



## Disha – A Rural Development Model in West Bengal, India

Hunger, literacy and low school achievement are common social issues prevalent in rural areas where more than 80 percent of India's population lives. Therefore, any rural sustainable development program must address access to high-quality education and training in order to create sustainable livelihood and rural economy competitiveness. In the past, rural development initiatives have focused only on traditional agricultural education and training; however, with rapidly changing technologies and increasing globalization our environment has shifted to non-farming activities. Today's rural development models must realize this shift and incorporate a more holistic approach that provides basic education, life skills development and vocational training in order to achieve sustainable livelihoods for rural communities.

**“Education and training need to be placed at the forefront of the rural development agenda in order to fight the evident extreme poverty and hunger in rural areas; to break the poverty-induced poverty-result cycle of rural life; to ensure sustainable agriculture, and to build the human capacity needed for development.”**

*– Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN and UNESCO, 2003 study titled, “Education for rural development: towards new policy responses”*

### Introduction

Disha was founded in 1991 with a simple but genuine purpose – to help the underprivileged rural people. Located a few feet from the villagers, the Seema Centre has now become an integral part of the adjoining villages. Over the past 15 years, Disha has developed and implemented an innovative rural development model which combines primary education, boarding facilities, agricultural training, food security, healthcare and vocational training for children, youth and women. Disha's target population is the 100,000 rural tribal children, youth and women situated in nearby villages that are living below-the-poverty-line in mud huts with one meal a day, no access to education, healthcare or job opportunities. These communities suffer from illiteracy, malnutrition, alcoholism, migration to urban centres, gender inequities and caste discrimination. Disha realized that there was no simple solution to rural development. Over the years, Disha has developed a holistic model that first addresses basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter and drinking water and then improves the children's ability to excel in primary education, life skills development and vocational training. The heart of this development is the Seema Centre located on six-acre plot which serves as a multipurpose centre where there is a boarding and day school for children, a 6 acre farm and a community centre for vocational training.

### Vision and Mission

Disha's vision is a rural India where villagers have the basic means and support to better their own lives. Hence, Disha's mission is to provide basic necessities, education, life skills development and vocational training, so that these villagers are well-equipped in becoming the nucleus of positive change in their rural communities. Disha believes that the best way to fulfill its mission is to provide children, youth and women with the Disha, meaning 'direction' in Sanskrit, develop sustainable livelihoods.

### Objectives

Disha has 6 principal objectives that guide program development and delivery of services to rural children, youth and women. The objectives are to:

1. *Promote literacy and education amongst underprivileged rural children and youth*
2. *Create training programs which impart relevant vocational skills to villagers*
3. *Provide a positive environment for villagers to learn, study, and interact*
4. *Assist in managing profitable business ventures initiated by villagers such as farming and baking*
5. *Raise the standards of health through preventive and curative measure*
6. *Improve village infrastructure such as access to water, proper drainage systems, and roads*

## Seema Centre's Principal Activities

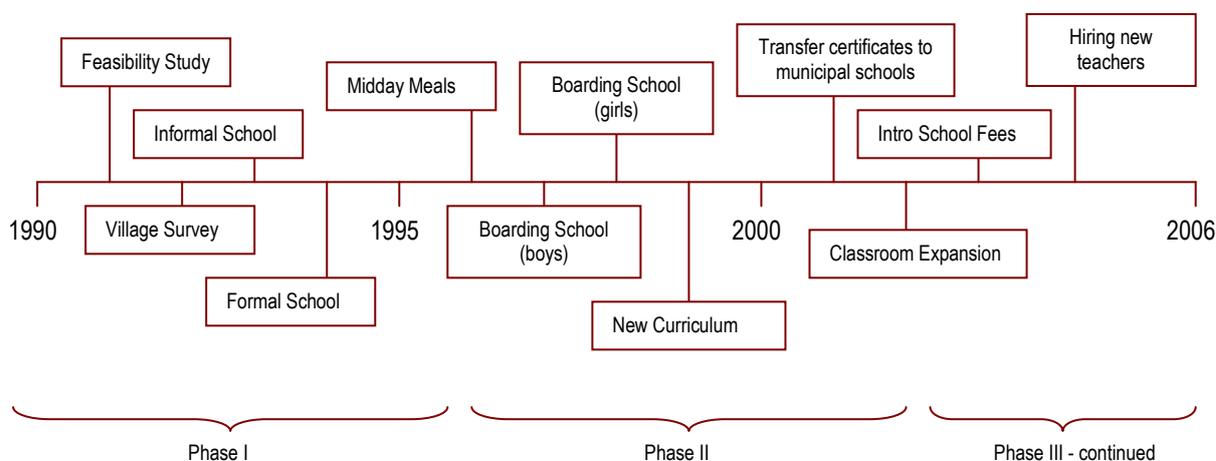
### A. Primary Education and Boarding School

**Need:** In 1993, before initiating any programs, Disha conducted a baseline survey of the villagers located next to the site where the centre was to be built. This survey assessed what services were considered essential by the villagers. Disha wanted to provide services that were relevant and considered most important by the community. A majority of the villagers expressed a need for primary education (from KG to class IV). The survey indicated an 80-90% illiteracy rate among villagers. The following are key reasons for increased access to primary education:

- Poor quality government education resulted in high drop-out and failure rates
- Parents complained of high education costs for books, tuitions, school supplies etc
- School timings limited the children's ability to work in the fields or at home
- Long distances to travel to existing schools was a disincentive for young children
- Schools provided no additional support to attract young girls, increasing gender inequities

This preliminary survey indicated a need to increased access to primary education for children of the adjoining villages.

**Timeline:** Disha's primary education program has constantly evolved over the past 15 years. The experiences from each year since 1991 have influenced each development of the program into what currently exists. The following timeline highlights some key events and activities that shaped the education program. The success of the education program has been its ability to adapt to the needs of the community



### Development of the Education Program:

**Feasibility Study** - This study was the initial business plan for the overall organization that provides a road map of how Disha would accomplish its vision and mission. Disha's original goal was to mainly provide technical training to the youth that match market demands in order to create better job opportunities. For example, car mechanics and electricians were in demand from local shops; housekeeping for domestic workers in urban cities etc. Refer to Appendix A: Seema Training Centre Feasibility Study 1991. This was submitted to IIT Kharagpur in order to finalize the land lease. Based on this proposal IIT Kharagpur offered 6 acres of land next the rural villages of Sonamukhi and the IIT Rural Development Centre. The land was given on 100 year lease.

**Village Survey** – Since the feasibility study was written without any context to the location, it was necessary to survey the adjoining communities to ensure that the plan was in fact feasible. Unfortunately, the survey indicated that there was an extremely high illiteracy rate of 80-90% in these

communities despite being situated close to a world renowned technical institute and having access to a few municipal schools. Disha realized that without basic literacy, imparting technical training would be challenging. Therefore, it became apparent that Disha would need to provide basic primary education and life skills training; the technical training would be incorporated as literacy improved.



*Informal School* - Disha first started with an informal literacy program in order to gauge whether parents would send their children to school. A certain level of interest needed to be gained to ensure the success of the proposed formal school. Disha hired a teacher from the community to ensure that there was buy-in from the villagers. There needed to be someone that had a strong connection with the community and could encourage young children to attend. The first informal class started with the new teacher, a large tarpaulin mat and 20 children under a tree. Disha also provided footballs, boots and shirts to the village youth club in order to increase awareness of Disha and our intentions of helping them improve their lives. The villagers grew to know Disha and our teachers. By 1993 the informal school continued to grow and then transitioned to the formal school once construction of the classrooms was complete.

*Formal School* - Based on the success of the first community-based teacher, Disha continued to hire teachers from the villages in order to strengthen the relationship with the community. The formal school had 5 classrooms from KG to Class IV; teachers were responsible for collecting children in the villages, bringing them to school, teaching and dropping them home. This significantly improved attendance rates and parent participation.

*Midday Meals* - After the formal school was in operation, Disha noticed that attendance rates in the afternoon were dropping. Children who came in the morning would go home for lunch and then not return for the afternoon sessions. Also, attendance further suffered due to frequent illnesses of children; the teachers started taking children to the doctors and it became apparent that children suffered from extreme cases of malnutrition. Disha realized that this was affecting their ability to learn and attend; hence Disha introduced a healthy well-balanced midday meal and tiffin. Not only was there a significant improvement in current attendance and knowledge retention, but the news of a free-meal traveled across to villages 3-4 km away; parents were showing a greater interest in enrolling their children.



*Boarding School* - As teachers gained the children's trust, many social issues prevalent in the communities were being shared and discussed openly; many children talked about the physical abuse they experienced from alcoholic parents, unhygienic toilet conditions causing further illnesses, homework could not be completed because there was no electricity, many still lived on the one meal provided by the school, girls were made to focus on household chores rather than schoolwork and performed poorly in tests, parents would force children to work rather than attend school when there was no money etc. After numerous discussions with parents and teachers it was decided that opening a boarding school for the most-needy children would combat some of the issues prevalent. Providing a safe, secure, healthy environment would be much more conducive to learning and life skills development. Disha first started the boarding for boys, because the parents wanted to see the clear benefits before sending their girls; it was a common belief that sending girls was higher risk since they are more vulnerable. It took over a year before parents were willing to send their girls.

*New Curriculum* - After creating the boarding school, Disha introduced evening tutorials where boarders completed their homework, and poor performing day students were provided help. As Disha moved into the Phase II of the education program, there was a greater emphasis on how to improve the curriculum and include life skills training. The main changes was incorporating agricultural skills training by having children work in the fields, vocational training by providing sewing classes, computer classes, baking and selling bread etc. and life skills training such as hygiene awareness, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health etc. Disha realized that some children were not capable of transitioning to municipal schools and passing; therefore, creating a balance between academics and life skills training was even more essential.

*Classroom Expansion* - Disha's relationship with the community grew even stronger as the agriculture and life skills training were extremely relevant to the villagers and parents were aware of the relevance. They realized that children were not only learning typical school subjects like math, science etc but could also help in the fields during harvest etc. In fact some youth were learning various simple methods that improved productivity. Parents were keen on having their children enroll not only in the school but also be admitted into the boarding school. Since demand began to overburden the current infrastructure, Disha raised additional funding to expand the school to include 4 more classrooms. Parents were traveling 5-10 km to admit their children; Disha had to turn-away over 50% of the children interested in attending.

*School Fees* - As Disha experienced a significant increase in demand and realized that in order to move towards a sustainable model, there was a need to charge fees to those families that could afford to pay. Surprisingly, school fees were readily accepted by those parents that were keen on sending their children to Disha; however, these fees were also need-based, some would pay smaller amounts and others would not pay at all. The school fees are now covering a portion of the running costs.

*New Teachers* - Over the past few years Disha had been mainly focused on engaging the community, tackling basic needs such as food security, hygiene, health care leading to an improvement in attendance and learning. However, now Disha realized that the quality of teaching was weak as scale increased. Teachers that were originally hired were needed to develop the community-trust; however, Disha did not need this connection since a strong independent relationship was created over the past 15 years. Disha now hired more educated teachers which have resulted in a significant improvement in performance of those who attend both the Disha School and those who have transitioned to the municipal schools.

**Key Financial Statistics:** Disha's primary education program has been mainly funded by friends and family of the founders. However, Phase III plans to include more institutional funders. The following chart highlights the costs associated with the primary education and boarding programs.

Item	Avg Cost per Year	Total to Date	Projected
Building/Infrastructure	Rs. 1-2 lakhs	Rs. 25 lakhs	Rs. 4.2 lakhs
Teacher Salaries	Rs. 45,000	Rs. 5 lakhs	Rs. 80,000
Food Costs	Rs. 2.2 lakhs	Rs. 22 lakhs	Rs. 2.6 lakhs
School Supplies	Rs. 48,000	Rs. 3 lakhs	Rs. 60,000
Health	Rs. 20,000	Rs. 1.5 lakhs	Rs. 15,000
School Fees (Revenue)	Rs. 45,000	Rs. 2.5 lakhs	Rs. 1 lakh
# of Children Attending	120	1,140	130 students per year

Note: (1) 1 Lakh = Rs. 100,000

#### **Achievements:**

- Convinced rural parents to invest in girl child education
- Built a strong relationship with the community

- Created a home for the children of the village that encourages learning and entrepreneurship
- Boarders had a 2% failure rate compared to 25% for day students
- Families are willing to allocate funds to pay for school fees
- Primary education program is starting to be financially self sustainable with school fees and lower food costs (the farm)
- Children are transitioning to municipal schools and performing well
- Decreased malnutrition and common illnesses among the children attending school
- Girls are provided a safe, supportive environment that encourages attendance and learning

#### **Challenges:**

- Realizing that some children are not able to perform well academically despite a supportive environment
- As children grow older there is less interest in pursuing further studies, the village is a distraction
- Parents will not allow children to attend while harvesting time this disrupts their studies
- The centre cannot accommodate for all the demand that has grown over the past 15 years
- Girls are pressured to marry at an early age, so parents are only supportive up to Class IV
- Dependency on community-based teachers for quality education is difficult
- Providing services that meet all the needs of the children tends to foster too much dependency on Disha

#### **Learnings:**

- Identify the key needs of the community before starting any rural development program
- Develop a strong link with the community by engaging key community members in the program itself
- Build-in feedback mechanisms that enable programs to better adapt to the environment
- Parents play a key role in their children's lives therefore programs should facilitate regular interactions
- Create a contextual curriculum that incorporates the given community and their environment; this makes the learning process more relevant and enjoyable
- Basic necessities such as food, shelter, healthcare and clothing are necessary before any learning or training can be effective

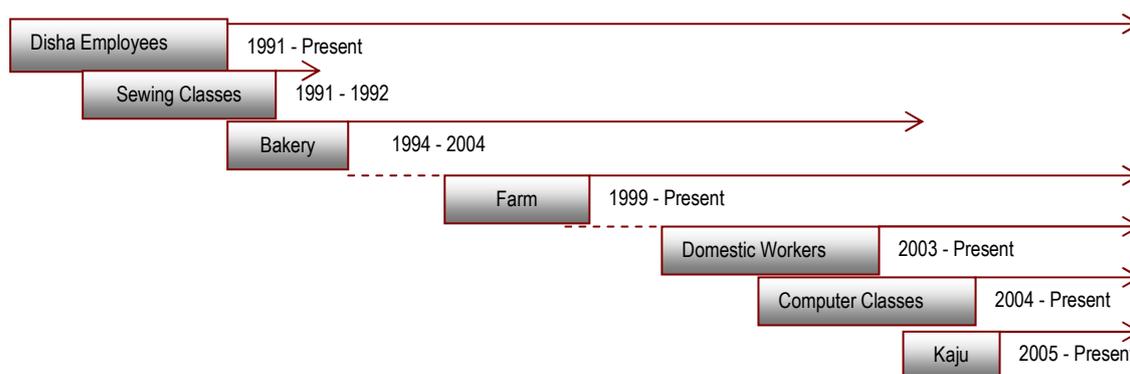
### **B. Practical Life Skills Training**

**Need:** Disha's original goal was to exclusively provide technical skills training to village youth and women realizing that creating livelihoods in rural areas could play a key role in decreasing urban migration and improving rural life. However, with the initial village survey it became apparent that literacy levels were extremely low and insufficient to start any of the small business ventures listed in the study. Therefore, Disha decided to first focus on improving literacy levels and simultaneously include basic skills training that neither requires technical know-how or higher education. While having several discussion groups with the youth and children, it was evident that they needed to develop both personally and technically in order to be eligible for any job. For example, youth would be employed as delivery boys or runners and would not attend work regularly; often arriving late for work and leaving early. The following are key reasons for introducing life skills training through small business ventures:

- Lack of exposure to life skills that prepare people for the job market
- Youth and women are unable to cope with the work ethic once offered a job; high turnover
- Practical training is non-existent in the current government curriculum
- Many children who are not academically inclined learn significantly more in practical training environments
- Although women faced similar skills training needs, no training or exposure was provided by any other institution

Therefore, Disha initiated small business ventures where children, youth and women could work and train. Small profits from each of the ventures would subsidize the primary education program and the boarding school. While the classroom and center provide excellent environments to improve academic and personal skills, there was no substitute for actual entrepreneurship. With a view of developing strong work ethic and entrepreneurial skills, all students spend 2-3 hours per day working at Disha's various small business ventures. Working in Disha's endeavors allows students and women to experience the real world in a safe, supportive environment and gives them an opportunity to give back something to the center. Furthermore, these ventures incorporated literacy concepts, math and basic business practices; for example, where children were selling bread on the trolley they were required to write accounts as well as do some marketing.

**Timeline:** Disha's life skills training program has constantly evolved over the past 15 years. Every 2-3 years new ventures are introduced, replacing other unsuccessful ventures. Since 1991, various ventures have influenced many children, youth and women's lives in terms of both income generation and skills training. The following timeline highlights key ventures and events that have shaped the program. The success of this program has been its ability to continuously introduce new ventures and replace unprofitable ones.



### *Disha Employees*

The first employment opportunity for youth and women of the adjoining villages was working at the Seema centre. Hiring only women teachers from the community to start the primary education program not only helped the education program succeed but these women also became mentors for instilling work ethic, discipline and entrepreneurship among the children and youth of the school and village. Some of the teachers that started with Disha in 1991, eventually left the school and started running many of the small business ventures such as the bakery and canteen. They would become managers of the children and youth. This provided an important safety net for the children and youth creating a supportive environment for development and learning. Over the past 15 years, the centre has hired cooks, matrons, cleaning staff, security and gardeners; all these employees have come from the villages and progressed to different jobs after working with Disha for 3-5 years; increasing their earning potential significantly from 25-30%. Their entrepreneurial successes were based on the initial opportunity and experiences at centre; Disha encourages its employees to develop skills and other opportunities as part of its development process.

### *Sewing Classes*

The centre was donated 12 singer machines in 1991 to start sewing classes for the women of the villages as vocational training. The objective of offering these classes was to teach some basic sewing to women so that they could open small tailoring shops in each of the villages. Unfortunately, Disha was following the trend that was prevalent in the early 90's where many NGOs introduced sewing classes as vocational

training with success stories of women opening their own tailoring stores and earning significantly more income. However, Disha realized very quickly, that there was no demand for 80-100 newly trained tailors in the Kharagpur area. In 1992, Disha decided to no longer conduct sewing classes and started to take an innovative approach to vocational training, where small business ventures would be started by Disha and operated by children, youth and women; realizing that providing practical life skills was more important than teaching women how to sew, prepare pickle or make handicrafts. Disha strongly believed that only teaching these skills and not focusing on the marketing and distribution causes more harm to the people rather than opportunity for livelihood improvement. Starting sewing classes made this more evident and lead to Disha's new wave of thinking in the development sector; Disha was moving away from the traditional vocational training and introducing a new practical life skills training program; the bakery was the first step. The sewing machines are currently being used to teach the students of the education program basic sewing skills, so that they can make their own clothes and easily mend used clothing; this is part of the life skills development curriculum; ironically, some youth have opened their own tailoring shops.

### *The Seema Bakery*

The bakery was established in 1994 as a channel to impart entrepreneurial skills and earn profits for the centre. From its humble beginnings as a single-oven operated by three villagers in one of our classrooms, the bakery grew to include five fulltime villagers and every able student as its staff. They worked for 12-16 hours a day baking innovative products such as pizzas, hamburgers, hot dogs, and bread; these were not available at any other bakery in all of Kharagpur. As demand continued to grow, the Bakery was moved onto IIT campus and a temporary selling stall was set-up in the Technology Market; a trolley system selling door-to-door was also introduced. Children and youth operated the trolley and the market stall; the women and out-of-school youth baked in the bakery. While operating the trolley or market stall children and youth were exposed to different people and situations that required them to be polite and well-mannered. This was an excellent training ground for improving spoken English. In terms of profitability, 75% of the profits subsidized the primary education program and boarding school and the remaining was profit-sharing.

The main focus of the Bakery was a mechanism for practical training where some literacy skills could also be further developed. Never having worked regular jobs or been given responsibility, the villagers learned many essential skills. Students were expected to go to the Bakery or to the market at their appointed times. In the Bakery, they maintained a strict standard of quality control and are taught not to cut corners. In the market, they are responsible for keeping track of what they sell and for collecting and returning money to the Bakery managers. Adults manage the students and do the more labor intensive work. They are also responsible for meeting deadlines and buying supplies. Finally the head of the Bakery was in charge of the entire operation including accounting, marketing, and new product development. He was considered the owner of the Bakery and received a pay commensurate to sales.

However, as the success of the bakery gained wide recognition, competition and corruption started to hamper sales. Initially, Disha was able to get contracts from the IIT campus hostels, however, older vendors that were being replaced were not supportive and started to lobby the bureaucracy with bribes; Disha could not compete on this basis. Although the first 8 years showed continued growth and success, the last two years started to see a decrease in renewed contracts. This made the venture unprofitable, and Disha made the difficult decision of closing the bakery in 2004. This was a tremendous learning experience for everyone, often NGOs spend significant resources trying to operate small businesses that end-up being extremely unprofitable and time consuming. Disha strongly believes that strong business discipline must be encouraged even in the NGO business so that students and women know how to either turn-around a unprofitable business or can make the difficult decision of shutting-down. Closing the bakery was a joint decision of all stakeholders; this process of evaluation was invaluable and though-provoking for many.



### *The Neera Farm*

The centre was located on 6 acres of land, where the soil was not naturally fertile. In 2004, Disha decided that food costs were growing too high since the newly started boarding facilities provides 3 daily nutritious meals; it made economic sense to start growing some vegetables in the back of the school. This was the first step in creating the organic farm. The small patch was the initial training ground for the students where they were taught basic agriculture such as irrigation, planting, watering, weeding and harvesting. They learned which crops were suited for what type of weather; this contextual practical training is an innovative development tool used by Disha. Although Disha initially wanted to only provide technical training, it became apparent while working closely with the community that agriculture continues to play an integral role in rural life. Being able to grow food is essential to food security for rural families; many have small plots of land that need to be developed for growing food. Disha provides the initial life skills training that increases awareness of farming techniques and know-how. This has proved to be extremely rewarding for both the centre and village development.

Based on the success of the small vegetable plot, Disha began to improve the soil quality on all the 6 acres of land. Many different types of fruits, vegetables, pulses, dry fruits and special wood trees were planted at various stages. Now Disha has over 500 cashew nut trees, 175 mahogany trees, 250 teak, 500 local trees, 30 eucalyptus, 7 spice trees, 40 flower trees and 100 fruit trees. Although this land is not naturally fertile, Disha worked hard to improve the soil quality over several seasons. Now several kilos of produce are provided on a daily basis to feed the children of the education program. The crops grown on the land have become an important project for not only the sustainability of Disha but also for providing a strong contextual skills training program.

The plantation is also producing increasing amounts of peanuts and cashews that have started to be packaged and sold to the local markets. Disha recently purchased a cashew de-husking machine at a subsidized price from the government to process the cashews produced on the farm. Students and women are learning the process and playing an important role in developing a local market. Disha mainly uses the produce internally, but excess output of any particular product is sold in the local market.

In addition to the plantation, the farm also has cows that produce milk for the students. The purchase of the cow has significantly decreased dairy food costs such as milk and yogurt; two important food items for the children's nutrition. The cows are also used to provide life skills training to the students where they not only learn how to milk cows, but also how to care for them in terms of feed, illness diagnosis etc. This training is invaluable as many villagers do not know how to care for their animals; proper care and

maintenance can help each rural household. This is another example of how Disha uses the rural context and provides relevant practical training as part of the life skills development curriculum. Recently, Disha constructed a man-made fish pond to start an aquaculture training program; fish produced here will be used for nutritious meals and provide training to students and youth.

The Disha farm project also provides some land to agricultural pilot projects run by IIT Kharagpur's professors. For example, some land was provided to see if a tea could be grown successfully in a different environment from the typical hill-stations. The tea has grown well and will be packaged to be sold locally. This was a learning experience to only our students but also provided evidence for leading agricultural research. Disha expects to continue to support such research efforts as a partnership with IIT Kharagpur. This not only helps the field of agriculture, but exposes the villagers to new plants and technology.

### *Domestic Workers*

Disha has 2 homes and one guest house on the 6 acre land where domestic help has been used for cleaning, dusting and cooking. In 2004, Disha realized that each girl who worked with Disha for a 2-3 years period was then moving to Delhi and working in wealthy middle class families. Over the past 15 years, Disha has unintentionally trained over 8-10 youth that were making Rs. 2,000-3,000 per month in Delhi and Calcutta. This is significantly more than earning the Rs. 40 per day of seasonal labour in the fields. Each girl sends a major portion of her income back to her family in the village; the family has used this money for upgrading roofing, paying for a younger sister's wedding, cremations etc. This sudden access to earn more has reached many villages around the centre; with the spreading of this success, many female youth have approached Disha with a keen interest in being sent to work as domestic help in the cities.

At first Disha was very reluctant to encourage these youth to leave their village and work far away from home. But the girls were extremely persistent and so were their families; therefore, Disha re-considered whether this is an area to be supported since it encouraged urban migration rather than Disha's original goal of rural development. However, Disha's priority is to meet the needs of the children, youth and women. So after several discussions with the villagers and the girls, it was decided that Disha would start to help girls be placed in safe, secure homes where constant communication and feedback to their families in the village was provided. This opportunity provides the income needed to improve the desperate poverty levels of their families.

Although, this program is still new and continuously being improved the current process first involves the initial training and discussions with the group of girls interested in being placed. Then they are matched with homes that request for domestic help; these placements are based on word-of-mouth and referrals. Each urban city has a person that is central communication point for all the Disha domestic workers; for example in Delhi, there is lady who has taken the responsibility of ensuring that the workers are safe and if they have any problems they contact her; she also plays an important role in finding placements. Disha is considering expanding to Mumbai.

### *Computer Classes*

In 2004, Disha was donated 10 computers by IIT Kharagpur so that computer classes could be integrated into the academic curriculum. Disha realized that this training would provide its students with a unique set of skills that could provide greater job opportunities in the future; computer literacy is considered an important requirement in today's job market. Hence, Disha wanted to provide this training to its students at an early age; therefore, basic computer education is provided to all the Disha students and youth.

However, over the past year some older college students and youth from slightly wealthier families have requested computer classes in the evenings. Now Disha is considering starting computer classes for

others at a nominal fee in order to provide some income for the other Disha programs; which may become another small business venture for Disha.

#### **Achievements:**

- Disha has provided job opportunities to over 750 people over the past 15 years at the centre
- Increased average income of each employee by 25-30%; the domestic worker program is much higher
- Integrated sewing, agriculture, dairy, aquaculture and computer skills training into the education program creating an innovative contextually-based curriculum
- Graduates from the Disha centre are operating several of their own businesses that includes catering, paan shops, vegetable vendors etc
- Employees of Disha have left to join higher paying jobs such as the railways, government services, private companies etc
- Created a unique partnership with IIT Kharagpur which exposes students, youth and women to leading-edge technology research in the agriculture improving yield, productivity and new products

#### **Challenges:**

- Shutting down unprofitable businesses after 10 years of operation when villagers have invested so much time and energy is difficult
- Students enjoy the practical training too much and often do not want to attend the academic sessions; however, both are mandatory for Disha students
- Lack of motivation plagues the youth of the village despite exposure to Disha and job opportunities
- No amount of entrepreneurial spirit can overcome deep-rooted corruption and bureaucracy in small businesses like the bakery

#### **Learnings:**

- Unprofitable business ventures should be shut down despite the difficulties since it places an economic burden on the other programs and services
- Contextually based curriculums merged with practical training provides a strong platform for engaging students and improving learning
- Vocational training needs to result in job opportunity; the environment should be researched to understand what skills need to be developed in order to generate these job opportunities
- Constant interaction and feedback from the beneficiaries is necessary in order to ensure that programs and services offered by the NGO are relevant and needed; sometimes re-evaluation of one's objectives may be necessary in order to meet the needs of the beneficiary; building this dynamic, trusting relationship is a key success factor to any development program

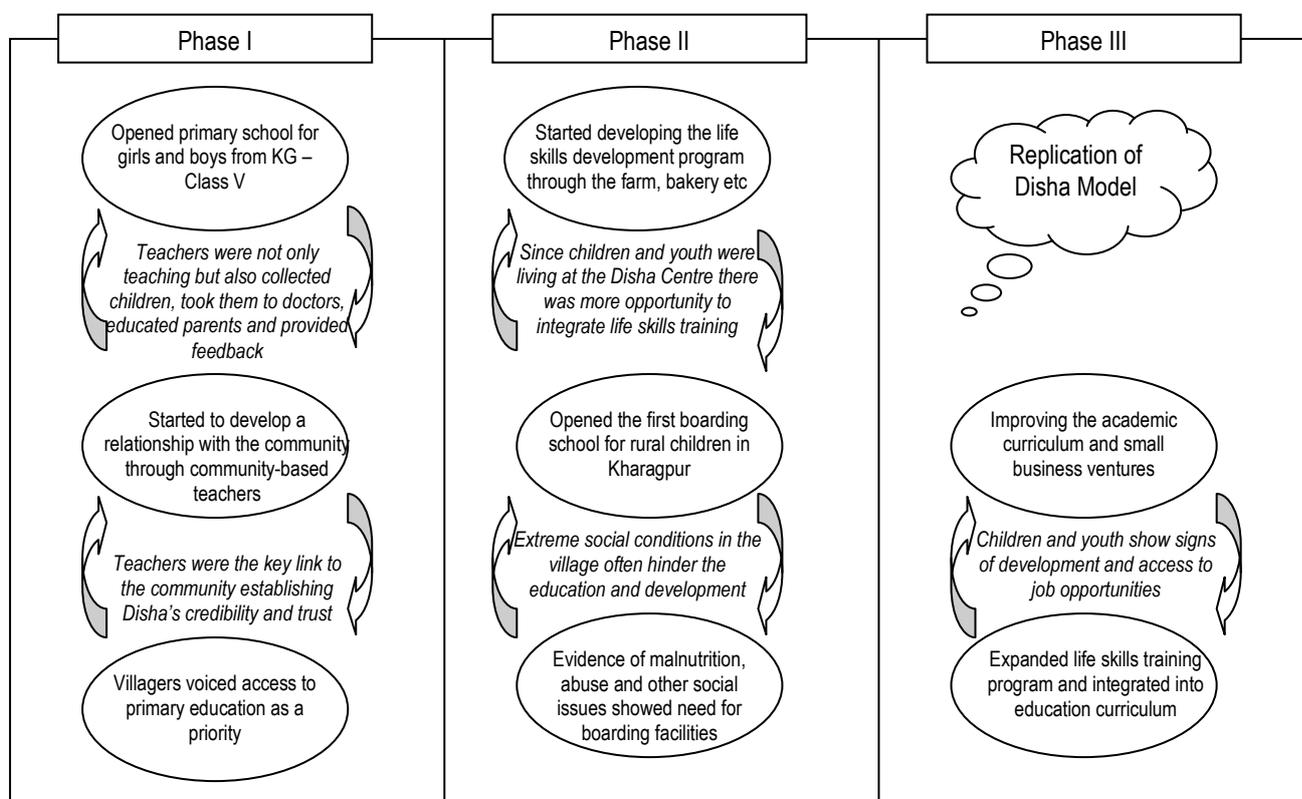
### **Conclusion**

Disha was founded by Hansa Nundy and P. K. Dwivedi. After starting life studying engineering at IIT Kharagpur in the early 1960s, their lives diverged as Hansa moved to Canada to become a professor of electrical engineering while P. K. stayed in India to become an electrical power engineer. In 1992, they reunited in Kharagpur, bound by a common dream of dedicating the rest of their lives to helping the underprivileged located on land provided by their alma mater. Together they founded Disha with funds from their own earnings, family and friends. Now they work year round to realize their dream of empowering rural children, youth and women through the Disha centre.

After 15 years of experience, Disha's rural development model has been tweaked to meet the growing needs of the community. Now Disha is at a point where its successes, failures and experiences need to be shared with the broader development community as a valuable learning tool. Disha has an innovative

model which merges academics with practical training providing a unique platform for life skills development in rural India. Over the years, Disha has proven that creating a contextually-based curriculum promotes learning and attendance even at the primary education level; since agriculture is still a strong economic force in the rural environment, it is essential that children and youth are able to work in the field. Teaching them methods that improve yield, productivity with limited investment is an important development objective for livelihood sustainability since small personal plots are still the main source of food for many villagers.

Disha's success has been mainly due to its involvement with the community and beneficiaries. From inception, Disha has used community-based teachers to initiate the primary education program, these women were not only the link to the village but provided the safety net around which all the other Disha programs could flourish. The teachers became leaders, mentors, caretakers and entrepreneurs; no outside skilled person could have replaced them. Their involvement was a key success factor. Below is a diagram that provides an overview of the process of how Disha developed over three phases:



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