

# A book in hand, a vision for future

## They struggled, faltered and finally achieved their dreams. The brothers are now out to ensure easy access to study material for thousands of children in the Sunderbans

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Where there's a will, there's a way, goes the saying. The reality, though, is different: many people do have the 'will' but cannot afford the 'way'. No one knows this better than Debabrata and Sankar Halder, who have promised to find a way for underprivileged students to fulfil their dreams.

Born and brought up in a remote village of Raidighi in the South 24 Parganas, the brothers had to live life the hard way — no running water, no electricity and no regular newspapers. With their parents struggling to arrange for the basic necessities of life, Debabarata and Sankar had to borrow books and study material from their seniors to prepare for exams throughout their school life.

Cut to the present. Sankar is now a manager at Tata Consultancy Service, posted in Sydney after completing his graduation from the Goenka College of Commerce and MCA from Jadavpur University. His brother Debabrata is well-placed in Coal India after studying mechanical engineering from Jadavpur University.

But the brothers have not forgotten their childhood struggle. "We would rush to our seniors' houses as soon as their exams got over to get their books. We had no other option," rued Debabrata.

In 2003, Sankar and Debabrata founded Mukti, a socio-economic organisation which works on education projects such as sponsorship programmes for meritorious students, a book bank for underprivileged students, coaching centres for rural children, solar lights for students and special coaching centres for board exam candidates.

"We had many friends who wanted to study and dreamt of bigger things. If someone had been there to help them, they would have become doctors, engineers and teachers by now. They had merit and talent but poverty stopped them from studying further. Today, many of them work as casual labourers," said Sankar with a sigh.

The book bank project started in 2003 with 100 students. The number has now gone up to 5,000



Children with the books they received from Mukti book bank run by (top right) Sankar Halder and (bottom right) Debabrata Halder

with the project covering around 20 schools in the Sunderbans villages such as Nagendrapur, Kankandighi, Maipith, Gadmathura, Patharpratima and Namkhana. "This project has significantly reduced the school dropout rate. It has also encouraged parents to

send their children to school," said a delighted Debabrata.

The brothers select needy students who wish to study and bring them under the purview of the book bank. Sankar had bought the first books for the book bank, worth Rs 1,000, with

his pocket money. "I spent my pocket money to buy the first few books because I knew that very few people would take the initiative. We started collecting old books from across the state two years ago. Now we have books on all subjects, which we collect at

the end of the academic year," he said. But Mukti loses around 20 per cent of its stock because of damage and change in syllabus.

It is not only schoolchildren who benefit from Mukti's large stock of books. From budding engineers and doctors to those doing

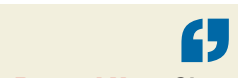
graduation and master's, there are books for everyone.

But there are problems as well, mostly financial. Mukti has now decided to introduce a yearly rental to be refunded to students when they return the books. "Thirty per cent of the total cost of a book will now be taken in the beginning as rent. This is being introduced so that the students develop a sense of responsibility. This way, we hope to get back all the books in proper condition and reuse them next year," says Debabrata.

The brothers have a message for people: "You too can spread the light of knowledge by donating old books to Mukti. Your books will help less privileged children to fulfil their dreams. Instead of selling or piling them up, call 9163632192 or email at debabrata.halder@muktiweb.org. Your contribution will change someone's life, someone less fortunate than you and me."



Children deposit textbooks in a book bank at a tutoring centre in Queluz near Lisbon. Struck by a severe crisis in Portugal, many families have opted to exchange textbooks. More than a hundred shops, pharmacies, florists and associations have already volunteered to host a space for textbook storage and exchange. This initiative will allow families to save money while most students in primary education must purchase their textbooks, which represents a budget of around 300 euros per student. (AFP)



**Pronoti Nag, Class IX, Nagendrapur Hemanta Kumari High School**

My father is a farmer and works very hard to make ends meet. It is not possible for him to buy books for my education. Mukti is beside me. I study with books from the Mukti book bank. I am really grateful to them for this wonderful initiative.

**Bularani Mondal, master's in physical education from State Institute of Physical Education, Alipore,**

I have been taking books for my studies from Mukti Book Bank since 2003 and I have benefited immensely. It is because of Mukti that I have been able to complete my graduation. It would not have been possible for me to achieve my dream without Mukti's support.

**Nemai Gayen, science teacher, Nagendrapur Hemanta Kumari High School**

I am proud to teach in this organisation. Knowledge is meant to be passed on. Supravat Halder, one of our students, secured 82.5 per cent in the Class X board examinations this year. I dedicate this success to Mukti and thank them for providing books to these students at the right time.

**Mahadeb Moyra, math teacher, Nagendrapur Hemanta Kumari High School**

Apart from school books, Mukti provides guidebooks to students of classes IX and X, helping them to prepare for their board exams. In fact, several students have secured good percentage this year.

**Bandana Pathak, guardian**

My husband is a farmer and I'm a housewife. It's next to impossible for us to purchase books for our daughter Madhumita Pathak who is in Class V. I don't have to worry about buying books for her anymore. Mukti has ensured that she continues her studies. And I dream that one day my girl will make Mukti and us proud.

**Jhantu Maity, guardian**

My nephew Chiranjit Maity had secured above 80 per cent in Class X and Class XII board exams only because Mukti provided him with books. I am thankful to Mukti for the support. I have brought Chiranjit up and I would love to see him do even better. After completing his studies, I would like him to work for needy children here.

# Mukti from steep tuition fees

## Coaching centres at an unbelievable Rs 20 per month have brought special classes within the reach of students and helped them progress with the right guidance from local teachers

Mukti runs coaching centres for students who want to pursue higher studies but do not have the means. It all began in 2006 with just two centres of 120 children each. Today, Mukti runs eight centres with the help of local teachers. Students from villages through the centres, where the fee is just Rs 20 per month. Classes in these coaching centres begin at 7am and continue for two hours.

Four students from the coaching centre share their experience:

**Ria Mondal Class IX, Jogendrapur High School**

**Family** My parents, sister and me  
**Breadwinners in the family** My father is a graduate. He works at Mukti. He is a math teacher. Before Mukti appointed him, he used to give tuitions but the money he earned was never enough. My mother works at Asha Prakalpa but her income is irregular.

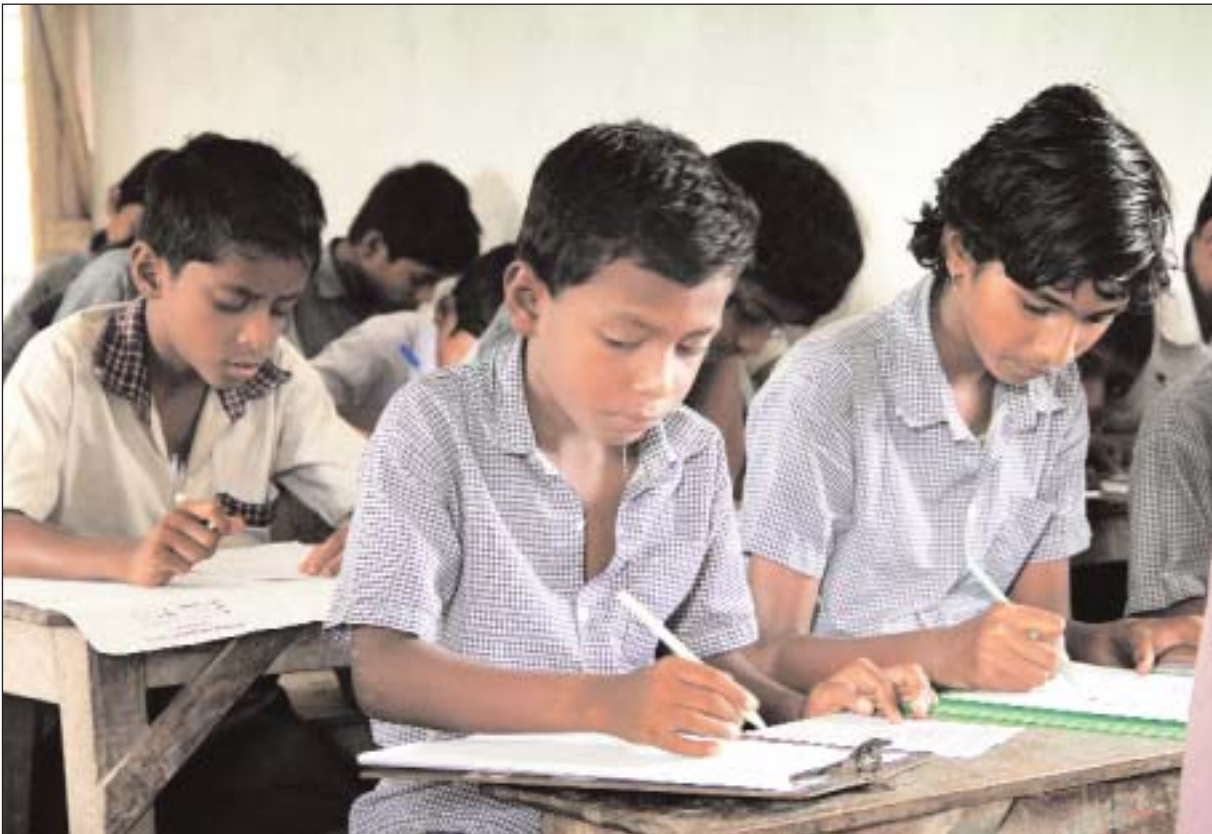
**Why she went to Mukti** My father earns Rs 2,000 and my mother is never sure whether she will get her salary at the end of the month. Low-cost education was the only option for me. So, I went to Mukti when I was in Class V.

**How Mukti has helped** I was very weak in math but could not afford private tuition. Having joined Mukti, I have become confident and can face any exam. In fact, math has become my favourite subject now.

**Aim in life** I want to be a math teacher and teach students in this village. I don't want students like us to suffer.

**Daily routine** Apart from going to the coaching centre three days a week, I go to school every morning and study in the evening. Being the eldest daughter, I have to cook and look after the house too. I don't get time to play with my friends.

**Marks before and after Mukti** I used to score around 47 per cent in Class V. Now I get 70 per cent.



Students at the coaching centre and (right) children wait for their classes to begin. Pictures by Bhubaneswarananda Halder

**Jogodish Bhandari Class VII, Jogendrapur High School**

**Family** My parents, my sister and me  
**Breadwinners in the family** My father is the sole earner in the family. He works as a help in other people's houses.

**Why he went to Mukti** My father earns Rs 1,000 a month,

not enough for the entire family. I needed help in my studies. So I joined Mukti in Class V.

**How has Mukti helped** I am doing better in my studies. The fear is not there any more. The teachers have a lot of patience and devote a lot of time to help us.

**Aim in life** I want to complete my graduation and pursue higher studies.

**Daily routine** I work in the field besides going to school and the coaching centre.

**Marks before and after Mukti**

I used to get 50 per cent in my exams and now my percentage has increased to 70 per cent.

**Dipika Khan Class X, Nagendrapur Hemanta Kumari High School**

**Family** My mother, father and two sisters  
**Breadwinner in the family** My father is the sole earning member of the family. A

mason, he lost his job after an accident. Mukti has given him a job.

**Why she went to Mukti** My father earns Rs 2,000 per month, which is not enough to run the family. I have an elder sister studying in Class XII and a younger one in Class IV. My family could not afford the cost of my studies. So I turned to Mukti for books and guidance. I joined when I was in Class VII.

**How Mukti has helped** I was weak in English. My English teacher at Mukti helped me a lot. He worked on my spellings and grammar and there has been a

marked improvement in my marks.

**Aim in life** I want to do well in my exams and study in Vidyasagar University. After finishing my studies, I want to be an English teacher.

**Daily routine** I go to the coaching centre thrice a week — Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays — and from there to school. I come back home around 4pm and help my mother with household work and also study if I get time.

**Marks before and after Mukti**

I used to get low marks before joining Mukti. Now my percentage has gone up to 70.

**Mukti the changemaker**

Till recently, education was not given any importance here. Parents were reluctant to send their children, especially girls, to school. Students of Class X often need private tuition to prepare for their board exams. But the cost of private tuition is impossible to afford for most of the families living here. By giving books to students and holding coaching classes, Mukti has taken a big burden off their shoulders.

**Amit Mondal Class IX, Jogendrapur High School**

**Family** My parents, my brother and me.  
**Breadwinners in the family** My father is a farmer and my brother has also started working with him.

**Why he went to Mukti** My father did not earn much and it was difficult for my brother and me to continue our studies. So I decided to join Mukti in Class V.

**How has Mukti helped** I am not a very good student. It's because of my sir, Bijoy Mondal, in Mukti that I have improved in my studies. This year (Class X) is a crucial year and we need extra help for the board exams. Mukti is the only place where we can get this additional help for just Rs 20 to Rs 25 a month.

**Aim in life** I want to be a teacher and work for students of this area.

**Daily routine** Mukti tuitions in the morning and school over, I come home and study for my next day's classes. I also help out my father on the rice field.

**Marks before and after Mukti** I was poor in studies, I used to score just 40 per cent. I have improved to 55 per cent but I have to work a lot harder for the board exams.

**As told to Malancha Dasgupta**