faced. At bottom, women are denied their basic humanity here (as in other parts of rural India). Domestic abuse is widespread, and torture of women is not uncommon. Child marriage is the norm. Girl children are often neglected, while adolescent girls are often viewed as sexual objects and abused. And of course, both boys and girls are exploited as labor.

So what exactly has Mina done about these problems? She started with awareness training for the women. She organized the women in various villages into Mahila Mandals, women's societies that would act as a forum for airing their grievances, and as a platform for sharing their

experiences. I asked Mina if there was resistance among the men to these Mandals. "In the beginning, there was tremendous resistance," she said. "The men folk threatened us, charged at us with *lathis*." But Mina, and the women, were undeterred, and continued with their activities. Mina used these Mandals to raise the consciousness of the women, and to spread the message that they are the equals of their menfolk. Women began solving problems collectively, and resisting collectively the atrocities committed upon them. Today, more than half the villages in Mina's project area have Mahila Mandals, many of which are extremely strong. Besides providing a collective front for women, the Mahila Mandals of the area take up other reform projects, including the education of children, the elevation of the status of the girl child, and the abolishment of child labor.

I drove with Mina and Dr. Raha to Kochpukur, one of the poorer villages in the region. About 10 kilometers from Baruipur, we turned from the tar road into what was just a dirt track. The rains had turned this track into a river of mud, and at various points, our Ambassador car got stuck and we had to alight and help push it. Along the way, Mina pointed to a delapidated building: "That is the primary school in the region, see how broken down it is," she said. "The government does not care about education in these villages."

After three kilometers of this dirt track, we reached Kochpukur. I was taken aback by my reception. The women of the village had arranged a traditional Bengali welcome. Two women came forward and led me by the hand, saying "Aao, dada!" ("Welcome, brother!") An old lady, presumably the matriarch of the village, performed what seemed like *aarti*, waving various tiny plates with flowers and candles around me. Other women crowded around me, and blew conch shells. At some point in time, I was told to take my shoes off, and I stepped into a shallow pan of red water. Simultaneously, all the women showered me with flowers, and I ended up with flowers *everywhere*, over my hair, in my clothes, even in my shoulder bag. I was overwhelmed with the sincerity and the purity of the welcome.

I was taken in to a community center, built with the help of the Mahila Mandal. It contained a lush garden in the center, and around it some rooms, one of them quite large. This room was being used as a school, and there were two classes being conducted simultaneously, one on either side of the room. The kids were about five or six years old, and they were being taught the alphabet. The teacher demonstrated the syllabus to me. Nishtha has a very interesting, *local* approach to education. Mina had designed the syllabus to be a combination of formal and non-formal learning. In addition to the usual reading and arithmetic lessons, the children are taught songs, written by the teachers, that instruct the children about local plants, fruits, and animals, about hygiene (very important, as the villagers are typically quite unaware of sanitation issues), and about nutrition. Much of the teaching is done via music (and drama); for instance, Mina and her troupe have written songs that teach the letters of the Bengali alphabet. Singing these songs (and acting in plays) serves as well to build children's confidence and to generate a sense of cohesion and common purpose. The teachers are themselves hired from the villages in the area; they are some of the more educated women in the neighborhood.

Mina runs nine such schools in her project area, and has plans for five more. These schools are primary schools, designed to prepare students for the fifth class at nearby government middle and high schools. She also runs a total of eight medical clinics in her area; some of these clinics

are situated in her own schools. The clinics focus on health checkups for children, prenatal and postnatal care, immunization, and women's reproductive health.

I was led to a meeting of the Kochpukur Mahila Mandal; there were about three hundred women present. The women spoke to me; two women, in particular, recounted their experiences of how they used to be regularly beaten up by their husbands, to the point where one of them was suicidal. They turned to Mina-*di*, who gave them shelter and asked the Mahila Mandal to act: the women of the Mahila Mandal promptly marched to the husbands and demanded that they stop their atrocities. Using the gamut from gentle reasoning to outright threats ("If you do this again, we will break your arms") they were able to persuade the husbands to desist, and the two women have led violence-free lives for the past two years.

The women of the Mahila Mandal explained to me the changes that have occurred in them after being organized. "We are much more conscious of our rights," they said. "Earlier, our husbands could manipulate us, get us to sign any document that they needed, cheat us of our property, but now we bring all issues to the Mahila Mandal. We act collectively, and they cannot cheat us anymore."

What struck me was that although the women were clearly angry at the atrocities committed against them by their menfolk, their anger did not seem to permeate their personalities. They seemed sweet and considerate, and they showered me (a man, after all!) with gentle affection. I was very touched by this behavior. I asked the women if they had any messages that I should take back home. "Tell the women of America that they too should band together and fight oppression," they said.

Impressive as all her accomplishments with the women and the schools and the health clinics are, perhaps Mina's most impressive accomplishment is her unique scheme for ensuring that her reforms live on in the next generation and spread through the land. She has organized nearly a thousand adolescent girls and boys, selected for their leadership qualities, into Kishori and Kishor Bahinis (female and male teen brigades). These girls and boys are trained to be self-confident community workers and change agents. They fan the villages, spreading messages about order, hygiene, nutrition, and respect for all sections of society. They go to the fields, singing songs about education, equality among the sexes, and sanitation. They look after the upkeep of their own villages, keeping them clean, paving roads, digging drains, and repairing buildings. And perhaps the most important task they perform: they go from house to house and insist that every child---male and female---attend school.

Mina brings the Kishoris and Kishors together once a month, and talks to them about health, education, the environment, water pollution, agricultural techniques, and income generation schemes. As part of their training on political awareness and on individual rights, she familiarizes them with governmental institutions and teaches them to be self-assertive about service at these institutions. Normally indifferent to rural citizens, corrupt, and often aligned with rich landowners and local political parties, these institutions---the police, the post-office, banks, the block development office, and the village-level panchayat office---have all learned to respect the kishors and kishoris and to respond to their needs.

Mina has since started Balika and Balak Bahinis, pre-teen counterparts of the kishoris and the kishors.

Earlier in the day, I was treated to a dance and music performance by the Kishoris , the Kishors, the Balikas, and the Balaks. As I looked at them, I could not help noticing their confident demeanors: they looked no different from the students of any of the well-known urban schools. They talked to me about what Nishtha has done to their outlook, about the importance of education, and about the equality of the sexes. Interacting with them, I was conscious of a surge of optimism: if the entire new generation were like this, then India's problems will soon be history.

Perhaps the ultimate proof that Mina's reforms will live on: some of the earlier kishoris have gone on to start more Mahila Mandals as they have come of age; also, one of the two teachers I met in Kochpukur was herself a Kishori just a few years ago!

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