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Anudip and iMerit in Kolkata, India

by Lauren Farwell

The Beginning – 1st 2 weeks



Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Kolkata, India has been our home for almost 2 weeks now. I would classify the first several days here as “sensory overload”. Taking in the sights of the city all around us, nonstop sounds of cars and horns, the smells of the city’s streets and spices, the vibrant colors on the buildings and the intricate saris and kurtas worn by women, our wild commute to work on the metro and autorickshaws—it’s all a bit overwhelming. It seems to be a world of paradoxes, of green jungle trees and dirt parks, fancy malls and people making homes on the sidewalk right outside, British colonial apartments with windows open to the chaos of the street, high technology offices with computers neighbored by run-down market stalls. This city never stops moving, and every square inch seems to be covered. I see pain, beauty, richness, stagnance, and hope all at once.

Hope is something that Anudip and iMerit specialize in. These are the social enterprises we are working with during our 7 weeks in Kolkata. Anudip is dedicated to creating livelihood opportunities for women and youth in rural areas and urban slums of India through Market Aligned Skills Training (M.A.S.T.) and personal development. iMerit employs Anudip trained graduates, providing improved livelihoods with business process outsourcing jobs doing projects for clients around the world. Anudip and iMerit realize that populations living in rural India have great potential, but just don’t have access to higher level job

opportunities. It is possible for someone living in these rural communities to graduate from high school and remain unemployed for years after. Often, the only jobs available to them are merchant jobs- such as selling fish or poultry. Anudip starts training centers in rural communities and guarantees two interviews with outside companies for employment for each student after completing the two-month M.A.S.T. course. Many Anudip students are also employed by its sister-company iMerit, where they receive a salary much greater than that of any job available in their local communities. In order to benefit the local communities and individuals, Anudip also runs a program called DREAM- Developing Rural Entrepreneurs through Adoption and Mentoring. This program gives students who aspire to start their own group-based micro-enterprises the tools to do so, as well as financial assistance for startup costs, guidance in the incubation phase, and ongoing support. The entrepreneurs are typically low income, unemployed youth from agrarian backgrounds in rural villages. Cyber Cafes, digital photo studios, and computer training centers are just a few examples of enterprises made possible through DREAM.

This past week, we began to see the social impact of Anudip and iMerit firsthand, visiting rural centers where its students and employees are in action. The hope for a brighter future was laced throughout all three centers we visited. The first during week 1 was Metiabruz- a conservative Muslim village on the outskirts of Kolkata. Here, the women and girls are not allowed to leave Metiabruz, unless accompanied by family or a man, so their access to the job market is limited even further than most rural populations. To address this critical need for income earning opportunities for women, an Anudip training center and an iMerit work center were established for just young women. We were able to sit in on an Anudip English language skills class in Metiabruz, where the girls participated in mock interviews and answered their teacher with a confidence that did not exist in the slightest just two months prior. Radha Basu, founder of Anudip and iMerit, testified that when Anudip and iMerit first started in Metiabruz, the girls would not even make eye contact. Furthermore, the girls remove their burka when they enter the office- a symbol of the empowerment taking place here. The iMerit women explained the tagging and zoning projects they were working on at the moment. Their projects are very cutting edge, and it is clear that the women are very intelligent and highly skilled. Chatting with the girls, I learned bits and pieces about their families, backgrounds, and what brought them to Anudip and iMerit. Many girls there have strong, charismatic personalities- too big to be confined to the borders of their village. These women are blossoming into their full potential, that their community would not have recognized without the opportunity provided by Anudip and iMerit.



A confident young woman stands up to introduce herself to Radha, describing her goals for a career in tourism.

At the start of week 2, we were able to visit two more rural centers with Radha. We went to Sonarpur and Bonhooghly, over an hour from Salt Lake where the Anudip and iMerit headquarters offices are. These rural areas are lush like jungle, yet not too distant from the bustling city of Kolkata. We were given a very warm welcome, complete with flower bouquets and snacks, since we arrived with the very well-respected Radha (“Radha-Di” as they call her, DiDi meaning older sister). The students were given an opportunity to stand up and introduce themselves, speak about their families, their experience with Anudip training, and their goals for the future. When we asked if they feel more confident after two months of training, they responded with a resounding yes. Many of them are motivated by the prospect of providing a brighter future to their family members, many of whom their income will support. At the Sonarpur center, the instructors and students shouted their motto “We Can!”, showing their fervor for learning and work. In just these first two weeks, we have gotten a glimpse of how Anudip and iMerit are creating hope and livelihoods for thousands of rural women and youth, and I cannot wait to see the evidence of social impact that the next six weeks hold!

Employees & Entrepreneurs – week 3

As of week 3, we have now covered every mode of transportation- auto-rickshaws, trains, buses, and taxis, oh my! This is exciting because it means that we've begun to go out in the field to carry out projects. Last week consisted of setting details about our projects and putting together a schedule for the interviews and photo sessions at various Anudip training centers in the coming weeks. We also made plans with Anudip's Entrepreneur Development Program department for Phil to take videos and for me to do photograph sessions of M.A.S.T.-trained Anudip graduates who are successfully employed at outside companies, as well as entrepreneurs that have set up their businesses with the help of Anudip's DREAM program. These videos are to be used at a big event called Training of Trainers (T.O.T.) taking place this weekend July 5 and 6. Here, Anudip and iMerit will be sharing skills and methodology with people who will become trainers at Anudip's current and upcoming centers, as the growth is happening at such a fast pace. Monday and Tuesday of this week was focused on this T.O.T. project.

Monday, two Anudip employees from the Entrepreneur Development Department, Raju and Atanu, took Phil and I to iMerit, IKF, and Indian Info Line to interview former Anudip students about their jobs and how Anudip M.A.S.T. training has been a catalyst for change in their livelihoods.



Taposi Jana and Anima Mandal, two confident women employed by IKF Technologies after Anudip training



Mohona Sarkar, an 18-year old married woman and successful sales manager at Indian Info Line. M.A.S.T. training graduate.

Anudip guarantees two interviews with outside companies as a part of its training course, and these employees are results of those successful interviews.

These individuals are proving their workplace readiness in fast-paced and cutting edge BPO business settings. The fourth stop of the day was a return to Metiabruz, a community we feel connected to after just one previous visit. Here, we interviewed, filmed, and photographed two outstanding young women, Sabiha and Rehanna, about their lives pre- and post-iMerit for the T.O.T. This shorter visit left me enthused to return to Metiabruz Wednesday and Thursday for further relationship-building, conversations, and photograph sessions.



Bijoy Halder works at the iMerit headquarters in Salt Lake, Kolkata.



Rehana Khatoon works on big projects at the iMerit office in the Metiabruz community.

On Tuesday, an Anudip employee named Arnab accompanied us on our first Indian train adventure to a region called Basirhat, two hours away. As cramped and uncomfortable as the train was, the lush green fields, forests, and lakes that streamed past us out the windows were stunning. Basirhat was our first region outside of the city of Kolkata, and was quite rural. The day entailed visiting two entrepreneurs, Amit and Faruk, who were able to start their businesses because of Anudip's Entrepreneur Development Program (EDP). Amit's social enterprise is called World Enterprises. It is a garage-like storefront with a simple desk and one computer, which provides printing services, mobile upload services, photo printing, Internet access, and job consulting. All of this is done by one man with one computer. In this rural setting, his enterprise is addressing an important need for Internet access and these other services.

These visits in week 3 showed us a new side of Anudip's programs and the rural settings gave us a new perspective on the populations that Anudip reaches. Seeing the entrepreneurs in action makes me hopeful about Anudip's Developing Rural Entrepreneurs through Adoption and Mentoring (DREAM) program for women that is in the works. In our three and a half weeks here, I've been impressed by the big dreams that people have conceptualized, and it's clear that they are fully capable if they only have access to support. Through this new program, women entrepreneurs will be able to realize their business dreams and flourish in their very own enterprises.



Amit began his own business World Enterprise in Basirhat, West Bengal through the EDP.

"It takes a lot of courage to show your dreams to someone else." — Erma Bombeck

A woman's world – weeks 3 and 4

Reflections on Metiabruz



View from the iMerit center in Metiabruz

In Weeks 3 and 4, we spent many of our days at the iMerit center and Anudip classes in Metiabruz. I have mentioned Metiabruz in previous posts as the very conservative, predominantly Muslim community on the outskirts of Kolkata. The beautiful call to prayer that rings out from the mosques in town makes me acutely aware of where I am- as does the predominance of the burka. Being foreigners, of course we stand out in any location, but there I am hyperaware of my gender and feel noticeably more uneasy than in Kolkata. And that's just what I feel from the short three-minute walk from the auto-rickshaw to the doors of the iMerit center. Last week, I had the chance to go deeper into Metiabruz to gain a better understanding of the community by visiting the homes and families of iMerit girls. What we knew of Metiabruz prior to this was only what we see on the inside of iMerit's walls- colorfully dressed, talkative,

confident, and intelligent young women hard at work.





We were lucky enough to receive an invitation to visit the homes of two of the iMerit girls that I befriended on our first visit. Shagufta and Nahid are best friends, and naturally couldn't have us visit one house without visiting the other, so our visit lasted hours longer than we had anticipated, and every minute of that time made for a rich experience. These two visits were separate from our work agenda, so we left our cameras and video camera equipment behind- and because of that, we found these visits to be beautifully personal and engaging.



There is a phrase in India that the "guest is God", and we truly felt that as the families pushed snack after snack and sweet after sweet our way. They insisted that we sit on the shared family bed, and gave us attention that we had not earned. Getting to be in their modest homes and to meet the parents and extended families of the girls we have befriended at iMerit was such a gift in itself, let alone the incredible hospitality. The next two interviews were more focused on interviewing the families for our projects, but we were welcomed just

the same and shared stories and smiles with Wajda and Arfana, two iMerit young women, and their families. Anudip trainers Sarala Mishra and Mehuli Majumder came along to translate in Hindi and Bengali. Sarala and Mehuli are outstanding trainers- extremely intelligent, powerhouse women who challenge the Metiabruz girls with high expectations because they are truly invested in their personal growth. They are just two examples of the quality and strength of character across all of the trainers, employees, and administration of Anudip and iMerit.



The very day that we planned to visit Shagufta and Nahid, I learned that both girls had quit working at iMerit. Yet they hadn't informed the company yet. Both girls were working the second shift at iMerit, from 1:30pm-9pm 5 days per week. They were both very successful. After specialized training, these girls can make more than three times higher than that of most jobs available in Metiabruz. In fact, after just a short time, Shagufta was already working on iMerit's most important Catholic Relief Services project. Both of their families had decided they were out of the house working too much, and would rather have them at home more often. Both of their fathers echoed traditional views that women should not be working as such, so they made their daughters quit. It was a controversial issue and all of a sudden we were in the middle of it in the very presence of the fathers and families- and seeing firsthand what happens so often in Metiabruz when conservative views clash with progress. It breaks my heart to know how confident, capable, and bright Shagufta is, and to see her being limited in such a way. Wajda's family, while appreciative of the income she is earning, would prefer that she didn't work at iMerit. They allow her to because they so greatly need her additional income, but without that need, Wajda would be at home. I have so much respect for Wajda, who is actually a Team Leader at iMerit, and is excelling even without the support of her family. I find hope in the family of Arfana, who shows nothing but pride that their daughter is proving herself and is independent. Her mother and sister were all smiles when boasting about her. Ideally, this family is what the future of Metiabruz looks like. These four bold young women, along with 120 others at

the center are paving their own future and shaping the environment as a whole.



Metiabruz, like many other communities in the developing world, is a man's world. Slowly but surely, it is becoming a woman's world as courageous girls are breaking the norms, becoming income-earners, and pushing the boundaries

of traditional roles and expectations. The growth that has resulted in just 3 years since the Merit center was opened in Metiabruz is remarkable.

“Be not afraid of growing slowly. Be afraid only of standing still.” ~Chinese Proverb



Jobs and Dreams – weeks 5 and 6

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you’ve imagined.”

— Henry David Thoreau



Anudip partners with Youth Global in its Namkhana training center. The shoe pile outside shows the impact by pure numbers

The days following the last blog post have been packed with a trip to the Sunderbans with Radha and Dipak, interview and filming visits to rural Namkhana and Laksmikantapur Anudip centers, a weekend of adventure in Jaipur and Agra, and wrapping up final aspects of our projects in Kolkata.

The Sunderbans are a series of hundreds of islands across the coast of West Bengal and Bangladesh where all rivers meet the Bay of Bengal. They are some of the largest mangrove islands in the world, and the area is known for the presence of the notorious Bengal tiger, crocodiles, sharks, and many other exotic species. The tide goes in and out by over twenty feet twice a day, and given the landscape, communities here are very dependent on the will of nature. Almost everyone is a cultivator or a fisher. Travel is done by boat, and it's amazing the distance people will go from the Sunderbans to reach opportunity.

Before visiting the Sunderbans, we had met some young students at Anudip training centers that travel hours each way to reach the classes, at the prospect of becoming income-earners for their families someday. The Sunderbans weekend was more of a leisure trip than a work trip, but seeing the area made us think about rural populations there and how gritty life can be in such wild nature. Anudip is reaching these marginalized populations with a center nearby in Namkhana and plans to expand deeper.



Tanushree and Atanu, two Anudip trainers with several young trainees in Namkhana



Students collaborating inside the Namkhana Anudip training center

The week following the Sunderbans trip entailed mine and Phil's final rural center visits. The visits are something we have thoroughly enjoyed. Getting to

see this other side of West Bengal beyond the busy city of Kolkata has given us a glimpse into the reality of most Bengali's livelihoods. We've been lucky enough to be accompanied by new friends that work at the Anudip head quarters, and the 3 hour rides on local trains offered a lot of quality bonding time. During this week we went to Namkhana and Lakshmikantapur. Namkhana was like many other centers we visited, but looked notably successful as each room was packed with students, both men and women. I was struck by the sign in the corner of the center that advertised 100% job placement guarantee after training. Anudip has a strong partnership with an NGO at this center.



Trainer Souraj with his large class at Lakshmikantapur center on their first day of class. Some students traveled for 4 hours to reach this class.

The highlight of my week was visiting one of Anudip's DREAM centers in Harindanga, just outside of Lakshmikantapur. DREAM stands for Developing Rural Entrepreneurs through Adoption and Mentoring. I see a lot of potential in Anudip's budding DREAM program. It is reaching people that are motivated to improve their livelihoods but in a different direction than IT and computer-based work. The DREAM program's mission is to help rural individuals and communities start their own businesses, such as beautician shops, tailoring shops, goods kiosks, and much more. The goal is also to use technology in these rural shops to give them an advantage over competition, so the courses teach computer use for records and accounting as well as basic business skills. The Harindanga DREAM center has a large group of women attending, learning how to specialize in tailoring. Right when we walked upstairs, we could tell something beautiful was taking place through DREAM as more than twenty beautiful faces greeted us in a room lined by old Singer foot-powered sewing machines. The women have just recently began their training, so they were able to show us samples of Indian kurtas, salwar pants, and petticoats. They shined with pride in their work.



We were able to interview the women as a whole group, so we asked how they heard about the DREAM program, what motivated them to begin the courses, how they are changing and developing personally, and what their dreams are for starting their own tailoring businesses. Similar answers echoed amongst the women, many of whom were already mothers and have been housewives up until this point. Their husbands are merchants and farmers, but the families

struggle to make ends meet. DREAM is the first chance these women are getting to gain skills and become income-earners to fill in the missing expenses that their husband's salary can't quite cover. The women have a renewed sense of purpose, a self-confidence that comes from learning a new specialty, and the pride of providing for their families. Just one afternoon spent at Harindanga showed that this tight-knit group of women is one of support and positive change as they are becoming more and more empowered each day.



Workplace Readiness – week 7

Workplace readiness is one of the areas where Anudip and iMerit really excel. In week 7, I had the opportunity to do a photo shoot for the Workplace Readiness curriculum that Clinton Fellow Hallie Noble and Anudip employee Tania Biswas are developing. The curriculum is meant to be interactive and to teach visually. It follows the story of a make-believe employee named Krishna.

Krishna is from a rural area and has decided to relocate to Kolkata to take a well-paying job. So a lot of things are new for Krishna. Including a Western toilet, workplace attire, office habits, using an elevator, interacting professionally, and having a desk and computer working space. When talking about job placement help, one thinks of resume-writing and interview skills. Anudip really goes above and beyond these basics to prepare its rural students for their new professional lives. The goal is to alleviate some of the fears that are inevitable with such an overwhelming lifestyle change.



Krishna (Sanjay) kicks back on his desk with CEO Dipak Basu in the background. He poses as an example of what not to do in the workplace.



Krishna gets “workplace ready” as he puts on his professional attire

Everyone in the Anudip head quarters office and I had a great time as employee Sanjay posed as Krishna, the not-so-workplace-ready employee. Krishna shows up to work in jeans and a jersey, stands on the Western toilet seat, puts his feet up on his desk, sleeps at work, leaves his work space full of loose papers and old food, and leaves people in the office feeling very uncomfortable. Although we all shared laughs as Sanjay posed for the shoot, I’m interested to see the ways that the visuals will really be helpful to the workplace readiness curriculum.

As Phil and I interviewed Anudip M.A.S.T. graduates at their workplaces in corporate Sector 5 of Salt Lake in Kolkata, we were able to see success stories of the workplace readiness curriculum. They moved from their rural homes to take jobs in businesses like Tech Mahindra, Indian Info Line, and Aegis. The curriculum prepared them for their new jobs in high-rise offices, for a workplace setting, for city transportation, and even for their local accommodations. It’s visible that Anudip’s support does not end in the classroom. The skills students are given in their M.A.S.T. training leaves them workplace ready and confident enough to take on their new lives in the city. The support continues even after they have begun their jobs.

“Tata” For Now – final thoughts

“Tata” in Bengali means goodbye, and the time to say tata snuck up on us faster than we could’ve imagined. 7 weeks flew by, and they were full of relationship-building, cultural discovery, personal growth, challenge, seeing social impact firsthand, and engaging in a dynamic workplace.

We feel beyond blessed for these 7 saturated weeks. And we owe it all to the following people (and this list only scratches the surface of the beautiful people along the way):

Radha, Dipak, Sam, Hallie, Susie, Abhijit, Joy, Anindiyah, Romy, Ankur, Manish, Swaban, Avishek, Tanmay, Tania, Priyanka, Santanu, Raju, Atanu, Prakash, Subhro, Rumia, Mona Lisa, Dipyendu, Tanima, Suchetan, Arnab, Mehuli, Sarala, Noorjahan, Wajda, Arfana, Shagufta, Nahid, all Anudip and iMerit employees and trainers, Swayam, Youth Global, Bola, and all of the young women and administration at the Metiabruz center.

The hospitality with which we were welcomed and the constant support and care we received from so many made for such a beautiful experience. We could say thank you a million times, and that would not suffice.

So, for the help when we first arrived,

thank you.

For showing us the route to commute to the office,

thank you.

For cups of chai brought to our desks,

thank you.

For check-in texts and calls,

thank you.

For meetings to touch base and give guidance,

thank you.

For weekend travel advice and trip tips,

thank you.

For helping us with our rent and finances,

thank you.

For each ride back and forth between the headquarters offices,

thank you.

For friendship building and chats inside and outside the office,

thank you.

For setting up and accompanying us on our rural center visits,

thank you.

For making the most uncomfortable long local train rides some of my favorite memories of bonding,

thank you.

For being accessible and always making time for us,

thank you.

For making room for us and giving us precious desk space,

thank you.

For inviting us into your Metiabruz homes and into the lives of your families,

thank you.

For each and every interview and insight,

thank you.

For every single smile and conversation,

thank you.

For running an inspiring and impactful social enterprise,

Thank you.

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Already awaiting the day I can return to this beautiful country and our dear friends.

Tata, until the next time!