

## Peer Review for grantmaking

Peer review for the purposes of annual impact assessment, strategic planning or grantmaking has been a certain success for Nirnaya over the years.

Once the decision to grant first / second cycle of funding for a list of groups based on their need and past performance was taken at the board and advisory council level, a meeting was organized in Bhubaneswar for the eastern India based groups on February 13th and 14th. FARR was kind enough to provide the space for the meeting and organize the food and accommodation for the participants. There were representatives from six groups and the objective was to understand the background of each group, governance, program management systems and goals of project seeking Nirnaya's grant.

Pramila Swain from FARR, welcomed the participants followed by the opening remarks by Indira Jena on the objectives of the meeting. Nirnaya had an amount

of Rs 13,00,000/- for grantmaking in Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand she said and felt that it would be best for them to decide how best the money could be shared among themselves. They would justify the project, spell out expected outcomes, fix indicators for measuring impact of the project and go into peer assessment as a next step. This gives them greater ownership of the shared mission which is empowering Indian grassroots women in every possible way. She also declared the opening of a branch office in Bhubaneswar, keeping in mind the convenience of the grantees who finds it very difficult to travel all the way from their respective places to Secunderabad for meetings.

Following this, each participant introduced herself, the organization she represented and her position within it. Pramila Swain spoke about Friends' Association for Rural Reconstruction (FARR), which is applying for a second year's grant from Nirnaya.

Anupama Rout, Secretary of JEETA, which is applying for a third year grant spoke with pride about the initiatives taken by her team to enable tribal wasteland development, use of organic agricultural practices, land rights, promotion of bio fertilizer, setting up grain and seed banks etc.

*Cont. on Pg 6...*



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## Our 10 Year Journey

*How does one describe a journey that has lasted ten long years and touched more than a 1,00,000 lives? Satisfying, fulfilling, exhausting, feeling of elation, despair?*

*Probably all these and more, because there have been phases of all these deep feelings.*

*Like on holding her new born baby, a mother forgets her pain and exhaustion, in Nirnaya too, there have been harrowing times, exhausting routines, but all that was forgotten on seeing the amazing results of the hard work put in by the team.*

*Women living in abject poverty have become entrepreneurs, giving employment to many others; those who did not know there was a world outside their village, today go to banks, travel long distances to meet the government officials to get their problems redressed. Thanks to the legal aid and education cell and SHG group support, women who once suffered domestic violence in silence, today stand up to their men. Disabled women are running catering services. The stories are endless but the common thread that runs through them all is that, these women feel empowered, financially, emotionally and have found a new voice and respectability in society; so essential for a human being to live a life of dignity.*

*While this has been the story in the field, Nirnaya the organization too has built up hundreds of careers professionally. Often staffers in Nirnaya come fresh out of college and all green behind the ears, but in the proactive and open atmosphere of Nirnaya, they get to meet life in the raw. Learn real lessons of life and go out into the world as mature and wise professionals. The staffers in Nirnaya not only get to take responsibility from day one, but are also given exposure to various training programmes in India and abroad. Nirnaya gets loads of letters every year from grateful ex-staffers who now grace positions of responsibility and eminence in various organizations; thanking Nirnaya for the jump-start it gave them in life.*

*However, the ten long years have not been without hiccups, there have been challenging times which have tested the mettle of the organization. For instance, the times when difficult decisions had to be taken in cases of gross misutilization of sanctioned grants, or facing the sudden stoppage of funds due to doubts among the donors about the governance issues of the organization.*

*Bouquets or brickbats, there is always more fun in traveling than in arriving. So even after a 100 years Nirnaya will not say it has arrived...*

– Aruna

## Grantee Speak

Priyasheela Besra, the project head of Saheli Adhyayan Kendra, Jharkhand is enthused by her own self improvement as a result of Nirnaya support. Her eyes widen and her whole face lights up as she speaks of what engaging with Nirnaya has done for her. She said that first of all her quality of life has completely transformed. She has through the capacity building and peer review reflection sessions learnt a lot and is able to speak in public forums which was unimaginable earlier. She has got an identity now and has been able to sharpen her working skills. The recognition and rapport has helped her get a grant from Action Aid for a time bound district level project.

## Staff speak

Mahalakshmi – The mission of Nirnaya is to create a platform to build women's capacities and enhance their skills and self-confidence. I have experienced it personally. Due to some personal challenges and several hardships, I was forced to resign my previous job. After abandoning my job from my former organization, where I learnt so many good things, I felt as if I was kept in dark. After a long gap of five years, I once again got an opportunity to work with the blessings of God. When I joined Nirnaya, to my dismay, I was completely ignorant of the terminologies used to carry out my day-to-day activities. Today, to some extent, if I am capable of executing my tasks is just because of Nirnaya and its founder Indira Jena. She, not only as a founder but also a mentor inculcated the talent, knowledge and self-confidence in me. Being an introvert, my confidence level was not up to the mark till then. I wish that the branches of Nirnaya should spread wide all over India and empower women from all walks of life who have become the victims of atrocities. Whether I remain in Nirnaya or not, evergreen memories of Nirnaya will always remain in me...

# Urban Slum Development Project

## Vikasini Girls School , Hubli

Medical check-up camps for the students started being conducted during the 2nd and 3rd weeks of January. Sireesha Elizabeth Soans, the local Nirnaya coordinator enlisted the services of the nearby Corporation Hospital doctor for the purpose. The doctor scheduled the check ups for all the students according to her free time and was paid Rs. 3/- per student. Alongside a routine check up the doctor administered medication wherever necessary and also explained the golden rules of simple hygiene after which she distributed pellets for purifying their drinking water.

In terms of academics the UKG students are performing to the best of their capacities. The syllabus was completed for the academic year and annual examinations completed in the last week of March. It is quite a job for the teachers to contain the mischief and playfulness of the children. There are plans afoot



to provide regular weekly outdoor sports from the next academic year. It is rather surprising that the little ones from playhome are comparatively smarter in doing their day-to-day activities and their reading, writing and recitation skills have enhanced appreciably.

The parents meeting focused on personal hygiene of the children, maintenance of the text and note books since these are usually recycled within the school for the next batch of students in each class. The parents were also encouraged to give the children breakfast before packing them off to school since lunch is only at 12.30 p.m. The process of having the children complete their homework in school itself had to be clarified to the puzzled parents.

Republic Day celebrations took place with the ex corporator Manjula Kulkarni hoisting the national flag and distributing sweets among the students.

The little ones exhibited their potential as future sportswomen of the nation by their lively participation at the annual sports day events on February 15th. After the various events like 50 meters running race, chocolate eating race and potato race, biscuit eating, lemon and spoon race and stick collecting race the children wound their way home weary but lively at 2 pm.

Annual Day 2008 was held on 18th March exhibiting the unbelievable synchronization and melody thanks to the untiring efforts of Sireesha and the teachers in program finalization, regular rehearsals and dealing with last minute glitches. The chief guest was the mayor, Manjula Kulkarni. The songs and dances of the 'little stars' won all round applause from the audience. Prize distribution and a word of encouragement from the chief guest brought the program to an end. Later the Mayor visited the school premises and was very much attracted by the work done by the tailoring students. Before she left for the day, the mayor promised Sireesha that necessary arrangements would be made from her side to get the land approved for the school and requested Sireesha to appeal to the concerned authorities at the earliest.

## Vikasini Girls School, Secunderabad

Vikasini celebrated its annual day on 16th March at Bhaskara Auditorium, Hyderabad. The event was inaugurated by the board members of Vikasini. and the first student of Vikasini K. Swapna who is now in class 2. The welcome address was made by 4th class student, U. Mounica . The programme theme was "Stop Child Labour." It was a razzle dazzle medley of songs and dances interspersed with touching skits on child labour written for the occasion by well known Telugu writer Satyavati and performed by the students. Kudos to Sam and his team for giving a stunning choreography to have everyone tapping their feet to the tune. Indira Jena gave the annual school report in English with Mohan Kumar the Nirnaya projects officer in charge of the education projects doing the same in Telugu. Usha Ashok Kumar did the honours of prize distribution and the program ended with Sam entertaining the audience with games for the parents and children of Vikasini.

# Regional Networking of Women's Funds

The Asian Regional Network is part of the larger International Network of Women's Funds of which Nirnaya is a founder member. March saw two important activities happening. One was the regional exposure by a team from Tewa, Nepal Women's Fund comprising of staff and grantees and the other was the INWF Annual Asian Regional Meet 2008.

The exposure visit was to JEETA, in Pallahara, Angul Orissa between 25th – 27th. Lalita Missal, Nirnaya CEO made the time to be involved in the process and it was a mutually enjoyable experience of learning, sharing and having lots of fun. According to JEETA staff it was a novelty for the local community in Pallahara to get to meet 'Nepalese people' and interact with them.

For Tewa also it was an enriching experience. In Tewa's Co - Program Head, Deepak Dewan's words, 'Nirnaya's money is going to the absolutely right place.'

Bhawana Thapa said, 'JEETA is doing a tremendous job for the backward group. I am very much inspired by their motivated activities like advocacy, income generation program, diversity

of forest products, enhancement of domestic compost, adult education, making use of forest land and their spirit to work together, promotion of indigenous seed and mingled activities. All these activities are different from TEWA grantees.'

Laxmi Bhutta said 'the program implemented by JEETA was a new experience for me, like proper utilization of forest products and the co-operation activities among Adivasi community JEETA has brought an appreciable changes in the life styles of people belonging to this community. The effort of JEETA to enable the Adivasi mass restore land and traditional agricultural activities



are very much motivating part for me. Getting participation in Panchayatraj is good learning matter for the Nepal Adivasi women. The women of Orissa are more advanced than women of Nepal. I also appreciate the grantees for implementing the developmental activities so effectively with an amazing moral and financial support provided by Nirnaya.'

Santi Pasman of Golbazar Nepal, will start to work on women's rights as soon as she reaches her hometown. During her visit to India she came to

## Volunteer speak

Vijeth “Against the advice of my friends, I ended up giving my resignation at my previous company, where I worked as a software engineer. I was lucky enough to be given a chance to teach mathematics, a subject that I love, to the underprivileged students at Vikasini School. And I did leap at the opportunity. On the first day, I was introduced to the children, who looked eager to learn, as children from the underprivileged parts of society are apt to do. I couldn’t wait to get started. I knew it would be great fun to teach the kids, and the thought of giving something back to society was a refreshing thought. I started off by just getting to know the students, beginning with their names, and a bit of their family histories. When asked what they wanted to become when they grew up, I got responses like ‘Police’, ‘Doctor’, ‘Collector’, while a surprisingly large number of them said that they would want to become Teachers when they grew up. It is good to see the kinds of ideas they have, and I hope they are able to turn them into reality. So this is how my teaching stint at Vikasini started. The class size being optimal for individualized attention, allowed me the time to evaluate each student and to try and address their individual weaknesses. Over time, I realized that they were as eager to learn as I had predicted them to be. It was refreshing to see that unlike with other kids, it was easier to get them to pay attention to the lesson, they didn’t have to worry about the latest serials on TV, or when they’d get that toy they had been hoping for, for these things were luxuries that most of them just didn’t have. I proceeded

to teach the students the finer aspects of mathematics, by explaining to them the practical uses of mathematics in everyday life, and by telling them the importance of mathematics. I found that after I addressed these points, they started showing more interest in their lessons; I encouraged them to speak up, to say what was on their minds. Initially they were quite shy and would not reveal their doubts, but after a while, they became more open, and started asking me a variety of questions, all of which I make it a point, to answer. On certain days, I would just cut back on the lesson, and just let them talk, they would ask questions like ‘Is it true that abroad, parents throw their kids out of the home at the age of 10?’ at which point I would proceed to tell them the difference between our country and the other countries. We would then have a discussion, and it is an interesting experience to watch them as the moment of realization is suddenly betrayed by their expressions. As though they were demonstrating what an ‘epiphany’ looks like. Thus, I taught the children at Vikasini, 6 days a week 2-3 hours a day, we finished the syllabus in advance, and I got to know all of them very well, and they have written quite a few tests, and most of them have done well, with a few having performed quite marvelously. I got to know them personally, and I feel like I have actually done something for them, it is definitely a refreshing experience to interact with them, and I must say that I have learned quite a bit from them too.



know that there are some countries where the women have the freedom. In India, women are working together with the men which happens to be very difficult in Nepal. Santi Paskan shares her experience that JEETA has brought a tremendous change within the women belonging to the most backward communities of the society. She is also determined that she will work on the women’s right like JEETA.

According to Goma, the most inspiring feature was the grain bank which is a great boon for the poor family at the time of crisis. Important aspects which she had inculcated from these women are proper utilization of the forest produce. Nirnaya’s grantees are highly educated where as TEWA grantees are not. Nirnaya’s

grantees are also hard workers and very sincere on their tasks. JEETA she feels has devoted all its time and money to bring these women belonging to the backward community to the limelight. All these could be achieved only because of Nirnaya. Women of Orissa are much different from Nepal. In Nepal, women do not have the freedom like Orissa especially in JEETA field. The women of Orissa can speak, work with men, and have her own decision freely but in Nepal it is very rare.

Goma expressed that if the women from Nepal, are given an opportunity to go on exposure visits regular, would become more efficient in implementing the programs. She also hopes that these exposure visits will motivate active participation in all programs.

Cont. from Pg 1...

Munni Hembrom who has been implementing Nirnaya's rural development project in Dumka, Jharkhand spoke about the development of the area, the groups and her project team. Munni Hembrom is seeking support for herself and her team for the fourth year in succession.



Sabiha Naaz, Secretary of Mahila Sewak Samaj, Biharsharif, Nalanda, Bihar is a first time applicant and gave brief profile of her organization.

Neelam Besra from Churchu Block, Hazaribagh, Jharkhand gave a brief description about her work which mainly concentrates on women's holistic development.

Priyasheela Besra represented Saheli Adhyayan Kendra, Sahebganj, Jharkhand, and is a second term applicant for Nirnaya support.

Post tea, the participants were assigned the task of preparing a brief presentation of their project's vision and mission, objectives, activities, target groups, operational area, impact, indicators and the budget.

The presentations were reviewed critically by the rest of the participants on the second day and revisions suggested and clarifications sought. For example Neelam was advised to organize cost-effective, realistic and practicable programs which she resisted initially but saw the sense in it.

## Regional Networking of Women's Funds



# Rural Development Project

**Munni Hembrom** and her team have been supported by Nirnaya for carrying out Empowerment of Marginalized Santhali Women for three successive years and it has been one success story after another. The focal point is the SHG. As a result of the formation of SHGs, capacity building of the same and training the community as a whole has got the members start cultivating their own fields and the profit has reduced the financial constraints considerably. The SHG women conduct regular meetings to discuss their problems and to find solutions. Some of them are quite unique. Awareness raising was done on a regular basis. The village committee has both men and women and is responsible for conflict resolution and ensuring outreach of government programs. Women involve themselves in the decision making process, contrary to what the situation was in the past. The struggle is for women's human rights. There is also a network for the campaign for tribal women's land rights and Munni is in the forefront.

The approach is holistic and covers health, agriculture, education and gender equity. She said that the project has helped people get engaged in various development activities where in the past they were just selling the forest produce, primarily coal and wood for livelihood purposes. Regular meetings and training have the community women focus on agriculture, seed and grain banks. There is reduction of migration.

**Neelam Besra** and her team work in 3 Panchayats of 15 villages in Churchu, Hazaribagh Jharkhand. The team facilitates the outreach of government development programs to the target community and educates the community by disseminating information on government plans. It is also fighting for equal rights for girls and equal property rights. The main operational area is Churchu. Neelam Besra is a first time applicant. Immediately on receipt of the request from Neelam, Nirnaya had deputed Munni Hembrom to visit the area and send an assessment report. Her recommendation was that Neelam's working area is so remote and widespread that Nirnaya ought to support the initiatives.

## Conferences / Meetings / Seminars / Visits

- ♦ Visit of Shalini Natarajan, Vice President Programs, Global Fund for Women, USA: January 8, 2008
- ♦ Advisory Council / Board of Trustees meeting: February 9, 2008 at Nirnaya's registered office, Secunderabad. The commencement of the transition process was finalized.
- ♦ First Peer Review meeting for the year 2008: February 14 - 15 in Bhubaneswar
- ♦ Foundations For Peace – Victim Empowerment Expert Panel meeting: February 28 – March 1, 2008 at Amman, Jordan – attended by Sujatha Rita and Indira Jena: the VEP publication finalized
- ♦ Workshop on "Process Documentation" organized by Nari Shakti: 26th – 27th March 2008 sponsored by CWS, Hyderabad at CYSD, Bhubaneswar: attended by our Bhubaneswar based program associate – Sadhana Bisoi



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