



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

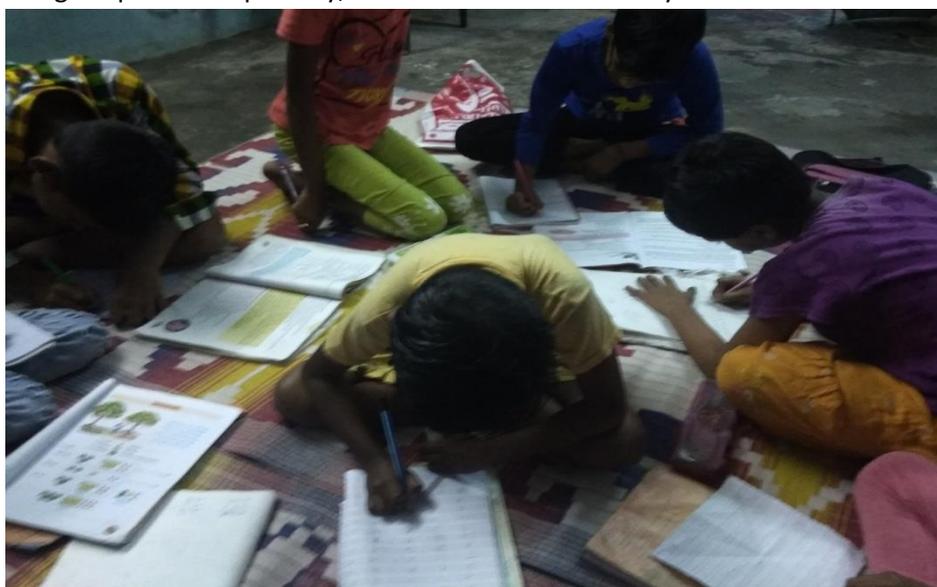
The programme titled *Antariksha (Space in Between)* is a unique multifaceted programme that aims to address gender equity and promote a society free from gender discrimination and gender based violence. As a part of this programme Praajak works with adolescent and young boys and girls in the districts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

Training on Gender and Masculinity

The Module

Working towards gender equality remains pivotal to Praajak's work. Thus all the adolescent and young boys and girls Praajak works with undergoes training on gender and the impacts of toxic masculinities. For this 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 Foundational Course includes some basic concepts of human rights, differences between sex and gender, gender based discrimination and violence, gender equity and patriarchy besides a strong emphasis on puberty, adolescence and sexuality. The final Module is

divided into two section A and B. Section A is focused on girls and Section B on boys which specifically talks about health issues that impact girls and boys respectively due to patriarchal social values and hegemonic masculinity. These trainings help the



children and youths understand and situate issues of Early Child Marriage, Child Labour, Trafficking and other forms of gender based violence and discrimination within the gender discourse. It enables them understand the root causes of the problems and thereby explore ways to address the causes, instead of taking legalistic ways of prevention. Most of the adolescent and young girls and boys Praajak works with attend these Gender trainings regularly in forms of Study Circles. Along with the

trainings, they participate in various community action including awareness campaigns and community interactions.

Along with this module, Praajak used its interactive workbook '*Amar Boi Amar Kotha*' to spread awareness about sexual violence and abuse among both girls and boys in the community. So far, 50 girls and 50 boys have attended these sessions. However, this was initiated only in January after it was possible for children and adolescents to sit together maintaining all protocols. The first phase of this will continue till the end of 2021. 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 has accessed services from this mobile library, inspite of the pandemic and resultant lockdown.

Impact of the training

- Most of the adolescent and young boys and girls undertaking the training on gender and masculinities acknowledge that their involvement in the Study Circles led to a change in their attitudes and behaviour which earned them respect and praise within their families and also from members of their communities. They were also being held up in their communities as example to emulate.
- Because of the communication skills they acquired being part of the Study Circles got them invitations from their schools and other local community organisations to act as anchors during large events.
- Members of the communities started coming to them for help for a variety of issues as they were emerging as notable persons within their locality.
- Family visits also reveal that there were major changes in the behaviour of the boys with respect to female members of their family. They were increasingly trying to be empathetic with their sisters and engaging themselves in household chores to reduce the work load from their mothers. They were also spending quality time with other members of the family. Many parents also reported that those attending the Study Circles were also showing increased interest in their studies.
- Many girls negotiated with their families to drop their plans for marriage and enable them to continue their education.

Efforts towards Collectivisation: Strengthening Community Ecosystems

The adolescent and young boys and girls become parts of the groups as they undertake the trainings on gender and masculinity and start taking up different community based initiatives. The collective members continue holding various action projects within the communities like holding Kabaddi tournaments for women, game activity -based gender awareness *melas* etc. These activities are geared towards generating 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 the youth collectives can intervene for effectively in cases of rights violations of women and other adolescents 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 have become core members of the Collectives came out as gender queer. Many of them succeeded in bringing in other queer youth to be part of the Collective's activities or the Study Circles. This process brought the project in close touch with 'chhokras', the popular name used for those young boys who impersonated female characters in traditional folk theatre, especially in a genre called the "Manasa'r Gan", widely prevalent in the Dalit communities of North-Central Bengal.

Impact

- Young men and women from among the collective members have decided to come forward and voluntarily mobilise adolescents and young people in their own communities to strengthen the network among young people in their own communities that would work towards gender equality.

- Additionally, one of the youth group members from Murshidabad has started an informal group with around 15 male queer youth. They meet at the Beldanga Railway Station almost every week, for about a year now. He recruited some of them into our Study Circles which they have since completed.



- Many of them continue to be part of organizing and participating in various group events throughout the year. They are also voluntarily involving other queer youth with the existing groups and bring up and discuss various cases and plan of action.
- One of the girls from Dumdum, North 24 Parganas initiated Kabaddi Practice sessions in Ward 3 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 the area. Another member of the Dumdum Collective Gautam Mondal is assisting her.
- The existing youth collective members and those that have been recently associated with were also engaged as participants and leaders in various campaigns like Annual District Kabaddi League for girls, BasantaUtsab and AbhayYatra. The youths were involved in choreographing and performing, volunteering in implementation and organizing logistics and also speaking about gender issues within the community using the platforms available during the campaign 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 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 enable girls and young women to make better life choices where the probability of abuse and exploitation can be reduced. The programme works with children and adolescents in *South and North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda and Jalpaiguri* in West Bengal to prevent early and child marriage, trafficking, sexual abuse and school drop-outs. The programme works both with boys and girls to empower them against the deep-rooted patriarchal system to ensure their rights. It works towards enhancing capacities of boys and girls aged 12 to 21 years on issues of gender and sexuality through a series of sessions (Study Circles) and breaking gender stereotypes through Sports like *Kabaddi* for girls and young women and facilitating *Collectives* of young people 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 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.

This year has been particularly challenging because of the pandemic. Despite lockdown, the project maintained continuous engagement with families via virtual and in person visits, which has helped to influence parents to allow their daughters to play Kabaddi as well as to change their perception on child marriage and other harmful practices. The use of role models (girl collective members) plays an important role to catalyse social change. In the past 12 months Praajak has realised how this approach has helped in mobilization of parents, especially fathers. Despite the pandemic, the programme has been able to achieve the following

- 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 4845 community persons. These girls are demonstrating their roles as active change agents.



The genders transformative approach used supported the boys who are part of the Study Circles adjust their gender role within the family.

Collective members conducted 23 community level social actions, where children spread awareness on early/forced marriage and COVID-19. These community actions were carried out through street drama, wall paintings and miking where 4,287 community members were reached. As

a result, 5 girls were able to prevent their own marriages. These results show how this project is enabling girls to become confident to raise their voice against harmful social practices and prevent them. Through life skills training, the project enhanced emotional and social wellbeing of 90 girls and 52 boys

- The projects strengthened 18 Child Protection Committees (CPCs) at village and ward level, where children (supported under the project) approached Child Welfare Committees, District Child Protection Officers and the District Social Welfare Officers and shared their needs and expectations. As a result, the DCPU supported 28 girls with a livelihood training program.
- Children within the project had an increased awareness on different environmental issues and took a joint action by appealing to their local administration to clean sewages and provide safe drinking water. Local authorities have also joined hand with children to address these community issues.
- The project team continued to advocate with the Sports Association and it is heartening that 42 girls were selected as district level players within this reporting period. These girls will receive free coaching, government benefits and participate in district and state level tournaments. The girls selected as district level players are now mentoring the other girls as peer coaches and providing support to the Animators to teach the new girls. They are now agents of change, helping their communities to shift the way of thinking and narrative around gender.
- 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.



Use of different cultural forms to work with communities

Vasantotsav Udyapan Samiti, Beldanga, Murshidabad

Holi is a popular celebration in Bengal. However over the last few decades, the festival is known more for the drunken and violent behaviour of men who take over the streets of towns and villages. Given the lawless atmosphere, women and girls rarely venture out of their homes to celebrate the festival to play with colours and to otherwise mingle in the community. In fact a feeling of general fear pervades habitations and most often the streets and public squares of the villages wear a deserted look.

In this context, 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 of Shantiniketan, instituted by Rabindranath Tagore. 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. This would culminate in all assembled smearing colour on each other irrespective of sex and age.



To achieve this one staff member along with 6 women members, who were the mothers of collective members formed a Vasantotsav Udyapan Samiti (Vasantotsav Celebration Committee). Other collective members and other young children and youth not part of the collectives responded to the call to celebrate Vasantotsav positively, participating in the rehearsals and mobilising funds for some of the expenses that would have to be incurred. Muslim members of the community also joined hands to make this a success. While religious convention decreed that they not play with colours, nothing prevented them from joining in as spectators. Many youth from the community took up the responsibility of distributing water to the dancers of the 'baitaliks' at strategic points of the procession.

The Holi celebrations of 2020 saw 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 3 kilometre stretch. 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

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.

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.

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: Apart from the main railway station of Malda and Asansol, outreach activities are g conducted in adjoining stations as well. The purpose of the outreach activities is to create awareness on child protection issues and safety of children in contact with the railways with passengers, vendors/shop keepers, railway staffs, cleaners, Railway Police Force (RPF), Government Railways Police (GRP), Train Ticket Examiner (TTE), rickshaw,totos, and taxi drivers. Through these outreach programs stakeholders are made aware of CHILDLINE (1098 number) and its services for children in need of aid and assistance.

- In Malda outreach is conducted in 9 other stations (like Gour Malda, Harishchandrapur, Malda Court Station, Khaltipur)
- In Asansol outreach activities are conducted in 6 adjoining stations covering the stretch from Durgapur to Chittaranjan.
- In the period April 2020 to March 2021, 196 children were rescued from Malda station and adjoining areas, of them 162 children were restored back to their families and 36 children were kept in the different shelter homes.
- In the period April 2020 to March 2021, 86 children rescued were from Asansol station and adjoining areas, of them 63 children were restored back to their families and 23 children were kept in the different shelter homes.
- Praajak also conducts trainings of concerned stakeholders such as RPF, GRP on issues of child protection and legal implications



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. In April 2020, Praajak initiated Covid 19 relief efforts in Cooch Behar, Murshidabad, Malda and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal. 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 relief work was initiated in South 24 Parganas. Subsequently, such efforts were undertaken in North 24 Parganas as well. Overall, Covid 19 and Amphan related relief efforts were undertaken by Praajak between April – October 2020. Praajak undertook a 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,	Malda town

		Ratua 1, Gajal, Old Malda, Englishbazar	
12	Murshidabad	Beldanga 1&2, Nowda, Berhampore, Raghunathganj 1 &2	Berhampore
13	Nadia	Shantipur, Ranaghat1, 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
Dr.Nandini Ghosh	Academician and Activist	President	Flat B, 403, Benubon Coop Housing Society, 93/2 Kankulia Road, Kolkata-700029 Email:- nandinighosh@gmail.com
Mr. Jerome D'Souza	Development Professional	Secretary	P 106, CIT Road, Kolkata-700014 jeromedsouza@yahoo.com
Mr.Joydeep Sen	Lawyer	Treasurer	5 JatinBagchi Road, Hindustan Park, Kolkata-700029 joydeepsen4u@rediffmail.com
Dr.Ramaditya Ray	Medical Practitioner	Member	Highland Park, Brook Towers, Flat – 12A2,1925 ChawkGaria, Kolkata – 700075 ramadityaray@hotmail.com
Dr.Amitava Dasgupta	Medical Practitioner	Member	Flat 1D, Urvashi Apartments, 53 Janata Road, New Santoshpur, Kolkata – 700075 dramitava@rediffmail.com
Ronita Chatopadhyay	Consultant-Process Documentation and Knowledge Management	Member	Shivalaya, Block I, 53A PM Roy Road, Alipore, Kolkata-700027 ronita.chattopadhyay@gmail.com

Himalini Varma	Social Communications	Member	3b Tara Apartments, P 405 Parnasree,Kolkata-700060 Email:- himaliniv@gmail.com
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Ms.Veena Lakhumalani	Development Professional	Member	A/9 205 Kumar KrutiKalyani Nagar, Pune 411 014, Maharashtra. veenalakhumalani@gmail.com
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Acknowledgements

Directorate of Child Rights and Trafficking

District Child Protection Units, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Malda, Paschim and Purba Bardhaman, Siliguri, Jalpaiguri

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