



Suchana is a community group working in rural West Bengal, focusing on education and health. The education project (the Early Learning Group) is a group of children and teachers which meets three times a week to participate in an activity-based learning curriculum aiming to support and encourage those children who attend regular school, and provide an introduction to literacy to those who don't. Currently, 148 children participate.

Our health project in the six Suchana villages, delivers primary health information in a participatory format and links villagers in with locally existing health services. If you would like more information, please contact us at [milward.bose@gmail.com](mailto:milward.bose@gmail.com)



# Suchana

Newsletter Issue 6, November 2007

## Christmas Cards

The children have excelled this year in producing six wonderful designs for our Christmas Cards.

The cards are available in packs of 6, one of each design, with a choice of inside greetings: 'With Best Wishes for Christmas'; 'Seasons Greetings' or blank. They cost £3.99 a pack.

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## Events update

It's been a long time since our last newsletter, for which, apologies. We may have been silent, but we have also been busy - hence this expanded newsletter. It just won't fit on two pages this time!

### The Early Learning Group

Our big annual event - the ELG Function - took place at the end of February. It was a wonderful culmination of a lot of hard work by children and teachers - a colourful and cheerful day with singing in Konra, Santali, Bengali and English, dramas by two class groups - including one which had boys cast as girls and girls as boys - poetry, rhymes, and a ribbon dance to 'Kumbayah'.



In April, 34 new children joined the ELG, bringing our numbers to 148. Most of these children were 4 year olds, so our pre-school section has dramatically expanded. To



'All Things Bright and Beautiful'



'Lighted Tree'



'Star of Wonder'



'Indian Elephant'



'Village Celebration'



'Glad Tidings of Great Joy'

## Land .... The key resource

Good news! Today Suchana signed an agreement and put a deposit on a 1/3 acre plot of land just beside the Santal village. While the registration process is not yet complete, this agreement makes it highly likely that it will be - by the middle of December. This is a real landmark for us. The organisation badly needs adequate teaching space - we have just completed another monsoon teaching on wet verandas and the driest patches of grass - as well as an institutional location. Arriving at this point has taken much longer, and been much more frustrating, than anyone was expecting (more details on p.3), but having got this far there is every chance we'll be properly housed soon.

With the site problem resolved, raising the remaining funds for the building is even more urgent! Any help you can give us through buying or selling Christmas cards - or in any other way - would be very much appreciated. Please contact [angela@cforstal.surfaid.org](mailto:angela@cforstal.surfaid.org) if you're in the UK, or [milward.bose@gmail.com](mailto:milward.bose@gmail.com) if you're in India.

cater to this, we had welcomed **Rajeshwari Konra** to our teaching staff in March. Rajeshwari comes from the *adivasi* village where many of the ELG children come from, and has been a great help with the pre-school classes, with one-to-one reading sessions, and with the flourishing library.

Starting in March, we began reviewing our **library** system, not least because, with more children, we had to figure out how to issue and process books more quickly. With the help of **Taposh Mondol**, a local librarian, we came up with an easy-to-implement issue and return system and a classification system involving colour shelves and coloured marks on the books which allows even 4 year olds to use the open-access system.

We have held two teachers' workshops and a parents' meeting to plan our changes, review methods and develop curricula. In June all the teachers also attended a 2 week **training programme** in Kolkata, run by the staff of Loreto Sealdah, well known for its alternative approach to teaching in low-resource environments. They returned full of great ideas to input into their teaching, and with lots of enthusiasm.

Suchana's relationship with the Kamalakantapur Primary School - which about half the ELG children attend - continues to flourish. **Taposh Majhi**, one of the teachers there, is now taking some of Suchana's English classes, as well as leading a self-study English circle for the Suchana teachers. Suchana is also paying the surplus for a dance teacher to go to the school once a week.

We are becoming old hands now at taking groups of ELG children on **local trips**, important partly for what can be gleaned from simple exposure to different activities and events, and partly for the freedom that comes with having a good sense of one's own environment. We took 2 classes to an exhibition of children's art work - including some of their own. This was an outcome of a series of workshop co-ordinated by **Eva Vogler** in conjunction with Suchana, the Kamalakantapur primary school, and two other local school organisations. In March, 3 classes walked to see festival events at the Santal *Bahar Porob* - the inspiration for one of our Christmas card designs. In August, 4 classes went to see *The Wizard of Oz* at the local cinema, and in September, 4 classes went to watch drama productions by children living in a nearby orphanage.

We have also had a number of much welcome **visits** from both nearby and far-flung friends and well-wishers. **Narissara Tantikumnoetkul** took and gave us a wonderful series of photographs of the ELG at work. **Saipin K. Hamdani** took an interview mainly on Suchana for the Thai *Image Magazine*. **Maura Hurley** and **Tad McNulty** have both helped out with impromptu teaching. And in September a **Korean Documentary Unit** filmed Suchana for part of a documentary on Santiniketan.



After all that picture taking, we thought each of the Suchana children should own at least one **photo of themselves**, so we took and printed one each over the year and gave them out as Puja gifts. Our Art teacher, Gopal Saha, had also run a beautiful project in which every child painted their own **school bag** in a wonderful display of colour and talent. These highly personalised cloth bags now carry library and exercise books to and from Suchana sessions, somewhat protecting them from incidental damage.

### Watch Suchana in Action

**Christian Wach**, who visited last December, has made a lovely 5-minute film of one Suchana ELG session, now posted on YouTube for all to see at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRYXsYuTstc>

Thank you Christian!

### Organisational development

Suchana as an organisation is evolving. We are taking steps to set up a Trust in the UK called **Friends of Suchana** to co-ordinate fundraising. This organisation will eventually be registered with the UK **Charities Commission**, and will be eligible for **Gift Aid** tax rebates on donations. **Angela Stoddart, Anna Binnie-Dawson, Robert Anderson** and **Susan Ghosh** have valiantly taken on the responsibilities of the first trustees.

Back in West Bengal, Suchana's 2007 AGM took the decision to improve representation of two villages by voting 4 new members onto the Executive Committee, and to replace 2 inactive members. Thus we welcomed **Joshna Khan, Kartik Konra, Makhan Ghosh, Santana Konra, Sushanto Ghosh**, and **Santo Kora** to our decision-making group, which now numbers 19.

### The Health Project

Our health workers Satya and Krishna continue to work hard to find practical routes to better health through both preventative and curative strategies.

Their **TB identification** process, involving three layers of screening, uncovered 2 TB cases which are now being treated via the government's DOT programme, as well as a number of chronic chest infections. It also brought to light a **leprosy** case in which the standard treatment had brought on skin lesions, so the treatment had been incomplete. Working with the hospital leprosy programme and a skin specialist, Satya found an alternative prescription, and the patient is now making good progress. The project has also been active in accessing a mixture of public and private treatment for a case of severe depression of an adolescent (who has now returned to school), and a case of **cerebral worms**. A doctor from Germany, **Monica Golembiewski**, visiting a neighbouring project, kindly did medical checks for a number of ELG children, which Satya and Krishna then followed up, and ran a **reproductive health** workshop at the local school for adolescent and newly married women.

In an initiative to find a low-cost way of addressing the widespread **anaemia**, Satya and Krishna systematically took BP readings, and prescribed iron and multi-vitamins to those with low readings and other symptoms. This process also uncovered a number of cases of high BP, which were initially treated with homeopathy and dietary advice in an ongoing monitored process.

Our **eye-care** work also continues: 4 pterigium operations were eventually performed at the subdivisional hospital, through Suchana's intervention. Our third eye-camp in coordination with the hospital ophthalmologist is scheduled for December.

In more process-oriented work, Leena - who is waiting for news of her new government posting - kindly continued to help out with a series of **ear-cleaning** workshops. The **first aid** now offered during Suchana sessions appears to be much appreciated by both children and parents. Our **nutrition** work in liaison with the Kamalakantapur primary school, has also made a good start, with Suchana paying for the ploughing, seeds, and a once-a-week gardener to help the school grow vegetables.

## Donations – and Thank Yous

Many of you have continued to help us generously with time, money and moral support. This time, we particularly want to thank **Frederique Lohier** who held a mini music festival in his house and sent the proceeds to Suchana; to the newly-inaugurated '**Association AmbouduMonde**' in France; to **Norman Heindson** and **Chandra Ghosh** who have helped us with our planned health infrastructure; and to **Walthamstow Academy** who raised funds with non-uniform days and other events. We depend on individual initiatives like these, and we are, truly, grateful.

### Suchana in Context: So why has it taken so long to buy land?

Globalisation processes have turned the heat on land issues in West Bengal recently, as evident in the deep conflicts emerging in Nandigram and Singur, where the State Government has been trying to acquire land for multinational industry. The conflict is essentially about who should bear the risks involved in the transition from an agriculture-driven to an industry- and-service driven economy: the Government, the multinationals, or the people who happen to be in the way? When small farmers lose their land – by force or by voluntary sale – they lose their most substantial asset. In a context of unreliable financial markets, they also lose their most secure savings mechanism or investment. And they lose the source of their customary livelihoods or means of production. Significantly, they also lose their tangible ties to a culture deeply engaged with and defined by agriculture – marked by festivals and food, but strongly shaped on a day to day level by planting and harvesting cycles; by seasons; and by cultural references which deify rice.

And what might they gain? They gain ready cash, which might be reinvested in land or property elsewhere, required for health care, or put into less straightforward investment strategies such as dowry or education. Education remains somewhat risky because of the particularities of local labour markets, and weak quality regulation in both the public and private education sectors.

Nevertheless, they might, if they already have a child in the right place in the education system, gain an industrial job for someone in the family, which may eventually serve to raise the social status of the whole family. They might be able to survive via the increased demand for informal services likely to be generated by a large industrial enterprise: transport; cooked food; small shops. But all of these options are uncertain, and depend on a variety of unknown factors. Sometimes people also make bad choices. It may well seem safer to keep hold of that land, which can guarantee at least that there is rice in the store.

Some of this heat can perhaps be felt in the Bolpur-Santiniketan area. Bolpur is a busy and growing rural market town, where the signs of India's economic changes are certainly visible: there are new, bigger shops selling ready-made clothes; there are Chinese gift products like clocks and key rings; in a few shops there are packaged food products from East Asia. In many, there are consumer durables such as TVs and VCD players.

Santiniketan's local economy, meanwhile, is influenced

by a different set of issues around the wider economic changes. Primarily, its status as a key source of West Bengal's cultural heritage in the form of Rabindranath Tagore and his institutions, combined with its strong links to Kolkata via Tagore's University, Vishwa Bharati, make it a hot spot for 'economic overspill' from Kolkata's prosperous classes. This mainly takes the form of investments in land and/or property: sometimes land is made productive; often a rarely-visited second home is built on it; sometimes it is left just as is it. Whichever the case, land in and around Santiniketan is seen as a safe form of saving, and this confidence is self-fulfilling as it constantly and rapidly pushes land prices upwards. Local people have in general benefited little from this, except where they own land and need cash.

But what does all this have to do with Suchana's efforts to find a very local site on which to develop its work? First, these new economic processes are overlaid onto older economic systems in ways that seem to have 'clouded' land markets for everybody. There is currently a great deal of nervousness around land transactions, often with good reason.

Land markets have perhaps never been very clear: older processes influencing the scene include that formal registration of inherited land is often not undertaken because it will attract tax as well as leg work, and local knowledge is usually enough to regulate who gets to use what land. Santal or *adivasi* land is protected by specific laws to limit transfers, which are nevertheless often unscrupulously manipulated. As a result of these, 'clean' land – with up-to-date paperwork and tax receipts – has been, by tradition, hard to locate.

Add to this 'land sharks' moving in to make speculative investments amidst rising prices, and the waters begin to look really muddy. Suchana spent at least 4 months each following up 2 promising plots. The first was part of a larger area which had recently been bought by an agent – a 'shark' – who went incommunicado shortly after promising to get the papers in order. The second was a plot owned by a Bolpur family apparently keen to sell, but who were eventually unable or unwilling to get the one out-of-town brother with ownership claims to the drawing board to sign an agreement. We have little idea what went wrong in either of these cases – like the owners, perhaps, we can only speculate.

Our third attempt, however, does look genuinely hopeful. It is a direct 'no sharks' transaction with the landowners who all live in the village and have signed an agreement. The papers are pretty much in order, so there's not much leg work to do. Here's crossing our fingers.

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