

Contributions of the Women Groups of West Bengal, India for Solving Rural Water Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Poor rural communities suffer from many socio-economic issues; however, the availability of clean and safe water is the fundamental challenge amongst all other hindrances confronted by these communities. This article focuses on the non-profit organization, Nishtha (meaning dedication) and their intervention in women empowerment for better water accessibility in rural communities of West Bengal, India. The paper will further highlight the so-called “rural ignorant women’s endeavour” in innovative thought and strategy to protect their own families and the community. The article also discusses Nishtha’s intervention during water crises and disasters using a participatory approach involving women.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 About Nishtha

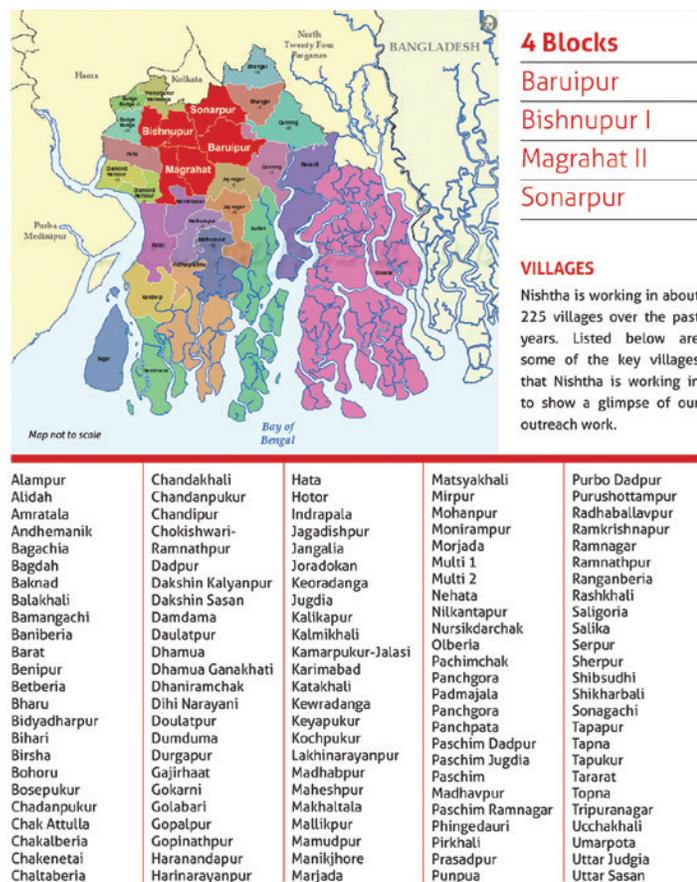
NISHTHA, a community-based women’s organization, was born in the mid-seventies in West Bengal, India, to empower poor rural women to understand and demand their rights. Nishtha’s mission is to empower women to fight for equal opportunities, equal rights, and equal dignity. Nishtha presently works in more than 300 villages in the District of South 24 Parganas. Nishtha’s programs reflect continuous self-analysis and subsequent proactive revisions that make it a participatory resource center for community women, girls, and elderly women. The goal of Nishtha is to empower women leaders to lead movements to change the existing discriminative norms in the family and society. Nishtha strives for ushering a brave new world that would deny all discriminations based on gender, class, caste, creed, religion, or color; where men and women would have equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal dignity; where children would not have to toil hard to earn their food; where all children would go to school; where

the old and the young would have the respect they deserve; where there would be no violence, and no war.

1.2. Nishtha’s Endeavour

Since 1974, Nishtha has been primarily promoting the active participation of the adolescent girls and the women of the marginalized section of the community by bringing them together for their empowerment. In the operational villages of five community development blocks in South 24 Parganas in West Bengal, more than 5000 girls and women groups have been formed by Nishtha. These groups have been actively implementing various activities for ensuring the retention of girls in formal schools and the development of entrepreneurship among women. They have also engaged in the prevention of child marriage, trafficking of children for labor and prostitution, gender discrimination, and violence against girls and women. These goals are achieved with the active support of the stakeholder. These stakeholders include government service providers such as Panchayat (Local Government), police, Child Line, protection officers, judiciary, local youth clubs, and religious leaders.

Figure 1: The map and the list show the key villages that are benefited from Nishtha's outreach



Nishtha's endeavour is to work on service-based, rights-based, community-based, and policy advocacy-based women issues. Entire endeavours can be grouped as follows:

- Group formation & Leadership building
- Awareness generation to create strong public opinion, capacity building, and training of leaders and group members
- Ensure Girls' education, prevention of child marriage, and prevention of trafficking of girls
- Awareness & service on reproductive health to youth
- Livelihood and income generation for women, advocacy, and campaign for ensuring women rights
- Formation of women groups to prevent male pressures on women, male sensitization, sensitization of stakeholders for the eradication of gender discrimination, gender-based violence, and injustice against women & girls and their rehabilitation
- Protect and promote biodiversity and ensuring the rights of women farmers through the practice of organic farming
- Free legal aid to women
- Day-care for children having special needs
- Safe shelter for sex workers' children

2 INDIA'S WATER ISSUES

2.1. Background on India's Water Issues

In India, plenty of water is available during the monsoon season. However, farmers face water shortages during dry months for agricultural purposes. According to World Bank Statistics, only 36.8% of the agricultural activities in India were reliably irrigated in 2013 (World Bank in India, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/india/overview>), and the rest of the land could not be utilized to full potential for being entirely dependent on rain. As a result, two-thirds of the Indian population living in villages remain deprived of earning their livelihood as agriculture is their only option for sustenance. Despite this constraint, India is the largest producer of fruits, spices, and some other agricultural crops, according to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO, 2014).

The contribution of agriculture to India's total GDP was 16.5% in 2019–20, which is a reduction from a 2014–15 contribution of 18.2 % (Economic Survey, 2019–20). The contribution of agriculture to overall GDP could continue to decrease since a major chunk of the arable land cannot be utilized due to the paucity of irrigation.

Hence, water has been one of the significant predicaments for the agricultural community. This recurrent hindrance made them suffer from poverty generation after generation. According to World Bank (World Bank, 2019). Climate change has disproportionately affected rural families due to erratic rainfall, drought, and abrupt changes in seasons.

2.2. Participatory Development Process for Addressing Water Accessibility

The participatory development process has been suggested by eminent economists worldwide as the most effective *modus operandi* for boosting the socio-economic situation of the marginalized people living in developing economies. In India, since 1990, necessary constitutional amendments and enactments of policies such as the Panchayati Raj Act (formation of village-level government) have been implemented to ensure the participation of people, especially women, in the development process starting from planning to obtaining their feedback on the success of the development initiatives.

Unfortunately, women have remained in token positions. Women do not always participate in the formulation of the planning, execution, and monitoring phases of programs, even though 50% position share is reserved for women at the Local Self Government. At the three layers of the Panchayati Raj system, women remain almost passive and always guided by the male members of their families and the community. Women's participation in the decision-making process in the family and community has been denied in the true sense of the term despite the many legislative efforts to ensure such participation.

To address these governance shortcomings, Nishtha has adopted the following strategies of participatory development:

- Formation of groups with the adolescent girls and women
- Leadership building among the adolescent girls and women
- Formation of strong public opinion in favor of rights of girls and women

Nishtha believes in collective leadership and practices for transparent endorsing of its policy and actions. Thus, Nishtha's most important work has been community women group formation and building leadership among girls and women. These groups are formed to ensure raising the children to be gender-sensitive from their early childhood and bring forward women into leadership. Nishtha has cohesive groups of women of different ages to bring about an all-pervasive change regarding society's attitude towards women. Nishtha works with a four-tier pyramid structure of girls and women groups, namely Kids Groups, Adolescent Groups, Women Groups and Senior Women' Groups (called Balak-Balika Bahini, Kishor-Kishori Bahini, Mahila Mandals, and Baristho Mahila Dol in the Bengali language)

Figure 2: In a women group meeting, Youth Groups' Members convincing other women groups on how gender-based violence & gender discrimination affect their lives



Development activities are implemented following the participatory approach. First, religious leaders, Panchayat functionaries, teachers, police, judiciary, and other influential people are thoroughly oriented and sensitized. This process helps build a liaison between girls and women group leaders and the stakeholders. Grass root level groups have a substantial role in decision-making, i.e., formulation, implementation, monitoring, and feedback, etc. But the final approval is taken at the Governing Board Meetings of Nishtha.

The Mahila Mandals' (women groups) leaders have been the backbone of Nishtha's operation over the years. These leaders often represent the village women that suffered violence and injustice. Therefore, the leaders are committed to working for the betterment of women and girls. They protest violence, protect girls and women from being victims of violence, take action to improve their environment, train to speak up against violence, and advocate for their rights. They have mounted a successful campaign against discrimination and humiliation. These grassroots groups broaden the social network, develop new ideas, and facilitate village attitudes and behaviours.

3 NISHTHA'S INTERVENTIONS TO RESPOND TO SYSTEMIC WATER ISSUES AND NATURAL DISASTERS

3.1. Nishtha's Involvement in Participatory Development Process for Piped Water Access in villages of West Bengal

The piped water systems were introduced to the villages under Julpia and Rashkhali Gram Panchayet (Village Government) in 2008 and 2009. During this intervention, no woman was ever asked for suggestions on the tap water point's location to be installed. Women had no role in the decision-making process. Women in rural areas play a crucial role in managing water for their household for drinking, domestic purposes, or irrigation. Although women shouldered the sole responsibility, the piped water system's installation was done without incorporating their views. Water Tap points were installed beside the main road. The relatively higher-income families got the water connection by depositing required charges. The marginalized families living away from the main road could not get the water as the pipeline has not been extended to their locality.

Whenever women groups submit any appeal to the Gram Panchayat (Village Government), leaders of women group and in some cases, Nishtha's Girls group leaders remain present. Moreover, Nishtha always keeps close contact with the elected Panchayat members in mitigating some social issues affecting the interest of community people especially women and girls and invite them in almost all the different sessions or events either as speakers or inaugurator especially on the poverty alleviation schemes launched by the government and implemented by the Panchayat schemes in order to facilitate the poor families and the community as a whole to get the benefit.

The elected Panchayat members and the male members were convinced that women would not waste a lot of time collecting water if a piped was installed in their community as a group connection. This also meant that girls did not have to miss their schools as they could easily fetch the water for family consumption from a nearby accessible location. Despite this

effort, men were often not convinced and it appears to be a norm to not emphasize women's inconveniences.

Figure 3: A Pregnant woman carrying a heavy bucket of water from a pond for domestic purposes.



It is common to see a well-constructed house along with toilets but no bathroom. Men take baths in ponds or a roadside public water access point (such as a tap or a hand pump). However, a bathroom is an absolute necessity for women, especially during the menstruation period. It is also used as changing room, as the number of rooms in rural houses is minimal. Though the availability of bathrooms is critical for women and young girls, it is hugely overlooked. Girls and women can never take their bath or refresh themselves properly as they are compelled to do it without removing their clothes or possibly in the presence of other men.

An overwhelming percentage of these women suffer from gynecological disorders diagnosed by doctors as ignorance and lack of hygiene and cleanliness. Also, 47% of village pregnant women and 67% of total women between the age group of 15 and 49 were found to be anemic (page 4, District Fact Sheet South Twenty Four Parganas West Bengal, National Family Health Survey — 4, 2015–16, Govt. of India, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, done by International Institute for Population Sciences (Deemed University) Mumbai).

In response to the issues mentioned above, Nishtha initiated two projects, called Bikash and Bikash Rashmi in five villages Julpia and Rashkhali GPs, which involved active participation by women groups to bring drinking water in their villages. These women group members were extremely infuriated, and protested, and submitted their demands at the Government Block Development Office. They also protested by sitting in front of the Government Block Development Office. They were informed that the government has provisions for individual water connections, but there was no provision for group connections. The families were so economically wretched, they were unable to pay the required amount for availing of individual household connection; hence, they

approached the government for a hamlet-based group connection for each hamlet¹.

Some of the girls continued to remain absent at schools. Women continued to fetch drinking water for their families from distant water stand posts. The protest incident was communicated to the Block Savapati (President). With his personal initiative, 21 group connections were given, which was the first instance in this CD (Community Development) Block. This initiative raised the question of who would bear the excessive cost since these new group connections would require bigger diameter pipes and needed to be extended to the interior parts of the villages. Besides, the government was skeptical about the maintenance of group water stand posts. Therefore, the government was not eager to assume such a responsibility, as government rules do not have any such provisions.

Nishtha women groups persuaded the issue through the local Member and Savapati (Chairperson) of the CD Block (the head of the CD block, 2nd tier of local self-government in the rural area). With his intervention from Block Administration, the Public Health Engineering (PHE) Department (the department responsible for distributing water in the state) was given special instruction to resolve this critical water connection issue.

In summary, with Nishtha's help, women appealed to the government for giving the group water connection and that the cost of installation of pipelines would be borne by the women users. Afterward, these women formed hamlet level small water committees. Almost all the women of the hamlet also served as members of other women groups. They started collecting donations and took loans from some organizations or individuals to mobilize the required funds. Since then, the water committees have been collecting water charges from the users for maintenance costs. It is a remarkable model for the sustainable development of small water systems. Observing this initiative's success, adjacent two hamlets successfully got the group water connection for their neighborhoods.

3.2. Nishtha's response to the 2020 Cyclone Amphan

On 18th May 2020, the Super Cyclone, Aamphan, made landfall coupled with a wind speed of 240 km/h (150 mph) in the South 24 Parganas. The cyclone shattered houses and ruined agricultural lands and orchards. The water bodies were over-flooded with saline water of the Bay of Bengal. The water got polluted with germs that made communities prone to water-borne diseases & left no scope for cultivation & fish farming.

After hit by Amphan, Nishtha workers went to visit the coastal belt area of the Bay of Bengal, the area that was impacted severely. Nishtha shared the Bikash and Bikash Rashmi Proj-

¹ Hamlet is a conglomeration of a few families dwelling a geographical periphery. Therefore, there are small hamlets in each village and each hamlet has got a name like, Pubpara (East hamlet) or Mandalpara, Daspara etc. Nishtha forms women groups with the women members of the families living in each hamlet.)

ects model, which was well-received by cyclone-affected women. All girls and women met with the local GP administration and block administration. They demanded installing a deep tube-well, reservoir, and pipeline connections in the cyclone impacted areas. In this coastal region, drinking water is a severe problem. Most of the district's groundwater contains high salt levels, and potable drinking water is available at a depth of 1200 feet. As a result, the cost of installation of tube-well is very high. Therefore, the existing number of tube-wells is insufficient compared to the total inhabitants.

Women and girls go to a distant area for fetching water which causes girls to miss school frequently. Meanwhile, the Government Block authority was convinced by the women to make a decision to construct a tube-well and an overhead reservoir to supply water to two to three hamlets. The Block authority agreed on the condition that the operational methodology followed by the Nishtha's water committees in Bishnupur I must be replicated here to maintain the project's long-term sustainability.

Figure 4: Nishtha Workers are providing basic foods to impacted villagers



Accordingly, Nishtha and women agreed to form a water committee for shouldering the responsibility. Now GP authority came forward to solve the drinking water problem in this area. There is also a need to fulfill domestic and cattle rearing water demand in addition to drinking water. The surrounding water bodies were contaminated with bacteria; however, people were bound to use this water for bathing, washing, cooking, washing utensils, and bathing of cattle. Tube-well water was used for drinking purposes only.

While disaster response is on one side, water availability is a permanent problem in this area. One of the women mentioned that, even though there are ten ponds in the area, most of them become dry during dry months. This meant that digging

additional wells was necessary to fulfill water demand during dry months. While discussing it with local women, an elderly woman said, *“you should have a walkthrough of ten villages, and you would obviously find at least one pond/water body that never dries.”* When Nishtha workers asked her about the causes, she replied, *“you are educated enough, and Babus (Higher Govt. Officials) are there at Block Office who studied a lot and possessed so many certificates, don't they know it? Try to find out as we need such water bodies to reserve the sweet water/rainwater here for us.”*

We then discussed the issue with the APO, Officer at the Community Development Block Office. Fortunately, a very dynamic person informed us that a good site with plenty of water had to be identified that would never dry in extreme summer. The location could be detected from a satellite image. Groundwater Board of Government located at Kolkata should be consulted to excavate such pond or water body. The elderly lady guided this process, but the sad truth is that local women know many things but ironically that have never been documented or preserved.

After discussing this issue internally, the Block Authority would go for digging two new ponds as a trial which would also be coupled with a satellite imagery observation. The women's water committee would shoulder the responsibilities of maintenance and management of the proposed water project. Nishtha would also help in building leadership qualities among the members of the water committees.

The women group has also planned de-silting and disinfecting the water bodies filled with saline water and bacteria with the measures to be suggested by the scientists and experts. They have also decided to earmark 3 to 4 ponds (small water reservoirs) for use by the community people exclusively for bathing and cooking purposes. All the villagers will be motivated by them in this realm. For washing clothes, cattle bathing, and irrigation, a few ponds will be earmarked successively. They are also looking into innovative options, such as the plantation of saline-resistant trees that can facilitate underground water recharging. To avoid rainwater run-off, they have also started planting mangrove saplings during this monsoon period on a large scale. The women groups have also taken the initiative to make a nursery for growing mangroves.

3. 3. Irrigation capacity for agriculture

There is a big plot of agricultural land in Jugdia village under Mograhat II Community Development Block in South 24 Parganas. More than 400 farmers are engaged in farming in this land. They remain almost uncultivable due to lack of irrigation during the dry season and waterlogging (saturation of soil with water) during the monsoon season. Panchayat, Local Self Government, tried utmost but failed to arrive at a consensus. Afterward, the Women Group mobilized the Panchayat, landowners, sharecroppers, and farmers, and brought all the stakeholders under one platform.

Figure 5: Women manually irrigating land for rice farming



Women Group members came out with a feasible, innovative idea to excavate a sub-canal and connect it to the pre-existing larger canal about 3 kilometers away. This diversion would fulfill irrigation water requirements during the dry season and drain out excess water during the monsoon. The women groups were able to convince the landowners to donate the land to excavate the sub-canal. The local Panchayat has approved the proposal and assured to extend their administrative and financial support from their available government development schemes. This funding from Panchayat would help meet the excavation of the sub-canal and re-excavate the silted larger canal. With Nishtha women groups' intervention, higher officials from agriculture and irrigation departments of the State Government have already taken some effective measures to mitigate this perennial issue. Currently, the activities have been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In many areas, fish cultivation in local water bodies is also at stake since polluted water from the neighboring city floods into the local water bodies due to the overflow caused by heavy rainfall. The heavy rain, lack of irrigation water in dry months, and pollution are a severe threat for the entire community people in several areas.

3.4. Planned Installation of a “WATER ATM.”

Women typically walk 2 to 3 km to fetch drinking water in Birsa, Golabari, Maheshpur, Kalash, Nainan, Chakda, and many other villages. These villages come under Dhamua South Gram Panchayat and Nainan Gram Panchayet under Magrahat II Development Block. A few families also buy drinking water from the market.

Installation of a WATER ATM in a village has been planned by one of the Nishtha women groups. The women groups also convinced a villager to donate some land to construct the proposed WATER ATM. The local Panchayat has also assured the necessary support after these women groups reached out to Panchayat members to implement the plan and manage the kiosks. The group has decided to collect only one Indian Rupee (\$0.02) per liter as a service charge from the user-families for effective maintenance of the WATER ATM.

4 OUTCOMES OF THE NISHTHA WOMEN GROUP'S INITIATIVES

Since household water responsibilities are borne mostly by women, they understand and perceive value of water differently compared to other men in their households and communities. They understand the need for effective planning and the execution of the planned activities for their judicious use, preservation, and restoration for the sustenance of the entire community. Compared to male counterparts, women's role in understanding the problem and their determination to address the problem by working together is praiseworthy. In these communities, women have proven to be much more accessible and acceptable by all the stakeholders. It has nullified the traditional myth that 'women are ignorant and brainless machines.' By nature, women are the creator hence, they can aptly protect nature through achievable steps conceived by them by their instinct.

5 NISHTHA'S ACHIEVEMENTS

It has been observed that around 98 % of the girls supported by Nishtha have been retained in school. More than 98 % of girls have been protected from early marriage and early pregnancy. More than 1000 girls successfully passed the school-leaving examination (Secondary level), 675 passed higher secondary studies, and many are now going to colleges and universities. All the groups take active participation in different forms of awareness-generation programs effectively, and the group leaders have been able to mobilize group members in taking concerted actions against domestic violence and other social issues. There are approximately 15,000 members in adolescent groups, 18500 members in Mahila Mandals, 825 volunteers have come out from the committed and dedicated groups and lead these movements. They all are the backbones of Nishtha.

In recognition of the work, Nishtha has received several national and international awards listed below.

- *Ashoka Fellowship 1995* for the empowerment of groups of adolescent girls and women
- *Apeejay India Volunteer Awards 2011* for extraordinary work in promoting volunteer participation at over 5000 volunteer bases.
- *Vivekananda Medal 2014* from The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, for excellence in selfless work for the community.
- *Best NGO in West Bengal 2016*, for adolescent empowerment, by CINI.
- *Champion of Youth* award received by Empower USA, in the year 2017.

More than 10 years ago, Nishtha recognized that to empower women, education of women is essential. Nishtha developed two projects named Bikash and Bikash Rashmi projects to

educate girls of five poor villages. These projects are generously funded by Mr. and Mrs. Patrick McCann and Mr. and Mrs. David Steinglass of the USA. The girls that benefited from the program were from poor families, and their parents were often not educated.

After completing ten years of these two projects, close to 100 girls and 98 boys from these communities are now in college. Some even completed post-graduate studies and engineering. Now, these young girls and boys are real assets to these communities. The girls are highly active in managing disasters due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the Aamphan cyclone. These women are prepared to respond to these uncertainties from their learning from Bikash and Bikash Rashmi Projects' activities and from the training provided by Nishtha.

These initiatives have made women realize their own potentials and provided the strength and self-confidence to face any socio-economic and environmental challenge. Their leadership qualities have been built up, and the manifestation of their innovative ideas has also been noticed in eliminating different sorts of problems. Their understanding has been dramatically enhanced to perceive the injustice committed on them, e.g., child marriage, domestic violence, lack of education, information, and knowledge, and the intention of making them fragile. This miracle has happened primarily due to the sacrifices of mothers of these girls. They are all committed to getting their children educated.

Adolescent Girls groups also deserve praise since they have made changes in their families' status by being educated. The families suffer low-paying occupations with no way out to get out of poverty for generation after generation. These girls have overcome this barrier after becoming educated. A few of them have even obtained post-graduate degrees. Many girls have secured positions in the government sector and private companies. Educated individuals get due respect in their villages, and low-paying occupations have been challenged by them. Now, they are engaged in white-collar jobs. This is not merely a change; instead, it has brought about a sustainable change and a silent revolution. It will pave much more positive changes in the days to come for marching forward more progress.

These girls go to school after working at their agricultural field in the morning, having no proper home, getting insufficient food, having not enough time for study. Despite this, some of these girls got exceedingly good grades in their secondary and higher secondary exams. A few of them have become engineers, teachers, and some work in banks and police departments. They are securing jobs that are considered prestigious in society.

With continued efforts from Nishtha, these historically disadvantaged communities will continue to be educated, occupy prestigious professions, and break societal barriers. Education has brought this change. Nishtha is exceptionally grateful to the person who facilitated this change process, Guru

and Master, Dr. Arun Deb, who says, "change is possible, and only education can bring the desired change." Now, at Nishtha, we observe this miracle every day.

6 CONCLUSION

Clean and safe water is the foundation of the wellbeing of the entire human and non-human biodiversity. Health and hygiene can better be maintained if the accessibility of safe and clean water is ensured to communities. Besides enhancing their economic condition for augmenting the agricultural production, fisheries, cattle rearing, safe drinking water, and good hygiene will reduce family spending for medicines and treatment due to water-borne diseases. Simultaneously, a pleasant environment will be created to retain girls in school, prevent gender discrimination in the community. Finally, women's access and control over resources at the family and community can be achieved.

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