

1

**EDUCATION: Pre-primary**

OUR 15 pre-primary schools in as many villages had 982 children, 479 boys and 503 girls. On an average each worked for 221 days, which is much lower than usual, but in many villages a substantial number of the children had had their homes damaged or totally destroyed and in some our school itself was being used as a living place for the homeless. The frequency of the supervisor's visits also came down, but the floods were only one reason for this. We have to place more faith in the teachers' commitment and competence if our model is to be viable in a wider context. Also, we wish to move beyond just running a few schools of our own and our supervisors are now spending much of their time liaising with Government and panchayat officials to devise ways to get the wider community more involved in all schools in any given area. In our own schools there were 55 parents-teachers formal meetings, with an average attendance figure of 31. The teachers made 4472 visits to the children's homes to discuss individual problems with guardians.

The teachers had their yearly planning workshop, and their monthly meetings. There were also four group visits. We had decided to hold a 2-phase, 15-day training session for teachers from other organizations and schools who wanted more familiarity with our methods. In the first there were 18 persons, among them two of our own teachers who had started work later than their colleagues and so had received less training than them. The second phase could not be held because of the floods.

This year we almost completed work on three school buildings - at Matia, Uttar Media, and Rudrapur - with money sent by Friends of Swanirvar but even though they have been consistently generous quite a few of our schools do not yet have brick buildings and only six have toilet facilities. On his annual visit this year, the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Friends of Swanirvar devoted considerable time to this and promised all help.

The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) has begun to be extended to some of our work villages. We feared our enrolment figures will come down because the schools under this scheme provide food to the children and we do not have the monetary resources to match this. The advantage has certainly and justly drawn some parents to choose the ICDS centres but the very clear superiority of our teaching methods has kept our support base largely intact. However, we do not at all see this as a matter for competition or comparison. Food for the children is a very important component of the education-for-all concept, so we wish the ICDS to prosper. We are ready to share our teaching-learning methodology with its workers so that the children benefit in both ways.

CRY continued to support this programme financially and with other inputs. Its representatives kept in close and regular touch with what we were doing. In June, six CRY partners from Uttar Pradesh came to visit our schools.

**EDUCATION: Primary**

OUR three primary schools - at Fatullyapur, Chandalati, and Andharmanik - had altogether 475 students in their classes I to IV, 232 of them boys and 243 girls. The average number of working days for a student was 224, a figure which would have been considerably higher but for the floodwaters. For the teachers however, this figure was 243 as they often work on Sundays on their nonteaching chores so that the children get all their time on school days. Taken together the parents and teachers of the three schools met on 8 occasions, with a total attendance of 480. The teachers and the supervisor made 2172 home visits which means every student's individual problems were discussed with his guardians five times a year on an average. We spent Rs 1,44,481 on giving the children something to eat during school hours. The building at Andharmanik now has two storeys, thanks to the Friends of Swanirvar, though neither they nor we could have guessed that almost the first use of the first floor would be to give shelter to about 250 flood-marooned persons. The ground floor was under water.

The teachers held their monthly meetings and central workshops as usual, and each school received six group visits. Representatives from the funding agencies and other people who had heard of our experiments visited one or more of our schools on 33 occasions. The head of the department of Initial Teacher Education at University College, Worcester came from England to spend seven days with us, four of them in the villages, watching and talking to the teachers and students in and outside class, and discussing ways in which our methods and ideas could reach more people.

We continue with our efforts to take the children away from and beyond their text books, to see, find out, and judge for themselves. Thus, students of Class III were asked to work on the area's festivals and dresses on their own, with guidance from the teachers and help from the family. This forms a chapter of their Geography text but they now know much more about their local scene than any book at that level can hope to tell. Similarly when the Class IV children were studying "industry" they were taken to a local manufacturing centre to find out about what a unit needs in terms of labour, raw material, transport and marketing facilities etc.

All material that they gather is then expressed through charts. In nature studies, the text books mention an experiment, and then proceed to narrate in full detail what is to be, and is, observed, and also the findings. What we do is not the perfect way, but it should certainly be more rewarding for the children than having nothing to observe or discover by themselves. We ask them to conduct the experiment much before they come to that chapter in the book and when we do come there we just ask them to recall what they learnt and noted down.

During a study trip to Santiniketan our teachers were impressed by a Sahitya Sabha organized by the secondary school children there. After some planning such an evening was arranged at

3

Chandalati when our primary school children, those who have passed out from there, members of the Kishor Kishori Bahini and some local senior school students read out stuff they had written, acted out small plays they had got together, recited poems usually of their own. The creativity was infectious and the whole thing was enlivened by the very confident way in which the children themselves conducted the "meeting".

We have already mentioned the parents-teachers meetings, which are usually held at each school once every three months. These are somewhat formal affairs, and we place equal value on the visits we receive from individual parents at school. They watch their children at work, in or outside class, and then discuss with the teachers how better results can be obtained. A rough survey reveals that almost 80% of parents paid at least one visit to a school to see for themselves the progress and conduct of their child, which they would discuss when the teachers visited their house.

A welcome offshoot of this was that on quite a few occasions, and for quite longish periods also, we had parents, particularly mothers, volunteering to help us in the school. Their offer was most useful when some teacher was absent for a few days at a stretch and even more so when two mothers at Fatullyapur helped us almost on a regular basis in establishing some sort of parity among children newly admitted to Class I who showed widely varying literacy and numeracy skills.

Whatever changes and improvements we are trying for in the total teaching learning process can reach a very limited number of people if they are practised only in our three schools. So we have all along been trying to involve in our work children who go to other schools, and their parents and teachers, along with the general population as well as panchayat members. In earlier years we organized an evening of cultural performances and competitions at Fatullyapur where many children who went to schools other than ours also came. This year we managed to widen the circle of participants to include all school-goers, parents, and panchayat members, and the evening became something like a village festival of culture.

Rakhi Bandhan, which we celebrate jointly with other schools, was this year observed with even more enthusiasm by a larger number of children. This was particularly true at Fatullyapur where we managed to involve the panchayat and its members in every stage of the programme. It was decided to tie up Rakhi Bandhan with Independence Day celebrations, and the schools in the panchayat area were divided into six clusters which observed the days as their respective committees planned. Each committee included a panchayat member and the panchayat also gave some monetary help to each cluster.

Once the clusters and the committees were in place, Swanirvar workers persuaded the latter to think about the problems of the schools in their respective charge. They discussed issues like

4

how to get drop-out children back to school, how to ensure that parents do not fail to secure the birth certificate for their child, how to keep the schools' furniture and grounds protected from misuse, how to keep a sizable number of boys from leaving school to go to work in the brick kilns when demand for labour is the highest there, etc.

A number of the 17 primary schools in the Fatullyapur-Bajitpur Panchayat area now have an education committee, following Government regulations and Swanirvar's efforts. Some schools also have parents' committees. It will take time for many of the committee members to understand that their responsibility does not end with their silent presence at a meeting, but to really believe that they can and do have things to say, ideas to contribute, time and energy to offer for the betterment of the village's, even if not their own, children. Some of the committees have already begun to consider ways of improving the physical condition of the school buildings and of getting more teachers for them.

Some of the things we have done over the years are now being taken up at some other schools also. The more significant among these are observance of locally and/or nationally important secular days, sifting the oral tradition to know more about local history, producing maps of the village, complementing class learning with cultural training etc. More people are now likely to know of our work in primary schools as Communication for Development and Learning, a Bangalore-based organization, sent two of its staff to our work area to see things for themselves for a booklet they plan to bring out on our schools and their special features as part of the Childhood Matters series sponsored by CRY.

There have been disappointments too. Seven of our children have joined the ranks of drop-outs in the past five years, which means they did not complete Class IV. Two girls were decreed by their families to be "too old" to study any further, a boy went to Kolkata for work, and four others work as farm labourers. Seven in five years is of course well below the national average, but we take it as a failure on our part.

Since we think of our schools as investments in the nation's future, we try to keep track of our alumni. Forty-six of them were in Class VI in different high schools; one of them, a girl, was among the top performers, 35 were in the middle ranks, and 5 did not do well. Similarly, of the 76 children from our three schools who are now in Class V in high school, two, both girls again, were among the very best, 60 were middle rankers, and 11 did not do well. This we mention only as passing information, as such indices are neither sacrosanct nor permanent nor really indicative of anything. More important to us is that there were six drop-outs in both classes. One is chronically ill, another "too old", another too poor, three are needed for domestic work, and six have to work to earn a living, one in a Mumbai tea shop. Only one of them, who works at a kiln, keeps some touch with our work, the others are lost to hard reality.

Part of our expenses in running these three schools came from the Government of India through Vikramshila Educational Resource Society but that stopped in January 2001. An expert from the NCERT came for an evaluation and wrote in his comments for our records that he was satisfied with the children's achievements and performance.

We continue to be an active member of the West Bengal Education Network or WBEN. It met once in August when, among other things, we discussed doing a fresh round of surveys and campaigns related to NAFRE (National Alliance for Fundamental Right to Education). These were done and we met again in September to discuss the results. In December a 2-day State-level meeting was held in Kolkata, to which Swanirvar brought an 18-member team, which included our own workers as well as teachers from our area's Government schools, both primary and high, and local youths interested in education. The main agenda was the 83rd amendment to the Constitution. Political leaders, educationists and education officials, teachers, experts from related fields, and activists spoke at several panel discussions. A candle march was held at the end of the second day. The year's last meeting was held in February to discuss what would go into the WBEN status report, the network's strengths and weaknesses, future plan of action, and to choose people from West Bengal who would participate at the forthcoming NAFRE meet in Delhi.

The only way we can bring more and more children, and teachers too, into the teaching-learning system we are trying to put in place, is by getting the Government schools interested. We have been considering various strategies of extensive interaction with the Government system and made some beginning this year. In February we called a day-long meeting at Katiahat, a village where we do not have any programmes running, but where we have had good relations all along with the local high school and this we chose as the venue. This was attended by 35 Government primary school teachers.

The most significant thing was that these 35 belonged to two rival associations which are at loggerheads in their State-level agendas, but they agreed to share the same stage here. We explained what we do and what we want to do with their help. Most of them were hopeful that an appeal to a wider audience would also bring good response, so we decided to call another meeting.

This was again at Katiahat, in March. This time there were 120 teachers, and two School Inspectors in charge of schools in our area. The discussion was lively and besides the 83rd amendment we discussed how to go about forming village education committees which would be active and effective. Almost everybody stayed till the meeting ended at about 4 in the afternoon, which is a fair indication of their enthusiasm.