



ANNUAL REPORT 2020 – 2021

NEW ALIPORE PRAAJAK DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

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Notes from the Director

Praajak, meaning '*charioteer*' began its journey in 1997 with a commitment to securing a better present and future for children and youth living in historically disadvantaged communities, in confined custodial milieus and those who find themselves surviving on their own. The organization works with the government, civil society and community based actors to provide an enabling and secure environment for children and young people. Praajak has consistently worked to address gender inequalities and challenged traditional notions of masculinity and patriarchy which have led to a growing body of work with boys and young men and supporting them in playing their part in creating a gender equitable society. Praajak has worked on a range of child protection issues including preventing and addressing unsafe migration, child trafficking, child sexual abuse, early/child and forced marriages and child work and labour. child, early and forced marriages, trafficking and abuse.

Praajak believes in child centric approach, which implies that the organization makes all efforts to recognising and making sure that the child is put first before anyone else. A child centred approach encourages every child to communicate and connect with people who look after them and works with them. This approach also puts the concept of child agency at the centre of all our direct interventions and advocacy. When children have a sense of agency, they are able to make choices and decisions to influence events, and to have an impact on their world. As children make meaningful decisions and choices about things which affect them, they begin to see themselves as competent, capable learners, as valuable and valued citizens within their families and communities.

This year, COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented upheaval – magnifying the hardships of the children and their families we work with. The pandemic also deepened systematic inequalities within societies and made our work for vulnerable children more urgently needed than ever. The challenges were huge, but with the support from our stakeholders, staffs and donors we were able to respond to the needs of our communities. As an organization we learnt the ways of working remotely due to the lockdown and stay at home orders, forcing us to find out innovative ways of working with our children in the communities. With travel and movement restricted we started tele counselling services and devised various methods of reaching out to children through different online platforms.

I remain thankful to all our partners, stakeholders, particularly children and donors for believing in us and providing us with necessary support to steer through the crisis.

Deep Purkayastha

Our Work

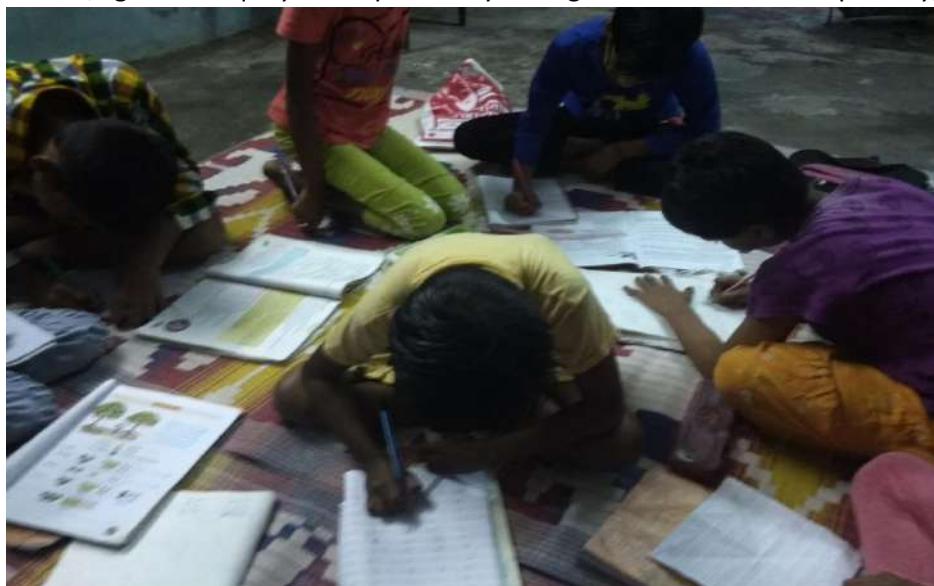
Antariksha: Empowering Children and Youth with Agency to Transform their Worlds by transforming themselves

The programme titled *Antariksha (Space in Between)* is a unique programme that aims to address gender equity and work towards a society free from gender discrimination and gender based violence. As a part of this programme Praajak works with adolescent and young boys and girls in the districts of South 24 Paraganas, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling districts of West Bengal. Different strategies have been adopted by Praajak for working with children, adolescents' youths, their parents/guardians and communities, which include outreach, trainings, efforts towards collectivisation and forming collectives of adolescents and youths, empowerment of girls through sports and use different traditional cultural forms that help communities to bond as collectives and work together on issues significant to them.

Training on Gender and Masculinity

Working towards gender equality remains pivotal to Praajak's work. Thus, all children and adolescent boys and girls Praajak works with undergoes training on gender, gender-based violence, masculinities and how it impacts both boys and girls. Over the years Praajak has developed a Foundational Course consisting of 9 Modules for both boys and girls on the basis of experiences of Study Circle conducted by field persons of Praajak and feedback from participants. The Course includes basic concepts of human rights, differences between sex and gender, gender-based discrimination and violence, gender equity and patriarchy along with sessions on puberty, adolescence and sexuality. The module has separate sections for boys and girls to enable discussions on how the patriarchal beliefs and value system impacts them.

These trainings are conducted with the objective of enabling the



children and adolescents understand and situate issues of Early Child Marriage, Child Labour, Trafficking, Child Sexual Abuse and other forms of gender-based violence and discrimination within the gender discourse. It helps them understand the root causes of the problems and thereby explore ways to address the causes. All children and adolescent girls and boys Praajak work with attend these Gender trainings that are conducted in their localities in forms of study circles. Approximately 714 adolescent and young boys and girls were reached out to through these Study Circles across the districts of Malda, Murshidabad, South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas.

As a part of the training sessions and study circles, there was a mobile library that was running in Praajak's Dumdum field area of North 24 Parganas. 270 children in the area accessed services from this mobile library.

On completion of the trainings, they identify different issues of child protection and gender-based violence and discrimination in their communities and accordingly takes various initiatives involving the community which includes awareness campaigns, interactions with different stakeholders.

Praajak used its interactive workbook '*Amar Boi Amar Kotha*' to spread awareness about sexual violence and abuse among 50 girls and 50 boys in the community. This activity was initiated after the lockdown was called off and face-to-face interactions was possible within the communities.

Impact of the training

- Most of the adolescent and young boys and girls undertaking the training on gender acknowledge that the sessions changed their perspectives, ways of seeking things that resulted in a change in their attitudes and behaviour. In fact, they mentioned that this change earned them respect and praise within their families and communities. They were also being held up in their communities as example to emulate.
- They felt that their improved communication skills, being able to talk with reason, being able to manage their emotions enabled them to deal with various adverse situations within families and communities, which otherwise they were unable to handle before.
- They reported that members of the communities approached them for help on different issues that included issues of their children and family.
- Family visits also reveal that there were major changes in behaviour of boys towards their mothers and sisters. They helped their mothers and sisters in household work. They were also spending quality time with their families instead of just roaming around with friends. Many parents reported that being part of the study circles have also increased their interest in studies.
- Girls negotiated with their families to delay their marriages and gained permission to continue higher education

Efforts towards Collectivisation: Strengthening Community Ecosystems

The adolescent boys and girls become parts of the groups from the time they start attending the study circle and continue holding different action events within the communities after the completion of the study circles. These activities are intended to generate awareness on issues of child marriage and different gender-based discrimination and violence. It has been reported that these initiatives have led to enhancement of the quality of community life.

Many collective members have opined that they can intervene effectively in cases of rights violations of women and other adolescents more effectively if they had the support of the local women's groups. Keeping this in mind Praajak was able to contact and receive support from 174 women in the areas that the collectives were operating in.

Over the last year, it has been noted that many of the boys who have enthusiastically participated in the study circles and emerged as core collective members came out as gender queer. Many of them succeeded in bringing in other queer friends to be part of the activities of the collectives and the study circles. Thus, Praajak came in close contacts with '*chhokras*', popular name used for boys who

impersonated female characters in traditional folk theatre. This is widely prevalent in the Dalit communities of North-Central Bengal.

Impact

- Adolescents and youth from among collective members have mobilised other adolescents and young people within their communities thereby consolidating and expanding the work further in their areas. The adolescent and youth leaders also continue organizing, participating in various group events throughout the year.
- One collective member from Murshidabad has started a group with around 15 male queer youths. He recruited some of them into our study circles.
- One of the girls from Dumdum, North 24 Parganas have initiated Kabaddi Practice sessions with 10 girls from her neighbourhood. Her aim is to build self-efficacy among girls in her community through sport and institute a kabaddi league for girls and women in their community. She is being assisted with another member from her collective.
- The leaders of the collectives and the members have also been extensively involved in *Basanta Utsab* and *Abhay Yatra*, where they performed, volunteering in implementation and organizing logistics for the events. They also raised different issues on gender-based violence and discrimination within their communities during the campaigns prior to these events
- During the pandemic, members of youth collectives worked together to identify single women and transgender persons within their communities who needed relief and actively participated in the relief distribution process, maintaining all covid protocols.



Empowerment through Sports

The programme has been implemented in *South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda and Jalpaiguri* in West Bengal to prevent early and child marriage, trafficking, sexual abuse and school drop-out.

The programme has been an affirmation of Praajak's belief in the power of sports as one of the tools to empower and amplify women's voices and tear down gender barriers and discrimination. Playing Kabaddi along with development of life skills and gender sensitisation activities has helped to improve self-efficacy of girls and women and contribute to the development of leadership skills. These have enabled adolescent girls to make better life choices where the probability of abuse and exploitation can be reduced. The programme works both with boys and girls aged 12 to 21 years to enhance their capacities on issues of gender and sexuality through a series of sessions (study circles) Breaking of gender stereotypes have been made possible through the playing of *Kabaddi* by girls and

forming their collectives to drive change in their families and communities. The use of role models / positive deviance from the community has played an important role to catalyse social change. It has helped in mobilization of parents, especially fathers to transform their perceptions and mind set towards girls' involvement in Kabaddi.



The development and use of impact films and change stories are an effective and powerful approach to meaningfully engage children, as these media tools provide a platform where their voices can be heard and can be used to advocate against early marriage, stigma and challenge negative norms within the community.

- Praajak worked with 35 Kabaddi groups with 597 girls, who participated in 33 study circles along with attending the different Kabaddi practice sessions.
- 12 new collectives were formed with 227 adolescents including 147 girls. They conducted 32 joint social actions against gender based harmful practices and COVID-19 protection messages reaching to 4845 members within their communities.
- These girls are demonstrating their roles as active change agents, 5 of them stalling their own marriages.
- Through life skills training, the project enhanced emotional and social wellbeing of 90 girls and 52 boys
- Praajak strengthened 18 Child Protection Committees at village and ward level.
- Collective members advocated with Child Welfare Committees, District Child Protection Officers and the District Social Welfare Officers with their needs resulting in 28 girls being supported by the DCPU with a livelihood training program.
- Collective members also advocated with local administration to clean sewages and provide safe drinking water.
- 42 girls from the different Kabaddi teams were selected by the Kabaddi Association as district level players within this reporting period. They receive free coaching, government benefits and participate in district and state level tournaments.
- Girls selected as district level players are now mentoring the other girls as peer coaches and providing support to animators

This year has been particularly challenging because of the pandemic. Despite lockdown, Praajak maintained engagement with adolescents and families mostly virtually. In person meetings / interactions were conducted when the lockdown restrictions were withdrawn

The Second Annual Kabaddi Tournament was held on 22nd January 2021 in Kolkata. It could not be held at the scale we had planned due to COVID-19, however it was still attended by key stakeholders including members and Sports personnel from the State Kabaddi Federation.

Vasantotsav Udyapan Samiti, Beldanga, Murshidabad - using cultural forms to establish their rights within communities: A Case Study

Holi is a popular celebration in Bengal. However, over the last few decades, the festival in areas of Beldanga was known more for the drunken and violent behaviour of men who took over the streets of towns and villages. Hence, women and girls rarely venture out of their homes to celebrate the festival with other members / friends in their neighbourhoods. A feeling of general fear pervaded habitations and most often the streets and public squares of the villages wear a deserted look.

Young girls from some of the collectives in Pilkhana village of Beldanga decided to make a change by trying to transform the public spaces in Pilkhana and surrounding villages into areas where women and girls can venture without fear and celebrate Holi. The girls decided to celebrate Holi across 13 adjoining villages in the lines of the Vasantotsav celebrations instituted by Rabindranath Tagore in Shantiniketan.



This implied morning processions, or 'baitalik' of girls and boys who would dance to songs of spring and Holi and circumambulate the villages and finally gather at a central place to conclude the 'baitalik' with a cultural medley, which then culminated in playing with colours irrespective of sex and age.

The women of the community came forward to support the collective leaders the Vasantotsav Udyapan Samiti (Vasantotsav Celebration Committee) was formed with 6 women members, who were the mothers of collective members along with one member from Praajak team. Many children, adolescents and youth not part of the collectives responded to the call to celebrate Vasantotsav participating in the rehearsals and mobilising funds for some of the expenses that would have to be incurred. Though their religious convention decreed that they not play with colours, Muslim members of the community also joined hands to make this a success. They were there as spectators ensuring that everything went as per plans. Many youths from the community were found to take initiatives on their own and they distributed water to the dancers of the 'baitaliks' at strategic points of the procession.

100 young men and women from 6 collectives and 50 women from local SHGs and the community participated in the procession through 10 villages covering a stretch of 3 kilometres reaching out to 6000 people.

This was the first-time women and girls organised a public event in the area and laid claim to the village streets on Holi. Anecdotal evidence from community members seems to bear out the fact that public drinking and alcohol induced violence in these villages seemed to have gone down.

Muktangan: Ensuring Child Protection

Praajak has been working with Children in need of Care and Protection (CNCP) and Children in Conflict with Law (CCL) since its inception. The organization has been working with CNCP children within the communities working towards their empowerment and care and has been working in the Observation Homes across West Bengal working with the CCLs. The main focus of Praajak's work with the CCL has been their psycho social rehabilitation within the community building upon restorative approaches as against the usual practice of retribution.

Non-custodial approaches to child protection: Working with Children in Conflict with Law

The programme envisages implementation of the spirit and tenets of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection) of Children Act, 2015 with regard to diversion and measures for dealing with children in conflict with law without resorting to judicial proceedings unless it is in the best interest of the child or the society as a whole. This programme is unique to firstly, employ "*positive measures*" of mobilizing resources of those of family and community, for promoting the well-being, providing an inclusive and enabling environment to reduce vulnerabilities of children secondly, to support structures like Juvenile Justice Boards (JJB) to follow the "*Principle of Diversion*" and build capacities of concerned stakeholders.

The programme is an approach in identifying and managing cases of children in conflict with law "*without resorting to formal trial,*" where it so warrants. It is an approach to justice that personalizes the crime by having the victims and the offenders mediate a restitution agreement to the satisfaction of each, as well as involving the community. Restorative Justice is an alternative paradigm to build community, address violence and repair harm that is rooted in community solutions and relationships. It is based on a theory of justice that considers crime and wrong doing to be an offense against an individual or community, rather than the State.

Over the last year Praajak has worked with 15 Children in Conflict with Law who have been referred to us by the Juvenile Justice Board of South 24 Parganas. Praajak has been working towards their community-based rehabilitation with necessary psycho social support and thereby avoid incarceration and recidivism.

With this programme Praajak is trying to work towards a dynamic and efficient inter-agency cooperation and collaboration between the JJB, the Police, Child Care Institutions (CCI) and District Child Protection Units (DCPU) to ensure rehabilitation of CCLs through restorative approached.

Railway Childline: Working with Children in Need of Care and Protection

The Ministry of Women and Child Development and Ministry of Railways have jointly taken an initiative to ensure the care and protection, security and well- being of run-away, unaccompanied and trafficked children who come in contact with the railways. Praajak is collaborating with CHILDLINE India Foundation in Malda Railway Station (Malda district) since November 2016 and in

Asansol Railway Station (Paschim Bardhaman district) since September 2019 to run the Railway Childline on the station premises.

Outreach activities were conducted by Malda Railway Childline in 9 other stations (like Gour Malda, Harishchandrapur, Malda Court Station, Khaltipur) to generate awareness on child protection issues and the child helpline number of 1098 among various stakeholders including railway staffs, GRP, vendors of the railway stations, coolies along with passengers.



Similar outreach activities were conducted by Asansol Railway Childline in 6 adjoining stations covering the stretch from Durgapur to Chittaranjan.

Children Rescued		Children restored back home		Children in child care institutions	
Asansol	Malda	Asansol	Malda	Asansol	Malda
86	196	63	162	23	36

Emergency Response Services

Relief Services for marginalized communities during Covid 19 pandemic and Amphan

Baid or Bediyas, Fakir, Sain, LodhaShabar, KheriyaShabar are some of the extremely marginalized caste-communities belonging to De Notified Tribe category, who owing to their more than a century of social and economic persecution and oppression have mostly remained outside of the development initiatives. Most of them do not possess any documents, like Adhaar card, Voter card, Ration card etc. and hence are systemically left out of the welfare schemes meant for the poor and the vulnerable.



Praajak's close engagement with communities across districts in West Bengal and the sense of their deteriorating living conditions pushed the organisation to undertake relief efforts. It had never been involved in disaster relief efforts in the past. But the growing burden of vulnerabilities and losses faced by children and their communities compelled Praajak to act.

Praajak initiated Covid 19 relief efforts in Cooch Behar, Murshidabad, Malda and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal in April 2020. Meanwhile in May 2020, government advisories, advice from health functionaries and the evolving experiences from the relief efforts were used to formulate a Covid 19 related protocol for Praajak. In the month of May 2020, *Amphan* related relief work was initiated in South 24 Parganas. Subsequently, such efforts were undertaken in North 24 Parganas as well. Praajak undertook participatory lessons, learned collation exercise during September-November 2020, which was consolidated as a report and was shared internally as well as with its partner organizations.

- Praajak focused on families with children and elderly, single women, families belonging to nomadic/itinerant groups or tribes (Baid, Mal, Jogi, Gond, Lodh-Sabar, Fakir-Sain, Madari, Shah, Kapuria) and folk artists (especially adolescent boys and young men who impersonated female characters) in the relief efforts.
- Praajak consciously involved volunteers and members of collectives (groups of young people associated with Praajak through various activities) in the relief efforts. Those who had been engaged with the organisation for several years were entrusted with more responsibilities. In select districts, local NGOs were also involved.

This relief measure undertaken allowed Praajak to expand on its development mandate while also utilising the much-needed humanitarian approach in supporting individuals and communities affected by the twin calamities. It has also taught the organization to incorporate long-term planning to work with the communities, like helping them get identity documents, enabling them get benefits of the welfare schemes of the state beyond short-term and immediate relief measures. The relief reached out to about 18,752 adults and 12,154 children across the following 19 districts in West Bengal.

No	District	Rural areas (block)	Urban areas
1	Alipurduar	Madarihat, Kumargam, Kalchini	
2	Bankura		Bankura
3	Birbhum	Nalhati 1 & 2, Rampurhat 1, Labhpur	
4	Cooch behar	Tufanganj	
5	Dakhin Dinajpur	Gangarampur	
6	Darjeeling		Siliguri
7	Hooghly	Pandua	
8	Jalpaiguri	Rajgange	
9	Jhargram	Manikpara	
10	Kalimpong	Kalimpong II	
11	Malda	Harishchandrapur 1, Manikchak, Ratua 1, Gajal, Old Malda, Englishbazar	Malda town
12	Murshidabad	Beldanga 1&2, Nowda,	Berhampore

		Berhampore, Raghunathganj 1 & 2	
13	Nadia	Shantipur, Ranaghat 1, Kishanganj, Tehatta, Karimpur	
14	North 24 Parganas	Hingalganj	Barasat, Dum Dum
15	Paschim Bardhaman		Andal, Asansol, Durgapur
16	Paschim Medinipur	Kesiyari, Kharagpur 1	
17	Purulia	Adra	Purulia
18	South 24 Parganas	Magrahat II, Basanti, Joynagar II, Kultali, Namkhana, Pathar Pratima	
19	Uttar Dinajpur	Goalpokhor II	Raiganj

Governing Body Members

Name	Occupation	Office held in the association	Address and email id
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Acknowledgements

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Juvenile Justice Board, South 24 Parganas

Child Welfare Committee, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda, Paschim and Purba Bardhaman, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri

Municipal Corporation and Panchayat Members of different blocks in the districts of South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda, Paschim and Purba Bardhaman, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri

Police Officials from South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda, Paschim and Purba Bardhaman, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri

American Jewish World Service (AJWS)

Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF)

Terre Des Hommes (TDH)

UNICEF

CRY

Childline India Foundation

Humming Bird Foundation