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Reaching the un-reached: Case studies of the learning initiatives of the street children in Kolkata

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Abstract:

This paper showcases three education initiatives from the Niharakana Rehabilitation Centre, the Nabadisha Project by the Women's Interlink Foundation and education-related projects by the Hope Foundation. These initiatives were coordinated by a school teacher, government bodies (Kolkata Municipal Corporation and Kolkata Police) and a Non Government Organisation (NGO). All three aim at facilitating learning and information among the street children as well as distressed children in Kolkata City in the state of West Bengal in India.

Keywords: reading, learning, outreach services, street children, Kolkata India

1. Introduction

The Indian subcontinent has a dense, multicultural and multilingual population; diverse geographic conditions; and different levels of growth and development. With a developing economy and often shoe-string budgets, it is difficult for the Government alone to cater for the basic needs of its citizens. Collaboration and cooperation between the various stake holders, public and private organizations and citizens, is necessary to ensure that the benefits of learning and education reach even the Below Poverty Line (BPL) population.

2. Objectives

This paper showcases three education initiatives from the Niharakana Rehabilitation Centre, the Nabadisha Project (Women's Interlink Foundation) and education-related projects by the Hope Foundation. These initiatives were coordinated catered by a school teacher, government bodies

(Kolkata Municipal Corporation and Kolkata Police) and Non Government Organisation (NGO). All three aim at facilitating learning and information among the street children as well as distressed children in Kolkata City in the state of West Bengal in India. The aim of these initiatives was to move beyond the four walls and traditional ways of reaching the un-reached.

3. Method

This study was confined to the street children in the Kolkata metropolis of West Bengal State of India. This paper showcases three different case studies in taking learning beyond the walls. The method used in each case study was non-participant observation followed by interviews of key persons/participants actively involved in the project. Online resources were also heavily analysed and explored. Emphasis was on creating un-conventional ways of reaching the un-reached and on creating a better life for the deprived through access to information and knowledge. For Kolkata, it is a case of *out with the old, in with the new*.

4. Case study 1: The Niharakana Rehabilitation Centre (2014)

This case study examines the personal project of an individual teacher who set out to provide new opportunities for footpath dwellers and distressed children. Mrs. Kanta Chakraborty, a primary school teacher, sought to use a different mode of delivery (learning both within and beyond the walls) and innovative formats to redesign learning in order to make it easier/simpler for children who had never been to school or who had an intermittent schooling background. Her main aim was to facilitate learning and literacy among under-privileged street children through non-conventional ways. The amount of formal schooling experienced by this group is variable, with many children having no experience of school. Problems such as dropping out, being first generation learners and fatigue due to starvation are prevalent. A focus of the project was to find practical ways to counter these challenges.



Image 1: Kanta and her girls

Commuters in Kolkata metropolis would regularly see the little beggar girls near Dum Dum train station. Some would give alms, while others would ignore them and pass by. However, when Mrs. Kanta Chakraborty, a primary school teacher, saw them for the first time it struck a chord in her heart. She tried to devise a more suitable, long term solution to the problem rather than handing over a few coins. She felt these girls deserved a chance for a better life. To bring these orphan girls back into society, Kanta started a school in 2007. From the onset, she received help and encouragement from her husband Mr. Chandan Chakraborty and a few well-wishers.

An initial problem was the space required for running the school. After much talk with different sectors, Kanta sought the cooperation of the Railway Hawkers' Union, Railway Police Force and some other kind-hearted railway employees to set up the Niharakana Rehabilitation Centre. Kanta started her school with only 3 to 4 girls at the offices of the Railway Hawkers' Union. Currently, the number of girls is 22. Problems faced by these girls include:

- homelessness;
- poor nutrition and lack of food;
- no clothes; and
- lack of protection from abuse and alienation from society.

They needed, on a bare minimum level, adequate food, shelter and clothing.

Kanta wanted to provide not only these basic needs for the girls, but also other social needs such as education, dance, drawing, learning how to swim and access to medical facilities. In short, she tried to provide an well-rounded and comprehensive education for these deserted and deprived girls.

Money was needed for food, school uniforms, books, dance and swimming costumes and for various other purposes. A large chunk of her salary (as well as her husband's salary) was used for this purpose. Some philanthropic people also contributed to the cause by sponsoring a child or contributing towards dresses or a festive meal. Two ways used by Niharkana Centre to raise fund are to:

1. sponsor a child; and
2. donate money through PayPal

Space for the school was found in premises adjacent to the Dum Dum railway platform and at the Metro Railway premises during the monsoon period. A typical school day runs from 8 - 10am where the girls are taught at the Centre. Then all these children go to different regular schools and classes based on their age and academic achievement. This is followed by singing, dancing or swimming classes. From 6 - 8pm the girls once again have classes at the Centre.



Image 2: Dance Performance

The Niharkana girls are given four nutritious meals a day and tuition is provided by Kanta and other volunteers in the morning. After school, they are given snacks and evening tuition. In between, they take music-dance-drawing and other lessons. Some of these extra-curricular teachers give free or subsidized tuition. Still some money and dresses are required for these activities too. The eldest one of the group is now in class IX and some of the girls are currently first and second in their class. Some have also won prizes in extra-curricular activities. These girls along with a handicapped little boy are enjoying their childhood just like mainstream children due to efforts the kind-hearted Kanta. Kanta's aim is to bring them back into the fold of the mainstream society.

Long term work such as this project should not be ignored. Kanta and her team have received recognition and awards from the State Bank of India Officers' Association (Bengal Circle), The Telegraph Ananya School Award and the Anvesha Medha Award. Other awards include the Frank Brothers Honour for an Educationist 2010 and the West Bengal Women's Commission Award 2011. Praise for Kanta's vision and work has been received from renowned Bengali novelist Sri Samaresh Majumder in 2011 and Sananda Nihar Samman from the Sananda Television Channel in 2012. Reports about the good work done by Niharkana Rehabilitation Centre have also appeared in major Kolkata-based Bengali and English newspapers.

As evidenced from the media and awards, Niharkana has already created a ground-breaking model. Replication of this model has begun or will begin soon at different locations and Kanta has high hopes of continuing beyond school level to college and university for group of the girls she is nurturing. When asked about other girls in the same situation, she hopes that others will take up a similar role according to their .

5. Case study 2: The Women's Interlink Foundation

The Women's Interlink Foundation (WIF) is a non government organization (NGO) and was founded in 1990. This organization works in the area of women, child and community development related projects. WIF focuses on needs-based interventions, which are scalable and replicable, and works at national and international levels to promote social justice and sustainability. The organization addresses a number of issues at all possible levels including education and skills development. This paper presents the work done on literacy.

A variety of programs that fall under the *Nabadisha Education Project* (WIF, 2014) are summarized in Table 1 below.

Nabadisha Project started in the 1999			
Responsibilities shared by WIF, Kolkata Police, concerned members of the local community			
Purpose	Through bridging course to formal schooling		
Beneficiaries	537 children	47 in Bridge Course class (three Rs)	490 in Remedial class (tution)
Number of police stations covered	15	Passed the 2012 Exam - 100%	
Girl traffick victims went to school	10	Passed Madhyamik - 24	
Mainstreamed in the last year	65 children	Passed higher secondary - 2	
Girl traffick victims girls in vocational training	11	Vocations such as tailoring, jewelry making, beautician course	
Sensitization programs in schools	110 students and 14 teachers	How to avoid traps laid by the traffickers and how to protect themselves	
Health Cards	All children		

Table 1: Nabadisha, education project for street and working children with Kolkata Police

These children are also taking part in cultural programs as well as in art, essay and sports competitions. On festive occasions, they are given special meals and/or new clothes. The WIF, the Community and the Kolkata Police jointly take responsibility for these children. The skill-based training programs were organised in the red light areas where thirteen trainees completed their courses, with eight already in the workforce. The trainees use their new skills to earn a living and many other women-in-prostitution from nearby areas have shown interest in the programs.

The Key to Freedom project

The *Key to Freedom Project* was set up in 2012 after the Duke of York met Aloka Mitra, the founder of WIF, and some of the young women and girls WIF had rescued from the sex trade. The Duke has lent a helping hand towards marketing products made by these distressed women.

6. Case study 3: The HOPE Foundation

The aims of the HOPE Foundation (HOPE, 2014) centre on the removal of social inequalities. A main goal is to develop mainstream education programs for the children of vulnerable communities. Among its education-related activities, two are focused on literacy:

1. the preparation of preschool children for primary school; and
2. building awareness of the need for education.

HOPE works in association with the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, a State Government body.



Image 3: Daring to HOPE project - literacy for working children

Yearly Intake		Intended For	Through
Girls	490	Education of Slum Children	Learning and coaching centres
Boys	451		
Total	941		
Target population		3 to 18 years of operational pockets	Ward no. 03, 06, 20, 29, 32,39,45,58, 82, 84, 85, 86, 94 and 127 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation

Table 2: HOPE education activities, summary

Yearly Intake			Intended For	Through
Male	Female	Total	Direct beneficiary reaching 10, 497 people	Awareness camp Stakeholder sensitization Parent meetings Parents Committee Meeting Home visits
58	40	98	3 Years to 5 Years	Early learning centers
363	398	761	Age Group: 6 Years to 18 years	Coaching centers
20	36	56	Outreach Sponsorship	Sponsored by outside Indian families and Indian families Education of slum children
Target Population			3 to 18 years of operational pockets	Ward no. 03, 06, 20, 29, 32,39,45,58, 82, 84, 85, 86, 94 and 127 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation

Table 3: HOPE education activities, breakdown dataset

Outcomes from the HOPE Kolkata Municipal Corporation partnership include the following.

- Academic achievement - To encourage the students, a scholarship of Rs is awarded. 1000 rupees per annum is given to students who securing 50% and above marks. Last year, 55 students secured this scholarship.
- Awareness camp - Awareness Camps are organized on education-related issues such as the right to education, literacy campaigns, dropout issues and child marriage, and the role of parents and teacher committees in school.
- Train the trainers - 37 staff training sessions have been conducted with an average of 24 staff attending each training session.
- Involvement of the government organizations and neighbourhood communities -The Kolkata Municipal Corporation is associated and collaborates with the HOPE Foundation in a variety of ways. A local businessman named Asif Hussein has donated a computer for the children and the local club has arranged for a teacher for teaching computer literacy to the children.
- Capacity building through international collaboration (Froebel Group of College, Ireland) – The Froebel Group of College, Ireland is in partnership with HOPE and provided teacher training sessions four times during 2013.
- Involvement of the stakeholders - Parents play a crucial role in education. The Parents Committee was formed and conducts regular meetings to examine education and rights issues.
- School enrolment camps - Though an enrolment camp where teachers, HOPE-nurtured students and different school authorities were present , seven children were selected for admission to a number of mainstream. Among these children, there those working in tea shops and other small-income jobs.
- Networking and advocacy and enrolment camps - Three hundred and sixty children went into formal schooling and twenty-four children were admitted to the local ICDS through regular visits to local schools by the local Member of Legislative Assembly and Member of Parliament.
- Cultural activities – These include sit and draw competition, sports days, Independence Day celebrations, Children's Day celebrations. Children took active interest and took part in recitation, songs and games. Sweets and chocolates were distributed.
- Hope Foundation English program – The Macmillan English program, taught by Liam O'Connor involves teaching teacher who have English as second language at the Education Coaching Center of the HOPE Foundation.

7. Conclusion:

This paper showcases three partnerships between public and private bodies, and citizens to develop literacy outcomes and educational opportunities for the street children and distressed children in Kolkata, India. Showcasing such literacy initiatives assists in raising global awareness and the visibility for such programs, which in turn helps to stimulate the replication of these programs. By sharing responsibility at the local level instead of expecting government to solve or fund all problems, local communities also become more active and educated about the role of education and literacy in creating life-changing opportunities for all children and adults.

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