

EGIYE CHOLO

(Marching ahead...)

(April – September 2022)

BI-ANNUAL REPORT

Supported By:

MUNAKATA FOUNDATION

Implemented By:



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Area of Implementation:

**Namkhana Community Development Block
South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, India**

OUR HEARTFELT GRATITUDE

The entire Nishtha family is highly indebted and grateful to the Munakata Foundation for extending its generous support like a blessing from the Omnipotent to strengthen and empower the girl children with two splendid projects, Egiye Cholo and Training for the Health Care Assistants. Your timely support; especially in this most disastrous circumstances has been unparalleled and it has come at the time when we and our beneficiaries were standing nowhere.

Nishtha really has no words to praise your gratitude. We wish to seek your kind support forever which strengthens our hands and enables us to work vigorously in an attempt to uplift the underprivileged and most vulnerable girl children of our community from the dreadful and insulting state they are living in at present.

BACKGROUND

In April 2020, the whole country came to a standstill due to a strict Lockdown imposed by the Government because of the Novel CoronaVirus Pandemic. The place where Nishtha works is predominantly occupied by the daily wage earners like agricultural laborers, artisans, fishermen, cobblers, blacksmiths etc. These are those people who have no savings to keep aside for their future; until they work for a day, they will have nothing to earn. For the last two years they had nothing to earn; they were left in a penniless condition and as a result there was a scarcity of food and other essential materials.

Their fortune went to an impasse when the Super Cyclone, Amphan and Yaas hit the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal all of a sudden, this is the same place where Nishtha carries out its activity. Both these cyclones were the most severe cyclones that people of West Bengal had ever come across in the last 10 decades. The severity of it was so much that it devastated almost 80% of the houses in this district; besides this it also uprooted gigantic trees, electric posts, telegraph posts, etc. like a toy. It not only took the roof from the head of the people dwelling here but also tossed up their cattle, beddings, kitchen utensils, educational materials of the children; almost everything. Everything was lying hither and thither; the life of the people till now had entirely collapsed because of this dual disaster.

The two years of lockdown and two destructive cyclones have ruined everything, even the hope to revive has become a nightmare. As a result the women and the girl children are the worst sufferers. This crisis has also invited the perils such as trafficking, child marriage, child labourer and school dropout. *All of a sudden more than 65% of the girls were forced to leave their studies half way.*

In these changed circumstances, there hardly remains any option in front of us other than retaining the girls back to formal education and providing the girls with sustainable alternative livelihood options. And thankfully we have the strength of these two amazing flagship projects that meet both these requirements.

Now, without dedicated action, girls and women affected by the crisis will struggle to recover from the economic and mental shock of Covid-19 and secure resilient futures. More importantly this will set back progress on gender equality and decent work commitments within the Sustainable Development Goals and we cannot watch this happening being a mute spectators.

THE ROLE THIS PROJECT PLAYED IN THIS DREADFUL SITUATION

Last couple of years were extremely tough and we could not think about any achievement. The situation was especially dreadful for the students; especially girl students since the schools remained closed for nearly two years. Which directly affected their academic career. Parents now hardly want their daughters to go to school; rather they consider it better to get them married to any person considering them as a liability for the family. The overall situation has become so dreadful that even the traffickers and cheap labour suppliers took this as an opportunity and started luring the innocent people.

As per the reports and statistics of the National Family Health Survey – 5 (NFHS-5) released by the Government of India, the rate of Child Marriage in West Bengal is highest i.e. 41.6 percent in comparison to the National percentage of 26.2. The situation in Rural Bengal is more dreadful since the rate surges to 48.1 percent which means every second girl was forcefully married before the legal marriage age of 18.

The situation was no different in the percentage of School Dropouts. Though as per the statistics in recent years, the State has done better in this regard; but the ground level reality will curl one's lip. The report published by Unified District Information System for Education (UDISE) states the Net enrolment of girls to school was only 32.72 percent post pandemic. Whereas in South 24 Parganas District almost 21.38 percent of girls dropped out at class VIII –IX.

When the girls are in school, it becomes easy to know their whereabouts effectively but due to two vicious years of lockdown and Two disastrous cyclones, Amphan (2020) and Yaas (2021); the entire system got disrupted. But Despite of such adverse situations we take pride in bringing to your kind notice that we had 100 percent retention of girls in XI and XII. Beside this we also had 100 percent passed out results. This for us has been our biggest achievement under such adverse circumstances. Even when it comes to rate of child marriage; we saved all our beneficiary girls from this menace, making the percentage to hundred percent. Nevertheless the overall retention rate has been consistently outstanding for the last three years and we consider ourselves extremely fortunate for the same.

The journey so far was never easy; in fact ever since we started we had to come across many obstacles and odds. All the negative factors have always been the obstacle to the progress of the project; but because of the unconditional support from Ms. Mana Tanaka and the entire Munakata Foundation Family; the girls associated with this flagship project always stood tall and gained the power to defeat every grim situation of their own with their endless fighting spirits and sacrifice.

THE ACHIEVEMENTS

Here we are still living in a mess. The outbreak of Covid-19, lockdown and two massive blows of disastrous cyclones hammered the final nail in the coffin. People here are still struggling to survive and procure a morsel of food.

But Despite of such adverse situations we take pride that we could not only save our targeted girls from this menace but at the same time, they also have achieved some outstanding results in their respective examinations. Besides this, we also have some other remarkable achievements like;

- Just when the school began from February, 2022 after the two years of closure due to lockdown, all the beneficiary girls were retained back to the school. We consider this as a terrific milestone since the situation was tremendously harsh; especially for the girls dwelling in this coastal Namkhana as their parents hardly wanted their daughter to continue with their studies.
- All the girls who appeared for their respective Board Examination secured terrific marks

Details of the uchha madhyamik (higher secondary) results of Egiye Cholo girls

- 42 Egiye Cholo Children appeared for their Uchha Madhyamik Pariksha (Higher Secondary Examination) in 2022. And we had a 100% *Uchha Madhyamik Pass result in 2022.*
- Most significantly, in the results that were published in 10 June, 2022 - all the 42 students associated with Egiye Cholo have successfully passed their Board examination.

- 40 secured Honor Marks (Above 90 out of 100)
- 02 secured 1st division (Above 80 out of 100)

The biggest surprising thing that they did in these dreadful circumstances was getting the addresses forcefully, from the chief labor suppliers of the girls who had left the villages with their parents to the cities in search of jobs with the help of those suppliers, just after the ruination of Yaas. Those addresses were then sent to the leaders of the **Egiye Cholo**, who then began the search operation and brought them back. They in total rescued 151 girls who were located in various places of the city.

THE PROJECT

Goal

The goal of the project is to ensure mainstream education to 100 vulnerable girls residing in South 24 Parganas district, West Bengal and empower them with formal education, adequate knowledge, information and training.

Activities undertaken

100 vulnerable children studying in Higher Secondary (Class XI & XII) were selected and their parents have been sensitized through ample one-to-one sessions, small group discussions and the stakeholders were mobilized to convince the family members that their daughters could reach a safe phase of their life if they allow them to complete their Higher Secondary and finally, graduation degree from the college so that these girls could lead a dignified life thereafter. It would also bring forth a new social change when they shoulder the responsibility of running their own families and relieve their own parents from perpetual poverty. Therefore, among the convinced parents, 100 girls were finally chosen and brought under the benefits of this project.

Activities Undertaken:

Distribution of tuition fees:

All the 100 girls associated with Egiye Cholo Project were provided with the tuition fees of 300 rupees from April to September 2022.

Distribution of hygiene kits:

Each girl was provided with napkins, soap, Detergent Powder and Toothpaste.

Meeting Details:

Meeting with Adolescent Girls:

During this period we conducted **52 meetings with 1126 participants**.

The situation was continuously changing so it was necessary to have discussions and come up with innovative ideas so that they can deal with the circumstances quite confidently. These meetings presented brief details to them which turned out to be tremendously effective while it was implemented in their working field.

Various issues were raised during these meetings which included;

- The re-enrolment of the girls in schools
- Whether they were getting the tuition fees, extra clothing and tuition fees timely.
- The meeting also discussed those girls who were not able to access these facilities. The group started a self-subscription in order to support those ill-fated girls too and ensured they too face no hindrance while studying.

- The other most important activity was engaging the local Panchayats, ICDS, Asha Karmis to ensure all the girls are getting the opportunity to go to schools. We are thankful to the Panchayats who enthusiastically helped us in this regard. The Panchayat proclaimed it strictly, if there's any family which is prohibiting their daughter/s to go to school, or forcing them to get married, shall not avail any government facility at any cost.
- Besides this, the girls group also continued their campaigns, home visits, individual stakeholder meetings, etc.
- Most remarkably they kept a sharp surveillance on the identified 21 most vulnerable families which were highly prone to get their daughters married or send them forcefully to other places. The vigilance on the girls of those vulnerable families was done in a very articulate manner. At regular intervals meetings were conducted in the houses of the neighbors of those families' houses. Home visits were done frequently. The daughters and mothers of those families too were kept engaged with various group assigned activities.
- The overall strict surveillance was observed to ensure none of the girl is forced to move out of the village.

Meeting of mothers' groups:

During this period we conducted 61 meetings with the Mothers' groups with 1295 participants. In these unpredictable circumstances, it has become very necessary to have discussions with the mothers.

Various issues were raised during these meetings which included;

- Severe impact of lockdown
- Understanding the importance of Education in their daughters life
- Importance of socialization on gender
- Reducing the cases of child marriage; especially fake love affairs and understand the essence of life
- Fight for the equal rights and opportunities
- Assessment of follow-ups of tuition classes by Group leaders
- Identifying the root cause of violence against girls and women and applying methods to stop it

Meeting of fathers' groups:

Fathers play the pivotal role in the decision making of the family hence it is necessary to make them aware and provide them with a clear idea about the subject so that they can change the erroneous thinking in their society. Through these meetings fathers got a clear idea about the various issues, special emphasis was given on the issue related to the girls' empowerment. In these meetings they also gave their suggestions and shared their experiences.

During this reporting period, we organized 9 fathers' meetings with 138.

In these meetings we discussed about, fathers role in daughter's education, role of male members to cease domestic violence, improving future of the girl child, gender discrimination and its ill-effects on the family, how to decrease this discrimination from own house, etc.

Postering:

Each group divided themselves into 6 villages (Dariknagar, Fatikpur, Ishwaripur, Haripur, Bishalakshmipur and Rajnagar) and conducted posturing. Around 5229 self- made posters were stuck in the some chosen walls of those villages which were visible from a long distance.

Recently a few cheap labor suppliers were seen roaming in the villages who were trying to lure innocent girls and their families with fake job promises and hence it had become very essential to create immediate awareness among the community before the situation goes out of control. Hence poster campaigns were one of the best modes available in front of us. Through these

posters awareness on many issues were given which firstly prioritized being alert from such job offers since it might lead to trafficking or any other major issues that might ruin their life forever. Moreover awareness on child marriage, trafficking, domestic violence, etc. always remained the utmost priority.

Rally:

During this reporting period only two rallies were held on the occasion of International World Environment Day on 5th June and International Women's Equality Day 26th August.

Through this rally a strong public opinion and awareness was tried to set up and to build a support group at the community level.

Keeping the health guidelines in mind we restricted a large audience; however we conducted 8 pocket size rallies too.

One on one session:

Conducting one on one sessions were very important in this continuously changing situation. As mentioned earlier the situation was more threatening for the girls and hence our first priority was to engage them back to their respective schools after the lockdown. The girls, parents, and also the stakeholders were engaged in this one on one session.

In total we conducted 2786 one on one sessions in this reporting period.

Training Details:

TRAINING OF LEADERS OF ADOLESCENT GROUPS:

For the leaders of the girls' collectives, 3 in house training programs had been organized in Nishtha Conference Hall, Namkhana, in this reporting period. Besides the leaders; the co-leaders and a few active members were also present in those meetings.

In this training we raised many issues but our main stress was on the subject, 'Understanding self for better communication', 'End shame around the menstrual cycle', and 'What marriage is'.

DATE	PLACE	PARTICIPANTS	SUBJECT
15.07.2022	Nishtha Conference Hall, Namkhana	30	Understanding self for better communication
16.07.2022	Nishtha Conference Hall, Namkhana	30	End shame around the menstrual cycle
27.07.2022	Nishtha Conference Hall, Namkhana	30	What marriage is

TRAINING OF LEADERS OF WOMEN'S GROUPS:

Providing training to the leaders of the women's group has become very important since they are the one who play the pivotal role in training the other women of the community in urging their male counterparts to support their daughters' education. During this reporting period we conducted 2 training programs with this group.

Table shown below focuses on the profile of the small such training programs.

DATE	PLACE	PARTICIPANTS	SUBJECT
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18.07.2022	Nishtha Conference Hall, Namkhana	30	Manifestation of gender based violence
19.07.2022	Nishtha Conference Hall, Namkhana	30	Communication with adolescent

CASE STUDY - I

Name: Nivedita Dhara
 Father's Name: Gautam Dhara
 Mother's Name: Jogmaya Dhara
 Village: Fatikpur



Surashi made the very harsh decision of getting married to a boy who she considered loved her very much. She was in class 10th then. But soon she understood the reality. The boy to whom she had got married, started abusing her both physically and mentally. Somehow she managed to flee away from there and come back to her parental house but they refused to keep her since she had married the boy against their will. However it was her group who intervened in the situation and persuaded her parents to forget everything and give her a chance to live normally.

She was included in Egiye Cholo and thereafter she has been getting the educational support from here. Moreover the group also helped her with extra educational materials, clothing, and dry food materials, taking the help from the stakeholders.

She has confessed, "Egiye Cholo which means 'Go Ahead' surely has provided me with a new diversion, if today I hadn't received the support from the group, I surely might have been killed in my in-laws house. I was sure that if I flee from hell, my fellow sisters surely will stand beside me. I am extremely thankful to my friends and especially to the Munakata Foundation who has allowed me to be a part of the Egiye Cholo program.

CASE STUDY - II

Name: Reena Naskar
 Husband's name: Bimal Naskar
 Village: Haripur

At a very tender age I lost my father in an encounter with the Tiger while he had got inside the core forest of the Sundarbans to pluck woods. He was the only earning member in our family and after his death our lives had become miserable. My mother and I both started working in a brick field. Somehow we tried to meet both ends of our family.



Soon I made a blunder and I still consider it as my life's biggest mistake. In the brick field where I was working, I met with Bimal Naskar with whom I married in haste. But soon things proved disastrous. I hardly can describe the amount of torture my husband made to me. His brutal assaults on me increased soon after I gave birth to two daughters. Each day for me was nothing but a nightmare.

My eyes were always wet and I mercilessly cried when my daughters struggled for a morsel. Hence I decided to catch fishes and for this I had to stay half of the month in the sea. With this I was quite able to feed my children. But soon my life got the turning point when once I came

across one of the leaders of the Nishtha women group. She included me with Egiye Cholo and thereafter I could see my dreams coming true since my daughters were going to get the opportunity to study. And fortunately with the help of Nishtha and more importantly, the Munakata Foundation, one of my daughters is in class tenth.

I really can say it without any hesitation, without the support of the Munakata Foundation and Nishtha, I hardly could have dreamt of this. My daughter is doing well today and I am sure never in her life she will have to struggle like me.

I thank Nishtha and the Munakata Foundation wholeheartedly.