



Suchana is a group of children and teachers working in rural West-Bengal. The group, which meets twice a week, offers an activity-based learning curriculum which aims to support and encourage those children who attend regular school, and provide an introduction to literacy to those who don't. Currently, forty-seven children participate. If you would like more information, please contact us at milwardbose@rediffmail.com

Our Curriculum:

Suchana is a culturally very mixed group, which emphasises equality – between boys and girls as well as between cultures - and cultural exchange. Our teaching takes place in three languages, according to need. We believe in education to support creativity, and hence emphasise art, craft, music and self-expression in our curriculum. We also emphasise local knowledge, and take care to focus on situations and information relevant and useful to rural children in India. We have been developing our activity-based learning methods, and do not use text books except as reference resources.

We divide our sessions into two parts, the first part in classes according to literacy level, and the second part all together.

To our pre and neo-literates, we teach

- Literacy through Santali;
- Literacy through Bengali;
- Basic numeracy;
- Songs, Dances, Rhymes.

To our literates, we teach

- Environmental and natural science;
- Village-based social science;
- English language;
- English literacy.

All together we enjoy

- Singing (in three languages) and music-making with rhythm work;
- Crafts – with an emphasis on local crafts and materials;
- Art – with lots of variety;
- Stories – from books, from memory, or even from the internet;
- Sports and games – including mixed cricket.



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Rehearsal for our 'show' ... "Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes"

Suchana is expanding! We now have 47 children participating, and more who want to join. The children come from a variety of communities, representing the local villages. We have Santal, Kora, Bihari, Bengali and Bengali/British children. We have a policy that adivasis (Santals and Koras) and girls will always each make up at least 50% of participants.

First, a sincere thank you to all of you who supported us by buying our greeting cards and / or making donations. We raised enough from the sale of the cards to run a no-frills programme for seven months - which is fantastic. Many thanks also to Bunty and Sue Ghosh who's generous donation means that we have been able to invest in books, teachers, and plan a 'school trip' to Kolkata Zoo.



We are very pleased to have recruited two new teachers: Somnath Dolui who is teaching Bengali literacy and Jhuma Gonrai who is assisting the environmental science and Bengali literacy teaching. Somnath is a qualified primary teacher who also has training in working with children who have dropped out of school. Jhuma, from one of our member villages, is an undergraduate in Political Science. They join Bhabini Baski, who teaches Santali literacy, music and dance, and Gopal Saha who teaches art and craft on a much welcomed voluntary basis.



We also want to thank Natalie Clarke for her wonderful work with us while she was here in Santiniketan as a volunteer from November to January. Natalie, qualified as a primary teacher and in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), was an inspiration to our programme and a major stimulus in taking the English Language teaching forward. We all learned from her wealth of ideas and enthusiasm. Please come back Natalie!



Suchana has a logo! Thanks very much to Eva Vogler who volunteered to design it for us. We think it looks great!

Since November 2004 we have been meeting twice a week - for four hours on Sunday mornings and three hours on Wednesday afternoons.



Annual Show

In January 2005 we held our annual 'show' for parents and other guests. The children performed a puppet show of the Santal creation story, in which an earthworm collects earth to build an island in the mass of water - Hihiri Pipiri. The children also sang, 'We shall overcome', in three languages, danced a Santal dance, recited poems and sang in Santali and Bengali, and did a masked performance in English.

Our links with local schools

Congratulations to Kasturi Roy, Joydeb Kora and Shibcharan Kora for graduating to secondary school this April. They will continue to join us on Sunday mornings for this year.

Many thanks to Tapash Majhi, teacher at the Kamalakantapur government primary school, for his continuing support for the Suchana project. Tapash runs a fine school with few resources. We think that Suchana's links with his school can be helpful to both organisations, and we look forward to many years of shared work.

Planning and Training

Tapash also assisted our first Curriculum Planning Workshop, held at the end of January, and attended by all the Suchana teachers. It was a great opportunity to exchange ideas on teaching methods and activities, assess the progress we have made, and think about where we aim to be in six months time.

quality of teaching and learning in some local schools is very poor. Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen's recent research on primary education in West Bengal found that 50 % of a sample of class III children were unable (or unwilling) to write their own names. This research in general found a great deal of enthusiasm for education, but various weaknesses in delivery. It also found that the most significant determinant of literacy levels amongst primary aged children was the existence of after-school private tuition arrangements. This is resulting in something of a two-tier system within government education: those whose families can afford private tuition succeed, while those whose families can't, don't (*The Pratchi Education Report, 2002*). This is particularly significant in a situation where a large percentage of children in state primary schools are first-generation literates, which means they cannot elicit 'free' help from home for writing-based tasks.

About half of the children who participate in Suchana's activities go to a school where they acquire solid literacy, thanks to the efforts of their teachers. The other half either do not go to school, or do not acquire there the skills they deserve. One of Suchana's objectives is to help fill some of the gaps by giving these children an alternative to 'private tuition', which their families cannot afford.

Health Initiative

We have just embarked on an important area of NEW WORK - health. A qualified homeopath, Satyanarayan Ray and a nurse, Leena Murmu, trained in herbal medicine and allopathic referrals will be visiting homes in one of the Suchana children's villages to elicit and discuss health issues and problems, provide basic medicines where appropriate, and help the village people access government health facilities. We hope eventually to expand this area of work to the other villages that Suchana works with. We would greatly appreciate your help in this effort.

More Christmas Cards!

We are already working on our 2005 Christmas Cards! So if you want to be really organised, contact Angela Stoddart at angela@cforstal.surfaid.org for design previews and delivery details, anytime from the end of May!

Suchana in context: Primary Education in Birbhum, West Bengal

Official figures for primary school enrolment in West Bengal suggest that 92 % of primary aged children are enrolled in school. Figures derived from whether children can read, - and therefore whether they actually attend school - suggest much lower rates, however: 69 % of boys and 61 % of girls. In Birbhum district, the rate is even lower at 57.5 %. There is a great deal of inequality amongst social groups, however. Literacy rates - suggestive of school attendance rates - amongst Scheduled Tribes (adivasis) are much lower.

In Birbhum, the literacy rate amongst Scheduled Tribe (adivasi) people aged 7 and up was 23.63 % of men and boys, and a woeful 5.63 % of women and girls. (West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004).

The good news is that school attendance rates and literacy rates amongst girls and boys are increasing, but there is obviously still a long way to go.

Teachers work under extremely difficult circumstances. In 2001, the teacher: student ratio in Birbhum was 1:46. Moreover, 1384 primary schools in West Bengal had no classrooms - never mind any other facilities. In 2003, 23% of primary schools had only one room to teach four classes in.

Under these circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that the

