

## Milestones Reached In The Road To Progress



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Nirnaya's work in the area of Rural Development is undoubtedly bringing about a change in the mindsets of the target communities that it works with. The result of persistent efforts at ameliorating living conditions, fighting for rights and providing means of livelihood has begun to show concrete results.

The right combination of inspiration and an inclination to improve one's lot can come a long way in achieving tangible goals. Paklu Murmu from Badtali village, Badtali Panchayat, Jharkhand took Rs.1000 from the SHG to buy seeds for cultivation. She cultivated the seeds at the right time and got a bountiful harvest. The month of April saw rich rewards for her, as she was able to sell vegetables worth Rs.1000 every week thus earning a monthly income of Rs.4000. In May the prices of vegetables lowered, as the supply of vegetables was plentiful. Paklu earned Rs.800 per week and her monthly income stood at Rs.3200-3500. Paklu's success had a visible impact on the other villagers as many of them took up cultivation of vegetables. The most substantial gain was the halt in migration to Bengal in search of jobs as villagers found it more profitable to stay in their own villages and grow vegetables rather than migrate.

One of Nirnaya's goals is to gradually reduce the grantees' dependency on Nirnaya and become self-sufficient. Shamshallapur witnessed an affirmative step towards holistic development when women from the two SHGs started attending adult literacy classes every

evening. As the women are interested in setting up a dairy farm, they have been advised to do their groundwork thoroughly before venturing into the enterprise. Nirnaya has told the women that if they are interested in any entrepreneurial activity, then they would have to hold a meeting, decide their plan of action, work out the details for the loan requirement and apply to Nirnaya for a loan to set up entrepreneurship activities.

When the target community becomes aware of its rights and is willing to fight for its rights, it may be rightly called a milestone in an organization's work. Such a milestone was reached in Nirnaya's work when four hundred Irulas in Denkanikottai Taluk went on an indefinite fast to call attention to their valid demands such as collection of Non Timber Forest Produce, implementation of the Forest Act 2006, changing of settlement villages to revenue villages, etc. The petitions were submitted to the Tehsildar who accepted them and issued a statement that the petitions would be worked upon. The fast was then called off. Thereafter the Aaranya Irula Federation held a meeting in which discussions revolved around the steps to be taken if no action was taken on the petitions submitted.

Though certain milestones have been reached, there is a lot more to be accomplished and many more miles to be covered. But every mile that is covered begins with a single step and it is heartening to note progress being made slowly but surely.

*The memory of a dear one is forever. Set up a Tribute Fund!*



In a phone conversation with Mohini, a commercial sex worker Nirnaya supports, to mobilize women like herself to address issues specific to them, I asked what happened to the original idea Mohini had about organizing the sex workers and creating a platform for them.

She said that what she wanted to do was create a platform for poor women (belonging to different castes), who do not come under the label 'CSW'. I could not immediately understand what she was trying to convey and replied that working with 'CSW' was her original mission which we in Nirnaya saw as empowering a socially excluded group and so sanctioned her a fellowship... and now it was three years, so what is happening...

Mohini then responded tentatively, but patiently that over the past three years there has been an increase in women from 'decent' families taking to prostitution due to poverty and their problems were similar to commercial sex workers – only that they wished to retain some vestige of 'respectability' and not be labeled as sex workers. In order to include all such women she felt that it should be a broad term which all of them felt comfortable with.

We agreed to find a suitable time to meet and discuss this matter more in depth so that the desire of the women with whom Mohini works can be fulfilled.

My reason for giving this example is that most often we, in the 'development' sector tend to worry more about the politically correct definition rather than hear what the community we are trying to 'empower' are saying.

Having talked about listening to the community's voice and taking our lessons from them for about a decade, we have once again moved into the comfort zone of debating on politically correct terms and losing sight of the real issues and possible solutions for them. It is imperative that we recognize this and keep up a constant ongoing effort to understand the impact that global economic and political changes are having on vulnerable sections of society and support local action that they identify and prioritize.

## Herbal Wonders



Nature has always given her bounty freely to us but we have always taken her for granted. If we live in harmony with nature and understand her only then can we understand life and illness. Unhealthy lifestyles have replaced holistic living. Therefore one must evaluate one's lifestyle to understand illness.

We need to learn to live without fear. If one wants to live happily, one needs to have satisfaction in life. To be satisfied, one has to control one's desires, which are endless. Ego plays a detrimental role in closing all our doors to happiness because it makes us look at the world with closed eyes. Ruthless competition ensures that values have no place in our lives. It also plays a decisive role in reinforcing inequality in society. All can live happily only if all have equal opportunities. A simple life leads to sound health. Health conditions like diabetes and blood pressure are widespread because of our lifestyles.

Insufficient intake of water and vegetables cause certain diseases. A number of plants and herbs keep us safe from disease. Animals live without medication because they know by instinct which plant to eat when sick. Our kitchen itself is a medicinal laboratory. Our elders used home remedies to cure ailments. They knew the medicinal value of turmeric, ginger, garlic, salt, onion, etc. Western medicines, which have a lot of side effects, have totally garnered the market. Aloe Vera has become very popular in the market because others have used our knowledge to their advantage. We are ready to buy bottled medicines but unwilling to grow the plants at home. If we rediscover the herbal wonders in our backyard we can keep illness at bay.

to be continued...

# Girl Child Education

## Little Sunbeams Shining Brightly

A warm welcome awaited Indira and Mohan, Projects Officer at Vikasini, Hubli on their first visit after Sireesha Soans took over as Program Coordinator. The tiny tots had put up pretty welcome pictures and drawings. Indira distributed chocolates among the children. She also conducted tests to gauge the grasping ability of the children as well as the quality of teaching imparted. Trouble caused by the previous coordinator had resulted in the shifting of the school premises under threat. Nirnaya even considered the prospect of closing down this project but well wishers in Hyderabad asked Nirnaya to persist. In fact one of the local donors used her contacts in Hubli to enlist Sireesha.

The number of students decreased to thirty-seven, as many children cannot attend school due to shifting of the school premises, family problems, conveyance problems or migration by their parents in search of work. Sireesha will look into each dropout case and take remedial action. Two teachers assisted by a childcare assistant handle the classes for UKG and



LKG. The prevailing atmosphere at school is that of joy, as all the children seemed to genuinely enjoy being at school. It was decided to take twenty new admissions in Play home for children in the age group 3 years & 8 months - 4 years & 6 months.

Dr. Mohammed Allahbakshi Kundagol, Principal, Ayurvedic College and Ms. Manjula Kulkarni, Stree Shakti Women Welfare Organization were the Chief

Guests for the Annual Day celebrations held on March 24, 2007 at Corporation Kalyana Mantap, Heggeri. They first arrived at the school and were taken on a guided tour and enlightened on the functioning of the



school and the tailoring classes. The tailoring students not only participated in the celebrations but also assisted enthusiastically in organizing the program. They stitched the costumes for the program. The other programs held in the year were the Drawing Competition in December '06, the Annual Sports Day in January '07 and the Flag Hoisting ceremony on January 26, 2007. The students drew the National Flag to mark the occasion.

The school is perceived as unique and quite a few foundations and organizations have come forward to support the cause. Akshaya Patra supports the midday meal and has agreed to send more quantity in case the number of children increases. Another organization has committed to supply the one-time as well recurring expenses.

There is an ongoing effort to shortlist the families who are unable to bear the costs involved in transporting their children to school. It was decided that Nirnaya would meet the costs of transportation for such children to prevent dropouts. Sireesha was also advised to form a working committee comprising of like-minded socially committed individuals so that she does not feel alienated. Moreover by doing so, the school would gain

access to free medical camps conducted by the Rotary Club, the Lions' Club and other local contributors.

There is a palpable difference between the students in Secunderabad and in Hubli. The students at Secunderabad are confident, as they have had more exposure to different people, which has increased their self-esteem and knowledge. The students in Hubli lack this kind of exposure, as their movement is restricted between home and school. They live in a cloistered community and the effect is discernible as these children's grasping powers are slower. A thrilling turn of events is that Sireesha is taking the initiative for fundraising. She plans to hold a fundraising event and is identifying people or organizations with whom Nirnaya can partner.

It is heartening to witness the speed and skill with which the twenty students of the HRD Centre in Hubli (between the age of 18 and 22 years from the minority community) have learnt cutting and stitching within a period of three months. They are planning to stitch school uniforms for the children free of cost. These tailoring students have expressed interest in learning English so that they can generate income by conducting tuitions at home.

## Tribute Fund – Make the Change

Someone loved, someone missed, someone cherished, someone to be remembered forever! Most of us hold someone in high esteem and value the memory of that dear one. Nirnaya has thought of way to commemorate such a dear one's life in a unique manner – by means of a Tribute Fund in memory of the person. The dictionary says that a tribute is an act, statement or a gift that is intended to show your respect or admiration especially for a dead person.

A Tribute Fund would be utilized either for Girl Child Education that is for Vikasini or for empowering women through the different projects that Nirnaya funds for the development of women. It has always been a part of Indian ethos to do a good deed in the name of departed soul to benefit the underprivileged. The same act has been taken forward with a name given to it – Tribute Fund.

Nirnaya's appreciation of the donor's contribution would be expressed by presenting the donor with a plaque bearing details of the loved one with a one liner of the donor's choice expressing his/her emotions or thoughts for the person in whose honor the fund is set up. It would be beautiful and meaningful to translate one's affection for a person into an act that would benefit a poor starving child deprived of the necessities that we take for granted. It would make a world of difference to a marginalized woman struggling for her daily existence. It would in fact transform the world of the less fortunate. And the amazing part of all this would be that you are the change agent who wrought such change by a simple act of love for someone you deeply care for. So then go ahead and make the change!

## WORKSHOPS & SEMINARS

Paralegal Training (PLT) Part II, Smart Growth Training Series was held on April 14, 2007 at Smart Growth Training Center, Secunderabad. The facilitator Ms. Annie S. Mathews imparted theoretical knowledge pertaining to the provisions of the Personal Laws and the Criminal Procedure Code.

Peer Review Reflection (PRR) Phase III, Smart Growth Training Series was held on May 15-17, 2007 at Smart Growth Training Center, Secunderabad – Dr. Sujatha Rita and Ms. Indira Jena facilitated on mandatory accounting procedures to be maintained by NGOs.

Ms. Sheela S. Mathews attended the India-UK Fundraising Study Tour, April 22 - 27, 2007 organized by Resource Alliance at London.

Ms. Indira Jena and Ms. Annie S. Mathews represented Nirnaya at the Women's Funding Network 23rd Annual Conference, April 26-28, 2007 in Seattle, Washington, U.S.A.

Ms Indira Jena attended the Foundations For Peace network annual general meeting at Colombo on May 16th and 17th.

# Rural Development Project

## Striving Towards Equality

A society can never be deemed as just until all have equal opportunity. Striving towards equality, Nagamani works with Nirnaya's support in six villages of Kadiyam Mandal, East Godavari District, Andhra Pradesh for the upliftment of Dalit women. As reproductive health is the top priority in this program, importance is given to lowering the number of child marriages, the high incidence of hysterectomies and early and frequent pregnancies. Of these six villages the Madiga community lives in only two. They work mainly in the nurseries and are treated as bonded labour for small amounts owed by them to the nursery owners. Adolescent girls drop out of school and work in the nurseries and fields.

Nagamani conducted awareness meetings in each of the six villages on the eve of the 'Reproductive Health Day' in May. The local MRO, MDO and the government Medical Officer were invited as guest speakers. The objectives of the meetings are to generate awareness on reproductive health, prenatal and postnatal care, the ills of child marriage and its adverse effects on women's health. Nagamani opines that illiteracy is the major contributing factor to health issues faced by Dalit women as they lack awareness.

The urgent need of the hour is basic medical facilities as the Primary Health Centre at Veeravaram is too distant for the Dalit women. The government hospital at Alamuru lacks water and medicines. The medical staff is indifferent and irresponsible. One of the major constraints that Nagamani faces is the difficulty in organizing meetings as women work in the day and commuting becomes difficult in the evening. Moreover there is opposition to the women attending meetings conducted by Nagamani.

The future course of action entails a door-to-door survey for baseline information on socio-economic status, income turnover, age of marriage, pregnancies, family planning and the number of hysterectomies supplemented by demographic details from the Panchayat Office. After this, the first step would be the formation of a village level sangam. A year is required to achieve this. Sangam leaders have to be identified. The next step would be to form two clusters and leadership training imparted to the sangam leaders to make

them effective awareness raisers. Efforts will be made to encourage girls who are school dropouts to rejoin school. The strength lies in the fact that Nagamani's team comprises of dalit women working among their own community women.

## Gradual Change

The entire gamut of maltreatment of women can be witnessed in a single visit to Betul District, Madhya Pradesh. Girls are married young lest they be a burden on their families. They are not considered worthy of education and if they are educated it is at the risk of being raped. Apart from strangers, girls face the risk of rape by their teachers and women are vulnerable to it in their own homes. Female literacy is as low as 8.81%. Wife beating is the norm of the day. Women subsist by eating leftovers in their natal or marital homes and are anaemic and malnourished subject to a host of health issues. Men migrate in search of jobs, marry again, raise families and forget their wives back home.

Pradeepan works at empowering tribal women in 30 villages of Bhimpur Block, Betul District. Hectic lobbying by Pradeepan saw women get the same remuneration as men for work done. A federation has been established with 25 members belonging to the Dalit and tribal communities. SHGs or clusters refer cases to it depending on their magnitude. The cases have to be solved within a timeframe. A case of subverted justice is that of a deserted woman whose husband coughed up compensation on the SHG's intervention. The Panchayat appropriated the money to buy durries (carpets)!!





Dori village faced acute water shortage. The water supplied was dirty. The SHG members swung into action and presented this case before the local Member of Legislative Assembly. A hand pump was installed within eighteen days. The group wants to start a nursery in the village. The activism of this group is evident from the case of the village elder who would get drunk, abuse women and ask them for sexual favors. The women roughed him up and filed a complaint against him. He was arrested and made to sit handcuffed during the Tehsildar's (local revenue officer) meeting. He was later paraded handcuffed in the village as a deterrent to erring men.

In Nanda village, the villagers accepted the SHG gradually. The group lobbied with the local government and got people their fair share of ration under the Public



Distribution System. When Rekha, our Program Volunteer asked the Panchayat Secretary of Ratanpur village to get lavatories sanctioned, he replied that the lavatories would be used to store grain. The three SHGs in Ratanpur can be the change agents who launch an awareness campaign on the utility of lavatories. Jagori SHG bought cows, set up a diary and supplies milk to the villagers. Prabhat SHG in Hillri Samaldana village plans to set up a tailoring center in Bhimpur for training adolescent girls of the village.

The need of the hour is livelihood, which will ameliorate the condition of women to some extent by decreasing the migration of men. This in turn will reduce the incidence of desertion and exploitation of women. In the meantime, gradual change is being brought about.

## Urban Slum Development Project

### The First Step

The fundraising meet in USA in April translated into a new program initiative. Mr. Paritosh Bajpay and his family at the meet expressed keen interest in developmental work in their hometown of Tekari Sub-Division, Gaya District, Bihar. As an initial step, Indira and Amrita, Program Officer visited Tekari in April. Bihar is characterized by a high rate of infant mortality, maternal mortality and lack of proper housing, food or drinking water. Widows irrespective of caste are hunted down as witches for their property. Nirnaya aims at helping create model villages so that the local government takes notice and begins to involve itself in

the development process. Once the local government initiates participation then the state government will involve itself in the development process.

The drive from Patna, the capital city of the state was a revelation. Mounds of garbage line either side of the road as the sanitation workers refuse to dispose of the garbage, since their salaries are overdue from the state government for five years! Vast tracts of agricultural land remain untilled for years due to a combination of socio-economic and political reasons. Despite being in the center of the town, the Bhuyan community lacks basic amenities such as drinking water, sanitation facilities, etc and the means of livelihood.

Indira and Amrita had a meeting with prominent residents of Tekari to discuss the area to be adopted for developmental work. Initially the group was reluctant to conduct a baseline survey as suggested by Nirnaya. However on Indira's insistence it was decided to conduct the baseline survey after the Municipal elections scheduled in May. The baseline survey would then be sent to the Nirnaya office for analysis.

The patriarchal order restricts the mobility of women. This notion was reinforced at the meeting held with girls attending the computer classes. Barring three girls, all the girls had to use their powers of persuasion to convince their parents of the need for computer education. Most parents are agreeable to their daughters studying up to Class XII after which it is understood that the girls will settle down in the confines of matrimony. It appears to be an uphill task to convince parents of higher education



for their daughters. As many of the girls had overcome opposition at home to study further, it was felt that they would be ideal change agents. The idea was put forth to them to form a group whose major task would be to convince parents to permit their daughters to study further.

After much discussion, it was decided to set up tailoring centers in two villages in Tekari. The centers would be formally launched in July. Each center would have 4 machines and a trainer. The training would be for a period of six months. Mr. Shakti Bajpay has offered to let Nirnaya use their ancestral house in Tekari free of » charge for the tailoring centre. In order to coordinate the work at the different project sites, it was decided to use the services of a Program Coordinator based in Patna. Another initiative that came up was the



establishment of a school in Tekari for girl children from the economically marginalized section of society. A sanitation drive would be launched to clean up drains and spread awareness on issues like cleanliness and personal hygiene. The building of a community toilet in Tekari is a matter of priority. But change happens only if change agents, that is, the women are effectively mobilized. The first big step is towards that direction.

## Fundraising

A bonanza awaited Nirnaya in the U.S.A.. Drs. Arvind & Chitra Kumar and Mr. U.S. Varma organized a fundraising meet on April 29, at the Kumars' residence in New Jersey. About thirty people were present at the get together. After an introduction by Mr. U. S. Varma, Indira gave a presentation on Nirnaya to acquaint the audience with our work. This was followed by an interaction between Indira and the audience in which enquiries were answered and doubts clarified. The spontaneous response was evidenced by the contributions that came forward and the possibilities explored. The immediate outcome was the proposal to start developmental work in Tekari, Bihar. Interest was also evinced in programs for holistic development in Uttar Pradesh and Champaran District, Bihar. Potential donors would be contacted after Nirnaya's visit to these areas to ascertain whether Nirnaya would be able to meet the requirements of the potential donors. After the brainstorming, the group enjoyed the sumptuous spread laid out for dinner.

Donations to Nirnaya are exempted from tax under Section 80G of the IT Act, 1961.

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