



2005-2006

Activity Report June 2005 – March 2006

Suchana works in six villages in Birbhum, West Bengal: Uttor Chandipur, Khanjanpur; Hanuman Mandir, Kamalakantapur, Ringdanga and Aliabad. The population of these villages is culturally mixed, with more than 60% adivasis – both Konra and Santal.

Suchana started a very small programme for pre-school age children in January 2004 on an informal basis. In July 2004, the name 'Suchana' was given, and a teacher was employed to teach literacy through Santali to about 15 primary-aged children. In October 2004, 20 more children started attending on the recommendation of the teachers at the Kamalakantapur government primary school. By March 2005, when two more teachers were recruited, it was clear that a formal organisation was required, and would be welcomed as a community organisation in these villages. Suchana completed its registration as a Society under the West Bengal Societies Act, on June 23rd 2005. The organisation now has a 15 member Executive Committee, composed of 12 residents of the village and parents of children attending the Early Learning Group, and 3 members from other villages. The Executive Committee was decided by a group of about 70 interested parents and residents who attended two meetings for this purpose. It includes members from 5 of the 6 villages. 8 members are women, and 7 members are adivasi.

Since June, this Committee has met every two months to discuss the functioning of the ELG, decide strategies for admissions and new recruitment, and to develop a sense of priorities in education and health. Meetings are minuted.

The Early Learning Group

Suchana's education work formally became the Early Learning Group (ELG), which aims to facilitate underprivileged children, especially Santals, Konras and girls, in accessing quality education. The ELG meets twice a week on Sundays and Wednesdays. Numbers of children attending the ELG have risen over

the course of this period. In June 2005, there were 47. Four more children joined in September, and a further 15 in October, taking ELG numbers to 66 by March 2006. Sushanto Ghosh, a parent of two of the ELG children, volunteered to teach maths in the ELG and has been working with us since November 2005, bringing our teaching staff – a mixture of paid and voluntary contributions – to 6.

The ELG 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. 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.

Over the course of the year we have been developing our activity-based learning methods, in a series of teacher training and planning workshops. In one of these workshops, focused on activities for teaching literacy, Suchana was joined by 6 teachers participating in a pilot project for improving education delivery to Santal children in SSK schools.

Environmental science: We have been experimenting with growing a traditional variety of paddy organically. The children sowed the seeds and transplanted the seedlings themselves (with a little help), and continue to water and weed regularly.

Literacy: We have been thinking through ways of monitoring progress in literacy without relying on formal methods (e.g. tests and baseline assessment on admission) which are likely to alienate some of the less school-oriented children. It has been very rewarding to notice a general improvement in reading, writing, and in particular, interest in books. Many of the children are now really eager to read during our ‘free play’ session before classes start. And some of them are noticeably more able to complete and understand the stories. We have been helped in this by a range of good-quality stories in Bengali that we acquired from the National Book Trust.

Art and craft: We are very encouraged by the quality of art work many of the children are now producing. Although some of them were competent drawers when they started coming to Suchana, they had previously had little access to colour (crayons, paint) or even to paper. Thanks to Gopal Saha’s consistent guidance, we are now seeing some really colourful and interesting pieces of work.

Suchana has begun to run a small **library** for the ELG, so children can access and take home a variety of children's literature in Bangla and English.

In a new initiative, the ELG now meets for organised **sports and games** every Friday afternoon. A very competent sports teacher was employed for this purpose, and has begun teaching football and cricket in mixed-sex groups, as well as supervising local games.

Suchana deeply values its **relationships with parents** of the ELG children, and is developing ways to communicate openly and effectively with them. Some parents – and sometimes grandparents - of younger children accompany their children through ELG sessions, and we welcome this contribution. We have also held two parent's meetings of the course of the period. In the first, we were pleased to see that 55 of 66 children had at least one parent attend. Discussion was open and fruitful. In the second we requested parent's advice on how we could prepare for and best handle the new admission of 35 children expected in April 2006. Suggestions were helpful and constructive.

In a contribution to the running of the project, the children first designed a series of six printed greetings cards for local sale. They also prepared engaging pictures for 300 2006 calendars, which were sold at the local Saturday market, and through one craft shop in Santiniketan.

In February Suchana held two big events: the first was the annual **Educational tour and picnic**: all the children were taken to Rabindra Bhavan, the Rabindranath Tagore Museum in Santiniketan. This was followed by a picnic in a nearby mango orchard. The second was Suchana's **Annual Function**, for which the children had prepared songs in Bengali, Santali, English and Kora, and performed rhymes, a mime, and a short play in English. Class 3 children also prepared an Environmental Science Newsletter, which was distributed at the event. The show was very well attended, by approximately 300 parents and well wishers.

Health Work

In June, Suchana began an important new area of work: the Health Project. Two health workers have been employed to visit the villages twice a week - one is a qualified homeopath and the other has had extensive

training in Santal and herbal medicine, as well as primary health training under the guidance of a qualified allopathic doctor.

This team visits the villages twice a week to attend to minor illness, initiate health awareness ideas, and organise referrals to the hospital when necessary. The health team also arranges health camps, when doctors from the sub-divisional hospital are present to advise and prescribe. In November, 80 villagers attended an eye camp of this nature. The eye camp was followed up with help attending referrals at the hospital; with a refraction testing camp which offered eye testing at very low cost; and with 8 cataract operations at the sub-divisional hospital.

In November, the health team facilitated the access of a very sick baby whose mother had died shortly after its birth, to an organisation in Santiniketan which cares for sick and non-thriving children until they have put on weight and are healthy.

In March, the team attended a two day workshop on primary health held at Bishnubati village. Several young people from the village also attended.

Suchana has a small health library, where literate villagers can access resources and information on health and nutrition.