

An angel for those in the nowhere land

Sarbani Das Roy

Iswar Sankalpa

Iswar Sankalpa was founded by Sarbani Das Roy in Kolkata in 2007 to lend a helping hand to those with mental health problems, particularly those from underprivileged sections of the society. For, they are not only marginalised, but are vulnerable, disadvantaged and largely neglected. They are not even in a position to access or avail health care facilities provided by the state due to their mental state. A large proportion of the population of Kolkata lives in slums. The abysmal conditions of living, coupled with lack of resources and ignorance, make this population vulnerable to mental illness.

Iswar Sankalpa (IS) as it exists today was not a planned program. It was in response to suffering one comes across commonly in everyday life but which often does not permeate the superficial layers of our consciousness. IS's story is intricately linked to the story of one of its founders Sarbani Das Roy. She has played an important role in changing the lives of thousands of people affected by mental illness. This profile is an attempt not only to document Sarbani's journey, but also to inspire those who wish to make a difference in the life of another human being.

Early childhood

Born in the mid-1960s Sarbani's earliest memory of her childhood is being part of a huge joint family. Her father had ten brothers and six sisters, with all their families living together. All the children spent a lot of time together, being a part of family rituals and festivals.

Sarbani's mother worked in the health department on family planning issues. When Sarbani was very small, her mother was posted in a remote place in Haringhata. Sarbani accompanied her mother to live in Haringhata. She recalled it being a very rural area with nothing for miles around their living quarters. She recalled her mother sleeping with a sickle by their side at night for protection.

Having Sarbani study at Loretto Convent School was a closely held dream of her mother. To fulfill this, they moved back to Kolkata when Sarbani was four years old. Sarbani's sister was born in 1969. By the Durga Pooja of 1970, her mother was diagnosed with cancer and survived only for three months. She passed away in January 1971.

While her mother was in the last stages of her illness, Sarbani was sent to live with her aunt and uncle and study in Delhi. Sarbani said that she did not know it then, but this was the real

beginning of her homelessness. She always had a roof over her head and was taken care of - but it was someone else's home.

Sarbani's sister was being taken care of by her grandmother in the village. After about four years, her father decided to get both his children back, to live with him in Kolkata. Sarbani's father had not done well in his business and they had little to go by as a family. They lived in a government shelter for a while. Sarbani recalled those days as being full of fun with her kid sister. She hung around the locality with the street hoodlums and got a close view of what life was like for people who lived off the streets. She found the conversations in this group more meaningful and more relevant than she did the conversations with her friends in school and later in college.

Young adulthood and marriage

Sarbani finished her graduation in English literature and wanted to pursue her masters in the same. Her father insisted that she do an MBA. For all her rebelliousness, Sarbani said, she could never refuse her father's wishes and so she joined an MBA program she was not the least bit interested in.

While doing her MBA, Sarbani married her long-term sweetheart. She married into a conservative middle class Bengali family. Before marriage, her husband-to-be had told her that his family would never allow her to work. Sarbani said she did not realise the enormity of what this meant till she completed her MBA and campus interviews were on. She was not allowed to participate in any of the interviews. Personally this was another difficult phase for Sarbani as their plans to start a family failed. In a family that had accepted her with difficulty this was yet another challenging situation.

Sarbani said that she has always been a fighter and survivor. If she wanted something she would get it one way or another. She wanted children. She and her husband agreed that they would wait for five years and then adopt, which they eventually did. She has two young daughters who she said are the brightest sparks in her life. The couple had decided that they would accept the first child the adoption agency put into their arms and that is what they did. The household was full of joy. Sarbani and her family had adopted her first child without checking the medical history, because they accepted their child as she was. However not knowing the medical history was difficult as the child had to go through tough times over the years. Sarbani and her husband went on to adopt a second daughter.

Her parents-in-law, especially her father-in-law, were very supportive. Sarbani recalled her father-in-law's extreme kindness towards her, the sort no one had shown her before. Sarbani's husband went to work in Muscat and she lost her in-laws in 2007 and 2016. Her father went through a debilitating illness. Through all these ups and downs Sarbani managed her life and her work. Sarbani said that her father had always been concerned about her and was very disappointed when she did not pursue a career after marriage.

However in the last days of his life in 2011, he acknowledged and blessed her work. For Sarbani this was a validation she had sought all her life.

The rocky career trail

Amidst a lot of family opposition after her marriage, Sarbani joined a tea exporting firm. She recalled that she had to go to Sri Lanka and Russia on work. The firm resolved the first impediment of her lack of passport. But she had to deal with her family. She said she believed her husband when he told her to stay abroad and not come home if she decided to go. At 23, this was a very real threat to her. She gave up the job.

In the meanwhile her father had set up his own hosiery business and was doing well. She began helping him in running the business. Her father was a frugal businessman who turned his life around with sheer hard work. Sarbani said that the foundation of her work ethic was laid while watching her father at work. Those values are what she brought to Iswar Sankalpa many years later. Despite assisting her father, Sarbani said, she was mostly a homemaker. She said that she had lost confidence and had begun questioning her own abilities.

Around this time, one of her friends Shri Buddhadeb Bhattacharya asked her to assist him in proofreading a history textbook. It was a small job, but for Sarbani it opened up a tiny window to the world of interesting and intelligent engagement. Reminiscing about those days, Sarbani said, "It was almost as if there was a design to life; that it was no accident." Meantime Sarbani had a new neighbour Dr Shefali Moitro. She headed the women's studies and philosophy departments at JadHAVpur University. Sarbani said they were complete opposites. Moitro was a single woman, a highly acclaimed academician and scholar. Sarbani saw herself as the typical housewife with oiled hair and a child on her hip.

Moitro however was a very affectionate person and loved Sarbani's children. For Sarbani it was a close-up view of how a single woman, could love herself and live a life of dignity. Sarbani spent many hours talking to Moitro. It was Moitro who provided direction to Sarbani's listless wading through life. She suggested that Sarbani take up a two-year course in counseling from Samikshani, a centre for psychoanalytical studies and mental therapy. Madhav, Moitro's contact in Samikshani, was a little skeptical of Sarbani being accepted for the course. He said it was a very small batch and only about 12 people were accepted after an entrance test.

Determined to do the course, Sarbani cleared the exam and in the year 2000 began a journey that was destined to change her life forever. This was a part-time course with classes during the weekend and practicum during the week. It is here that Sarbani met Dr Narayanan, a psychiatrist, also one of the course teachers and a practicum trainer. Dr Narayanan and Sarbani would later go on to form Iswar Sankalpa.

During the course, Sarbani learnt about Sumedha, a temporary institution, largely running summer programmes around process work using Jungian school of thought that had been

propounded by well-known psychiatrist Carl Jung. This was a course which Sarbani not just felt attuned to, but also felt would help her earn a living. The big hitch was that the course was quite expensive. The course had three phases and the first phase cost Rs 25,000. Rotraut Roychowdhury, Sarbani's counselor and secretary of Samikshani came to her rescue and offered her the financial resource for the first phase, which she did in 2001. Her father paid for the second phase. By the time Sarbani came to her third phase of the course, she had done enough small assignments to repay the fee of the earlier phases as well as pay for her third phase. With an MBA, a professional course in counselling, besides the training in process work, Sarbani was well equipped to do a lot of corporate training and group work. She had a counselling chamber in Rifle Range and was doing well on that front as well.

Through all this, the perspectives of her marital family did not really change. What changed was her ability to deal with things. She also learnt to negotiate her way around her family. Sarbani's sister Laboni, who works with her at Iswar Sankalpa, was her main support. When Sarbani was doing the varied courses and the multiple assignments with long bouts of travel, it was Laboni who stepped in to be mom to Sarbani's very small daughters. Sarbani said that she could do what she did because of this unfailing support from her sister. Sarbani also said that while her husband was never the overtly demonstrative type in expressing his support - he stepped in for her and shared the household responsibilities, without which it would have been an extremely rocky ride for her.

Sarbani was instrumental in beginning a counselling course in Jadhavpur University and served as the course coordinator for a while. In December 2003, Hope Foundation asked her to work with their staff and children who were their beneficiaries, using group processes and counselling techniques. In December 2004, after the massive Indian Ocean tsunami, Hope Foundation asked Sarbani and Dr Narayanan to work with them in Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu. Sarbani said that working in such diverse situations notched up her confidence a great deal. Her management ability was clearly evident in her work. Hope Foundation asked her to join the foundation as the assistant overseas director.

A turn in the road

In 2006, around the time her husband went to work abroad, Sarbani was walking down the road with Dr Narayanan to visit the Missionaries of Charity for a meeting. Walking along the road she noticed a vagabond eating from a bin right opposite the Missionaries of Charity (MoC) home. Sarbani said that she would have probably encountered this on the streets plenty of times, this time however it struck a chord, especially because the man was right outside the MoC building. "MoC distributes food and so what is the need for this person to eat out of a bin?" she posed this question to Narayanan. The doctor asked her to look at the man closely. It was obvious that he was mentally ill. Narayanan said that even if the MoC made special efforts to give him food he would probably not take it. His demeanour probably scared people from approaching him.

Sarbani's next question was: "What would happen to this person?" Narayanan told her that in a few days' time he would probably die of de-hydration and become an unclaimed body on the streets. A myriad emotions and questions swirled through Sarbani's mind. Was someone waiting for this man somewhere? Would someone be looking for him? Did he have a family? Who was he? Where did he come from?

She was transported back to her childhood when she had lost her mother - whom she had seen one last time before leaving for Delhi. Sarbani said, intellectually she knew that her mother was dead, but her mother had been alive when she saw her last. Deep in the recesses of her heart, she harboured this fantasy that her mother was out there somewhere and that Sarbani would meet her someday.

Sarbani realised that while many entities worked for a variety of causes, this population with severe mental illness seemed to have fallen through the cracks and was truly a group hidden in plain sight. She asked Narayanan if he as a psychiatrist did he not have an obligation to serve the mentally ill. Narayanan told her that he had always wanted to work with the homeless mentally ill, but it was difficult to connect with them and so he did not know how to go about it.

Sarbani was at Hope Foundation and was in the business of developing proposals for various programmes. She used this platform to develop a concept to work with the mentally ill and came up with a basic plan with Narayanan. Sarbani presented this to Maureen Forrest, the head of Hope Foundation, when they were together in Ireland. Maureen told Sarbani that mental health was not Hope Foundation's forte but because this proposal was coming from her, the foundation would honour it with a grant of Rs 10 lakh. The proposal Sarbani had written called for much larger amounts of money. They had acceptance but very little money. Sarbani said she was forced to go back to the design table and rethink the way she wanted to do this work.

Iswar Sankalpa -the genesis

In 2007, the work began. Sarbani and Narayanan recruited a group of young people and armed with the ward maps of Kolkata, they walked the streets looking for the homeless mentally ill people. On the ward maps, they marked where they spotted their targets. Narayanan walked the streets with them, training the youngsters to identify people with mental disorders. The group based themselves out of Narayanan's house. In March 2007, Iswar Sankalpa was registered.

In their initial survey around Kolkata, the IS team found 466 homeless people with a mental illness. The team realised that each of these people had an ecosystem that had resources and caretakers to sustain the person on the street. Since the team had a shoestring budget, they tried to understand the resources that were available and to channelise the same for collaborative care of those identified with mental illness.

During their initial foray they understood that homeless people with a mental illness fell into three categories. The first ones were those who had lived in an area for a long time, whom the neighbourhood knew and recognised. The second category was the restless ones who would not stay in an area - they were the ones most in need of hospitalisation. The third category was the homeless mentally ill with higher vulnerability such as younger women who needed a safe house or a shelter. Early on, IS came out with their resource map document that mapped all the services that were available to a homeless person such as meals distributed at dargahs and charitable organisations, etc.

IS built its network of doctors from whom they could get medicine samples and give the affected. They also developed an understanding with hospitals where they could take the patients for immediate care. In the early days, IS approached community clubs who helped them organise medical and service camps. These camps were no simple feat, beginning with the barber who refused to touch the homeless mentally ill person. Sarbani said that she realised that the barber symbolised society's perception of a person with severe mental illness. The barber said that he feared losing his clients if he served the vagabonds. He was also afraid of being attacked by the wild-looking human beings. These typified the myths about severe mental illness that generally exist in our social milieu.

IS worked systematically at breaking down the barriers. They offered the barber a different set of tools to use for their patients and said they would be around if anything untoward happened. Getting the barber to accept to provide service to the mentally ill was actually the beginning of social acceptance. Sarbani said that she realised the good intent a community harbours. People in the neighbourhood came forward to help in the medical camps. The miracle of touch is absolutely essential in alleviating stigma, said Sarbani. It is in these camps that the idea of caregivers originated - not by any systematic plan but through simple human interaction on the streets of the city in a problem-solving mode. The problem-solving mode just got refined over time. Not everything is in place even today, but the IS team learnt the nuts and bolts of what goes into serving the mentally ill people on the streets.

This was a path strewn with stones. The first one was when Hope Foundation's administration questioned Sarbani's dual role. She quit her job and spent all her time for IS. Narayanan also quit his consultancy job with a hospital and began giving more time to IS. On 31 March, 2008, Sarbani and Narayanan took up full-time work in IS. Dr Srikumar Mukherjee, a psychiatrist friend of Narayanan also joined IS.

In early April, Sarbani decided to take a break and went to a friend's place in Delhi when she got the news that Dr Narayanan had passed away. Sarbani said that her first response was shock and disbelief, but she soon got over it and went back to the dream they had envisioned together. She said that death could not win over her so easily now as it had when it took away her mother. She went alone to Ireland and UK for the trip they had planned together for fund raising and networking. Losing Narayanan at a critical juncture turned the dream into a mission. Sarbani said that she did not know whether it was an

intervention of fate or providence, Dr Narayanan's last message to her had the name Bhagirath Gop of Tata Trusts. Narayanan had been instrumental in Ratnaboli Ray start Anjali, a mental health rights organisation in Kolkata, which was funded by Tata Trusts. This was the contact Narayanan had passed on to Sarbani. Tata Trusts later went on to fund a large part of IS's work.

The early years - from 2007 to 2011 - were the most difficult years, full of struggle with very little funding. The team literally managed on shoestring budgets and spot-innovations to fulfill the needs of the people on the streets they worked with.

IS used to receive funds from Hope Foundation through Mukti, an organisation run by Narayanan's brother. After Narayanan's death, this was the first hurdle that IS faced. IS functioned from Narayanan's house. Mukti started creating various hurdles and also asked them to vacate the premises.

Dr Srikumar Mukherjee and Sarbani went to Hope Foundation and requested not to route the funds through Mukti for the next cycle. Srikumar is the treasurer of IS and still walks the streets of Kolkata offering treatment to the many the team reaches out to. In 2008 IS shifted to a new rented premises behind their old office in Narayanan's house. The premises continue to be the administrative office of IS today. Sarbani said she had too many memories associated with the locality and did not want to leave.

IS identifies those that inhabit the nowhere land and with the help of volunteers connects them to government facilities and arranges for their treatment. IS is a model that arose from the experience of the team and the realities of the people they were working with.

The year 2009 marked another turning point in the journey of IS. This was the year Adivasi died. During their outreach, the IS team had come across a young mentally ill girl who appeared to be a tribal. They brought her into the fold of the IS's program. The girl never did say what her name was and so everyone generally called her Adivasi. They found Adivasi a caregiver, who ran a roadside stall in the vicinity the young girl roamed. Adivasi started working at the stall, washing utensils. But the shop's customers reacted adversely to the homeless mentally ill girl cleaning the utensils they used. IS, along with the caregiver, held discussions with customer groups and awareness programs and things smoothed out. As days passed, the stall owner told IS that the environment was very unsafe for Adivasi at night. She slept in the stall at night, as the caretaker could not take her home. Sarbani was in the process of collecting funds to find an option for Adivasi, but it was not to be. Four or five days after the caretaker told IS, a call came in the early hours of the day informing Sarbani that Adivasi had been sexually assaulted by a group and that she had died. By the time Sarbani reached the area, the body had already been picked up by the police as an unknown corpse and the IS team never saw her again. Sarbani said that was the day she took an oath that no mentally ill woman in the care of IS would die on the streets again. She said that even today IS's corpus is a total of Rs 9 lakh. She had no idea how she would fulfill the promise she had made to herself. IS needed a safe space for its women and they needed

it yesterday. Who had space that would come with maintenance paid? That is when Sarbani turned to the government.

Within a week of Adivasi's death, Sarbani started her vigil with the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The then mayor, Bikash Bhattacharya, knew about IS's work. Sarbani asked him for a building space as a safe house and he laughed outright saying that it was not possible. Sarbani said, she kept telling whoever would listen that she needed a building. But she also kept going back to the mayor again and again. The mayor finally told her he could not give her a building but asked if she needed anything else. Sarbani said that the next thing on her high priority list popped out of her mouth - an ambulance. Ferrying people they found in absolutely horrific states on the street was a routine nightmare. No taxi would be willing to take a person in a bad condition and if they did the charges would be multiples of the normal fare.

Getting treatment at hospitals was a different issue altogether. If they took the person to psychiatry, they would be told to get the person physically treated first. The medical department would shunt them back to psychiatry. The mayor approached Mr Arjun Sen Gupta, an MP (Member of Parliament), who had sought the mayor's recommendation to utilise his MP fund. Sen Gupta agreed to give an ambulance but that it would be given to the corporation. Sarbani said it did not matter if IS's name was not on the ambulance. It only worked out in their favour that the ambulance was given to the corporation, as in cases of maintenance and repair. For example, when the axle broke, it involved huge repair. Sarbani took the ambulance to the corporation and they got it fixed for her.

The ambulance needed a driver and there was no money to pay salaries. Sarbani used her personal driver. He would drop her daughters at school in the morning and then be ready to drive the ambulance. For two years, Sarbani's husband Tridib Das Roy sponsored the driver and the ambulance was parked in her personal garage. The most important lesson was that assets came with many strings and IS had to think through properly before acquiring them.

The shelter was nowhere in sight, but the need for safe spaces was paramount. Sarbani said she went back to Narayanan's primary idea of a day-care centre. She did not want to rent anything because at that time it was unsustainable for IS. Sarbani had gone through a very traumatic experience with the police when Adivasi died. The police officer in charge had said, "You appear to be from a decent family. Don't you have your husband and children to look after? Stop getting involved with dirty people and go home." The police force was a significant stakeholder when it came to the homeless mentally ill and what better place than a police station to house a drop-in centre, thought Sarbani.

Sarbani approached the police commissioner for help. The commissioner heard her out and asked her why the police should get involved. Sarbani told him about the Mental Health Act of 1987 and pointed to section 25 which clearly states that the police are the guardians for the homeless mentally ill. She asked him for space in the police station premises and he agreed. IS's initial surveys had shown a larger presence of the homeless mentally ill in

Sealdah and Hastings. The commissioner was willing to give them multiple spaces but IS just chose Hastings and he issued the orders.

Executing the orders at the Hastings police station was another challenge. Willy-nilly the police station allotted the backyard. Hastings is a posh area and the residents around the police station took objection to the mentally ill people being seen there. A space was allocated near the officers' dining room and the officers took objection to eating in the vicinity of 'these' people brought from the streets. The police station finally allocated a separate room. But there was no washroom and they were not in a position to build one for an NGO. Sarbani was in touch with the deputy commissioner, a young person with whom she had a good rapport. While waiting to meet him, she observed many businessmen meeting the commissioner. Sarbani said she told the commissioner to ask one of them to build them a wash room and that is exactly what happened. The drop-in centre at Hastings police station is operational today and many street dwellers on treatment use the facility not just for the basic amenities but to take a break from the harsh realities of the street and rest a while so that their medications can work properly.

Meanwhile IS came into contact with Farhad Hakim or Bobbyda as he is popularly known. He was a councillor then and he suggested that Sarbani ask for the shelter in a plot in Chetla Haat Road which was lying vacant. Sarbani made an appeal and Bobby Hakim wrote 'highly recommended' on the appeal. The mayor and the councillor were from different political parties. The mayor kept the appeal and did not act on it. Sarbani slowly built up the pressure. She went to his office every day for two months and would sit outside without an appointment.

The Harsh Mandar affidavit had already happened in 2009 and supreme court had mandated providing night shelters. The mayor finally sanctioned the shelter in January 2010. The mayor wanted to inaugurate the shelter before his tenure came to an end on 25 April. The building was in shambles and the mayor put in an entire workforce to prepare the building for inauguration. Since the two power brokers were from different political backgrounds, the inauguration was fraught with tension. Sarbani however maintained that she would not enter the premises without both their blessings, which she eventually achieved.

The women's shelter called Sarbaricame into being. Bikash Bhattacharya, the mayor, used a lot of foresight and got the MoU with IS legally registered. Of course there were times when the team had to ask a gurudwara for help with monthly ration of rice, etc. Today Sarbari houses about 80 women at any given point of time. More than 200 women have been united with their families. Along the journey, various individuals, philanthropists and corporate houses have joined hands with IS and helped them take their work forward. Though Bobbyda helped IS start the shelter, IS had a stressful relationship with him and another event had to take place to set things right again.

President Kalam was finishing his first term and Ms Mamta Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal had just recommended his extension for another term. Sarbani got to know that Kalam was visiting. She caught hold of his email address and wrote a simple mail about their work. She did not expect a response in her wildest dreams. In two days' time, the president's secretary called her up to discuss the visit. The entire municipal corporation swung into action with the shelter being painted overnight. The press was informed and Bobbyda swung back into action with IS. The president made a personal contribution of Rs 1 lakh from the royalty he had received for his books. Ever since Bobby Hakim has always supported their efforts. He has facilitated opening of bank accounts for the homeless, getting ration cards, etc.

In 2012, Tata Trusts' Urban Mental Health Program (UMHP) was started. The UMHP was a natural progression for IS. The vicious cycle of poverty, mental illness and lack of access to services drive homelessness. IS began a systematic approach to reduce this vulnerability in the lower economic settlements in the city. UMHP is a population-based approach to provide care integrated with the public health system. It is functional in two wards of the city. In this journey, Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiatives, countless individuals, agencies and foundations have supported IS and Sarbani.

Sarbani has many dreams. She wants to set up an independent living facility for women who can never go back home. She wants a mainstream café run by people with a mental illness. The ideas go on and on. Over the years she has built a strong army of foot soldiers and professionals who work side by side to make IS a reality. But for Bholu, Kalu, Tapan Chameli, Laboni, Gunjan, Supriyo, Avishek, Swapan, Monorama, Gautam and all the others, Iswar Sankalp would not be a reality, she acknowledged.

About Sarbani Das Roy

- Through Iswar Sankalpa that Sarbani Das Roy founded in 2007, she has been helping homeless mentally ill from the underprivileged sections of society
- Runs Sarbari, a shelter for abandoned mentally ill women
- Has helped more than 200 mentally ill women unite with their families
- Identifies the homeless mentally ill, connects them with government institutions and gets them treated, while continuing to work on social acceptance
- Envisions a world without mental illness

Sarbani Das Roy

Iswar Sankalpa
138, S. P. Mukherjee Road
Kolkata
PIN: 700026

Phone: +91 33 24197451/52

Email: isankalpa@gmail.com

<http://isankalpa.org/>

Written by Tasneem Raja