

Nirnaya's 8th Formation Day



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Nirnaya celebrated its 8th Formation Day along with the Annual Day of the Vikasini Schools in Secunderabad and Hubli on the 11th of March. The Hyderabad event was held in the IAS Officers Association, Begumpet. Some of Nirnaya's well wishers inaugurated the occasion by lighting the lamps on either side of the dais and simultaneously a group from Vikasini Mahila Mandali, Addagutta, Secunderabad performed the traditional Telugu 'bathkamma' dance singing the praise of the donors who have made it

possible for their daughters to attend school and access quality primary education. Indira Jena and Meenakshi Subramaniam, managing trustees of Nirnaya and Vikasini Girl Child Education Trust respectively welcomed the gathering, explained the purpose of having a joint program and spelt out the trajectory for the coming financial year.

The conclusion of the 88-day women's rights campaign that has been launched with a press conference on the 10th of December, 2005 took place. As a mark of its culmination, persons from our advisory council, local community and a program volunteer from Sangareddi were invited to share their experiences and thoughts of the campaign, and also break their 'money pots' (the clay pots Nirnaya had distributed for the 88-day donation) to symbolize breaking free of violence. Nirnaya's grantees from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka had simultaneously carried out the campaign in their respective local areas. An inter-

esting observation that was expressed at the conclusion of the campaign was that while the urban middle class section of people were still reluctant to accept



the fact that their society could have anything to do with 'violence against women' and wondered why they had been approached for the campaign, community women from the poor sections found that the campaign had given them the space to discuss core issues of their life and find strength in collective numbers!

Dr. Sujatha Rita and Mrs. Usha Ashok Kumar, Nirnaya's advisory council members encapsulated the 2005-06 events and programs of Nirnaya. Highlighting the milestones that Nirnaya had witnessed in the said year, they reiterated that the activities have been within the context of the organization's stated vision/mission. The cultural group of Indira Social Welfare Organization Dhenkanal, Orissa whom Nirnaya has partnered for two years performed two lively, graceful and expressive dance numbers, one set to a song celebrating womanhood and the other tracing the journey of a woman from isolation to finding voice in a local collective. Grant-



ee partners and community women from Dumka, Jharkhand, Hubli-Karnataka, Sangareddi- Andhra Pradesh and Denkanikottai- Tamil Nadu took turns sharing their personal and community experiences of social and economic changes that had taken place since the launch of the Nirnaya supported women's empowerment programs in their areas. This is where the community women benefiting from Nirnaya supported programs / initiatives publicly acknowledge the positive impact of Nirnaya's role giving donors and well-wishers an opportunity of understanding the scope and quality of Nirnaya's work. Towards the end of the presentation the two speakers threw the floor open to questions / suggestions from the audience for Nirnaya to improve itself.



For the students of Vikasini Girls School, Addagutta it was an important occasion since they were rewarded with prizes for excellence in academics, sports, various competitions and even a prize for the best parents of the year! Mr. Ram Nivas Bansal and Mrs. Bansal did the honors of giving away the prizes. The

students came up with an impressive number of songs and dances which kept the audience toe tapping. It was truly a proud evening for the children, parents, teachers and the Vikasini board members. The fact



that almost all the parents attended the program is a significant change. All are engaged in highly competitive, unskilled daily wage work and they run the



risk of not getting work for weeks if they miss a day – that they were prepared to take the risk is an indication of the change in the community.

The evening ended with a sumptuous dinner taken care of by the Bhumika team, who when thanked, said, 'this is our commitment to you and to Vikasini...'

Each new year reminds us at Nirnaya that there is so much more to be done but encourages us that there are so many more people getting engaged in some way or other and so the chain grows longer, the links stronger.

Recreating a beautiful Gomahar

Gomahar is a village in Nalanda district of Bihar, about 2 hours drive from Patna city. It was once a green and agriculturally rich village with enough rice on its fields and fish in its ponds. There was a good government school with a decent attendance. The situation slowly deteriorated and the severe drought of the last three years has cut off irrigation and drinking water supply. Dr. Chitra Kumar and her siblings, residents of the United States since over 15 years now hail from this village. Though they are highly successful medical doctors in the U.S. their hearts have not stopped beating for their Gomahar. It so happened that one of them met Indira Jena on her last year's visit to New Jersey and from there the whole change from 'wanting to do something' to 'actually doing something' took off. After a series of phone conversations between Indira and Dr. Chitra it was decided that Nirnaya's grantee Mahila Jagaran Kendra located in Patna would implement the project of developing Gomahar into a model village.

As a first step MJK conducted a 6 day participatory rural appraisal from which primary data emerged on the basic amenities situation, education and health facilities, the social, political, religious, economic situation and culture of the village.

One of the facts that emerged was that there are 23 wells in the village out of which 21 are personal and

2 are for community. From 2 wells one is in Chamar toli and other is in the Dom toli. Almost all the wells are dry, and those which are not dry, are dirty. People from the Ravidas community take water from other communities well. Due to this the owner of the well throws latrine (shit) into the well. Due to non-availability of drinking water, the people are bound to use this water only.

On February 3rd the three parties, Mahila Jagaran Kendra, Nirnaya and Dr. Chitra Kumar representing the A&C Kumar Family Foundation discussed the PRA analysis and prioritized issues for immediate addressal, based of course on the feedback from the local community. It was agreed that the A & C Kumar Family Foundation would support access to safe drinking water, training of barefoot health workers, electrification to some extent through solar power, communication facilities, bringing into place an effective education system, skill training for young women. Nirnaya would support the salaries and administration costs of the project. Regular monitoring and evaluation would be done by Nirnaya. On February 4th Dr. Chitra Kumar formally launched the model village project with the whole village population. There is hope that such a comprehensive development program within the village in the face of long-drawn governmental indolence, will yield results.

Housing for Irulas of Perumalai Hills in Denakanikottai

After much advocacy and lobbying with the local government and District Forest Officer, Rural Development Council had enabled the construction of 110 houses for the Irula Tribals of Kodagarai in August 2005. This is a remarkable achievement. According to the RDC staff, the local administration did not even know that a village called Kodagarai existed. It was RDC that took on the important role of giving the Irulas the visibility and advocating for basic rights that should accrue to them as citizens.

The presence of RDC on the behalf the Irula tribals located in the remoteness of the Perumalai hills has been largely instrumental in providing some insulation against exploitation by middlemen and corrupt government officials. The tribals face immense problems in accessing the income certificate and community certificate that are crucial to developing any basic capacities like getting a ration card, bus pass or even admission into school, for a decent livelihood. For every income certificate issued, Rs.150/- was asked as a bribe from the Irulas, most of who struggle to earn even Rs.20/- a day. From their own account, it is through RDC's lobbying that the Irulas get their certificates/documents from the government officials and that implies a huge reduction in the rate of bribes being taken from the poor tribals. Interestingly, the White Band Global Campaign Against Poverty carried out by the Irulas in July near the Taluk office was misinterpreted to be an anti-administration protest which got the officials very insecure and prompted them to issue all the pending income certificates that very day!

“I thought there was no escape from violence!”

For women who thought of violence as an unavoidable part of life and who had no inkling that such a thing as women’s rights existed, the legal training program begun in Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh has had a tremendous ripple effect! It has provided a space for women to discuss structural inequalities that were



thought of as private individual problems till now. Many of the women said that it was for the first time in their lives, that they are able to even stand up and

voice their problems and that the sessions had given them the much-required confidence to do so. Even as they were sharing this with the Nirnaya programs associate, some of the women were trembling. Some women said that they never imagined that there could be legal remedies accessible to them that could help them deal with their predicament.

Although the training had been sponsored for 25 participants, about 60 of them had participated. More women attended the second day of the meeting, after having heard from the participants about the first session. When the programs associate came to take the feedback of the training, there were even more women asking for more of such trainings. Even the legal expert who had conducted the training, felt that the session was more effective than the one-hour high court legal-literacy programs that she had earlier been involved with. The training has gained quite a bit of attention from the media, many of whom attended the sessions, since it was the first of its kind in Kurnool. Even bank members have shown interest and local corporators have asked for such trainings to be conducted in their wards.

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Empowerment of Kolati Tribal Women in Jamkhed

The Kolati community in Jamkhed, Maharashtra is a nomadic group that shares its social status with the dalit community in the caste hierarchy. The women of this community are its primary breadwinners. Their work is constituted by a contract ranging from 6 months to 3 years with theatre owners, in whose theatres they perform the traditional Kolati dance



and stay there until the contract expires. The dancers are usually young women ranging from the age of 9 to 35 years. While men do support the family,

this support ends as soon as a girl child turns 9 and is eligible to gain a theatre contract. The earnings made from dancing are meager and they must be shared with the theatre owners. Inevitably these women end up working as sex-workers and service clients who come to the theatres in order to supplement their wages and create savings for their dependent families. The health of these women is in a precarious condition and they hinge on a thin line. Most of them are infected with HIV. Ten women between the age 17 and 20 have died due to AIDS. There are not even basic health check ups for these women. They lack education and are meant to sacrifice for their families starting from the tender age of 9 until they are infected and succumb to life threatening diseases or are simply required no more.

Nirnaya has begun to support in April 2006, a project known as 'Mainstreaming of Kolati Women' that focuses on health, education and provision of alternative means livelihood for the Kolati women through skill training. This project is being implemented by a local group Gramin Vikas Kendra.'

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- Ms. Maureen Norton for supporting and mobilizing supporters for the agricultural land development and sustainable agriculture project as a step towards restoring land to poor tribal women in Pallahara, Deogarh, Orissa.
- A&C Kumar Family Foundation, United States for sponsoring the Gomahar Model Village project in Nalanda district, Bihar.
- Vasavi Seva Kendram, whose advertisement has covered the costs of this issue of the newsletter.

The case of Orissa!

Orissa has the largest concentration of tribal population in India. It is a storehouse of mineral wealth and holds the promise of becoming one of India's major manufacturing hubs in the near future. Having said this, it becomes imperative to narrate the story of the tribal peoples sitting on some of the world's richest deposits of iron ore, bauxite and copper, for whom hunger deaths and bonded labor are common and the human development index abysmal!

Development initiatives in the state are premised on technological, economic and environmental modifications instead of building local capacities and this manifests in advanced conditions of inequity. According to reliable sources, "Within the last one year, the state government has processed over 35 proposals, mostly of foreign corporations, worth over 25 billion dollars, to build steel plants and set up mines in the area."

The tribals have lost their lands not only to these project authorities but also to non-tribal outsiders who converge into these areas and corner both land and the new economic opportunities. Many of them become destitute after having been driven away from their lands and cannot even ask for menial jobs at the projects because of increasing levels of mechanization and capital-intensive technology. Inadequate rehabilitation has further compounded their woes as they have become asset less, unemployed and

are trapped in debt bondage. The Adivasi women in particular face the brunt of the situation. On the domestic front, they are subject to violence by men of their community who have turned to alcoholism in the face of poverty. In addition they are increasingly vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation not only by the non-tribal migrant labor but also by the police itself that has been relegated with the duty of safeguarding the 'development' projects. The number of tribals displaced by such development projects over the last 50 years exceeds nine million.



Maureen Norton speaking about her experience in Orissa

Nirnaya's support extends to the land reclamation and land development programmes such as training on crop planning, organic farming, orchard farming, public hearings on land rights, awareness generation on domestic violence and survey on the health status of women in Deogarh and Angul districts of Orissa. Today Nirnaya's work has encouraged more people to participate in furthering social change. An independent donor Maureen Norton from the United States who learnt about the project from the website became enthusiastic and visited the land development project in Orissa. So enthusiastic was she that she raised the rest of the required funds from her friends and family circle. She has offered to set the local group up with a computer. She has offered to help our fundraising initiatives. This is greatly encouraging for us and allows us to believe that building links through our work can lead to collective strength to overcome even the deepest of issues.



Usha Ashok Kumar and Sujatha Rita recapitulating Nirnaya's achievements on Nirnaya's Formation Day.



Let us light up our society with knowledge and peace ssay the Vikasini girls of Addagutta on their Annual Day.

Plight of the Musahars

The Musahar Community of Bihar, Eastern India comprising a population of 1.3 million in Bihar is a rat-eating community and occupies among the lowest ranks in the social hierarchy of the place. 95% of them work as agricultural landless laborers and are paid a mere 15-25 Rupees a day. Every year as the number of laborers within this community increases, their bargaining power falls. This community is so poor that it is not uncommon to see parents selling their children even for a pittance!

The Musahar women are fraught with the double oppression arising out of their caste identity as well their gender identity. Not do only do they become targets of the wrath and helplessness of the Musahar men, who spend most of their earnings on alcohol, but they are also deeply exploited by the men and women of the upper caste communities.

Most of these women are married at childhood and become mothers at the age of 14. Education is least of the priorities for them. In fact those girls who do manage to go to school are even punished for 'daring' to score good grades at school. 85% of them have formidable occupations and work as agricultural laborers, scavengers, sweepers and disposers of human waste. And for being termed an untouchable lot, it is ironic how often men of 'upper' castes sexually abuse these women.

Nirnaya has begun to support a cooperative society comprising over 300 members whose objective currently is to educate the Musahar women in Danapur, Patna district, Bihar and acquaint them with general banking facilities so that are freed from the grasp of the upper caste moneylenders.

Our heartiest congratulations to Sudha Varghese, Program Volunteer, Nari Gunjan, Danapur, Patna district, Bihar, who has been awarded with the Padmashri, the country's highest civilian award in January 2006 for her outstanding dedication and work towards the development of the women in the Muhasar community.

Indira - ' I visited the girls school in Nari Gunjan Samuhik center, in Asopur, Danapur block on February 5th which happened to be a Sunday. There were 17 girls aged between 0 - 14 years. One of them was veiled and nursing a baby of about 6 months. I was silent and careful not to convey any thought or feeling but a voice said that the baby was her second and the first child was two years old and in a day care center - the mother was all of 14 years. The girls were all bright eyed and eager to speak /hear. After a good hour and a half I thanked them for spending time with me and quite carelessly told them to go home and play and not to work or study...there were 17 pairs of eyes looking at me puzzled and in one voice they asked "if we don't go to work where will get food from?"

Though in all my years of working in the field of development I have come face to face with all levels and kinds of oppression and poverty, eyes filled and voice choked I hurriedly got into the waiting jeep and turned away. We hope that Sudha Varghese our program volunteer with rich experience of living and working among dalits will find Nirnaya's support useful in changing the lives the painfully downtrodden.'

Vikasini Mahila Mandali

The mothers of the students at Vikasini have been encouraged to form a collective where they deposit a saving of Rupees 30/- every month. This collective is about 5 months old. These women have decided to organize themselves into one large group which will later will probably change into a co-operative. Meanwhile it will be able to access bank loans with the help of Nirnaya. This act of saving is of much significance for the women. It means that they are able to access that money, since many women do not have control over money even if they are earning members. It also implies that they are able to negotiate with their husbands and channelize the money into saving against options such as drinking alcohol or gambling. From education of young girls in



the slums to empowering their mothers and changing their lives in a holistic manner, social change has taken off on multifarious levels be it the family, school or community

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