

Lines drawn up to define limits for women are meant to isolate them

Calcutta: Mina Das comes rushing out of her office in her trademark red-bordered white sari to greet me. She is a radiant woman, of a small frame, but widely regarded as a powerhouse. The 64-year-old founded Nishtha, an NGO that works with thousands of women in South 24-Parganas, having transformed many of their lives. We are meeting at Nishtha's office in Subuddhipur, in interior Baruipur, about 31km from Calcutta.

The office is a spacious three-storey building with a red boundary wall and a garden with rows of winter flowers and lavish trees. Asked how her work started, Das talks about her mother, Pritilata Das.

"Around 1975, my mother started a group with other women from Baikunthapur, to cope with life," says Das. Baikunthapur, not far from the Nishtha office, is the village Das was born and grew up in.

She cannot forget some incidents of violence that women around her faced when she was a child. The brutality of such experiences made her mother and her friends start the group.

"Women were then beaten up as a rule in our village," laughs Das. "Beating up was almost all right, though killing women was taking things a bit too far," she adds. She has a gift for irony.

But deaths were a regular event, too. Das remembers returning from college one day and finding one of her best friends dead. Her body lying on the floor in her parents' house. She had been tied up and burnt to death. "The rope marks were still there," says Das. The death had occurred at the in-laws' house.

"I also remember my cousin, who was much older. She was the

first graduate woman from our village. She lost her mind after her marriage. She used to dance at the village crossing," says Das.

That was another kind of death.

Das's mother and her friends would do what they could — and it was tremendous.

"A woman who had not eaten for days because she was being beaten up, would be made to take a bath and fed. After a bath and a proper meal, the world would look a little brighter, even for a woman who was contemplating suicide to end all trouble," Das laughs.

The group would also help a woman who was being harassed or just ill-treated by the landowner by finding another field, or encourage a woman who had lost her husband to learn a craft to make a living.

Das studied at Muralidhar Girls' College in Gariahat. She was one of the few girls from her village who went to college. It opened Das's eyes to many other things, as did the city.

She met people who influenced her profoundly. One of them was activist Maitreyi Chatterjee of Nari Nirjatan Pratirodh Mancha, which addressed violence against women. "After college, every day, we used to go to Maitreyi's house. I cannot tell you how exciting it was — to be there, to listen to her, to take part in the discussions," says Das. She remembers the Debjani Banik murder case around this time and the focus turning on domestic violence.

These were also very significant years of the women's movement in India.

That was a most inspiring period for Das. "But the discussions were in the city. Not in the villages," she says.



Mina Das at Nishtha's office in Subuddhipur, Baruipur, South 24-Parganas. Picture by Subhendu Chaki

A new thinking dawned on her. She wanted to take her mother's work forward, but with a few changes. Solidarity of women was the key to such work,

them," she says again with a twinkle in her eye.

A lesson on types of soil would go on to ask who worked in the fields. Everyone in the fam-

The local girls' high school began to actively demand students from the informal school.

The organisation had also started a cooperative for women

its strength. But Das and her contemporaries wanted to introduce a structure to it and reach many more women. In 1983, Nishtha was founded. Nishtha means dedication.

"We started an informal school for girls, who could then join a regular school. We thought of interesting ways to teach

ily did, including the children and the mother, who often played an equal role as the father. "Yet, who has the money?" The father. "Can he stop you from coming to this class?" Yes. We were trying to introduce them to understand who has the control and who performs the labour."

The girls began to do well.

where paddy obtained from Midnapore to be husked and sold by the members.

The work was not easy. Women were beaten up for being part of the group. "I remember one of my friends, who has attended a meeting, being chased by husband with a piece of wood on fire. She jumped into

the pond," she laughs again. "Another friend was beaten up for attending the meetings. She said she would get beaten up anyway; so she would continue."

The idea, says Das, was for the women to know that they are not alone. "Rules for women prohibiting going out or doing anything are created to isolate them."

The violence did not go away, but women kept coming to Nishtha.

Gradually, it was organised and given a structure, which is now very large and very efficient. It rests on two pillars: the Mahila Mandals (women's groups) and the Kishori Vahinis (adolescent girls' armies). The members of these two groups, numbering about 33,000, form a network spread over 300 villages in five blocks of South 24 Parganas district — Baruipur, Bishnupur I, Mograhat II, Sonarpur and Namkhana.

Das, who had been an Ashoka fellow, speaks proudly about the Nishtha community, especially about the Kishori Vahinis. I have the privilege of meeting a group of its members at Nishtha's day centre at Jagadishpur, a few kilometres from the office.

The Kishori Vahini members, sprightly, confident and very articulate, explain to me how they work. The major concerns in their age group are child marriage, trafficking and dropouts, all of which are related to each other and increased sharply after the combined assault of the pandemic and Amphan.

The girls keep a watch on their environment. "If someone is not attending school for a few days, we go to her house. If we get to know she is being married off, we talk to the parents. They listen to us or, at least, don't throw us out," says one of the

leaders. The parents know that they can be reported and authorities can step in.

"The women's groups and the girls are at the forefront," says Das. "We don't have to step in always." The centre, with a lot of open space and a winding ramp that goes up from the ground floor to the first, houses a sanitary napkin production unit.

Nishtha, funded by individuals and organisations, runs several other projects, including a small night-shelter in Purono Bajar, another part of Baruipur. The children from an adjacent red light area are looked after here.

Many children from the Nishtha community now have successful careers, including medicine, nursing and engineering.

"We are not only about empowerment and rights, but also about acting on those rights. We also have to remember that dealing with women and children are very different. We can't just deal with a situation from the framework of child rights," says Das. It requires knowledge, from the heart.

In a way, things have not changed and Nishtha continues to address that. It helps its community members with legal services. "Right now we are pursuing 69 cases. Most of them are about domestic or sexual violence," says Das.

But things have changed as well. In the later afternoon light, the girls at the day centre perform a dance drama in which a fisherman and his wife are reunited after a violent storm. The choreography, the stage, the make-up and the costumes are excellent. They have done everything themselves.

LIVES OF OTHERS

CHANDRIMA S. BHATTACHARYA