

NADIA SHIBPUR SAI SADGURU SAMITY



A young man on a leprosy awareness campaign in Shibpur village. Picture by Anil Biswas

No wall for graffiti, thanks to villagers

RABI BANERJEE

Nakashipara (Nadia), May 7: Election candidates in a Nadia village are left with no wall to write their graffiti.

Some village youths have taken it upon themselves to spread awareness about leprosy and written on all of them, asking villagers not to hate people afflicted with the disease or drive them away.

The campaign at Shibpur, 130km from Calcutta, was not born out of a conspiracy against political parties but the celebration of an old woman's getting cured.

A group of 20 had the woman secretly treated in a hospital for over a year, because she would have been thrown out of the village had her disease become known.

The silent war was won when doctors declared the 75-year-old Kamala Bala Joardar cured of leprosy last week.

Villagers were pleasantly surprised when the youths broke the news that Kamala had been suffering from leprosy but now she was cured.

Slogans like 'Kushtho ke

ghrina korben na (Don't hate leprosy) and 'Leprosy is curable, don't get scared' now adorn the walls of Shibpur.

The story of Kamala Bala has almost changed the way most residents of Shibpur looked at the disease.

Such is the popularity of the Good Samaritan youths that political parties are scared of replacing their graffiti.

"The walls of all pucca buildings have been captured. The issue is so sensitive that we cannot whitewash them to write our own," said Asit Sardar, the Trinamul Congress candidate for the village panchayat.

The CPM is distributing leaflets and hanging banners. "We are also going door-to-door," said Dinabandhu Mondal, the party's candidate.

The youths, mostly in their late 20s, had formed an NGO two years ago to fight superstition against polio vaccine, immunisation and witchcraft.

When Kamala first noticed a patch on her left leg in March 2007, her son Prabhat approached these youths. The NGO did not let anyone other than Prabhat know that she was su-

ffering from leprosy.

"We strictly told Prabhat to keep it a secret so that we could go ahead with the treatment without any hindrance," said Swapan Biswas, the secretary of the organisation.

They had a reason to do so. "Ten years ago, we saw villagers drive out a middle-aged woman afflicted with leprosy. She lived in a field outside the village until she died," said Shantigopal Mondal, a member of the organisation.

"Swapan, Sujoy Mondal, Tarit Pal, Shantigopal and their friends gave me Rs 5,000 for the treatment. I took ma to Krishnagar district hospital and got medicines every month," said Prabhat. "If it was not for them, I would have been ostracised by villagers."

District leprosy officer Prabir Ghosh Dastidar lauded the efforts of the Shantipur youths. "They have done a great job. They should keep up their awareness campaign."

There are about 250 leprosy patients in Nadia. "If the youth come forward in other places as well, it will be of great help," he added.

08 TH MAY 2008 KOLKATA

The Telegraph