

Newsletter

APRIL-JULY 2021



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The Year That Was

The last 15 months have been a period of shift, adaptation, and innovation. Almost all the systems, processes and procedures of learning, unlearning and relearning that were built over years had to undergo change. One may say, this is only part of the process of learning. At the least, it has been a challenge to overcome the fears and anxieties about our health. We probably followed the number of active cases and death rates due to COVID more keenly than numbers of an ODI final or the Euro Cup. The anxieties were a definite threat to our mental wellbeing, but the determination to serve our clients and keep the systems running in the face of the pandemic was our goal.

There is no doubt the number of homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities have increased on the streets. It however has been a challenge for the Community Outreach programme to provide services to more people. At this crucial time, Iswar Sankalpa has had to make many decisions about the way we would want to approach the need of the situation. Do we provide quality care to the existing service users, or do we provide basic care to new and existing service users. What is the risk?

We have dedicated, yet limited expert social workers. They are willing to risk their health and their families' but can our programmes sustain with sick social workers? They are the pillars of the systems through which we reach out to the vulnerable persons.

The pandemic has challenged us on different grounds—Can we travel long distances in public transport, to reunite homeless persons with their families? Can we bring in homeless persons to the shelter and risk the existing residents? How do we manage the wellbeing of social workers, who are frontline warriors and also householders, parents? Can we support vulnerable minds when the massive shift in everyday life brings back voices to the minds?

Inspite of these challenges, Iswar Sankalpa has strived to achieve its goals. We share with you some stories, reflections and achievements in this newsletter.

A Collective Holding

BY GUNJAN CHANDAK KHEMKA

Shanti* was studying Sanskrit in Tripura and does not remember how she came to be on the streets of Kolkata. She was lost, unsure, disheveled and incoherent when we found her. It took some days, but finally Shanti agreed to come to Sarbari with us. Sarbari is our shelter for homeless women with psychosocial disabilities in Kolkata, run in partnership with the local municipal corporation. (*Name changed to protect identity)

Shanti slowly started communicating with the team. She was confused about the voices who spoke to her; voices which had no physical presence. But her counsellor continued to work with her, and the team provided her with biopsychosocial support. Just before Covid-19 changed the world, Shanti was training to be a baker at a professional institute. Full of dreams and plans for her future, trying to map her way back to a family scattered across the country - to a brother, a father, and living with the loss of a mother who walked out of their lives, never to return.

The women in Sarbari found a foster family in the shelter, building relationships with the people there. Someone was *didi* (elder sister) while someone was *dada* (elder brother). They found a space to share their stories- from having a roof, a family they were born or married into, to their ultimate homelessness.

Many don't remember why they left, and most of them had no understanding of mental health issues, having grappled with their hallucinations and delusions alone. There was a collective holding they experienced at Sarbari.

In the hustle bustle of the everyday in Sarbari, there was familial routine, a sense of living, and shared experiences. There was a witness to their beings, a validation of their struggles.

And in the space between being in the shelter, and moving out to work, buy, or just for recreational purposes, there was a fluidity between being attached and separated.

The pandemic changed all of that.

When India went on lockdown to contain the spread of coronavirus it forced everyone indoors. With no preparation, Shanti and many others like her were confined to the shelter, stuck with four caregivers who lived there with them. This was perhaps, the first time that most of them, despite their experiences of abuse, violence and abandonment, were truly without choice. Even if they wanted to, they could not get out. And no one could get in. The collective holding suffered a breakdown.



The breakdown which manifested in the women, in the gradual but definite unravelling of their inner mind. The sudden absence of the other(s) (the support team) was traumatic which could not be voiced, only felt. The pandemic and lockdown forced a compulsory revisiting of the trauma which led to their homelessness, often creating a chain reaction amongst the women. Even though, they are individuals, the symbiotic relationship of living in a shared home, in the complex relational matrix of displacement familial relationships animated their lives - in all kinds of ways, because as Sudhir Kakar puts it in his book, *The Indians: Portrait of a People* (2009), family is the only "ism" which permeates experience in the Indian setting.

In Psychoanalysis, traditionally, we address the individual in isolation, but while we talk about the family, the lens shifts to a group. Women in India, given its patriarchal structures, have traditionally continued to find their own identities in relation to the roles they play in their families, and while urban India is experiencing certain shifts in this narrative, rural India, and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups largely continues to put the family first. And in this family, the women continue to be largely invisible.

The women in Sarbari hence continue to find their self through the larger group, where the holding is essential for healing, in an attempt to work through their internal memory of their families in order to find a self which can survive, and thrive. The caregivers themselves, isolated from other support, were overwhelmed with trying to be the 'good mother' stitching together the cracks in the holding, countering the group's fear psychosis, of being abandoned. Yet again.



For women with psychosocial disabilities in India, often viewed as a burden, the tradition remains alive in their subconscious where they continue to find meaning through the other. In the absence of that familial security and safety, the 'me' often loses itself, and there is an empty self. The lockdown pushed many of them into a space of paranoia, mistrust, and a reliving of that inner world of emptiness. The transference-countertransference dyad with their 'new' parental figures suffered a fissure, propelling many of them back to the comfort of the voices which keep them company, no matter which earthly catastrophic event takes place.

In the meantime, the pandemic rages on.

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Gunjan is also a consultant at Iswar Sankalpa, and was previously the Assistant Director at the organisation.

Home: The Longer Wait



Prathibha Das, a resident of Sarbari, speaks with her daughter in Assam in February 2021. She went running to the privacy of the backyard when she was told her daughter called.

Prathiba was brought to the shelter in 2017 by the Kalighat Police, her family was traced by the reintegration team in 2019. Prathiba was shunned from her house after her husband remarried. Aggrieved, she lost her way and reached Kolkata by train. The team went looking for her house in 2019 during another person's restoration, after locating it they spoke with the family members, and her daughter was most excited to bring her mother back and look after her.

Prathiba was scheduled to go back home in 2020 after another resident's home could be traced. The two of them would be taken back together. With the Lockdown enforced in March, Prathiba's wait to go home has become longer.

In the months April 2019 - March 2020, 55 homeless persons were reunited with their families across India, but in the months April 2020 - March 2021, 24 persons were reunited with their families.

'Bari Jabo' is one of the most commonly heard phrases in our shelter homes. Everybody longs to be at home, the place where the heart lies, where our loved ones await us, where we belong. Iswar Sankalpa's Reintegration team works everyday, connecting with Police Stations, hospitals, community resource persons and sometimes just random village persons to locate homes of the homeless persons who live in our shelter. For we believe, that every homeless person is a child, a sibling, parent, lover or a support to somebody and one's mental wellbeing truly lies when we are in the care of our loved ones.

Once the home of a lost person is located, the joy experienced cannot be expressed in words. Sometimes, persons with psychosocial disabilities lose their memory of numbers, addresses and names - it becomes difficult to trace their homes and families then. Sometimes, being from rural areas their idea of an address is a lake, bridge, market or some landmark - the process thereafter is to locate these little pieces of information on the map, identify resource persons in the area and then the family.

Once a family is located, the team and the concerned homeless person speak with the family, Level of recovery, situation of the

family, the social environment in the home is all considered before a homeless person with psychosocial disability returns home. Yet, locating home and doing the 'talks' is phase one.

Phase two is the journey back. If the family is socio-economically unable to make the journey to Kolkata and back, then the team travel with the person to their home. The journeys are sometimes thousands of kilometers to Karnataka, Gujarat, Haryana, Mizoram - hours of travel by trains, buses, other forms of local transport, and sometimes the process is different!

There is no address, it is vague image of home in a field, on the banks of a certain river, near a certain school. In such cases the team believes in the will of the client and they go on a wild hunt. 80% of the time the client is able to recognise the home, community persons identify the person and a mind finds their heart at home.

In the last one year, we have only been able to reunite families within West Bengal and the neighboring states of Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and families from Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh who made the journey to Kolkata. The risks are high, the uncertainty of a sudden lockdown, and exposure due to travelling long distance in public transport has limited our restoration efforts.

The wait for many homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities whose families have been located in other states of Assam, Maharashtra, etc. has become longer.

Community Caregivers

On 2nd March, the community volunteers, who support the social recovery of homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities living on the streets, came together to celebrate and acknowledge their participation in selfless service towards the most vulnerable citizens of our city. Participants shared their experience, motivations, and congratulated one another for the exceptional work they do.

The caregivers participated in activities that exhibited the collective effort required in supporting a vulnerable and disabled person, and a role-play to execute the effects of active listening.

Surajit, who was living on the streets with mental illness and has been accessing mental healthcare services at Iswar Sankalpa since 2018, voiced his opinion on the need for the support he received and spoke of the stigma attached with persons like him. "Anyone can recover, like I did. I work 12 hours a day. I live my life independently, I am grateful and would like to thank everyone who has supported me." he said.

We are incredibly grateful to our community volunteers who have stood by the nowhere people even during the lockdown and pandemic, giving even when they had little. This is the spirit of humanity that inspires Iswar Sankalpa.

It was a heartfelt moment when Mr. Sobhas Khan came to the Meet to share his father's legacy. Mr. Nihal had been a caregiver to our client Abdullah for 12 years till he went back to his family in Maharashtra, in 2019. Nihal ji had begun his journey as a caregiver by giving Abdullah food every Friday after Namaz, he then started giving him food and medicine everyday with our social worker's intervention in 2008. As Abdullah started responding to the care Nihal ji gave Abdullah a space to stay in his house, and job at his grocery store. This support and compassion gave Abdullah the hope and faith to start living on his own, with dignity. Over the years Nihal ji had inspired many other persons to support the journey of recovery of homeless persons. He supported Iswar Sankalpa during the Lockdown by providing dry food grains from his shop in Khidderpore market to the suffering residents of Hastings slum area. In September 2020, we lost Nihal ji to COVID-19. His son said, "I knew my father used to help a homeless person, I didn't know he was part of such a large community. I am so proud of him." We fondly remember him and his years of selfless service.



COVID-19 Second Wave Response

The past year has been a learning experience for Iswar Sankalpa, with the rise of COVID-19 and the lockdown that followed, clubbed with the super cyclone Amphan and cyclone Yaas that devastated our State of West Bengal.

The people we work with belong to the most vulnerable community - persons living with psychosocial disability who are homeless or belong to low resource settings. The risk is magnified for them, being completely exposed to a life threatening virus without any resources and with no roof over their head to protect them from natural disasters.

The first wave has taught us that we need to face the challenge head on and timely intervention is crucial to saving lives and reducing chances of damage. With the onset of the second wave we have been able to take action before the lockdown hit us. We have also been able to prepare and equip our stakeholders for the cyclone. The following are some of our interventions for the homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities living on the streets:

Providing ready-to-eat food kits

The community outreach team has been providing ready-to-eat food kits to homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities on the streets as the city has been under lockdown to contain the rapid spread of COVID-19, since 1st May 2021.

The homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities survive with the support of the community around them who provide food regularly. During the lockdown period, as people retreat to their homes, and small eateries close down, food for the homeless people becomes scarce. Ensuring food security is the most important intervention at this point.

Additionally, the social workers of Iswar Sankalpa have been mobilising community persons to provide regular medicines to the homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities, without which their mental health could be severely affected.



Distribution of food packets to homeless persons on the streets

Containing COVID-19 in the shelter

In April 2021, one resident of the women's shelter tested positive for COVID-19. All efforts were taken to ensure isolation of the resident and persons showing symptoms, resources for a medical emergency were in place, all residents were tested and efforts to break the chain were taken. This was the only case in the shelter after which safety protocols have been stepped up. Early detection was key to ensure early medical intervention.

Vaccination of homeless persons

103 residents of Iswar Sankalpa's shelter homes and Assisted Community Living Programme have received the vaccine for the Corona Virus from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation after advocacy.

As per the guidelines of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India for the vaccination of persons without identity proofs, Iswar Sankalpa has resolved to facilitate the vaccination for homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities we provide mental healthcare services to.



Tele-counselling via video call with a client



Vaccination of residents of Sarbari (Shelter for homeless women with psychosocial disabilities) at an urban primary healthcare centre

Providing tele- counselling support

Counsellors and social workers of the Urban Mental Health Programme (UMHP) have been providing tele-counselling services to clients of UMHP amidst this second-wave wherein physical presence at the clinic poses a risk to both service provider and client.

The community volunteers of the UMHP have been actively keeping in touch with members of their community to be updated on the situations and challenges they are faced with. More than 538 clients have been provided tele-counselling support in the time period December 2020 to July 2021.

The counsellors have also addressed fear and anxiety of our clients with regard to the Cyclone Yaas, which brings the horrors of Cyclone Amhpan that left a trail of devastation for many.

Preparations for Cyclone Yaas

Amidst the second-wave and lockdown, West Bengal was hit by Cyclone Yaas on May 2021. The organisation, having learnt several lessons in May 2020, when super-cyclone Amphan hit West Bengal, had taken all precautionary measures to equip the shelter homes with emergency water and electric supply. Food supplies for a week were procured and stored. Items that could be affected due to heavy rainfall were protected, guidelines for protecting electronic items in the shelters were shared with the caretakers of the shelter homes. The local government systems were contacted to provide emergency services in case the need arises.

At Uttar Kashipur, where our Assisted Community Living Programme - Nayagram is located, the animal shelters were protected, electric, food and water supply arranged.



Preparations for super cyclone Yaas at Nayagram (left) filling drinking water incase electric supply is lost, (right) preparing oil lamps for emergency situations

Isvar Sankalpa has upheld its mission to protect the rights and dignity of homeless persons with psychosocial disabilities in the last 14 months, as the city of Kolkata has seen a public health emergency threatening the life of persons who are vulnerable and without protection.

How You Can Help?

Donation options	Details
Support Medicines for a Client ₹1200	Covers medicines for one client for 3 months
Meals for Male Shelter Clients ₹10,000	Covers breakfast and dinner for one week for 30 residents
Special Occasion Lunch (Non vegetarian) ₹26,000	Special lunch freshly cooked and served in our shelters for 120 clients in celebration or in memory of an occasion
Festival Dresses ₹36,000	Covers new dress for 120 clients
Supporting a Client towards Independent Living in the Community ₹13,500	Supports living expenses for 3 months for one client working on an organic farm land owned by Iswar Sankalpa
Corpus Fund ₹50,000	Provides financial stability to the organisation and aids in sustaining the projects
<p style="text-align: center;">No Strings Attached</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Any amount of your choice can be donated through online transfers, cash or cheque, for the cause of supporting homeless persons with psychosocial disability. You can also contribute through kind donations.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Contact: udisha@isankalpa.org or +91 9051496627 for more details</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Volunteer & Internship Programmes</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Iswar Sankalpa provides a vast range of internships and volunteering opportunities in different ongoing programmes. We invite you to lend your skills and expertise to our cause. To find out more, drop a mail at hr@isankalpa.org</p>	
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All Donations are exempted from tax under 80G

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We sincerely thank everybody who has come forward to put a smile on the faces that go unseen, and for supporting us in all your capacity. Your support gives us the faith to move forward!