

# Newsletter

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The COVID-19 pandemic and Cyclone Amphan have left millions of families vulnerable to mental health problems and homelessness in Kolkata, bringing about a new wave of psychosocial disabilities in the city.

Iswar Sankalpa has been responding to the mental healthcare needs of marginalised persons, homeless on the streets and living in urban slums since 2007. The year 2020 has brought us to a point where we need to rise and adapt our programmes to the needs of our existing service users affected by the Pandemic, and additionally equip ourselves to manage the growing levels of psychosocial disabilities.

The loss of employment for daily wage earners, small business owners and domestic workers has left them depending on their meager savings. The two months' Lockdown and the gradual yet slow restart of economic activities have left persons in a position of food insecurity, unable to access basic healthcare or maintain social distance in their packed *bastis* (slums). For them the struggle is not just against coronavirus, but starvation itself.



*A homeless woman walking in the middle of the street in Kolkata*

The homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities living on the streets, depended on the small *dhaba* (food shop) owners, compassionate citizens who supported them with food, water and small monetary contribution; for their survival. The Lockdown took away this support system, leaving them in absolute poverty, *and* isolation.

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation and Social Welfare Department, Govt. of West Bengal had, in the first week of the Lockdown, made provision to relocate persons living on the streets in Municipal schools and other unoccupied buildings. However, a large percentage of such persons were left behind on the streets either because they did not wish to be relocated or due to the lack of space. During the Lockdown, these otherwise invisible persons were the only persons visible on the streets apart from persons with providing essential services. Today, there are many more homeless persons with mental health problems as compared to the months before the Pandemic spread. Our work becomes more important, and more challenging.

Since June 2020, after the Lockdown was lifted, our flagship programme Naya Daur has seen many changes. The programme is the genesis of Iswar Sankalpa. It aims at providing care and support to homeless persons with mental health problems on the streets, creating a care network with community members, local government stakeholders and Kolkata Police. Today, this programme has seen maximum innovation and adaptability. How do you show care and concern from a distance, with a mask covering your face? Adaptability is the only way forward, and we will move forward. We bring to you a brief report of our response to the challenges of food security, mental healthcare and homelessness during these months.

The Pandemic has brought forward many stories of suffering, pain and hopelessness. In this issue of our Newsletter we would like to bring to you a few stories of hope, joy and resilience in these times. Hope it gives you some inspiration, just like its given us.

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# A True Survivor

*“Ekthane chilo sara raat”* (She was here the entire night), says the shopkeeper next to where Prembai sits. Did Prembai really spend the harrowing 6 hours that Cyclone Amphan spent ravaging through the city of Kolkata, uprooting trees and lamp-posts on the streets? It is hard to fathom, but perhaps she did. She’s stronger than the roots of 7 lakh trees in the city.

Prembai refused to move, when the Kolkata Police came to rehabilitate homeless persons to safe shelters at the start of the Lockdown in March 2020. She refused to move when the winds came at her. Prembai’s speech is incoherent as she speaks a dialect unknown to the social workers of Iswar Sankalpa. But she doesn’t need words to express her will - She is not going anywhere!

Prembai has been living at the *ghats* (bank) of the Hooghly River at Nimtala ghat for more than 10 years. She wears close to thirty beautiful bangles that she says she bought from the market for INR 10 each. She cleans them regularly and they adorn her hands, till the elbow.

Prembai is upset, as her social worker had not been visiting her regularly for a month and a half during the Lockdown. Her social worker was a little worried, “I will have to rebuild my relationship with her, and she is not even looking me in the eye.” However, he knows that regular visits will be difficult now. But knowing she can take care of herself gives him some solace.

One may say, that Prembai cannot distinguish between what is good and bad for herself. But she is a woman with an iron-will, how else does one survive without loved ones or a shelter. She gets food from worshipers who visit the crematorium nearby, and she bathes in the river every now and then.



*(Above) Gandha with all her belongings on the day after Cyclone Amphan. (Below) Gandha's neatly arranged home by Nimtala Ghat*

To the many survivors like Gandha, this is what the undying human spirit is about.

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# Mental Health and Mehendi

The hands of five residents at Nayagram are decorated with orange stained designs. Their faces light up in bright smiles when asked about it. *"Lokhi ne Mehendi lagaya!"* "Lokhi applied Mehendi (for us)!"

Self-love, self-expression and indulging in activities that give us joy is one way to understand mental health and well-being, among many other ways. The application of Mehendi by the residents of Nayagram was exactly this. Each had their own design, some preferred not to wear it, and some preferred simple art.

Lokhi is a resident at Nayagram (Assisted Community Living Programme for Homeless Women with Psychosocial Disabilities), and she enjoys living in her commune. She works on the field, does her household chores and enjoys taking strolls in the forested area around the premises of Nayagram.

On one of her strolls, Lokhi located a wild Henna plant in the dense foliage, she doesn't share the precise location though. With a show of hand she will point to the sky, and you might think it is somewhere behind the cowshed, or maybe on the other side of the pathway, or perhaps on the complete opposite side. But she keeps going back to it.

With great enthusiasm Lokhi brings out the safely stored leaves. She will ask you softly, but with gleaming eyes, *"Chahiye?"* (Do you want?). If you say yes, she will immediately get busy at the *Shilnora* (traditional stone grinder) and make a beautiful rich Henna paste (Mehendi) with love, care, concentration, and excitement. There has rarely been a mehendi so pure.

It makes one wonder, shouldn't a definition of freedom be; to be as free as to chance upon a wild henna plant and bring smiles on the faces of the people they live with, with colours so bright and honest. Shouldn't freedom be about applying it on oneself for self-adoration and self-love?

The orange of the Kashipur Mehendi is bright, and the joy of applying it on your hand is an experience in itself. No fancy cones, no elaborate floral designs, just one's imagination.

Does making and putting Mehendi make Lokhi happy? Lokhi smiles with her eyes, and says *"Bahut achha lagta hai, baalo mein, haatho mein..."* and she gets back to grinding it into perfection. (I really like putting it on my hair, on my hands.)



*Different designs of Mehendi on the hands of the women at Nayagram*

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# “Hope” is the thing with Feathers

Shibani looks over her colleague's shoulder, she knows when to intervene – only when the measurements are not proportionate. Making dough in large quantities is not easy. The scaling of measurements is a skill, it requires a sharp mind, quick calculations and rechecking with colleagues. With the trainers locked in their homes, and instructions coming through the phone, Shibani, one of the most experienced bakers in Crust and Core must rise to be a peer trainer in her capacity.

Shibani has been training at Crust and Core (Iswar Sankalpa's café cum training unit for homeless women with psychosocial disabilities) since 2018. She enrolled at a professional bakery training course at JBL Academy in Gariahat, Kolkata in February 2020. It was a wonderful experience for her to meet other professionals in this sector. After living in the shelter for homeless women with psychosocial disabilities for two years, recovering from her mental health problems, Shibani was now travelling, interacting, working and learning like any other determined young woman, with a dream for her future.

Her sense of humour, wit and confidence makes her a very interesting person. At Iswar Sankalpa we celebrate her journey - from suffering immense trauma having been separated from her family and living on the streets for months to learning skills, and working towards building a future for herself.

Today, Shibani is eagerly waiting to start assisting an independent home baker, it will be her first job after completion of her professional training.

But the pandemic had put a pause to all her plans and dreams. These were challenging times, but Shibani continued to persist.



*(top to bottom) Shibani with her colleagues during online classes at the Crust and Core kitchen.*

*Shibani at JBL Academy during her professional baking classes.*

*Shibani with her certificate of completion*

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# "Hope" is the thing with Feathers

On 20th March 2020, Shibani attended her last baking classes at JBL Academy. She was promised that she could return after the 21 day Lockdown imposed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. In time, the 21 days became 65 days, and Shibani was getting restless.

Hope and opportunity are very precious for women like Shibani. Life has shown them what the exact opposite can be. She was determined to finish her training as soon as the Lockdown was to be lifted, and she did! She received her certificate of completion in basic training on Bakery and Patisserie from JBL Academy of Culinary Arts, on 10th July 2020.

The high cost of travelling safely in a post-pandemic world is a barrier in her way. The challenges before the Pandemic was the stigma attached to persons with psychosocial disabilities and the lack of exposure the women of Crust and Core had to a professional setting. As we all embark on a journey of adapting to the post-COVID world, Shibani is adapting too. She needs to keep hope and faith, like everybody whose dreams have come to a standstill has to.

With your support and encouragement, as Crust and Core rolls out batches of pastries, breads and savouries, Shibani keeps honing her skills. She recently helped her colleague and friend, Laxmi bake her own birthday cake. Using her learnings in the field she helped Laxmi decorate it with leaf shaped chocolate, from the garden! This is the spirit of learning that Crust and Core envisions for women like Shibani.

She has plans of saving her income and relocating with her brother. The journey is slow, but faith is the key.



*(top to bottom) Shibani and Laxmi with decorating Laxmi's birthday cake. The leaf used to make decorations for the cake.*

We had published an article on Shibani's plans of completing her training at JBL Academy on 29th April, 2020.

<https://lockdownvoices.in/2020/04/29/ishwar/>

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Mr. Chiradeep from JBL Academy for providing Shibani with the platform for equitable development, for being an enabler. A society with compassionate and thoughtful minds like his makes it possible to empower marginalised persons like Shibani to tread their journey with dignity.

# Iswar Sankalpa's Reponse



## 2205 food and hygiene relief kits distributed

Food and hygiene relief kits were provided to families living in urban slums and in rural areas of Bhangor, South 24 Parganas to ensure food security and address their hygiene needs.



## 467 persons were provided telephonic psychosocial counselling sessions

Counselling was provided over telephone through the Urban Mental Health Programme (UMHP) to address mental healthcare needs of persons in distress, in the period of April to July 2020.



## 10,000+ handmade sustainable masks made

Residents of Sarbari (shelter for homeless women with psychosocial disabilities) and clients of UMHP who have received skills training in tailoring made 3 ply cotton masks which were distributed to families in the relief kit. These masks are now being made to sell through Saksham - Iswar Sankalpa's Livelihood Programme. You can contact us for orders!



## 28 persons provided financial assistance to restore their homes after Cyclone Amphan

Financial assistance was provided to our service users and staff members who suffered significant losses to their homes in the Cyclone.



## 89 persons provided with psychotropic medication support

Psychotropic medicines which are vital for persons with severe mental health problems were inaccessible due to the lack of transport, the lack of income and mostly because of the broken supply chain due to the Lockdown.

# Events and Experiences at Iswar Sankalpa



*Relief distribution to tribal families in Bhangor II, South 24 Parganas*



*Purnima, a resident of Sarbari and trainee at Crust and Core receives her incentive amount after the Lockdown*



*Laxmi, resident of Sarbari gifts a handmade painting to actress Sreelekha Mitra on her birthday*



*Rakhi celebrated by the residents of Marudyan*



*Residents of Nayagram clear the fields after Cyclone Amphan devastated the banana plants*



*Independence Day flag hoisting with members of Innerwheel Club of Calcutta Midwest and District Chairperson Ms. Anita Ghosh*

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# Growing community of supporters

Over the months of April to August, Iswar Sankalpa has had to ensure the security of the 135 resident who live in our three shelters (Sarbari and Marudyan for homeless women and men with psychosocial disabilities, and Nayagram – assisted community living for homeless women with psychosocial disabilities). The homeless persons we reach out to through our Naya Daur programme were at risk, and our efforts were to ensure their safety. Our social workers went around the city on their bikes to locate our clients and ensure they are connected with community persons and have a steady source of food, and hygiene.

The support we received from you, and a whole new community of supporters has given us the faith, that we are all in it together. Every grain of rice is a blessing and a message of solidarity.

**Initiated online donations through our website:** Making a difference has become easier with our Donation page on our website [www.isankalpa.org](http://www.isankalpa.org)

**Art for Relief campaign on Facebook:** Noted artists and supporters of our cause, Nilanjan Bandopadhyay, Shatavisha Mukherjee Mardur, Upasana Das, Sonal Jha, Srabasti Ghosh, Swagata Majumdar, and Daminee Basu dedicated their dance, poetry and story-telling performances on our Art For Relief Facebook campaign. We raised Rs. 37,400 from the 7 day campaign

**Student engagement to support the cause:** Engaging young minds with the issue of homelessness and mental health gives us hope for a more inclusive future. Young students have collectivised, organised and contributed to the wellbeing of marginalised persons. We are grateful, and invite many more students to join the cause.

Students of Lakshmipat Singhanian Academy, Kolkata raised Rs. 24,500 to support our cause through the Syndicate Model United Nations organised by them. A group of students of La Martiniere for Girls raised Rs. 13,800 through an online cooking workshop for the cause.

**Ketto Online Fundraising Platform:** Iswar Sankalpa initiated a fundraiser to support homeless persons through the COVID-19 pandemic on Ketto, for a period of 45 days. We raised Rs. 4,78,949 through the fundraising campaign. Ketto waived their platform fee for the same, allowing us to raise more resources to support the last person in the streets.

**Corporates, individuals, Social welfare charity organisations:** In the months of April to July our supporters from the corporate sector [Capgemini, Cognizant Technology Services (CTS), Confederation Of Indian industry (CII), ITC Ltd.] came forward to help us. We also received support from individual persons and charity organisations like Rotary Clubs and Innerwheel Clubs. We are grateful to you for organising the procurement and distribution through the Lockdown.

# Thank you for supporting vulnerable and homeless persons



*All pictures and stories have been shared after taking consent of the respective person(s)*

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