

Everyone belongs somewhere! You belong somewhere, I belong somewhere, somewhere that you have grown up as a child, went to school, wandered with your friends, where your family lived or lives still, where you work, some place that you think you belong to! You know you belong to that place, because you can give it a name, locate it, but everyone cannot. Rupa cannot, she does not recall where she belongs to. She remembers her family, her house, but does not know where it is located, she belongs somewhere, but cannot locate it on a map. This is the problem faced by the reintegration team of Sarbari, when they want to locate and take Rupa back to where she belongs to. No coordinates. Falguni, on the other hand remembers the coordinates, but the family located at those coordinates do not want her back. It is her family, but they have redrawn their boundaries, and the line they have drawn now runs in a vague shape and draws a closed loop, not a circle, from which Falguni is excluded, rather she is outside of it, not inside with her family members, so she is no more a member, because the line defines membership. Even Mehazabien, Falguni's closest friend at Sarbari, found that her family had redrawn the line, and the result was predictable. Friends indeed have common traits.

All three women were staying at Sarbari, for more than three years now. They, like all others at Sarbari, had come from streets of Kolkata. Symptoms of their mental illness was a thing of the past, just like their stay on streets, just like their families, just like so many other things.

But this story is not about their past, it is about their present and indeed future.

Falguni, Rupa and Mehazabien live and work at Sarbari. Falguni works in the Vocational Training Unit, Rupa is one of the cooks in the kitchen, and Mehazabien helps with the general chores of Sarbari. Sarbari is home to nearly seventy women, and their care takers. During the day there are other staff as well.

The kitchen at Sarbari cooks for clients of the outreach service and those at men's shelter. It is an alive, bustling space and always in need of working hands.

The three of them are well settled at Sarbari, apparently, at least. They knew the workings of the place, they knew they were to help out any new woman that came to Sarbari. They helped the resident caregivers take care of the new ones, and in general helped in running the place. Cooperation and participation was easy to come by and kept the place running.

"Falguni, can you help the new girl take her bath, show her the bathroom, see if she needs help, stand outside till she completes her bath, will you?", the caregiver called out to Falguni on one typical morning at Sarbari.

The mornings are usually busy. Everyone is either busy getting ready for the day or prompting someone else to do so. Caregivers are very busy ensuring residents have woken up and readying themselves up. Everyone has to get ready, there are tasks to be done, they have to be allotted first, food has to be cooked and the usual work to be finished, like a busy engine room of a ship, all hands to work, to keep the ship sail along.

"Hum kyun denge humara paisa?", *"Aap logo ka kaam hai humara khayal rakhna"*, *"Humko nahi dena"* (*Why should we give away our money? It is your job to take care of us people. We don't want to give!*). All women in the focus group discussion were up in arms against the facilitator. She had proposed that women who had been staying in Sarbari for some time now and had been earning, contribute a portion of the expenses on daily living and medical treatment, usually medicines. This did not go down well with the women. The money earned was considered personal income and the place and its responsibilities were taken for granted to be duty of Sankalpa. There was an inherent belief that the food will get served, the place will get cleaned and all the other things get done free of cost. Their labour being the only contribution required.

Part payment was to instil a sense of individuality in the women, to make them think for themselves, to know how much they were earning, and that living exercised a cost, which they have to pay wherever they stayed. This suggestion was only for those women who fit a select criteria. They had been living in the shelter for 3 years or more, were earning a stable amount by working either inside or outside Sarbari and had savings to be able to pay for their expenses. A regular dialogue was required to quell any misconceptions, fear, and anxiety the women that their money would be taken away.

Many sittings had taken place. Very soon the discussions veered onto their likes, dislikes and expectations “*Hum kya puri zindagi yahan rahenge* (Will we stay here all our lives?)”, “*Humko khula jagah chahiye, jahan hum ghoom sake, yahan band rehna achha nahi lagta* (We want an open space, where we can move around; we don’t like staying indoors within the shelter here)”...

Besides a seeming dislike for Sarbari, women also expressed some dislike towards the work they were engaged in. Apparently, they did not like beading, stringing necklaces, stitching bags, cooking at the shelter: “*Humko yeh kaam achha nahi lagta - mala banana achha nahi lagta* (I don’t like doing this work- I don’t like stringing necklaces).

One day, while working in the garden, *Falguni* said she liked gardening. But she found the available space small for it. She had worked in the fields with her family and wished for a larger space - “*There should be land to cultivate and grow crops.*” She meant agriculture and not gardening, but agriculture in the city of Kolkata!

“*I used to help my father and brother in the fields. We had a piece of land near our house. We would go to the market, put up a shop and sell what we grew. I used to sell fruits and vegetables*”, Rupa shared during a group discussion. Her eyes were sparkling as she narrated about her work in the fields. “*Would you like to do the same work*

here as well?” the facilitator asked Rupa. “*Yes, I would like doing that. I can’t do beading and necklace making*”, replied Rupa.

The staff at Sarbari acknowledged that women from rural backgrounds found it difficult, if not frustrating, to work in the vocational unit, working with materials and products they couldn’t connect with. That there was always a feeling of alienation from their work. They also abhorred the constant reminding, monitoring that they had to endure in learning and practicing this craft. It was all making sense now.

But farming was not possible in the present environment of Sarbari. A new option was required. A few months later, in early 2015, Nayagram was envisioned. Located in verdant surrounding of Kashipur, Nayagram was an idea, in the countryside, about an hour and a half car ride away, but a world away from Sarbari!

Here, a few women would live life at their own pace, follow their own routine, work with the soil, sell the produce in the local market, keep accounts, pay for their own expenses, live in rented accommodation, pay its rent, work in the rural economy, mingle with people, with little oversight by Sankalpa from Kolkata. It was the closest they could feel to returning back to families. Sankalpa identified Mr. Ganguly, a local anchor. He was a respected community member, a good Samaritan, and the headmaster of the local school at Kashipur.

It was a leap of faith from Sarbari to Nayagram. To attempt the audacious was the nature of Sankalpa, hence the leap faith was made and the shift was made to Nayagram in 2016. But of the seventy odd women at Sarbari, who would make the cut, go to Nayagram. Sankalpa set up a process for it. Sarbari, the

Apni Bari – a house for me!

By Nayanika, Laboni & Vikram

head of Sankalpa, along with Laboni *di*¹, had to do this engagement with women.

It was a rainy afternoon, in 2015, and Sarbani sat in a group, with ten women of Sarbari and discussed with them the arrangements at Nayagram. *“You will have to work in the field there. We have spoken to a farmer, he is ready to employ you and give a small payment. You will buy your own ration, cook food and live on your own, like you used to back home. None of us will be there. You will have to manage on your own, will you be able to do that?”*

Falguni, Rupa, Mehazabien chose to go and shifted into the rented accommodation at Kashipur. They were selected because they were consistent in their work at Sarbari and they had the capability to look after themselves and each other, at least this what one had thought! These were vague criterion, the basic essential one thought was least required to succeed at Nayagram. Falguni was chosen because not only she fulfilled the criteria, but it was her idea, Mehazabien was a close friend and companion of Falguni, and Rupa, she was just very social, and perhaps could easily mingle in the new location.

Falguni was clear that she would prefer working in the fields, and was eager to go. She had leadership qualities and was good at managing accounts. She could be trusted to hold the fort and manage expenses of day-to-day living there. Her good friend Mehazabien too agreed. Mehazabien was a homely person, she had a steady and strong bond with Falguni and could help Falguni manage the house. She too had an agricultural background and would therefore be able to live and work in Kashipur, and Rupa, the ever ebullient, warm person could easily socialise and settle in the rural community. Together, they were a good group and had good chance of settling in Kashipur. These women had to be trusted in the choice they were making, after all it was created based on their preference, but did a desire to work in the fields come with all other requirements as

well? *“She is a leader, we need to trust her,”* Laboni di said of Falguni.

In August 2016, the trio of Falguni, Mehazabien and Rupa left Sarbari for Kashipur. With their belongings in hand, they bid farewell to their fellow residents and walked out of the shelter to a place that was created out of their wish. They set up their residence in a small rented portion in the house of Mr. Ganguly. They started working in the fields. They had set up their own *bari* (house).

Things were going on smoothly. They bought their own provisions, cooked for themselves, kept a track of their own medication, took care of other household chores, besides working in the fields to earn their livelihood. Rupa, in addition, also worked as a domestic help in nearby houses. She had settled well, and had quickly developed a rapport with people of the village.

Falguni was happy working in the fields as was Mehazabien. Staff of Sankalpa made a few visits from Kolkata, Mr Ganguly kept them abreast with the state of the three women.

Later that year, almost out of the blue, Falguni announced she wanted to leave Kashipur. She wanted to explore the world on her own. *“I have worked long enough, I always wanted to travel, now that I have saved money from my work at Sarbari and here, I wish to go and travel”*. This sudden decision of Falguni was a surprise for everyone at Sankalpa, and shocking for Mehazabien. Was she not the one who wanted to work in fields? Wasn't Nayagram an option beyond Sarbari, and Falguni was happy here, then why leave? Nayagram was supposed to be home for those who *could not leave*, after all they had no family to go back to! But, somewhere, it soon dawned on everyone that Falguni did not want to leave Nayagram. She, rather, wanted to realise her own dream for which she had to leave Nayagram. Perhaps, seeing her dream realised in the form of Nayagram, had given

¹ “di” is short for “didi”, a colloquial term used to refer to elder sister in some parts of India

Apni Bari – a house for me!

By Nayanika, Laboni & Vikram

wings to her lifelong dream, to travel and explore the world, and perhaps now was the time.

Sankalpa was in a fix! To heed or not to heed to Falguni's request, was more an operational dilemma than a moral one. They could not stop her from leaving. She was a free person, in any case, but what would happen to Nayagram, and what would happen to Falguni?

Very soon the anxieties were overcome, always the person was central to all that Sankalpa had wanted to do, and Falguni's wishes had to be respected. Falguni left, to travel the world, with her savings, she was sure she could manage, and everyone had to trust her. But, this meant that Rupa and Mehazabien were left on their own.

As luck would have it, around the same time, Mr Ganguly, fell ill, and had to be hospitalised. It was a serious ailment and had to travel out of Kashipur for his treatment. At a time when Falguni had left, his support had been critical, but the illness taking him away from regular activities meant that the two women were practically left to handle too many things by themselves.

After Falguni's departure, Mehazabien preferred to stay inside the house. She almost entirely stopped going to fields for work. She, eventually, relapsed. She went back to Sarbari with Sankalpa staff where she later recovered. Rupa also went along. Was Kashipur fraught with too much risk for women who were used to staying in Sarbari? Would it fail? What kind of women could survive and best use any new option like Nayagram? Is it a matter of careful selection or fate, or a combination of the two?

By early 2017, Lata, Firoza and Poornima went to Kashipur. In the two years since Falguni, Mehazabien and Rupa set up their *bari* at Kashipur, things had to change. Sankalpa had purchased a small piece of land and started developing it for women to stay and work at Kashipur. It had a house, a barn for animals, several trees, a small piece of land

for cultivation, and a well. Across the lane from the compound was the field where women would cultivate crops. It was a stone's throw from Nayagram. Nayagram had its own water supply, and its own boundary wall.



FAHIDA, SAPNA AND PREETI WORKING ON THE FIELD IN KASHIPUR

A caregiver now lived at Nayagram, and supervised all the work there. The three women who went to Kashipur in early 2017 were joined by another 4 later that year. Soon the number reached to twelve besides the caregiver.



RUPA STANDS IN FRONT OF HER NEW HOUSE UNDER CONSTRUCTION NAYAGRAM IN KASHIPUR IN 2018

Who were these women who had come to Nayagram after Falguni, Mehazabien and Rupa had left the place? Will history repeat itself and these women too would go back to Sarbari after having spent some time at

Nayagram? What qualities make a woman adjust best to Nayagram?

These were questions that occupied the minds of the Sankalpa staff. They had learnt that women who knew agriculture, who had good physical health, and who had a consistent work output at Sarbari would adjust and thrive at Nayagram. In addition, good interpersonal skills were important.

The four girls who went to Nayagram in the latter half of 2017, were screened on these criteria, and found suitable on it. Sapna, Preeti, Seeta and Panna were from among a group of 15 women who had expressed willingness to go to Kashipur. The four of them adapted to the place better than anyone else who had gone there earlier. Apparently, the new criteria was successful in identifying the women who would benefit the most. It was clear that each new option created suited some people and not all, there was no one size fit all. Neither could all women go to Nayagram, nor will they benefit from the place. For many living in Sarbari was best for them, Sarbari was their *bari*.

CRITERIA

Following parameters help to identify women who are suitable to shift to Nayagram:

- Is in good physical health and is fit enough for farm work, in addition, work in the kitchen and household chores
- Is able to manage money or assist in this function
- has good interpersonal and social skills, mingles with people
- less likelihood of running away from Nayagram
- has been living at Sarbari for three or more years and has poor chances of restoration back to her family
- Is compliant with medicines on her own or take minimal number of medicines

“25 women”! Laboni didi exclaimed! “Does everyone here want to go to Kashipur”? “Do women know what it means to live there? Don’t you recall what happened to Preksha”? In 2018, more women were offered the choice to go to Nayagram, 25 wanted to go.

Preksha, a city bred young girl, chose to go. She, however, found it difficult to befriend any of the eleven women staying at that time in Nayagram. She would often sit on the perimeter of the field, at a point farthest from where everyone was working. She sat there, ideal all by herself, while others toiled. Preksha had always lived in the city, had never been to a village before, and did not know agriculture. Agriculture was as alien to her as making necklaces was to Falguni. Even at Sarbari, she was a reluctant worker. She had come here because she was very enthusiastic to go. “Did she want an escape from her daily routine at Sarbari”? Did she understand that work in Kashipur was many times more than at Sarbari? Preksha struggled with the nature of work at Nayagram and slowly receded from it. “Body pain”, was her alibi to excuse herself from work, almost daily. Having escaped work, she would walk around in Nayagram, losing herself in the timelessness of the place, of its natural beauty. She did not participate in any work. Such aimless loitering exacted its toll. Preksha started to deteriorate. Her co-residents, too, were agitated by her non participation in any work. All women were supposed to work, that was the rule, and the women kept their rule strictly. Preksha had to be recalled to Sarbari where she was put on course to her recovery. She was better off at Sarbari than at Nayagram.

Independence comes at a price. At Nayagram, the price to pay is work. Women have to earn money by selling the produce from the field. Hence, collective effort is necessary to achieve an optimum output. For women, like Preksha, who are unaccustomed to such hard work, recovery is impaired by being in such an option.

From the year 2018 onwards, a list of criteria, had become the mainstay of deciding who would shift to Nayagram from Sarbari. Learning the mechanics of agriculture was difficult for some, natural to others, same can be said of the vocations practiced and taught at Sarbari. Sarbari and Nayagram were two different options. Initially, it was thought that those who did not have any chance of going back to their families would stay at Nayagram while others would continue to stay at Sarbari. But the two settings have evolved differently and provide different options rather than as a continuum. More options for a person to stay increase the probability of finding the one most suitable for their recovery, at a point in time. Free movement across options is also important. Nayagram or the new village as it means, is another option that Sankalpa has created for homeless person with mental health problems, and as Falguni had shown, she liked it there, but was also free to leave and go! There is always an option to exercise!

Conclusion:

Each new option has its own characteristics, and is suitable for a set of person with mental health problems, homeless or otherwise. It takes time and experience to understand who stands to benefit the most from a new option. Over time, a list of criteria are nonetheless developed to ease identification. However, these criterion do not and should not replace the needs of an individual and judgement of qualified professionals. They should be seen more as a guideline and not a line etched in stone. There will always be criteria and there always will be exceptions to them, this tension between the two will lead to constant evolution of the intention to meet needs of a person and aid recovery. At the end of the day, we have to trust the people for who the options are created. Are we all comfortable with fuzzy criteria or will we become protector of them, is for us to decide. At Sankalpa time and experience has shown that criteria are

necessary but not sacrosanct. As an aside, the experience of Nayagram has also questioned the uniformity of work options or vocational options available at Sarbari and similar places. Perhaps a range of options is required there as well, after all, interventions and its elements have to be tailor made to individuals, no one size fits all!

About Iswar Sankalpa

Iswar Sankalpa, a not for profit organization, started in 2007, in Kolkata, the city of Joy² on the eastern front of India. “*Sankalpa*’ means ‘a Resolution’. It is a resolution to make a difference to the lives of those who have psychosocial problems, and multiple other disadvantages. Sankalpa’s resolution is to bring about a change in the general perception of a person with mental illness, a resolution to make a difference in the way the person is treated, and how social systems can take care of the person. Intentionally, it works with those most disadvantaged- homeless on the streets, the poor living in slums, women, minorities, etc. It is to their lives that Sankalpa wants to make a difference.

In more than a decade of its work, Sankalpa has tirelessly worked towards creating a mental health-friendly society where persons with psycho-social disabilities have access to their rights and the opportunity to grow to their fullest potential.

Sankalpa creates service delivery models for mental health problems, and their design incorporates the role of the community, their participation, and involvement. One of its first service opened inside a police station, another inside the urban health center, its shelters for homeless run out of buildings given by the municipality, and its street care program counts more than two dozen people from the community as caregivers for homeless person with mental health problems.

² Kolkata, earlier called Calcutta, is named as City of Joy after a novel of the same name by

Dominique Lapierre, adapted later into a movie of the same name (Wikipedia)

Apni Bari – a house for me!

By Nayanika, Laboni & Vikram

Sankalpa, is an option creator, an organisation that continues to operate as per needs of the person even though the majority of the users are poor and lower middle income groups. Sankalpa started with street care program, a drop in centers inside a police station, added shelters to the menu, started working out of urban health centers, has recently opened a cafeteria run by its clients, and the quest goes on.

Priyal, works with Iswar Sankalpa and has reviewed the story.

-----END OF DOCUMENT -----

The driving force is a resolute commitment to address stigma and discrimination of the homeless and the mentally ill.

Nayagram is the story of a new option created by Sankalpa for some of its users, quite an unusual option though. The seed of this seemingly large project was a simple suggestion by a user that has now germinated and developed into a full blown project. The story is called – Apni Bari, translated as “my house” in English from Bengali.

About the series “Stories from project”

“Stories from Projects” is an attempt by PHF (India) and its partners to share with the wider world their learnings during project implementation. Hopefully, these stories would help others working in similar spaces overcome an obstacle they are facing in their work.

Apni Bari is a story from “*Sampoorna, Enabling homeless person with mental illness to live with dignity*”, a project supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (India), under its Open Grant Program.

To read more such stories, visit <[name of website](#)>.

About the authors:

Nayanika and Laboni work with Iswar Sankalpa and this story was developed by them. Vikram is a consultant with PHF (India) and has facilitated development of the story.