

## **Leader in the Making**

The Students' Nutrition Club of Hyderabad owes its origin to the personal initiative of Fiaz, a 10<sup>th</sup> Standard student of St. Marks Boys Town High School.

Initially when his school did not respond to the proposal for Science Exhibition and Project Work facilitated by the Children's Program of COVA, Fiaz approached COVA and evinced his interest in participating in both the events. He persuaded his principal, teachers and other students of the school in fulfilling all the formalities. He not only participated in the events but won prizes also. The Project work entailed visits to institutes such as NIN, UNICEF, WHO, Institute of Health & Family Welfare, etc. Fiaz spoke to the Director and the Deputy Director of NIN and expressed his wish to start a Nutrition Club in his school. Mr. Subba Rao, Research Officer, Communications, NIN discussed the idea with Mr. Fiaz of starting Nutrition Clubs in schools in Hyderabad. Fiaz, with the help of Children's Program, COVA, took the initiative and contacted nearly 150 schools in Old City, Hyderabad and Secunderabad. The managements were requested to nominate 2 students from each school for the school club. Many schools responded positively. On 8<sup>th</sup> March 2004. Mr. Shiv Kumar, Director, NIN, Inaugurated the School Students Nutrition Club of Hyderabad at St. Marks Boys Town High School. Mr. Shiv Kumar promised that NIN would facilitate all technical support and expertise to the club.

Now, Fiaz is the president of the Club. Bro Kuria Khan, Principal of the school has been guiding and extending all kinds of support to Fiaz in his endeavour. Today because of the personal initiative of a 10th Standard student, the club has 55 members. This kind of awareness and initiative is the long cherished dream of our Children's Program.

## **From Darkness to Light**

How different my life used to be, just 4 – 5 years back! Between four walls was my entire world. It was tough to make both ends meet. Happiness and comfort were mere dreams. I cannot forget that day, when I sat in a sullen mood and somebody called me. She wanted me to work as a link volunteer. She explained what I was supposed to do. I understood little, so declined her offer. But she kept coming to me encouraging me to take up this work. At last in an auspicious moment I became a volunteer. That was the beginning of the transformation of my life. I was trained in the mother and child health care. I stepped into a vast world and met many a woman like me and learnt many things. My capacity to take decisions improved. While I was attending the meetings, I learnt about thrift groups. Thus I became a member of a thrift group. Since I was also a little educated the group elected me as its leader. My responsibilities grew. There was also a change in the ambience at home. My husband also started respecting my views. I suggested that we start a petty business availing loan from the Group. He liked the idea. We borrowed Rs.1000/- from the Group and started a vegetable shop at our house. It ran well. I was encouraged.

I thought of improving the business and approached a shopkeeper on the main road. He allowed me to run my vegetable shop in front of his shop free of cost. The sales really improved. Having seen this improvement now the shopkeeper demanded a rent of Rs.500/- per month, which was a huge sum for me. So I thought of running a shop of my own, again borrowed Rs.5,000/- from Roshan Vikas and bought a kiosk. I ran the shop in this kiosk. My husband used to look after the shop in the mornings and I in the evenings. Now there was another problem. We had to pay about Rs.100/- for transporting the vegetables from the market to our shop. Luckily my husband

knew how to drive an auto rickshaw. So we bought an auto rickshaw through a loan. Now my husband gets vegetables from the market in his auto in the morning. For the rest of the day he drives it for hire. Our income increased. We found a meaningful occupation.

It was Rafia madam from COVA who showed me this path. It is due to her encouragement and the assistance of Roshan Vikas I have found my bearings in life. Now I have a distinct identity. Ghousia Begum of Sahara M.M. in Hafiz Baba Nagar. My son and daughter passed the 10<sup>th</sup> standard in first division last year. They are now studying in a college.

I want my fellow members to realize that they should generate some income even while staying at home. They should strive for an identity of their own. Then only can we mould the future of our family.

*Ghousia Begum, Sahara Mahila Mandali, Hafiz Baba Nagar*

### **Attempts to Come Out of a Negative Self-image**

Whenever fascist ideas take an organizational form, it becomes necessary to fill the minds of the members of the organization with hatred towards the selected 'other'. Along with this it has to be established in their minds that 'the other' has perpetrated atrocities against the 'self' for which the fascist organisation claims to stand. It is easier to plant such thoughts in a person who is not at all familiar with any member of the 'other' community. Alienation with the other and a sense of oppression towards oneself - these form the basis for any fascist critique that goes in the name of a socio-cultural identity. It is thus easier to imprint a sense of alienation and oppression in the minds of children and adolescents and once it is imprinted it cannot be erased for a long time. Hence the basic formula for any fascist thought and organisation is: Catch them young! Lock their minds right from childhood.

Similar thing happened with Adil too. Like many other children of Hyderabad he was caught young by a fundamentalist organization\*. He was taught how to handle a lathi and a talwar, how to attack. It was drilled into his mind that every non-Muslim is an enemy of Muslims. That it is not necessary to judge a person based on his/her good and bad actions, that it can be done on the basis of the person's identity from birth. Whoever does not accept our word is against us. Since he/she is not one of us, we should hate them and take revenge against them. It is not necessary to mix with non-Muslims - so that on the picture of hatred, which was drawn after a lot of hard work, there will not be any mark of understanding and love. Adil's mind too was conditioned on these lines. But by chance Adil found an opportunity to meet some non-Muslims in a camp. He became restless with doubts - eating and speaking habits of these people may be different from mine, but we think alike. Definitely some people must be feeling that every Muslim is a betrayer of the country, but these people don't. Despite several differences, across the nation, their dream is similar - like mine... Identity is not just created by birth, but by collective ideas and value system. Despite various kinds of differences, after all there are some things that are shared... For the restless doubts of Adil there was no answer with the activists of that fundamentalist organisation\*. How can there be? How can any group\* with such identity politics answer such questions- except through threats and abuses? Adil received a similar response. He understood that any politics based on alienation with the other and a sense of oppression towards oneself cannot in reality do any good to any oppressed section. That is only the strategy of the business of contractors.

Today Adil is a volunteer of COVA (actively associated with Play for Peace). COVA is a confederation of many local initiatives. After the terrifying communal riots of 1990-1991 in Hyderabad, a few sensitive social workers were faced these questions: How long do we keep reacting? How long do we play the role of relief providers? When do we provide an alternative to the underlying thought of the narrow and violent fundamentalism? When can we take an alternative perspective, their own proverbs and their own activism to the youth?

COVA was born out of these restless questions....

(Excerpted and translated from Purushottam Agrawal's article, "Nakaratkamak atmachavi se baahar aane ki koshish", *Jansatta*, )

*\*Translator's Note:* Names of these organisations are removed in the translation.

## **Open for a Dream**

Saleha was a 4<sup>th</sup> class drop out when I first met her. She was one of the intelligent girls that I met in the basti who had the potential to learn. She was doing Zari work and used to earn rupees 100 per week. Her parents were happy with that. I tried to convince Saleha to continue her studies. I asked her to spend at least one hour in the open school which could help her in the future. "I will lose money if I come to school. My parents will scold me", was the reply from Saleha. I talked with her parents and tried to convince them. They were very reluctant to enroll her in the Open School and thought their child's education would make a dent in their earnings.

But after repeated attempts to convince them, they agreed to enroll Saleha in the Open School. She studied there for one year and passed 7<sup>th</sup> class in the first division. Thrilled by her success, she expressed her wish to study further in a formal school and continue her studies. She was then streamlined into formal schools and with the financial support given by Children's Department of COVA, she passed SSC in first division this year. Her happiness knew no bounds. Her parents slowly gained confidence in her and proudly talked about her child's progress with their neighbours. COVA helped her to join intermediate course in DATAR Vocational Junior College in Bi.P.C. Group. "I will make her a Doctor", is how her elated father tells the neighbors.

Fascinated by Saleha's success, some of the neighbours also began to think of girl education. Now they are enrolling more and more girl children in Open Schools.

*Ms Yousuf Unnisa, Open School Teacher, Riyasat Nagar*

## **Reaching Down and Feeling High**

Khaleda Begum came into contact with COVA during a teachers' training program organized in 1996. Her ambition to reach a high position in society gradually transformed into a desire to do something significant for the downtrodden people. She feels, this desire found fulfillment at COVA. She used to participate in basti level awareness programs and later, when in 2000 Youth TRAC was formed, she worked actively as a volunteer. It is during this period that Khaleda learnt the value of punctuality, effective communication skills and alertness of mind.

Later with fellow members of Saheli, the adolescent girls' division of Youth TRAC, she used to visit the bastis and conduct family counseling and meetings on health, child labour and small savings, in collaboration with Rehabilitation, and Freedom Foundation, two other voluntary organisations. Saheli was thrilled at the impact of some of these awareness programs – some members of the community gave up bad habits like drinking, smoking and tobacco chewing,

influenced by these programs. Her self-esteem grew when she received the first prize in a singing and dancing competition organised by COVA, in which she alone had to both sing and dance.

Khaleda motivated the people of her own basti, Ambedkar Nagar, and Anjubail Colony to form SHGs. In one of the summer camps she was able to bring together people of two bastis, one populated by Hindus and other by Muslims. A training program was held during a summer camp for 15 days on videography in which 20 boys and 17 girls were trained including Khaleda herself. The acquired skill boosted her confidence. Afterwards she volunteered to videograph programs of COVA. It is also a matter of pride for her that 3 boys and 5 girls found livelihood in videography because of the training program she helped organize.

Once Khaleda wondered whether she could do anything worthwhile without support from COVA. She decided to test this out. When her youth group was able to successfully organise a singing and dancing competition for school children in her basti, entirely depending on its own resources, she learnt to trust her own strength. During the time COVA helped initiate the Red Cross Government English Medium School, she not only motivated the communities around to send their children here, but she also voluntarily taught at and coordinated the school in the beginning.

Much more recently Khaleda has been involved in exploring the issues of the communities in the old city of Hyderabad during the preparation of People's Manifesto. With such rich experience in social work, Khaleda was recently selected as Mandal Coordinator in NAANDI Foundation, a leading voluntary organisation in Hyderabad. Looking back, Khaleda is surprised at the change in her personality brought about by her voluntary work with the communities in the bastis: a timid girl dreaming to do big things, but lacking in initiative, to a woman confidently motivating the people of the bastis, shooting events, and yes, singing and dancing to her own tune!

### **Knitting Life Together**

Safia Begum was an innocent and illiterate housewife. After estrangement from her husband, she started living with her mother along with her 3-year-old son. Her mother was a family pensioner. With meager income Safia could barely meet her living expenses. Her sufferings compounded when her mother died a year ago, and her brother and his wife refused to look after her. Depressed and dejected, Safia was badly in need of help. At this juncture her sister gave her shelter and introduced her to Mahila Sanatkar. She was then counseled by the Family Counseling And Reconciliation Cell, which helped her come out of depression. She underwent training in jute craft and tailoring for six months. This gave her immense confidence to start commercial production with Mahila Sanatkar in a safe environment.

With Mahila Sanatkar's intervention, she was granted a loan by Canara Bank Center for Women Entrepreneur Development to purchase sewing machines and succeeded in setting up a small production unit.

She is now earning for her family and thinking positively about herself and the future of her child. She used to cry whenever people asked about her past life. But it is almost a year that she started feeling a marked difference in her morale and now she comfortably talks about her past and present life with pride and confidence. She believes that social awareness paves the way for economic prosperity also.