

Suchana is a community group working in rural West Bengal, focusing on education and health. The Education Resource Centre grew out of the Early Learning Group which started in 2004. The resource centre is open 7 days a week, and aims to support literacy and make learning relevant, enjoyable and accessible to very marginalised children. Currently, about 160 children participate, facilitated by paid and volunteer teachers from within the community.

Our health project in six villages explores primary health in participatory ways and links villagers in with locally existing health services.

If you would like more information, please contact us at
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The Uttor Chandipur Community Society
**Supporting a rural community: creative solutions
to education and health**

Newsletter Issue 11, April 2010



The first computer course, December 2009

SUCHANA'S NEW AVATAR

This is a bigger newsletter for a much bigger programme! Suchana has spent the last six months settling into a brand new routine in our beautiful new building and gradually implementing the Resource Centre programme. The much anticipated new elements: separate pre-school sessions; tuitions for older children; a computer course; and a full time library and free study space, are now all going strong.

Bringing in the new has also meant assessing the old: figuring out what it is we are building on. Putting these new activities in place in quick succession has required that we find lots of spaces for reviewing past activities, objective setting for new ones, articulating the approach for each part of our work, and then ironing out the administrative details. So we have discussed and developed an understanding of early years educational development for the pre-school; we have liaised with the secondary school to orient how we go about tuitions supporting the curriculum there; we have thrashed out what we want the computer course to achieve - what this technology might mean for these children - and written the 30-lesson course syllabus; and we have trailed suitcases to Kolkata and Suri book fairs to seek out good resources for the library.

Our new full-time space has also given us opportunities to assess and revitalise our on-going work. The Early Learning Group (ELG), the original teaching-learning project for children in the age group 4-12, still runs on Wednesdays and Sundays - with a sports session on Fridays. There are now 115 children in the ELG: the oldest batch now attend tuitions and computer sessions instead. In particular, we have re-vamped the one-to-one 'remedial' work in the ELG, exploring the logic of new methods which we hope will bring our remaining struggling readers to take-off.

Update – Special Events

Apart from the new, regular activities, we have had a series of special events over the last few months.

Solar Eclipse

The first of these was a Saturday in January watching the partial (80%) solar eclipse. This was preceded by a flurry of activity getting hold of enough eclipse viewing glasses and other equipment. Our group of watchers caused a lot of interest, with many people stopping on the road to borrow the glasses and ask questions.

Book Release

On 26th January, Suchana released an alphabet primer in the Kora language, 'Allo Pora', written by Shanto Kora and beautifully illustrated by Gopal Saha, both Suchana teachers. As far as we know, this is the second ever book written in this language. This has been a very popular library read, and an invaluable teaching resource in the Early Learning Group.



'Allo Pora' and Shanto's award for the book

Sports day

30th January was sports day, complete with sack races, peashelling races, maths races, ring rolling, 3-legged, cartwheel, red pant races, and a cow drawing relay. At least 70 children won a prize – which we count as a success as we try to make sure as many as possible get a chance to shine!

The Annual Show

Our biggest yearly event on 22nd February, and the first at the new location, was (of course) the best ever! It included 16 acts in 3 hours that we had learned and practiced twice a week for 7 weeks. A wonderful mixture of cultures, youthful energy and co-operation, the show was watched by 400-500 locals and visitors from afar. Let us know if you'd like a copy of the video.

The Picnic

This was a fitting reward for all that hard work – 170 of us climbed into buses to enjoy a day of temple visits, games, great food and the lovely forest location.

Right to Education

India's Right to Education Act, which came into force on April 1 2010, gives all children between the ages 6 to 14 the right to 'free and compulsory' education, and is in many ways welcome. It offers some leverage to children who want to go to school but are sent to work - in the homestead or outside -, or pressurised to get married. And it puts pressure on both schools and parents to make basic education a realistic endeavour for all children. It makes schools, teachers and parents responsible not just for enrolment in school, but also for regular attendance.

However, the Act has some weaknesses, especially concerning the quality of education. If it is now compulsory for children to attend schools, then it is doubly important that what happens to them when they spend substantial amounts of time there is helpful, positive, enjoyable, and works to counter the social discrimination many of them face in the outside world. In schools like our local secondary school which still has no electricity, has 12 teachers for over 1000 students and classes of more than 100 in the year 5-8 section, this is a real challenge for teachers to achieve. Many people are working hard, but the task is genuinely enormous.

Mother Tongue Learning

One aspect of this weakness concerns first language learning. The Act merely states that children should be taught in their mother tongues 'where possible'. It fails to demand that anything be done to **make** first language learning possible.

This weakness is particularly serious for the large majority of Kora and Santal children at Suchana. Mother tongue-based teaching is crucial to enabling them to participate in learning according to their evolving capacities.

The Kora community has a completely oral tradition; there is no literature. In many areas of eastern India, Kora people now speak only Bengali or Oriya - the main languages of their states. In Suchana's area, most Kora people still speak Kora, but as more children go to school - which is only in Bengali - less children learn their mother tongue.

Suchana's alphabet primer in Kora, 'Allo Pora' (see previous page) is a small book, but publishing it was a big step for two reasons. First, it helps enormously with learning to read: for the first time, the first words that these children read are in a language they know well.

Second, it helps keep the Kora language alive by making early years education in this language realistic.

Suchana wants to gradually publish more books for children in both Kora and Santali. Please contact us if you can support us in this work.

The new programme

The main elements of the resource centre work were carefully planned, but when we started using the new building there remained some unknowns. We have been lucky that rather than just implementing programmes according to prescription, we have been in a position to assess, respond, and change tack where necessary.

The pre-school

The pre-school started off smaller than we intended because one of the local *anganwadis* (Government organised crèche and perinatal health programme) has begun to function well, and Suchana does not want to duplicate viable services. So the first 11 pre-school children were Santal children living outside the catchment for this *anganwadi*. Bhabini Baski, our pre-school teacher, has been doing lovely work with them, in a programme that supports cultural, social, physical, emotional and academic aspects of child development. Recently, we began offering a limited number of pre-school places to a Santal village - Bandlodanga - up until now beyond Suchana's working area, and about 13 more children have started attending.

The tuitions programme

This work began in October 2009, with text-book based study groups twice a week in the vulnerable subjects, Maths and English, for children in class 6 (age 11), and adding Life Science for classes 7 and 8 (age 12 and 13) of the government schools. These inputs have been very well received, and we were very pleased that the whole batch of students passed their annual school exams in February! The oldest children moved into class 9 with the new school year in March, so we have recently started more tuitions classes to cater to the new class 6 batch. And since the tuitions support has clearly had a positive impact, we have also extended the groups to class 5 students (age 10) - the first year of secondary school. So there are now 56 students taking tuitions.

The computer course

The Suchana Basic Skills Computer course, designed by teachers Sushanto Ghosh, Shanto Kora and Uma Gonrai with help from Rabia Khatoon from Uddami in Kolkata, began the first run in early December 2009 with 10 of the oldest Suchana children. The course is built on 30 two hour classes and a two hour practice session following each class, and was designed to cover basic office-type skills as well as a lot of work on how to use computers to access information and other educational resources. The children, of course, learned very fast! And we were very pleased that there was a 100% pass rate (with attendance and exam-based criteria). After a short process to adjust the course for younger children, the next batch started on April 8th.

The library

The library now has about 1800 books and a steady stream of free-time readers. We are particularly pleased that we now have around 30 books in Santali, as these are hard to find! It is really rewarding to see the Santal children for the first time in their lives reading stories in their own language.

As a result of full-time library supervision, children also come to the centre to do art work, to play board games (our very local version of 'Monopoly' - hand-made by Akash, age 11 - is particularly popular!), and sometimes just to play.

However, partly because we noticed that far fewer girls 'just come' to the centre than boys - because they are less free to decide what they want to do when - we decided to offer more 'structure' to this free learning model. And the result has been 20 weekly activity groups.

The new programme cont...

Activity Groups

The new activity groups are organised as 2-month mini-courses. Children were asked to sign up for those they were interested in and could make time for. They are built on a 'spread the skills you have' philosophy - so this has quickly become a space for the Suchana team to try out new things and also an opportunity to start something which has been discussed since Suchana's beginnings - inviting local people to teach crafts. Activities range from gymnastics and story-telling for small people, to bamboo craft, loom weaving, science activities, singing, knitting, art techniques, learning Kora drumming, and creative writing in Bangla and Kora. So far so good - if all goes well, we hope to take these activities further.



Learning weaving on a loom

Health Work

The important new addition to our health work has been starting a weekly clinic by a qualified doctor, Dr Sitaram. Suchana charges a nominal amount at the clinics and provides basic medicines. A health worker now attends the Sunday ELG session, to treat basic complaints and spend time teaching children how to stay clean and healthy. We also made a start with what we hope will be a series of health video showings, lead by a health worker and followed by discussion.

Organisational development

We now have monthly Committee Meetings of the 21-member community decision making body. New features of meetings include an open agenda to which everyone contributes items for discussion; a revolving chair; a regular system for displaying minutes; and (sometimes) excellent *singara* (samosas) to sustain us through the 2-3 hour sessions. This is hunger-inducing democracy.

What are Suchana's strengths? – Emerging themes

The new programme has given Suchana the opportunity to clarify and strengthen important features of its identity. In this, several cross-cutting themes have emerged – aspects of our work which teachers and outsiders recognise as our strengths, and which, we hope, make up the 'flavour' of our work. As identified in a review workshop, these include:

- carefully supporting inter-community exchange and understanding;
- celebration of all our cultures;
- promoting a love of learning and fun in education;
- prioritising the role of art and craft in education;
- promoting equality between communities and between boys and girls.



Watching the solar eclipse, January 2010

Without your help, Suchana would not exist. We would like to thank ...

Everyone who bought Christmas cards, and those who helped sell cards and craft goods: Kirsty and Catherine Reid and helpers at the Sheldwich PTA Fair; Poppy Thompson who ran a stall at a UNESCO Fair, Canterbury and helped at Herne Bay and Faversham Craft Fairs; Avril Waters who helped at many stalls and with transport; Alcha, Santiniketan; Canterbury WholeFoods and Presentimes in Faversham; Christmas Dress Show at Faversham, Friends of the Earth, Faversham; Anna Binnie-Dawson; Canterbury Methodist church Fair Trade Fair; Ruth Jones and her group at Canterbury College; Mrs Gush-Aits and students at Queen Elizabeth School, Faversham; Soraya Khan and St Stephens Infant School, Canterbury; Sarah Horwood and Mrs Lam at Sheldwich School; Sasha Shop and CIMA Gallery, Kolkata; Maura Hurley for lots of help in Kolkata; members of Faversham Fairtrade Steering Group and Jinee Patel who helped with stalls and are always supportive to Suchana.

Many people who gave us donations: Siobhan Wilson; Sue Kali; Mary Hurley; Chris Rickerd; Mimi Radhakrishnan; Laura Miller; Sherry and Sasha Nakanishi; Dr S.K Ghosh; Janet Way for help with healthcare work; Alison O'Connor; Jo Richards; The Eliza Shepherd Trust; Daphne Winter; Daphne Vivian-Neal; Michael and Petrina Slaytor; Ann Gunn; Mary Gray; Mary Travis, Drs Ghosh and Hindson; Mr Blackford; Ben and Anne Wright, all those from Throwley and district who gave money and bought cards; and all giving regular Standing Orders.

Everyone who donated materials to help the programme and Suchana members: Kwak Jai Gu for the big parcel of clothes, Manjusri and Somen Basu for winter quilts and clothes; Sumita Dutt and Kunal Sen for the laptops; Debashish Mitra for art materials; La Martiniere school, Kolkata, for clothes and books; and Lisa Knight's colleagues for two digital cameras for the photography course.

Everyone who helped us with skills and skills training: Alison Saracena, Rabia Khatoon and Carlos Mayans for help with the computers and computer course; Mary Byrne for dealing so patiently with our accounts and for helping with teaching; Ruchira Das for accounts training; Bryan for maths teaching skills development; Maura Hurley for help with facebook and continuing help raising funds through Mustard Seeds.

Everyone who held and attended fundraising events, including: Judith, Ross and Mark and all the Mere Friends of Suchana group; Wendy Denton who continues to make and sell cards for Suchana; Sheldwich Coffee morning; all those who came to the Throwley Lent lunch, and those who helped who helped to run the Mere Quiz and Pancake evening.

The 2010 Annual Show, February 22nd
Children sang songs in four languages, and mixed community groups performed Santal, Kora, 'Hindi', Bengali, and English Country Dance forms. Other groups performed short dramas in Kora, Bengali and English, and an exciting gymnastics display. New inputs included a Magic Show by the children and an information newsletter in Bengali.



Coming soon ...

Library extension work

Work on the final element of the new programme – making the library available more widely – has recently begun. It has been a little slow taking off because we realised that the success of the library so far has not simply been about realistic administration systems, but about nurturing in the children a love of stories and a desire to read freely, which is not so simple to achieve. Working with new groups of children needs proper focus and space that seemed unlikely with so many new things happening. But the moment has finally arrived and we hope to introduce the first batches of new children during the monsoon.

Kora CD

On the back of the exciting work on the Kora book, we have moved straight into another project supporting and celebrating Kora identity: bringing out a CD of traditional and new Kora songs. Suchana teacher, Rajeshwari Kora, has been practicing with her group of Suchana students and others, and we have brought in expert help from Suchana parent Bagho Kora, master *Madol* (drum) player and musician. If all goes smoothly, the group will be in the studios by the end of April. The CD was initially planned as a teaching resource in Suchana – to make it easier for all children to learn Kora songs. But preparing it has generated a lot of interest, and we hope to be able to sell it to music lovers elsewhere, as well as to Kora communities.

The challenges of staying in school

The new school year for government schools began in mid-March. This is a classic time for children – especially girls – to drop out of school, so Suchana's teachers were worried when three class 7 and 8 girls (age 12-13) stopped attending Suchana sessions.

Gentle enquiry revealed that they were going to work every day in the nearby brick kiln, carrying raw bricks to the kiln for firing. This is piece work, so the girls were able to do it just for a few days while the new school session got going. The rate is 80Rs (about £1.17) for 1000 bricks, weighing about 4000kg in total.

The girls were doing this work to earn money to buy their school books for the new year.

Until class 5, text books are free, provided by the government. After that, they have to be bought at a cost of between Rs 600 – 900 (£9-13) depending on the school year. There are schemes for poor families to get free books, but they are implemented late. If you rely on the scheme, you are likely to get your books only after 1/3 of the school year has passed.

One of the Suchana girls had worked for a week in the brick kiln, about 5-6 hours a day, and found at the end she had earned Rs. 90/- (£1.30). Another said she 'worked really hard and fast because she had to get the book money', and was paid Rs. 300/- (£4.40).

Even after carrying about 20,000kg of bricks, they still don't have nearly enough to buy the books.

Hot off the press!

Check out <http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSTRE63E0MH20100415> for an article on Suchana written by Jo Winterbottom, who visited us in December.

Suchana is now on Facebook as 'Suchana Community'. Do check out our wall where we have been posting updates of events and programmes since January. We hope you will be inspired to become a fan!

The lovely new website had some teething problems: in October it was rudely and seriously hacked. But it went back online in December and has lots of information about Suchana and its supporters:

www.suchana-community.org

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