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## EDUCATION

WITH THE last coaching centre closed down - a rite of passage – our educational work with children thus year centred on pre-primary and primary schools, the former funded almost entirely by CRY (Child Relief and You) and the latter run by the Central Government as part of its “Non Formal Education 2000” programme.

All live old villages continued with their pre-primary schools and seven new villages started theirs. We give the attendance and allied figures separately for the two.

First, the old villages:

	Fat	Baj	And	Cha	Kol	TOTAL
No. of students	55	33	40	45	44	217
No. of boys	23	15	18	25	24	105
No. of girls	32	18	22	20	20	112
Average daily attendance (%)	78	72	70	85	73	76

attendance (%)

No. of working days	234	236	238	239	256	241(av)
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days

Fat is for Fatullyapur, Baj for Bajitpur And for Andharmanik , Cho for Chandalati, and Kol for Kolsur.

Then the new villages

	Gok	Pun	Bho	Dweep	Rud	Bag	Bel	TOTAL
No. of students	40	20	32	33	34	25	40	224
No. of boys	20	11	12	10	16	10	24	103
No. of girls	20	9	20	23	18	15	16	121
Average daily attendance (%)	81	63	76	76	65	73	76	73

attendance (%)

No. of working

Days	257	255	252	254	241	248	232	248(av)
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Gok is for Gokulpur, Pun for Punra, Bho for Bhojpara, Dweep for Dweep Media, Rud for Rudrapur, Bag for Bagjola, Bel for Beliyakhali.

Girls outnumber boys almost everywhere but we cannot say if this has any social or economic significance. The number of students could have been greater at a few of these places, particularly at Bajitpur, but we had problems of space. The number of working days also varied, ranging between 234 and 257, because of a number of factors. Local considerations sometimes made for longer vacations, at some; places the “class room” became unusable

when it rained hard. But we must overcome these.

The supervisor of our pre-primary programme, joined by local teachers and sometimes along with other Swanirvar star, met guardians regularly. There were 21 such meetings in the old villages, with an average of 25 guardians present, and in the 41 such meetings in the old villages, the average guardian attendance was 22. That the parents came at all is an indication of our success in involving them in their children's welfare, but mere presence is no guarantee of active participation. For various social reasons, many parents do not open their mouth in such meetings, particularly mothers, and there are of course those who feel shy about sitting at a meeting with, unfamiliar male faces around. To interact with them, our teachers or the supervisor regularly makes home visits. Altogether 845 such visits were made in the old villages and 1148 in the new. These discussions with mothers where they feel uninhibited led to easy solutions to various problems pertaining to individual children, to steady rapport with guardians and to increased fees collection.

The local organizations decide on how much fees will be charged and on what basis, so the collection varies from school to school. Rs 6786 was collected this year in the old villages and Rs 9910 in the new. Bajitpur, Kolsur, Dweep Media and Gokulpur lag behind the others but since even the pittance that we charge is too much for many families we do not really put any pressure on them. The money is not spent, and is kept in a bank in the name of the local organization for possible use when funding will cease.

The obvious reasons why guardians welcome our staff and are also willing to pay the token fees is that they have realised that our method and system both benefit the children generally and particularly when they have to compete with others for admission to the State-run primary schools. (In the villages where we run primary schools ourselves the children from these pre-primary centres do not have to go to a State-run primary school.) Without competent and dedicated teachers our success would not be possible at all. To provide the first we arrange for trainings when any teacher is first appointed, and then, to keep self-complacency at bay we send them for regular refresher trainings. Dedication is as hard to acquire as it is to impart, but so far we have been reasonably fortunate in our choice of teachers, give or take the odd grey sheep.

There were five workshops this year for pre-primary teachers, with an average participation of 11. Four teachers from the new villages and three from the old underwent a two-phase training conducted by Vikramshila in Calcutta. As a form of on-the-job training we arrange group visits where teachers from various schools visit one school to watch and observe and then compare

notes. Four such visits were made in the old villages and two in the new, with an average of 8 and 12 teachers respectively forming the group of visitors.

We hold a meeting every month separately with teachers from the old and the new schools. Here the supervisors discuss and evaluate the monthly reports, make lesson plans for the coming weeks, decide on the teaching aids to be used and made, and solve problems that might crop up. Attendance is compulsory and few, if any, fail to come.

To expose them to conditions elsewhere as also to hone their skills by watching other methods of teaching, we organized two visits to schools in distant areas. In one, 12 teachers from the new villages accompanied the supervisor to an NGO in South 24 Parganas and in the other, 8 teachers from the old schools and the supervisor went to an NGO in Orissa.

Apart from the monthly meetings, the supervisor keeps himself informed about the problems and progress, of both teachers and children, by making regular personal visits. During the year he made 1114 visits to the old schools and 69 to the new.

We have not been able to get hold of a doctor to run regular health check-ups of children in tile schools, but our health workers and the teachers do form a team to examine every child for personal hygiene and basic health indices. This year 33 such check-ups were conducted in die old schools, and 24 in the new. The second number is low because most of these villages do not have health workers.

These schools are all bookless, and teaching is through the Montessori method, adapted to local conditions. We do provide children with some games and toys and they also learn songs and action recitation. Their repertoire in these last two is quite extensive and while musical purists play not he thrilled with their rendering, we never cease to marvel at tile enthusiasm and joy which these small children, battling with monstrous deprivation all around them, bring to their singing and learning, too. Maybe structural inequity is not as invincible as the doomsayers would have us believe.

The Human Resource Development Ministry of the Government of India chose 50 NGOs spread over the country to run a few primary schools each under its innovative and experimental scheme called Non Formal Education 2000. The Calcutta-based educational resource organization Vikram shila- to call it by its short name - which is responsible for training our teachers and helping us produce educational aids and such things, was allotted 10 such

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schools and we are responsible for three of these. The Government stipulates that every class should have 25 students. We had three schools with classes I and 11, so should have had 150 children and did have exactly that. Fatullyapur had 51 children (28 boys and 33 girls). Chandalati 49 (27 and 22), and Andharmanik 51 (26 and 24).

At Fatullyapur the average daily attendance was 90.3%, at Chandalati 91.8%, and at Andharmanik it was 84.5% making for an average of 88.9%. The figure would have been higher if a number of families at Andharmanik did not have to move with their children during the transplanting and harvesting seasons to distant districts. A migrant labourer's child has inbuilt hurdles to acquiring first-generation education.

One major reason why most rural primary schools perform so desultorily is that there is no interaction between guardians and teachers. We would like to work in a radically different manner. Every parent, including the illiterate, has an obligation and also the right to know how their child is doing at school and also what the school is doing to the child. Thus we hold regular meetings with guardians. Altogether there were 18 such meetings in the three villages with an average of 29 guardians present at each. The most common subjects that are discussed at these meetings are the child's attendance, his progress, health and conduct. It is heartening that mothers far outnumber fathers at these meetings.

As we have said before home visits must supplement these guardians meetings. A mother would be far more articulate about her child in the security of her own home than where other parents are present. Our teachers and/or the supervisor made 559 home visits in the three villages during the year and these were of great help in solving problems, ironing out misconceptions, and developing trust. Also the child's profile takes shape in the teacher's mind after such feedbacks from home. These visits are good for collecting fees from the defaulters. This year we collected Rs 4200 at Fatullyapur, Rs 5863 at Chandalati, and Rs 1255 at Andharmanik.

The schools had three teachers for two classes, and they worked on an average for 244 days a year, compared to the Government primary schools' 229. We have continued with our practice of sending new teachers for initial training and old ones for refresher courses. We thank Vikramshila for acting as the resource organization for these courses. Seven teachers went for a two-phase training, and four teachers and the supervisor took another two-phase course. There were three workshops at Swanirvar, with all nine teachers attending, to decide on and to make teaching materials, aids, work cards, work sheets, picture cards. After these central

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workshops teachers at every school meet among themselves at regular intervals to discuss problems peculiar to their school, and to make materials they will need. The Fatullyapur teachers held 30 such meetings and the corresponding figures for Chandalati and Andharmanik are 28 and 18.

Every month all the teachers and the supervisor meet at Swanirvar for a day-long meeting to review the previous month's progress, and to plan for the next month, and to discuss everything pertaining to the school, the children and their work. Once a year teachers of two schools visit the third school in a group. After watching proceedings for 2 1/2-3 hours they discuss their impressions with the local teachers and the session of constructive criticism that follows has always proved to be very productive. Besides these internal exchanges of experiences and impressions, our teachers went to reasonably distant places to expand their horizon. Eleven teachers visited a school in Midnapur and two teachers and the organizer went to Orissa. Since we do not wish our teachers' work for the village to be confined to the schools only, they took this opportunity to see how those two NGOs worked in other fields also. We in our turn played host to 13 teachers and the secretary of a South 24 Parganas NGO.

The supervisor visited the Fatullyapur school 42 times, the Chandalati school 27 times, and the Andharmanik school 33 times in the course of the working year. He checks on attendance, of both teachers and students, on-the use of materials, on the proper use of lesson plans, and tries to solve any problem about the students or teaching that may be brought to his notice. If necessary he will place the problem before Swanirvar or Vikramshila. Such scrupulous watchfulness and purposeful cooperation is what ensures that our teachers give of their best. There are certain problems that have defied any general solution. The most important of these is the presence in every class of every school of a number of children whose performance is markedly and consistently worse than that of the class average. There can be so many reasons behind every child's failure to live up to our expectations. They may be dyslexic, they may be psychologically or cerebrally impaired, they may be late bloomers, their home conditions may be regressive. The possibilities are numerous, but we do not have the resources to make individual diagnoses and take remedial measures. Nor do we have the heart to tell these children or their parents that the rest of the class suffers because of them.

Education is an essential tool to combat the masses' accommodation to their permanent state of deprivation, to motivate them to escape the equilibrium of poverty. But things are more complex than such generalisations, especially in India on the brink of the 21st century. Education

should destroy that accommodation, but is unlikely to offer every single beneficiary here an alternative. The absence of aspiration, the refusal to struggle against the almost impossible, the preferring of acquiescence to frustration is not a question of "They do not even try", not a weakness of character, but, rather, a profoundly rational response, bolstered by instructions of religion. We thus did not see our education project as one linked with economic betterment, solely or primarily. We wanted to give children the scope to realise their latent creative urges, and also to inculcate a sense of values. As part of this we wished to revive local cultural traditions, not using "local" in any parochial sense.

Towards this end we observe various secular "days" in our schools, to celebrate the birthday of notable personalities, days of national historical importance, and modern acquisitions like Children's Day or Teachers' Day. This year 12 such days were observed in the schools, with parents and local people attending in large numbers to encourage the children.

Among the cultural activities the children have access to are Bratachari, puppetry, yoga, athletic dances, exercises with very light equipment, music, recitation, etc. Organized games might be a good addition, but none of our three schools has land of their own that can be used as a football field.

We receive a number of visitors and enquiries from neighbouring areas and so decided to hold two exhibitions, at Kolsur and Fatullyapur, on what exactly we are trying to do and how. In both places a number of teachers from the local Government high and primary schools came, had a close look at our teaching aids and other educational material, and talked to our children before sitting down for a long exchange of ideas with us. Maybe we presume, but our feeling is that they were impressed favourably by our efforts and methods. As a matter of fact, some of our teachers have been approached by their counterparts in the local schools to apply some of our methods to the traditional learners.

These extra curricular activities have now become such an important part of our work that we now have one c4' our members working full time to supervise this section. We feel we should give a few more details about some of the observances in our schools. On Independence Day, the national flag was hoisted at all the schools, the children performed some physical exercises, paraded through areas of the village, sang songs suitable to the occasion. Altogether 1100 children were involved. On Children's Day, speakers talked about Jawaharlal Nehru (whose birthday has been so recognized), and about the role and rights of children, and the children themselves sang and danced, and showed their skills in various disciplines.

# A N N U A L

village andharmanik, north 24 parganas, west bengal - 743 401, india.

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Altogether 1775 children in four villages had a good time, and an educative day. As we have already said there have been other such Days, when similar arrangements were made. The children may be too small to understand the import of some of these occasions, but it is never too early to impart the feeling that independence is something to be treasured, to be felt and valued even if its ramifications are not clearly understood.

As in other years, the children were invited to many places to perform plays or to present a puppetry show, or just to give a display of Bratachari or other mass exercise. On 44 occasions in 25 villages shows were put up, and in some cases there was more than one performance. Since all our programmes have some message in the entertainment, the children served a two-fold purpose.