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## **From the Cocoon to the Butterfly: the metamorphosis of my Self**

*I have mentioned many a times during the MacArthur Leadership Development project period that the decision to formulate the project in concrete, applicable terms, and to apply for a grant to actually put my ideas into practice, signified the beginning of a personal voyage. An expedition for discovering myself. For checking the validity of ideas gathered over years of experience in social research in the sphere of gender. For testing out the growing belief that intervention is needed among adolescents to ascertain sustainable changes in mindsets. For verifying how central an understanding of issues sexual is to the process of empowerment and agency development. Everything I have done during the project period has been a fulfilment of that initial dream. Markers in the success of the voyage I had in mind. Transcendence, even.*

*When this project entitled **Adolescent Sexuality and Fertility: Reaching an Informed Choice** got formulated and submitted to the MacArthur Foundation for consideration in late 1998, neither sexuality nor adolescents had yet emerged as major concerns on the international development agenda. Women's reproductive health was still very much the focus, with sexual health sneaking in through the roundabout route of apprehensions over the rapid spread of HIV / AIDS. And, there was Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) as a separate concern, for those specialising in working with children. Adolescents had just been recognised as a specific group needing programmes specially designed for them, but that recognition had not yet found concrete expressions in the world of developmental efforts.*

*The acceptance of this proposal, therefore, was indicative of more than a personal success. It signified the beginning of a programme particularly designed for adolescents, of shifting the focus from reproductive and sexual health to sexuality per se - certainly the first of its kind in West Bengal, where this project was based.*

*Attending an International Conference on Adolescent Reproductive Health in November 2000, when this project was halfway through, I came to feel the enormity of this project at one level. That such a conference was happening at that point of time was already a validation of the significance of the programme. But what*

had struck me most, as I sat listening to presentation after presentation, was the methodological exclusivity of the project, as also the distinctiveness of its target group. Every single report presented in that conference was based on macro studies relying primarily on quantitative methods, stressing informed consent as the legitimating factor of the studies.

How informed are our adolescents, I wondered. How empowered to give or withdraw consent? Especially in a culture that teaches the young to always accept the adult as just and accurate? And, what right did adult researchers have to intrude into something so private and personal as sexual behaviour and experiences? Were we violating their right to privacy and silence? What were we giving the participating adolescents in return of their role as objects of research? To transform them into subjects, so to say? What were such studies doing for their empowerment and agency building? And, above all, what was the guarantee behind their responses not being carefully constructed, politically correct answers? In other words, how reliable would the data generated through such studies be?

I do not mean to imply in any way that the reports presented in that important conference lacked merit or import. Nor that there was not enough representation from the sphere of interventionist activities. I state these questions as they had helped me articulate the USP of this project clearly.

This was a micro level, qualitative intervention that was open-ended to accommodate needs assessment by the participating adolescents themselves, so that they were able to direct the course of the entire endeavour. At the end of two years and a half, it is quite clear to me that this method of developing a non-intrusive space for adolescents - where they could voice, debate, discuss and settle their own needs and concerns - especially those surrounding sexuality and gender - would emerge in future as an important methodology in the sphere of interventionist activities for adolescents. My invitation to the European Social Science and History Conference, to be held in February-March 2002 in The Hague, Netherlands, to present a work-based paper on *Interventions in Adolescent*

*Sexuality: Methodological Musings* is a pointer to the academic significance of this project, I believe.

Much more important is the growth of the project participants, of course. The emergence of DIKSHA is the single most substantial indicator of the value and success of the programme that the Foundation had decided to fund. The participants of this programme have impressed IFSHA, an organisation based in New Delhi, India, so much through two residential workshops that IFSHA has decided to take DIKSHA forward as a pilot project in the sphere of peer educator development. That, too, justifies my sense of achievement.

My personal growth is inseparably intertwined with the expansion of the project itself. I have learnt from my partners how complex and multidimensional sexuality actually is. That understanding has helped me sort out my own sexual self, helping me to heal the wounds within and to emerge as a more focused person, confident enough of her own strengths, enabled to be a lot more accepting and accommodating than before. Devising innovative techniques for running the programme has needed me to make my creativity flow at its best, to brush up performance skills acquired over years and left to rust, to consolidate whatever I've ever learnt theoretically and practically so as to be able to give the project my best efforts.

If this experience has helped me grow professionally as a facilitator / communicator, that same growth has, in turn, facilitated the resolution of many personal conflicts and minimised chances of miscommunications at the personal level also. It is difficult, indeed, to separate the two aspects of growth - the professional and the personal. In fact, the entire experience has made me become confident to dream big, tolerant enough to accommodate and understand differences, composed enough to be a good facilitator / communicator. These are growths that are equally relevant to the personal and professional aspects of my existence.

Professionally speaking, this project - its challenges, its transcendence and its success - has helped me to be able to clearly identify the specific sphere I want to

concentrate on. I've found my vocation finally, I'd say. The sphere is: the development of inner strength. The methodology: understanding sexuality as a concept in all its dimensions and sort out the sexual self in the process. The means towards achieving this goal: introspective journeys using a wide range of techniques. This concretisation has been my biggest professional gain, and the fact that I've been able to run and develop a programme that can generate such concretisation has been my most remarkable achievement.

At the end of the first year of this project, I'd begun my self-evaluation thus:

If I have to express the entire experience through one word, I would say exhilarating . . . It has been a firm test of my originality and creativity on the one hand, and of my capacity for implementing the same effectively, on the other . . . My single most important contribution during the project period: putting an explorative but non-intrusive action research on adolescent sexuality on the agenda and creating a non-classroom methodology for the same . . . One of the most significant findings in this context is the overall empowerment that the process has come to signify for our young partners.

Don't think I could have put it any better today. But, at the end of the second year, I would add 'fulfilment' and 'self-assurance' to the feeling of exhilaration that had already been there. It is this combination that is giving me the courage to take DIKSHA forward beyond Kalighat, to introduce the DIKSHA core team as resource persons for a similar programme with fresh groups of adolescents in Kalighat and elsewhere. Hence also the plan to take DIKSHA to average Bengali-medium schools. Not only would that imply initiating the same process for a much larger group of adolescents - it would also mean the mainstreaming of our participants as able resource persons capable of training up fellow teenagers from 'normal', 'respectable' families. Hopefully, in another couple of years - these projections would be concrete achievements. With the success of this project behind me, I can confidently say so.

*It is quite impossible for me to single out any specific achievement as the single most important one from this entire process of attainments. However, if compelled, I'd mention the emergence of a group of community leaders from among the deprived and ostracised kids of red light zones. What years of developmental activities in one area by a number of NGOs concentrating on the welfare of women in sex work and their children had failed to achieve, has been attained through just two years of concentrated efforts. That, too, of just two individuals lacking official infrastructure and adequate funds. That very fact speaks its own story, I'd think. If challenged to substantiate this claim, I would simply invite the challengers to come and spend an hour with the DIKSHA core group - the lively, bubbly, able group of adolescents who are now in the process of consolidating the first-ever adolescent organisation in our part of the country. When this core group is seen in contrast to the new entrants to DIKSHA - a shy, unsure-of-themselves group, exactly as these other kids were two years ago, the impact of the programme will become clear enough to see for anyone who wants to.*

*One more thing remains to be said: thanking the Mac Arthur Foundation for making this entire endeavour possible. Had the selection board not shared in my vision, had they not taken me into confidence as capable of putting such an exploratory project into practice - DIKSHA might never have been born.*

*Pavani Bhanu*

*January 2002*





## The Notion at the Outset

When Paramita had started working in a concentrated manner with the adolescents in Kalighat, Khidirpur and Sonagachhi in August 1999, the project she had in mind was as follows:

- Aim: Empowering adolescent participants through an understanding of their own bodies and sexuality
- Method: Selecting teams of 20 – 25 teenagers of both sexes from red light areas
- Need to address both sexes together to –
  - ✓ Challenge traditional sexual / gendered role divisions
  - ✓ Shift the customary focus of 'responsible' sexual behaviour on women alone
  - ✓ Generate male involvement in gendered matters since the formative stage
- Map their own ideas about sexuality and fertility, focusing on the identification of the gray areas
- Sustained workshops to generate knowledge and understanding of:
  - ✓ Their own bodies
  - ✓ Sexuality
  - ✓ Fertility
- Emphasis on
  - ✓ Challenging taboos and stereotypes
  - ✓ Fostering healthy sexual attitudes
  - ✓ Consensus in sexual acts
  - ✓ Safe sex practices
- Methodology: Interactive open-ended workshops with no pre-determined modules so as to generate needs assessment by the participants themselves, and proceed accordingly
- All techniques to be used should be essentially non-classroom to ensure pro-active participation
- Development of project partners into a resource team
- Evolve performances on the things exposed and learnt, and use them as communicative tools for advocacy and outreach
- Through all the above, prove that:
  - ✓ Adolescent sexuality can be addressed, analysed and channelised into positive directions
  - ✓ There is scope for creating a new language of discourse on sexuality and fertility
  - ✓ Bringing out the element of agency in project participants, paving the way for their growth as thinking adults with values more gender-just than is the norm at the present



## The Project as it happened

An attempt at evaluating the process at the end of the first year had highlighted a significant transcendence from the original plan. The journey from *Adolescent Fertility and Sexuality: Reaching an Informed Choice* towards DIKSHA had already begun, though that was not yet apparent. What happened over the second year is basically the completion of that process of transition. Today, about six months after the completion of the MacArthur project, DIKSHA is a reality.

The end of the first year brought Paramita and Sumita the first real chance of looking at the project through an outsider's eyes. They were both too closely involved in this challenging but rewarding experience to be able to maintain a strictly objective point of view and measure the impact of their work from a distance. It was, therefore, a definite advantage for them that the Foundation sent Mr. Feisal Alkazi to evaluate their work. It was his report that gave their own work a concrete shape for them to look at and appraise. 'The evaluator is of the opinion that Paramita may need to revisit / rewrite her project objectives so that they are concrete, more feasible to achieve and have a sharper focus' – he had written. The second year's journey towards DIKSHA signifies that revisiting / rewriting, culminating in a tangible, easy-to-recognise goal that has now been attained.

When this work was started, the kids in Khidirpur could not believe that they might ever be asked anything by any 'aunty' unless the answer had been tutored before. Imagination was a faculty that seemed alien to these deprived and deceived kids. Nearly two years down the line, as Sumita and Paramita were working out strategies for a meaningful round off, the same children from Khidirpur were creating smart little skits that related directly to their everyday lives. Problems they were facing as growing children in an atmosphere at best indifferent towards their needs, and abusive and exploitative at worst. The problem of eve teasing and coping techniques emerged as one of the major issues. Questions of free mixing of the sexes, defying the prevalent norm of strictly segregating boys and girls as they reached puberty also surfaced noticeably. Asgari, Wahab, Rehana, Salman, Sultana, Sakina ..... and others like them were identifying the issues, working out refutations, finding forms of representation and chiselling them. They were all dreaming to be touring performers. 'Performers with a message to spread' – as they themselves would say.

Way back at the end of the first year, Mr. Feisal Alkazi had captured certain important indicators of the Khidirpur situation in graphic details:

. . . An hour had already elapsed without us realizing it. Several little lessons have been learnt along the way – how to share these improvised tools, for instance. For behind this process of modelling clay, there is a larger vision, a bigger picture. Paramita throws a question out to the group – how does menstruation occur? They have done it last week, one of the older boys explains, using the plasticine model to elucidate what he is saying. An excellent example of male involvement at a very young age!

In April 2001, in a lively discussion about the relative strength of men and women – a debate deliberately initiated by one of the resource persons taken to the centre for doing an internal evaluation – Wahab, by then 14, categorically stated: ‘Men may have more physical strength, but women can carry a baby for nine whole months. They also are very strong!’ Wahab – deserted by his sex-worker mother soon after birth, grown up as an orphan by sheer grit, perhaps, hated the term ‘woman’ when this programme had started all those months back! To a similar argument towards the beginning, when Wahab played the bully in the group and would simply NOT let any of the younger girls respond to anything, he had disdainfully said: ‘Kyaa jaanti hayn ladkilog? Sirf nakhraa karti hay!’ (What do girls know about anything? They can only act coquettish and coy!) What better way to capture the process of change than to quote Wahab himself?!

Every single participant in Khidirpur has thus proved a vital point: that an ability to address issues of sexuality that occupy an adolescent mind in many ways through different stages of puberty CAN help all-round development. These little kids from Khidirpur had, in fact, taught the slightly older participants of Kalighat an important lesson in one of the residential workshops that IFSHA had done with them. In an exercise, all participants of that residential workshop in September 2000 had created a puppet to capture the child that resides inside each one of them. When the time came to putting on the vagina / penis, it was the Khidirpur lot that carried on smartly – supplying the necessary details even to the IFSHA resource team – and egged the ‘bhaiyaas’ (elder brothers) and ‘didis’ (elder sisters) from Kalighat to overcome their embarrassment and carry on with the task at hand.

Given the background of extra conservatism that these young kids of Khidirpur suffer from owing to their religious faiths, this is no mean achievement. The attitude of a certain ‘community leader’ (male, of course) in Khidirpur happens to be: ‘Young girls from Muslim families – all they need is to learn the basics of reading and writing, a bit of embroidery and that’s it! Why should they have anything to do with songs and dance and theatre? . . . How dare you [Paramita and Sumita] get them to prepare models of the vagina and the penis and the uterus and display all that to outsiders?!’ A ‘community leader’ who happens to be a strict believer in the rule of the cudgel, subjecting the kids to terrifying beatings

whenever he feels defied. A 'community leader' who had made it a point to visit the house of each participant to persuade their mothers from withdrawing the kids from the weekly sexuality workshops that Paramita and Sumita were facilitating. This is an aspect that the Khidirpur participants have had to tackle, which is significantly different from the situation in Kalighat. Full credit, therefore, goes to those young leaders of Khidirpur to successfully tackle such repressive pressures and carry the process of internal development on. It was at this point that the implications of the sexuality education project became clearly visible to Paramita and Sumita beyond the immediately visible.

A woman passer-by: Dekh, yeh ladki log kitni kharab hayn – ladkosen gap maar rahe hayn! (Look how bad these girls are – chatting with boys!)

The companion of the above: Aajkaalke ladki kuchh aisi hoti hayn. (Today's girls are like that only.)

One of the girls from the group – Itni jaldi kisike bare me buraa sochnaa ghalat hay. (It's not right to think ill of anyone so easily.)

First woman – Aare chhod! Koi sharif gharki ladki raaste mein khade ho kar lodkonse baat karti?! (Shut your gob! Does any girl from a respectable family ever stand on the road talking openly to boys like this?)

Another girl from the group – Sharif dil ki hun, is liye to saare mahallake saamne baat karti hun! (I have a clean heart and that's why I can talk (to boys) openly like this, in front of everyone to see!)

Part of a skit created by the Khidirpur partners

The situation in Kalighat had always been somewhat different from that of Khidirpur. Because the poverty here is not quite as stark as in Khidirpur. Because most of the Kalighat participants are school-going. Because the bulk of the programme partners belong to a slightly older age-group. While most participants in Khidirpur were in the 12-13 age-group, the majority in Kalighat was in the 14-16 age-bracket. So, the Kalighat participants contributed the most in expanding the concept of sexuality much beyond the body and its erotogenic zones. They brought in questions on love and romance; distinguishing between and articulating on different kinds of love; on the role of the body and the heart in this emotion and so on and so forth. One of the important conclusions arrived at through these debates and discussions was, as several of the participants put it quite succinctly: 'If I can learn to love my body, I'll behave with responsibility towards it'. The importance of such a realisation can hardly be over-emphasised in a situation where child sexual abuse is accepted as a 'normal' part of growing up for girls

and non-existent for boys; where strong dissociation with one's body very often forms the only defence mechanism available to cope with the indignity of the life situations these kids and women have to face.

Sessions in Kalighat have always centred specifically on issues that the participants themselves had wanted to address. Trafficking of women and children, with special emphasis on the trafficking of male children, for instance. The reason they wanted to focus specially on the question of the trafficking of young boys was that, it happens to be an issue seldom addressed in workshops / discussions that focus primarily on the problem from a womanist point of view. The same thing happened with the sessions the partners had demanded on sexual abuse, including child sexual abuse. Here also, they came up with loads of questions and debates about the abuse of young boys. The special significance of this topic had already surfaced earlier when a 14 year old male participant had expressed concern at being mocked as 'less than male' by others of his age if his experience of abuse as a child got known.

Another topic that emerged as a major concern was HIV / AIDS. The partners in Kalighat came up with a wide range of questions formed in their minds from half digested information, gathered from the media and several one-day workshops they had attended through another organisation working in the area.

These sessions threw up vital pointers to a couple of key concerns in the sphere of adolescent development in general. Firstly, the criticality of addressing the needs of male children specifically and separately, for the repression of patriarchy affects both genders, though undoubtedly in different forms, and in varying degrees. If a gamut of restrictions and second classing create special situations of exploitation and oppression for women of all ages and backgrounds, the set notion of masculinity also makes working with the adolescent males quite challenging in different way. In fact, it is possible to argue that much of the burden of the pre-determined notion of masculinity could surface in this programme primarily because sessions were being held in mixed-gender groups and participants of both the sexes were already questioning set gender norms. If this experimentation with a mixed-gender group has facilitated male involvement in crucial factors that help reinforce and perpetrate patriarchal gender norms, it has also opened up ways and means of better understanding among the sexes. It has made possible the questioning of prevalent perceptions of both masculinity and femininity, making it redundant to underline gender oppression separately. These participants have developed a better and in-depth understanding of the construct of gender itself, for they have been able to identify the everyday manifestations of this abstract notion.

It deserves to be mentioned in this connection that the Kalighat kids started involving themselves with issues that had hitherto been the concern of Paramita and Sumita. They themselves started asking questions about the future of the programme. Came up with suggestions for fund-raising and awareness

campaigns. Poster exhibitions, street corner performances and leaflet distribution were some of the suggestions that had come up. They were quite clear on one point: visibility first; then only could funds be mobilized. What an evaluator had pointed out a year ago as a major lack in the project – inadequate (read non-existent) planning for achieving visibility – was now being identified and redressed by the participants themselves. It was at this stage that Adolescent Sexuality and Fertility: An Informed Choice transcended its own scope and DIKSHA: Discovering Inner Knowledge & Sexual Health Awareness was born.

The third centre in Sonagachhi had been our problem centre right since the beginning, owing to a variety of reasons. Unlike our partners in Khidirpur and Kalighat the participants in Sonagachhi seemed to have no urgent need to know, which could well be a result of over-exposure to a variety of development programmes carried out in the area. Partners whose mothers are not sex workers also had a sneering attitude towards those whose mothers are in the sex trade; a very important difference from both the other centres. Stereotypical gender consciousness was also found to be more firmly entrenched among these kids.

One thing that we need to mention, though, is that sessions here (in Sonagachhi) tend to lapse into the classroom mode of passive listening – an aspect we are not happy with at all. We are in the process of thinking up techniques that could facilitate the above discussions through active participation..... Girls have been perceived to be immensely unhappy with their state of existence while boys do not have any such perception. The issue of domestic violence emerged as a major problem in the lives of girls living here... We have just introduced the term 'sex' to our partners here. In response to what they understand by the term, participants have come up with a variety of weird responses. But, those who do have some idea, think of 'sex' as an act that is essentially immoral in nature. A detailed discussion on sex and sexuality has just begun here.

From the six-monthly report, year 2

Basing our next sessions on these observations, we started implementing the Khidirpur approach here – focusing on sexuality as essentially a clinical-biological phenomenon that has little to do with morality. In the sessions that followed, we concentrated on the biological aspects of adolescence, i.e. on the changes that occur during this period and the reasons thereof, using plasticine modelling as the method of participatory learning. There were detailed sessions on menstruation, sperm and ova, fertilization, conception, the development of

the foetus in the uterus, and artificial insemination – all topics that the participants particularly wanted to learn about. Each session was planned and executed on the basis of their questions, and finally, during the last lap of the programme, our Sonagachhi partners were fully into the process of actively learning all about sexuality. Two older girls, aged 14 and 15, started coming out with specific questions. Became vocal about their own ideas of sex and sexuality. Intimacy had finally been established; the taboo had been broken.

Notable were the responses that our Sonagachhi partners came up with in response to the question of what they understand by ‘sex’. Very instructive in terms of indicating their level of sexual exposure, in fact. Having skin hair stand on its end, and having a funny sensation in the breasts when a man touches them were two of the most graphic examples that had come up. These were, for the participants, ‘sex’. Combined with the assertion that to fall in love is immoral and wrong, the above experiential details reveal a different picture altogether. Sensations acquired through ‘mild and harmless’ abuse by their mothers’ clients? Or, gained from letting a fast food guy fondle them in exchange of an egg roll? Questions that Paramita and Sumita were left wondering, for subsequent sessions that would gradually bring such secrets up could not be held as the local organisation that given access folded up.

As in Khidirpur and Kalighat, in Sonagachhi also – discussions on the X and Y chromosomes generated much interest, and subsequent debates on gender issues. This has been one of the major learning experiences of this programme that information about a ‘simple’ biological fact can be the source of so much soul searching on gender questions, and can generate female empowerment, male involvement, and through all of that – significant understandings of patriarchy.

#### Gender Woes!

‘Everything I’ve learned through these sessions have been interesting, except that bit on Y chromosomes doing nothing.’

Bappa Ghosh, a 13 year old male participant at Sonagachhi

‘If the Y chromosome does nothing, then it must be the female!’

Tapasi Das, a 14 year old female participant at Sonagachhi

At this stage, guided imagery about one’s own body, combined with wish fulfilment charts were repeated – primarily to check if the detailed sessions on the clinical aspects of sexuality had anyway helped them overcome the earlier problems/negative feelings they had about their bodies and their dreams. Especially, the older girls. The experimentation proved successful, as revealed both through charts and through the reports of their inward journeys. For instance, the glitziness of the earlier wish fulfilment charts was

gone this time round, with the dreams concentrating much more on homeliness and inner peace. The fierce individuality of this group of participants also seemed to be yielding place to feelings of greater collectivism, as most of them mentioned meeting others in their journeys outside their bodies. This was the first time that our Sonagachhi partners really started emerging as a cohesive group.



## Hurdles Faced & Crossed

It should be mentioned that running the programme has not really been of ‘vini-vidi-vici’ ease. The intimacy Paramita & Sumita shares today with the mothers of their participants would hardly reflect the resistance the programme had to face initially from these same women. It had not been easy to convince the mothers that a programme addressing adolescent sexuality was necessary at all. Another strong source of supporting Kalighat today is the Abahelita Nari Yubak O Shishu Kalyan Samity (which would translate to An Association for the Welfare of Neglected Women, Youth and Children), an organisation born out of local needs for development, started many years before NGO activism had become fashionable. But, towards the beginning, Ms. Bela Roy, Secretary of the organisation had firm objections to the children of her area being trained about ‘immoral things’. It is the development of the participants, and the gradual emergence of an everyday intimacy with Paramita and Sumita that finally won the mothers and Abahelita over to the side of the programme and made them staunch supporters.

Many different levels of tensions also resulted specifically from working in collaboration with a bigger NGO. The idea of the collaboration was born out of the need of preventing duplication of efforts, but the partnership has not been an easy one. Some of the difficulties need to be highlighted, for they include several significant lessons learnt:

- ✓ A go-ahead from the head quarters of an organisation does not necessarily imply smooth sailing at the field level. The personality, the personal likes / dislikes / biases of field staff can affect the programme variously.
- ✓ Clash of interests might become inevitable, especially when the smaller programme is of a pilot kind, exploring new grounds. The development and impact of such a programme can well remain beyond the vision of the permitting NGO and that can entirely change the initial understanding.
- ✓ Another problem that can emerge is an insidious effort to swallow the smaller programme as one run by the bigger NGO, obliterating the efforts of the individual interventionists in the process and denying recognition and visibility to the distinctiveness of the programme. The infrastructural superiority of an established NGO with a full-fledged office and bevy of hierarchically organised staff can do this at a level impossible for a small team to deal with.
- ✓ The only strategy to deal with such problems is to develop independent rapport with the partners we have worked with, with the women in sexk whose children they are and with other significant personalities of these areas that has made it possible to take DIKSHA forward.

## Consolidating the Roots: The Disseminative Programme in Kalighat

As already presaged, Kalighat has been the centre that advanced most during the project period. That is why, Paramita and Sumita decided to have the disseminative programme at Kalighat, through a performance conceived and executed by participants. The programme turned out to be a huge success – in more senses than one – even though the kids had less than a month to plan, prepare and present

At one point of time, I was somewhat irritated with these two (Paramita and Sumita): what could they really be doing with a bunch of kids and all this sexual business? That is what keeps happening here, anyway. What more do these kids need to learn about anything sexual? Then I had a talk with them one day. Paramita and Sumita were there, of course, but it was these kids who explained. And, how well they did it! Gaining some knowledge about the so-called private parts of the body... You need that even to go to a doctor and specify what exactly is wrong with you. Even when it's a simple infection. And, the need is much more in our kind of an area. Kids here are much more at risk because of their mothers' trade; because of the sexually overcharged atmosphere...When the growing children of my area could convince me so well, what more would I have to say? I wish DIKSHA all success and hope that these kids will carry the process on further.

Excerpts from Ms Bela Roy's speech in DIKSHA's disseminative programme

For the first time in two years, this programme was being opened for inspection by others who lived away from this area. To friends and acquaintances of Paramita, Sumita and their project partners. To the media. The kids, their mothers and the other residents of the area overcame their customary resistance to media exposure and asked their 'aunties' to invite 'as many people from the press and the TV channels' as possible.

Residents of the area filled a large part of that huge hall, as did eager, adolescent

spectators from other areas. Friends and acquaintances invited by the Kalighat participants. Kids from Khidirpur and Sonagachhi were also there, of course. And, there were many from the NGO world – the real top brass from those with their head quarters in Kolkata. Friends from Maitree, a network of West Bengal based voluntary organisations and women's rights activists. Primarily to witness what Paramita, also a member of Maitree and variously connected with many different member organisations through a variety of voluntary services, had been doing so secretively, hidden away in a corner in some dingy Kalighat room, over the last two years. People from the academic and corporate worlds. People from

different fields of creative arts. All friends of Sumita and Paramita, curious to find out what it is that had kept these two so unaccountably, mysteriously busy. And the media people also came. To a hot and half-dirty hall in Kalighat High School – the school next door where most of the boys of the area go to. Tucked away in a narrow lane adjacent to the ‘outlines’, plaster peeling from its walls, cobwebs lining its window grilles, just two large pedestal fans inadequately airing a thirty feet by forty feet hall on a typically hot and humid August day in Kolkata. Not the ideal venue to hold the first media exposure, surely, since the NGOs in Kolkata by and large organise their programmes in select halls / auditoriums, if the media is to be invited. But, the people came. From the print media. From television channels. And, they stayed – felt ‘impelled to stay’, as one of them put it, for the entire programme. Spent time moving around, looking at the collage exhibition the kids had put up. Collages they had made on different topics at various stages of the project. They came back for separate longer interviews with the kids and their aunties, preferring to showcase the project rather than just the day’s programme. DIKSHA is proud today to have a steady flow of friends, supporters and acquaintances in the media world who keep inquiring about the progress of the project – out of personal human interest.

When it was time to begin the programme, however, some of the presenters were found busy taking part in a game of cricket being played on the school ground; some of them were dressing up, while some others were happily fighting over their respective duties for the day. It was a scene of near-total chaos with Paramita and Sumita breathlessly running around, attending to guests and media while simultaneously trying to muster the performers, so as to begin the programme.

It was a different picture altogether, the moment the first reeds of the harmonium sounded. Those unruly, unmanageable, bickering-bantering kids held the two hundred strong motley of spectators spellbound. The

response, indeed, was overwhelming. And all credits to the participants of DIKSHA, from whom

**The planning stage:**

Anita, F15 (and Shampa, 14 too): We’ll prepare skits on all that we’ve learnt.

Ashish, M14: A play on AIDS

Shiuli, F14: We’ll make things that we’ve learnt to make.

Puppets, for instance.

Saptami, F13: We should display the collages we’ve made.

Supriyo, M12: Performances on child trafficking.

Mili, F18: We’ll create skits and puppet plays.

Kalpana, F16: Plays on sexual abuse of women and children.

Mrityunjoy, M18: Plays we’ll create for sure, but we should also have charts on the changes that happen in the body during adolescence.

Amrito, M16: We should do something on sexual abuse.

Paramita and Sumita have also learnt such a great deal, that this project has now won a steady set of friends who have offered a variety of help and voluntary services.

The items finally presented were a collage exhibition, a brief talk on the entire project, a puppet play on child trafficking, skit-cum-puppet plays on trafficking of women and on the spread of HIV/AIDS through drug addiction, and a short play on the budding sexuality of adolescents, their own sense of responsibility growing out of understanding their bodies and their emerging sexual being, and the adult society's refusal to accept the young adults' emerging sense of self, agency and dependability in matters sexual.

Thanks to Ms Ratnaboli Ray, Ashoka Fellow and Managing Trustee, ANJALI Rehabilitation Programme, friend to Paramita and Sumita, an advisor to DIKSHA, and an instant hit with the kids on her first visit to the project, the Rotary Club of Calcutta Green, district 3290, had come to the aid of DIKSHA also. Ratnaboli had organised, as the director of community services in this branch of the Rotary, a donation of a set of drawing books, crayons, pencils and erasers for 100 needy children of Kalighat. The Rotarians came in substantial strength, distributed the gifts as per a list prepared by the DIKSHA team in consultation with Beladi. What is more, our performers managed to enthrall the safari-suit clad Rotarians enough to make them stay through the programme, in that hot and stuffy school hall.

The kids invited the assembled guests to give a feedback then and there – at the end of the programme itself. Useless to get into those details, for the assembled guests readily responded to the kids' request and everybody was all praises for the Kalighat team, as well as for their 'aunties'. That the audience was really impressed was, however, borne out much more through the offers they made for being connected with the future journey of DISHA, than through their words of praise.

## Beyond the Turn: Future Plans

One of the expansions of the programme happened through involving the adult women in the sex trade at Kalighat, and a few from Khidirpur, mostly mothers of the adolescent participants of the programme. These women had started showing positive interest towards sessions with Paramita and Sumita following pro-active communication by the young participants with their mothers.

The sessions with adult women are focused primarily on discussions around the need for a space for themselves, much like what DIKSHA provides for the kids. A space for them to feel and interact as human beings, as ‘individuals rather than mere creatures with vagina’, as one of them expressed it succinctly. What surfaced quite clearly through the early sessions is the need for running a DIKSHA for these women – which has now been achieved.

One significant side effect of the programme has been the emergence of performance in general and of theatre in particular, as an effective tool for a variety of interventions. It is primarily this budding concept that has made Paramita and Sumita get associated with ANJALI, a rehabilitation programme run for the mentally challenged incarcerated in government hospitals. Both of them are involved with ANJALI, doing theatre therapy with the beneficiaries of ANJALI, and working seriously mainstreaming theatre as a therapy, like psychotherapy and counselling. The future plans of DIKSHA include the gradual involvement of the older among its participants in UTTAR (Using Theatre Therapy as a Rehab-Tool) as resource persons. That would be particularly significant once UTTAR itself is more clearly defined, making emotional probing a possibility through this method for most of ANJALI’s female clients have histories of sexual abuse. Such involvement would simultaneously mould the mindsets of DIKSHA’s young exponents towards mental illness, and hone their skills in using theatre techniques for inward journeys into one’s own sexual experiences. Such an option adds another dimension to the DIKSHA dream of evolving its first set of partners as community leaders and agents of change from within.

DIKSHA’s evolving leaders perceive DIKSHA as an association of, for and by adolescents that would take this process of change from within far beyond the bounds of red light zones and enter into Bengali medium schools where they go, along with many other children from ‘regular’ lower income families. They want to take out a booklet describing DIKSHA as a process and documenting their experiences in DIKSHA. They want to develop a systematic awareness campaign on issues of sexuality, including those of HIV/AIDS, the importance of consensus in sex and the need to challenge stereotypical gender norms in prevalent sexual behaviour and practice. They want to get DIKSHA to function as a help-line for

adolescents with questions on HIV/AIDS, conception and contraception, about the problems of living in red light zones etc. And, most important of all, they have started fund-raising drives for all of these, without depending only on their 'aunties'.

The shy young kids of yesterday, somewhat incredulous of these two adults who were ready to deal with their questions on sexuality from a non-judgmental perspective, are today consciously and willingly sharing responsibilities with Paramita and Sumita. They are not just dreaming big, but are taking concrete steps towards realizing those dreams.

## **Additional Information**

**Abahelita Nari, Jubak O Shishu Kalyan Samiti** (Association for the Welfare of Neglected Women, YOUTH and Children): One of the premier organisations in the Kalighat red light zone of Kolkata, West Bengal, India, formed much before NGO intervention in this sector had become fashionable.

**ANJALI**: A mental health organisation, conceived and run by Ms Ratnaboli Ray, working in partnership with the government. Currently functions as a rehabilitation programme in two State-run hospitals in Kolkata, West Bengal, India, reintegrating rehabilitable patients back into their families/communities. Ultimate aim is to initiate reforms within the State-run mental health sector, so as to humanize the system.

**Feisal Alkazi**: A renowned theatre person, whose 'Theatre for Change' programme has been successfully using theatrical techniques as an informing and empowering tool for deaf children for several years now.

**IFSHA**: Intervention for Support, Healing and Awareness is an organisation based in New Delhi, India, working for several years with individualized focus. IFSHA aims to heal and change people from within. Inward journeys to understand one's own process of sexualization and dealing with repressed traumas gathered there forms one of its most important tools.

**MacArthur Foundation**: The John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation is a Chicago-based is a private, independent grant-making organisation that helps individuals and institutions. It supports research, policy development, dissemination, education, training and practice aimed towards fostering a sustainable improvement in human conditions.

**Maitree**: A network of voluntary organisations and individual women activists in West Bengal, India, which has been functioning since 1996.

## DIKSHA: A Personal Odyssey

Nothing conspicuous about the beginning – it started just as any other endeavour would start. I already knew Paramita through some other work. More than an acquaintance, actually. A kind of friendship, almost. One day, she just told me briefly about her thoughts on adolescence and sexuality. Said, she wanted to work in red light zones. I'd felt that such an effort would be worthwhile. The atmosphere in which the boys and girls of red light areas grow up – knowledge about one's own body, about sexual health and reproduction – these kids should surely have clear and translucent ideas about all of that. Proper and complete understanding about such things could only develop on the basis of their own needs and concerns, thrashed out in their chosen method. The project was accordingly named *Adolescent Sexuality and Fertility: Reaching an Informed Choice*. I'd expressed my eagerness to be part of this effort.

There was something beyond this, as well. Something personal. The first step towards transcending myself. Red light zones. Sex workers, till very recently referred to as whores. Some kind of terror about them resided in this average middle-class householder mind of mine. As a child, I'd crossed the infamous 'outlines' of Kalighat many a time, the security of my mother's hand tightly clutching mine. My mother's natal family still lives in that area. As an adult, I've thrown a curious, slightly embarrassed, glance at the bedecked women lining the Sonagachhi streets. I would, of course, feel secure in my husband's company. Human beings like I am. Women like I am. A part of my species, but my heart would be full of irrational fear. Paramita presented me with an opportunity to transcend that fear.

The project started, with help from the MacArthur Foundation, in Khidirpur, Kalighat and Sonagachhi. I wouldn't want to offer a detailed account of the project here, for this is the narrative of my personal journey. The saga of my personal growing. This is the story of how this project expanded beyond its initial scope; how it transcended itself without compromising the significance of whatever I'd taken to be important at the outset.

From *Adolescent Sexuality and Fertility: Reaching an Informed Choice* to *DIKSHA: Discovering inner Knowledge & Sexual Health Awareness* – that has been the journey of transcendence. For the project, as well as for everyone connected with it. The work that I'd considered essential only for the participating kids at the outset, gradually came to be vital for me, for myself. Understanding myself, striving to touch the inner I, struggling to accept my own sexuality as an essential identity for myself – from there on to an attempt of establishing a newer level of contact, a different one, with people, environment and society – that is how I've sought to grow. Gradually. Step by step.



From childhood to adolescence – a wide spectrum of thoughts, anxieties, of a whole range of psychological complexities.....Biological age increases despite all of that. But, can the mind always keep pace? When I, almost forty today, look back at that adolescent me – I can still see her standing hesitantly at the threshold of twilight. Childhood only a memory; youth an amorphous impression – she has no idea where to go. One by one they became clear and defined – those misty complexities and contradictions of a quarter century ago – repressed into oblivion for so long. Through this project, as I kept participating in it along with the kids.

The girl, a contemporary of many of our participants in Khidirpur, Kalighat and Sonagachhi, who happens to be my daughter, is a full-fledged thirteen-year old today. Different from our participants in her socio-economic status, but no dissimilarity in the basic problems of adolescence. The same questions. The same expectations and apprehensions. The same love for herself, and the same fears. Identical attitude towards the world around – oscillating between loving warmth and complete disregard. Much of her behavior comparable to that of our participants. That is why this thirteen-year old from a 'normal, socially accepted and respectable' family has had no problem getting acquainted our participants. The forbidding red light has been easily crossed. Hopefully, this acquaintance will one day grow into friendship. A transcendence that I could begin to seek almost past middle age- I've been able to create for my daughter an opening at her formative stage itself. For the same transcendence. Through this project of ours. Another aspect of growth.

Accepting sexuality as the core of human identity clarifies many a social, behavioural and gender-based problem. This is a concept that is well reflected in the development of DIKSHA. A concept that has been formed through the questions, debates and discussions of our participants. That the project we had in mind at the outset could transform itself this way was well beyond my imagination. Beyond Paramita's too. We were committed towards preserving an open-ended nature. Supplying the clues for debates and discussions to surface, controlling digressions and gentle steering towards the issue under scrutiny, rectifying ideas about the body or sexuality if they happened to be wrong in the clinical/ scientific sense, or, imparting relevant information about relevant issues in case of total ignorance – that is all we had defined as our role. The depth and width of this project have reached incredible proportions, through just that bit of facilitating from us. All because of our participants. From clinical discussions about the role of X and Y chromosomes in determining the sex of the fetus, these kids have taken the sessions towards complicated gender issues like the maltreatment a mother faces for delivering a girl child, or female feticide, even. Such an 'easy' passage towards comprehending the gender injustice inherent in blaming the mother for a girl child, when the sex of the fetus depends only on the chromosome supplied by the father!

That is how we have grown with the project. Never had a teacher-student relationship with the kids. Especially mine. I hadn't even started with Paramita's hypothesis. I've also delved, unearthed, understood and learnt along with our participants. And today,

DIKSHA is shaping up as a process that can be applied to different segments and spheres. A group will now develop it to be sharper, better and more effective. I consider myself lucky to be one of that group.

Sumita Bandyopadhyay

Project Assistant