

Annual Report on the work of the
Ali S. K. Memorial Society for the Children
for the year 2020-21

1. Introduction

The financial year 2020-21 was fully dominated by the Sars-CoV-2 Virus also known as the coronavirus and the pandemic caused by it. This pandemic which did not spare the *Ali S. K. Memorial Society for the Children* (ASKMSC) and its beneficiaries had a strong grip on everyone and everything throughout the year, but despite all the hardship it caused there was one event that made this year for us at least in some way memorable in a positive sense when in March'21 the last of our wards turned 18.

2. Activities

(i) General – In a financial year completely overshadowed by the pandemic and a prolonged lockdown the *Ali S. K. Memorial Society for the Children* had more beneficiaries than in the previous year. We financially supported a total number of up to 25 children and young adults in the past twelve months of which nine went to various schools, boards and classes while twelve went to different colleges. Three of these college students completed their studies with a bachelor degree within the year while nine enrolled newly for college. Also one was still to complete his computer training course which was also impacted badly by the lockdown. In addition to those doing educational courses or training we had to extend a helping hand and support to those of our former wards who fell on hard times due to the pandemic. Many of our already independent young adults lost their jobs and livelihoods and with it their savings and eventually could not pay their rents anymore. They therefore urgently needed our support again and on and off we assisted them not only financially, but also with food and shelter, groceries and/or guidance and advice when asked for. Particularly those of them who were stranded in and around Kolkata or somewhere in India after the sudden lockdown needed practical help to make it back to our home.

As a result of all this the initial expectation that the annual budget required for this past financial year might decrease even further in comparison to the previous financial years was not confirmed. It was previously thought that due to a further decrease in the number of dependent children and young adults and also to some extent because of the main renovation and repair work coming to end expenditure would go down significantly. So with the number of beneficiaries actually going up during the pandemic and also because many more than usual joined college last year it was unavoidable that costs increased instead. And it must be mentioned here that this high number of college admissions were in part also due to the pandemic, which caused a total collapse of the economy when everything

came to a halt during the lockdown. Hence it was considered to be a safer option to wait out the job crises while getting a college degree. In this situation it was particularly important that the financial support of our German partners remained stable and we are very grateful to them that they were able to keep up the level of their financial aid despite the pandemic.

Our 'Aftercare Unit' in Picnic Garden remained closed for more than six months because everyone had moved back to our home in Santoshpur where it was easier for us to provide for them during the lockdown. In September'20 the lockdown finally eased gradually and slowly came to an end. This was also the time when the central government adopted an amendment to the FCRA rules and made it amongst others mandatory for all NGOs to open a new FCRA account with the New Delhi Main Branch of the State Bank of India. Compliance with these new rules kept us busy for the rest of the year and will continue to do so in the coming financial year.

In October'20 we had a major outbreak of Covid 19 in our home when everyone had become a little careless after the lockdown had come to an end and once the virus had managed to enter our home it spread like wildfire. Fortunately nobody needed to be hospitalised and within a month it subsided. The assumption that after this outbreak of Covid 19 in our home probably everyone was immune to this virus for some time made it easier for us to decide not to cancel our annual 'Birthday' celebration on 19th November completely, but instead to have at least a small party amongst the inmates of our home. This helped a lot to lift the spirits a little after this absolute low point. Also in November most of our young adults moved back to our 'Aftercare Unit' or their own rented rooms again and things became quiet in our home after those crowded months before.

Due to the sheer endless lockdown and the backlog it caused in all fields everything got delayed and audit of our accounts was complete only by 16.12.20. In the AGM held thereafter the governing body of our society was rejuvenated when four former wards now in their mid-twenties joined the board after some long serving board members had decided to retire. We would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to those who got retired for their longstanding help and contribution and wish them well for their future. We would also like to welcome everyone new on the board and hope for a bright future for the ASKMSC.

Finally in the middle of February schools opened again after a gap of almost a year and those of our wards who were still in school eventually returned to their boarding schools hoping they could use the short time till the final exams to catch up with the syllabus.

And then in March'21 an absolute milestone was quietly achieved. Totally overshadowed by the pandemic and all the problems that came with it the last of our wards turned 18! From the 19th November 2000 till the end of 2006 when full capacity of our home was achieved a total of 41 destitute children had been admitted and had found a home and a family in

ASKMSC. The last of this first generation of children was now an adult and it was time for us to make plans now for the admission of a new generation of children in need. Here it fits quite well that the smaller repair work that was still pending mainly some plumbing work, fitting of new washbasins and some smaller painting work could be completed last year despite the adverse conditions and the difficulties to get materials and spares. We now still need to get new mattresses and bedding and do a little beautification here and there and we could theoretically take in children again if it wasn't for the license issue with the Directorate of Social Welfare which could again not be resolved last year. However our youth has formed a task force to finally sort this problem out in the coming year, so that there would be nothing in the way anymore to start with new children.

All in all this past financial year was characterised for most of us by being confined to our home in Santoshpur and the absence of things that we had been used to all those years, which meant no picnic, no excursion, no sports, no volunteers, etc. and it remains to be seen if the new financial year will be any better.

(ii) Problems faced by us – Throughout the past financial year the main problem for us and probably also for the rest of the world was the dreaded Sars-CoV-2 Virus and the pandemic situation that came with it. This had a huge impact on almost every aspect of the running of our organisation as well as the lives of our wards and staff. Apart from the medical threat it meant to the physical health and well-being and the mental pressure it put on all of us it also meant that many lost their jobs without being able to secure new ones and in this dire situation about eleven of our wards or former wards who were already independent were stranded in and around Kolkata and all over India in places such as Mumbai, Lucknow, Bangalore, Hyderabad and Delhi with no more income and no support. All of them needed urgent and practical help. This was one of the main problems caused by the sudden lockdown at the end of March'20 and remained so for almost the first half of the financial year. Some of them who were completely on their own tried desperately to get a little food and groceries while the police were enforcing the lockdown with bamboo sticks and threatened to beat them and the one who already had a family had to quarrel with his landlord everyday in order to not be sent out on the streets of Bangalore with his wife and three children when he was no more able to pay for the rent. With the total stop of all transportation there would have been also no way to somehow return to Kolkata for them.

We immediately set up a help fund of Rs 50,000/- in April'20 which we had to stock up by another 50,000/- in December'20 to help all of them who were stranded with no income. Further to this we tried our level best to help them return to Kolkata once the trains started to move again at the end of June'20 and accommodated them in our home in Santoshpur for those who needed shelter after a period of 14 days of quarantine in our

sickbay.

But not only the economy took a bad hit during and after the lockdown, also schools and colleges were closed for almost the entire year and when some of the schools and colleges started with online classes we tried to get a strong fibre optical internet connection to provide free and fast Wi-Fi to our wards. We also offered some of them work on our compound to give them the chance to earn some money while they could help us to complete some unfinished small repair work in the home. And even though colleges offered only online classes we decided to admit as many as possible in college in order to keep them busy during lockdown and to give them a chance to improve at least their level of education while they were forced to stay at home. We understood that this would probably increase our annual expenditure above the one of the previous year despite many savings in other fields due to the standstill, but we were sure that the benefits would definitely justify the extra costs.

As if these problems were not already enough yet another cyclone of category 5 hit us straight on in May'20. This so called Super Cyclonic Storm 'Amphan' caused us a lot of extra troubles to make our property 'cyclone-proof' in the middle of a strict lockdown and despite all our efforts some of the sheets of the fibreglass roof were blown off and an outside water pipe to the water tank on the roof was damaged by the coconut tree in the courtyard, but taking into account the huge damage the cyclone caused all around Kolkata and other parts of West Bengal and India we luckily faced only minor damage.

And then in September'20 the central government added to our burden when they came out with new rules in respect to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act. Amongst other things it became mandatory to open a new FCRA bank account with New Delhi Main Branch of State Bank of India. Also affidavits of all board members that they comply with all FCRA rules and regulations became now mandatory. Together with other new obligations such as the new re-registration under section 12A and 80G of the Income Tax Act it was felt that the timing for these new requirements was very unfortunate when most NGOs were struggling with the fallout of the worldwide pandemic.

In the course of the year it also became increasingly clear that the long-serving elderly board members would no longer stand for re-election. In these difficult and strenuous times they felt it was the right moment now to make room for a younger and enthusiastic generation and suggested a larger participation of the now adult former wards. After several meetings and discussions with our young adults it became fast clear that they were very much interested to help shape the future of our organisation and give support to more destitute children the way they had once benefited. It also turned out that a total of four young former wards were willing to take on a position on the board and so they were subsequently elected to the board at the annual general meeting in December '20. This new and rejuvenated board immediately took over and amongst other works submitted all the

necessary papers for the required new SBI bank account by end of the year and the same should be operational soon. It has also started the paperwork to sort out the longstanding license problem with the Directorate of Social Welfare and will apply for a new license as soon as possible.

(iii) Education – With the beginning of the pandemic and the closing of all schools and colleges in March'20 the country suffered from what could be easily termed 'The Great Educational Depression', in other words the past year was a complete disaster not only because of job loss and lack of employment opportunities, but also because of the huge impact it had on the students who were deprived of their daily studies and hence began to lose hope for their future, which could eventually lead to depression and mental disorders. So when educational institutions finally opened again in the middle of February'21 after closing for almost one year even those who normally did not like to go to school went with cheers and great enthusiasm if only for being able to see their friends again after a long gap.

As for us we had a total of six of our wards still enrolled in three different boarding schools last year. Those were Pearl Rosary School in Serampore, Himali Boarding School in Kurseong and Nimpith Ramkrishna Vidyabhavan in Nimpith. Another three were enrolled in the National Institute of Open Schooling, NIOS. In detail they were enrolled in the following schools and classes:

Pearl Rosary School

Class XII	2
Class XI	2

Himali Boarding School, Kurseong

Class XII	1
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Nimpith Ramkrishna Vidyabhavan

Class VIII	1
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National Institute of Open Schooling

Class XII	3
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Due to the school closure these students hardly attended any classes in school. Instead some of these schools, but not all of them offered online classes from June'20. There was also huge confusion about the board exams at the end of the previous school year. They were first postponed, rescheduled, again postponed and finally cancelled altogether. Instead

each board came up with a formula to calculate the final marks from earlier results on records. In the end another six of our wards have been awarded higher secondary pass certificates. Another two who had failed their class X board exams in one or two subjects in the year before were able to clear the same and were promoted to class XI this year. This means a total of 29 of our 41 wards have passed higher secondary exams by now and another 5 have passed at least class X board exams of which three are still trying for higher secondary. Only 7 out of 41 did not make it that far. This is a very good quota of which we can be proud!

With the economy down and job opportunities therefore hard to find we decided to send some more of our wards to college this year to sit out the crises while improving their educational status. For this reason a total of nine of our wards newly enrolled in different colleges, such as George College, iLEAD College and Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and they took courses such as Bachelor of Interior Design, Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Sport's Management and Bachelor of Tourism Studies. Also we had three more wards who finished their college graduation successfully in the past year and do have now a total of four graduates of whom two hold a Bachelor of Commerce and two a Bachelor of Sport's Management. And if this was not already enough to make us proud yet another of our young adults got ready to study abroad in the coming year after he had successfully applied for a Fulbright Scholarship to study in the USA. With the two of our wards who took up college in Germany he would now be the third from ASKMSC to study abroad.

Apart from school and college education quite a few of our wards had opted for foreign language courses with the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture at Golpark in the previous year for languages such as Japanese and Spanish, but these courses too stopped completely and are yet to be reopened in the future. And even though schools and colleges are open again since a few weeks it remains to be seen if they will stay open for long considering the ever faster increase in new Covid-19 case numbers at the end of this financial year.

(iv) Medical – The main medical issue of the year was of course the corona pandemic and the fear of a possible outbreak of Covid-19 in our home. With so many sheltered there it was not a question if it will happen, but when despite all the strict corona protocols and measures in place. The first of our wards tested positive for the coronavirus in July'20 after he had joined his work again in the bakery of another NGO. He had decided to move there in order not to put his brothers at risk by going in and out of our home every day. After he had tested positive he was immediately isolated there and luckily he remained asymptomatic and no further cases appeared.

In September'20 the government completely removed all lockdown conditions and after a month of Durga Puja and other festivals we were

sadly not so lucky anymore. At the end of October'20 one of our in-house staff tested positive after falling sick with strong headache, fever, loose motion, vomiting, weakness and body pain apart from flu like symptoms and he was immediately isolated in our sickbay. But unfortunately within a few days more inmates and staff got sick, some with similar symptoms some with milder complains and it was no more possible to contain the spread within the house. Fortunately nobody needed hospitalization and the majority did not show symptoms at all, but it is assumed that there were also many asymptomatic cases amongst our youth during this outbreak and maybe that was the reason that after this severe event no more additional cases were observed till the end of the financial year.

Interestingly as a side effect of the pandemic situation other health problems seemed to have come down to zero throughout the year particularly injuries related to sports since sports were limited to contactless fitness exercises. Visits to the nearby KPC Hospital were therefore rare, even after the OPD had opened again. As a result medical expenses dropped below 20% of those of the preceding year.

It is now hoped that the vaccination drive by the Indian government which commenced on 16th January 2021 will give us an opportunity to get our staff and our youth fully vaccinated in the coming financial year to reach some normality again.

(v) Sports and related Activities – With the beginning of the lockdown in March'20 contact or team sports were strictly banned in our home and outside activities were not possible for those who stayed in it. Instead one of our former wards who had been working as a fitness coach in Cult Fit Healthcare Pvt. Ltd. gave regular fitness lessons under strict observation of the social distancing rules. Lessons were held outdoors in the court yard of our home where everyone found a spot maintaining the required distance to the neighbours. This also helped to ease the pressure on the mind by the entire pandemic situation and all the restrictions that came with it and the feeling of being locked up.

Beyond personal fitness exercises and gymnastics for most of the year physical activities were not possible. Only by the end of the year things opened up a bit again and the first football matches outside the home were played with extra enthusiasm.

(vi) Leisure, Arts & Music – During a pandemic and particularly under total lockdown conditions one seems to have almost an endless amount of leisure time and with our home crowded again after a long time while at the same time social distancing norms were in place it became more important than ever for all and everyone to have some leisure activities to pass time on their own. So some of the boys started to draw again even though they had not done it for a long time, some did handicrafts, borrowed books from our well stocked library, listened to music with their earphones on or played online games such as Ludo or Soccer, etc. with

their brothers in other rooms of the home in order to maintain distance. If it was not already the case their smart phones became their best friends during these hard times. One could even talk with the brother next door by video call without having to get close!

Once the first corona wave was over and the strict lockdown lifted and particularly after the major corona outbreak in our home in October'20 one dared to do more activities together again while still wearing masks whenever necessary. Most of the time was spent gossiping in the courtyard after the monsoon had ended, but also old pastimes such as baking cakes and cookies in our oven, gardening or grooming our pets, helping with repair work, computer programming, music composing, etc. were now becoming popular again. Even football matches were watched together again by the end of the year, although outdoors on the rooftop terrace.

(vii) Birthday – Initially it was believed that our annual function on 19th November simply called 'Birthday' by all our children and young adults would sure have to be cancelled as it would not be possible to celebrate under pandemic conditions. But shortly before this date we had a major Covid-19 outbreak in our home where it was assumed that practically everyone has had the disease and it was therefore thought that it was at this moment at least safe to celebrate amongst the inmates and in-house staff without any outsiders or guests or in other words we decided for a little merriment within the same family after these dark days during the outbreak.

And therefore a small party was organized, birthday cakes were baked and delicious food prepared and everyone enjoyed a little, even though it could obviously not compensate for the real thing.

(viii) Meals – Despite some shortages during lockdown we tried our level best to continue with our time tested and nutritious weekly food and meal routine. We serve on three days per week egg curry for lunch or dinner, twice a week fish curry, once a week chicken curry and all other meals are served with a choice of vegetable curries and pulses with soybean flakes for additional protein intake. Vegetables vary as per the season, but there is always a well-balanced diet throughout the year. There are cereals with milk or butter toast with jelly for breakfast and the children get a 'school tiffin to go' to bridge the time until the main rice meal at lunch time. Everyday fruits are given during the afternoon break while there is another main rice meal with curries for dinner.

(ix) Excursions – Sadly the past year did not leave any chance for travel at all and even our annual picnic had to be cancelled due to the pandemic. This is very unfortunate particularly since we had plans in the past to organize more excursions again in the future! On top of that it can also not be said when such activities will be possible again, which makes it even

more depressing for all of us. We are therefore left with the memories of past excursions especially our last tour a camping trip to Hampi with our youth.

(x) Volunteers – Unfortunately all of our regular volunteers from abroad were no more able to come to support us due to the international flight ban imposed by the government of India from the middle of March’20 as a reaction to the worldwide pandemic. With the flight ban still in place by the end of the financial year only the initiator and co-founder of our organisation, respected Mr. Wolfgang Muller who was present when the lockdown started had been able to assist us as foreign volunteer during these hard times. In collaboration with his fund-raising organisation in Germany the “Aktion Lebenshilfe für Indiens Strassenkinder e.V.” he helped us to mitigate the huge impact the pandemic had on our NGO and our wards. But of course our wards themselves and our staff who were trapped in our home during the lockdown and also in the months thereafter helped wherever they could to ease the impact of this unfortunate situation. Whether it was fitness courses, gardening, cooking, beautification, repair and renovation work or administrative work someone always had time and motivation to extend a helping hand while keeping our corona protocol in mind. We would like to take the opportunity here to say special thanks to all and everyone who helped us get through the first year of this dreadful pandemic!

(xi) Aftercare Unit – For most of the year our Aftercare Unit in Picnic Garden remained empty since we had asked everyone to move back into our home in Santoshpur just before the lockdown began. Particularly through the first days, weeks and months of the lockdown it would not have been possible for us to supply groceries, cooking gas, etc. to them and besides our compound in Santoshpur allowed much more space for social distancing than the cramped space in our Aftercare Unit. Also with the beginning of online classes it became vital to have good internet facilities which were available only in our home. It was only by November’20 that a few had moved back again and only by the end of the year things slowly went back to normal.

3. Finances

During this first pandemic year it was more important than ever to have a stable and reliable financial support, particularly since many of our former wards needed help and support again! But when all countries of the world suffer badly at the same time and need huge funds themselves to cushion the impact this pandemic had and has on the people it could not be taken for granted that our longstanding German partner the “*Aktion Lebenshilfe für Indiens Strassenkinder e. V.*”, would still be able to provide the necessary funds for us particularly since our required budget for the year had gone up instead of down as initially expected. We were therefore very

blessed to still get sufficient financial support from “ali sk e.V.” who once again provided about 90% of the budget requirement of the ASKMSC for the year 2020-21 while the German organisation “H.E.L.G.O. e.V.” contributed the rest.

Their financial support became even more important since apart from these foreign contributions there have hardly been any local donations in the past year. Even the sponsored meals of earlier times did not take place during the pandemic. People were still kind though and helped out with donations of hand sanitizers and face masks and as every year there were also the annual membership fees of our members. But with no end in sight to these hard times it will be difficult to estimate what will be the budget requirement for the coming year and with such a dependence on foreign contribution it would also be vital for the survival of our organisation that the upcoming renewal of our registration under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act will be granted smoothly.

4. Outlook

It sure has become almost impossible to make predictions about the future, but it is our deeply felt hope that next year all our staff as well as our young adults can be fully vaccinated and we can return to some kind of normality again. A quick recovery from this utterly devastating economic situation will also be necessary to give our young adults a ray of hope for economic independence again. Further to this it is our strong wish that the in-classroom teaching that has just started again should not have to be stopped again if a further complete breakdown of education is to be avoided. In view of the strong increase in the number of infections at the end of this year, it unfortunately seems rather unlikely. But no matter how these things might pan out, it has to be our main goal in the coming year to take in destitute children again, because with many children having lost their parents to the deadly virus we feel that our help and our services might now be needed more than ever.