

Swanirvar

Annual report for 2002-2003

LOOKING BACK

This is our 14th annual report, dealing with our activities in the 13th complete year of our existence. Almost all our active founder-members are still with us but we are all so busy we rarely talk about the early days when there was a lot of debate among ourselves over how to formulate and define the Swanirvar mission. Several visitors and supporters, as also donor agencies, would now like us to clarify our goals, and we would also like to make sure our workers have not lost sight of them, so this seems a good place to write briefly about what Swanirvar had set out to do, and also how it wanted to do it.

The choice: model villages or model activities?

The choice in effect was between these two: Do we go for creating a few model villages, or do we follow model activities in a number of villages? Should we select some villages and try to tackle all the development problems of all the people there, in an effort to create villages that could be shown off as worthy of emulation? This was tempting and maybe closer to popular expectation from a rural development NGO, but to us the more appropriate approach appeared to be to identify certain specific aspects of development and then experiment in several villages with alternatives to the prevalent models. These experiments could be with some individuals, some households, maybe even some areas of a village, but never with a village in its entirety. Such complete coverage was beyond our capacity, even if we had taken it as our objective. That we left to the Government -- local, or state, or national.

So even in the five villages that have remained at the core of our work we are not active in programmes that reach all families or in all subjects. Rather, we want to make sure that whatever subjectwise alternatives we develop, should be applicable to and replicable in similar agro-economic zones in the State. Some should of course be relevant in wider areas, maybe the whole nation. Whenever our models were reasonably ready we planned to spread the information as widely as possible through involving other NGOs, networking, using the media, influencing the Government, etc. We shall not run pre-primary centres at more villages than the present 15, nor set up new primary schools, and we shall not expand our youth and culture work to beyond the present 8 villages (we do however expect areawise extension in microfinance, to finally encompass 50 villages where, apart from savings and credit services, we shall give health and agricultural help to the self-help groups, and in Panchayat planning where we may one day get involved in one block, that is 100 villages.), but what we achieve in these should be replicable and sustainable.

So the strategy was that Swanirvar would not itself try to multiply its successes, but would try to persuade the Government at all levels and various arms of the civil society to replicate its experiments and to institutionalize them in an effort to allow everybody to have access to them in a sustainable manner. To this end we have been developing ourselves as a training centre. Already people come from various places for exposure visits. More and more people and organizations want to learn from our education experiments. A national newspaper has recognized our work with high school seniors with an award. We have had visitors from organizations outside West Bengal to study our microfinance and sustainable agriculture programmes. Films on our "very low cost toilet" programme and the Kishor Kishori Bahini have been shown on national television a number of times.

Doing different things, and doing them differently

Which sections in a village do we choose to work with? Our main focus is the poorest, whom the benefits of any increased general economic activity or production have a consistent habit of passing by. We believe that present economic systems, best exemplified in agriculture, are unsustainable; the education and health systems unable to achieve stated objectives (which by themselves are suspect). The poor do not have access to banking facilities and even when they get it through some microfinance programme, they do not in fact get much if their empowerment is restricted to monetary access only, so a revised model has to be sought with some new components.

All this means that not only do we have to select what to do different, but also to plan how to do them differently. Once something takes a viable shape -- motivating the stakeholders to be active participants is hard and time-consuming work and requires a lot of patience and sensitivity -- it has to be very carefully nurtured and continuously fine tuned. Happily, our workers, all of them local, have over the years acquired considerable competence to complement their commitment. Some have been used by other NGOs as resource persons. Two have left to work elsewhere at a much higher salary, though one has come back. Two are members of the State Government's primary education resource group.

Spreading the work to a wide area could not be our job, but where were the vibrant local governments to develop whole villages or institutionalize the alternatives? This led us -- and we believe we were one of the first NGOs in West Bengal to do this -- to try to create a participatory people's government system, the basic ingredient of Gandhian self-reliant Gram Swaraj. Our visible efforts to strengthen the movement towards rural decentralization, participatory planning, participatory governance, etc. finally led to our coordinator being inducted in the Government-sponsored working group to design a whole new model of the Panchayat system in the State.

Losing track of the wider mission

In the 13 years that it has taken Swanirvar to traverse this small way, we have seen many ups and downs. One major transition was during 1995-97 when from having 30 workers in 5 villages we expanded to having 100 workers in 15. This predictably led to some amount of formality in our internal functioning. Slowly but inevitably the dreaded compartmentalization started taking root. Each department had its own programmes, targets, meetings, budget, funding partner, pressures from such partners, reporting and documentation requirements, etc. The new workers often found themselves so busy doing paper work and routine chores that they had no time to assimilate the original vision behind Swanirvar, or understand its wider mission. This trend, if anything, is spreading because nobody has time for regular debates and discussions and periodic collective introspection. Many workers today do not have a good grasp of total holistic development, of the major issues facing an NGO, of its goals, and also of the indicators that are normally used. This has led to the unenviable situation where workers are familiar with and knowledgeable about the objectives and interventions of their respective department but do not know -- in extreme cases they may not even care to know -- about the other work of Swanirvar. This specialization sometimes leads to the ironical situation where interesting developments among the clients of a particular department are not noticed by that department's workers as they are not part of their mandate, but workers of other departments find these worthy of notice and mention. Thus the effectiveness of the individual worker, and of course of the whole organization, is impaired.

In a way this is not totally unexpected. Unlike 15 or 20 years ago, when the general scenario in both the civil and the political society reflected an age of certainty, these days people accept that the right answer(s) may not be obvious and straightforward. Still, it is a failure of the Swanirvar leadership and will have to be addressed firmly in the coming years.

Swanirvar has never been a rich organization as we never had money to spare after meeting our project costs and paying our workers modest salaries, but broadly speaking so far we have never had to worry about money to run our programmes. This year things have started to look bad, and we are seriously troubled they may become bleak if by next year something does not turn up. Without a certain and long-term donor, our primary education programme leads a hobbled existence. In microfinance, capital for the revolving fund is available only at an unconscionably high rate of interest. In agriculture, we were on our own, after Service Centre, our partner and guide for long years, and we agreed to end our financial relationship. This was something like coming of age for us. "Friends of Swanirvar", ever friendly and ever generous, has promised to help, but we shall have to cut our budget extensively. Our work with the Panchayat generates a great deal of enthusiasm, but there is no outside financial support for the various small expenses that would have made our task easier and progress faster.

We accept these as occupational hazards of running an NGO and are not overly worried, but prolonged

financial insecurity does affect workers' morale and we cannot afford to have any of our excellent team to waver.

SUMMARY OF ACCOUNTS

Now for an account of our activities in 2002-2003, beginning with a brief summary of our accounts. Our main donors this year have been the following.

# FOS—Friends of Swanirvar, Worcester, England (this includes money from the Community Fund, UK, earlier known as National Lotteries Charity Board, or NLCB)	Rs. 8,71,683.16
# CARE, West Bengal (CASHE)	Rs 5,52,600.00
# S&C—Share & Care Foundation for India, USA (this is mainly money raised by friends in and around Los Angeles)	Rs 5,26,550.00
# AIH&PH—All India Institute of Hygiene & Public Health (this is money received from the India-Canada Environment Facility)	Rs 5,24,500.00
# CRY—Child Relief and You	Rs 5,07,400.00
# Service Centre	Rs 3,66,918.80
# ASHA For Education, Stanford, USA (the entire amount was donated by Mr. Arjun Bhagat for our primary education programme)	Rs 2,65,095.00
# AID-Maryland, USA	Rs. 97,198.00
# Individual donations	Rs 13,570.00
Total	Rs 37,25,511.96

Apart from these we earned money from the following sources .

# Pond lease		Rs. 70,000.00
# Rent for the guest house	8,100.00	Rs.
# Subscription	240.00	Rs.
# Bank interest		Rs. 32,367.00
Total		Rs. 1,10,707.00

TOTAL INCOME

Rs

38,36,218.96

We took the following loans during the course of the year.

# From CARE for women's self-help groups	Rs. 14,88,000.00
# From West Bengal Minorities Development Finance Corporation (for the same purpose as above)	Rs. . 3,00,000.00
# From individuals	Rs. 93,000.00
Total	Rs. 18,81,000.00
TOTAL RECEIPTS	Rs. 57,17,218.96

Our expenses, under three main heads, are given below, with the main source of the money on the right.

A.Capital

# Buildings	Rs. 6,69,785.55	FoS
# Land	Rs. 25,500.00	Domestic
# Furniture	Rs. 9,709.00	CARE
Total	Rs. 7,04,994.55	

B. Programme

# Microfinance	Rs. 8,67,247.90	CARE, Fos,NLCB,S&C
# Loan to SHGs	Rs.17,88,000.00	CARE, WMDFC
# Health and arsenic mitigation	Rs. 7,16,428.60	AIH&PH, AID
# Primary education	Rs. 5,89,140.20	ASHA, S&C
# Pre-primary education	Rs. 5,83,178.85	CRY, S&C
# Agriculture	Rs. 4,61,048.80	Service Centre, Domestic
# Youth and Culture	Rs. 3,37,601.10	FoS, NLCB

# Travel	Rs.	90,681.76	CARE,FoS,NLCB,AIHH&PH
# Meeting and training	Rs.	84,693.05	FoS, Domestic
# Printing and stationary	Rs.	82,602.20	CARE,FoS,NLCB,AIHH&PH
# Publication, documentation	Rs.	75,375.25	S&C,FoS,NLCB
# Panchayat	Rs.	33,340.15	S&C
# Organization	Rs.	29,236.80	Domestic

TOTAL **Rs. 57,38,574.66**

C. Administration

# Salaries and fees	Rs.	80,100.00	CRY,CARE,FoS,NLCB
# Repairs	Rs.	45,990.95	CARE,S&C,AIHH&PH
# Electricity and telephone	Rs.	40,096.78	CARE,FoS,NLCB,S&C
# Bank charges	Rs.	4,431.00	Domestic,S&C

TOTAL **Rs. 1,70,618.73**

TOTAL PAYMENTS **Rs. 66,14,187.94**

EDUCATION: Primary

We had always said we would not set up any more schools but certain conditions specific to Matia led us to open one there this year. What we have there now is not by any means a full-fledged teaching centre as we have in the three villages of Andharmanik, Chandalati and Fatullyapur, nor are we sure, given the state of our resources, how long we can keep it going, but this present account of our activities in the sphere of primary education covers the 13 children at Matia who went through Class I under one teacher. But before that a brief explanation of why we had to take the step.

At Matia our affiliate organization has long been involved with children of sex workers. These children begin life hedged in from three sides -- they are children, they are poor, and their mothers are without any social status -- and on the fourth is the unrelenting wall to which their back is thus permanently glued. Many of them have been attending the pre-primary school we have had there for five years, but when they move up to the local Government primary schools, it takes them only a short while to realize that they cannot continue. Social stigma and economic compulsions force them to drop out. Their mothers had been pleading with us for long to provide them with a safer place for a few years of formal schooling, and finally we agreed to take up the challenge. Many of the children are over-age as they have resumed studies after varying periods of hiatus, and not all the 13 are children of sex-workers. Throughout the year these latter have done their bit as mothers, involving themselves actively in the children's day-to-day progress.

Basic data

The four classes in each of the three other schools, and the one class at the new one, together had 510 students, 268 boys and 242 girls. The average number of working days was 223, with 88.3% average attendance. Altogether 110 children passed out and joined one of the several high schools of the area, and we can only hope that the conformist pressures of the mindless mainstream will not totally put out the few sparks of individual thinking that their years in our system might have ignited.

Financial constraints meant this year we could give the children only one set of uniforms, instead of the usual two, and some food only on 158 days. We cannot afford giving them any cooked meal and have to choose from bananas, biscuits, muri, germinated chickpeas, eggs, sweets, rural bakery products etc. This year the choice was widened when two groups of kitchen gardeners made coconut-based snacks and sold them to us at prices that gave them some profit but were still lower than in the shops.

Our teachers made 1,500 visits to the children's homes, an average of three visits to each. However, the parents of those who had some problem at class received more attention. They, and other parents also, continued to drop in at schools during class hours to watch what was happening generally, and how their children in particular were doing. We maintain a file for every child and parents are asked, even if they cannot read, to go through it with the teachers. The child is often present when his overall performance is thus analyzed.

There were 10 formal meetings with parents in the year. The first of these found “senior” mothers telling those whose children were coming to school for the first time the various little things they could and should do to ensure their children maintained a proper level of personal hygiene, cleanliness, and punctuality. They also stressed the need for parents to complement and supplement the efforts of teachers.

The supervisor visited the centres on 62 occasions and his comments and observations formed part of the agenda of the 13 meetings and/or workshops the teachers held among themselves. There were seven group visits by teachers of two schools to another for peer review. Until last year the visiting group would confine itself to aspects of only the teaching/learning process but from this year the scope has been expanded and now all records to do with the school’s work -- the admission register, the attendance register, records of meetings with parents, letters from students seeking leave of absence, etc.-- are checked. At the end of the day the visitors sit with the visited and exchange opinions on what they perceived as the strengths and weaknesses. Written notes are then prepared.

Sports meets were held in each centre. Each school now has a lending library, and there were altogether 221 borrowers this year. Only one school held a Sahitya Sabha, but this was a huge success, with the children running the entire proceedings and showing their creative skills in many directions.

Innovations this year

1. Workshops with parents: The supervisor and teachers sat with parents three times during the year at each of the three old centres and did a variety of exercises with them to make them understand what our teaching/learning methods are, so that they could meaningfully help the children. One of the three workshops was for parents of children in the two lower classes, and the other two were for the others. The first covered Language, Arithmetic, and Environmental Studies, and the two for the senior students’ parents were on local history, and local geography. Altogether 501 parents participated in the nine such workshops.

Among the exercises the parents did were making words by using letters in various ways; then making sentences by using words in various ways; classifying living and non-living things under various criteria; arranging numbers in various orders; drawing village maps, showing roads, trees, water sources, shops, schools, places of worship, some individual houses; listing agricultural plots according to the crops grown in them; listing cropping patterns and relating them to the climate and the soil; making timelines of individual children (birth, first walk, first speech, beginning school, birth of siblings, major illnesses, etc.), and then moving on to family charts covering 4-5 generations and including names, occupations, migration, etc.; listing soil patterns, waterways, landmarks; identifying local crafts, and their economics; season-wise listing of occupations and festivals.

Obviously not all parents were equally interested or participated with equal enthusiasm, but generally they - and among them are illiterate or barely literate parents -- clearly want the practice to continue, to cover more aspects of life around them. Many of those who did not come this time have since tried to make sure they are called to next year’s workshops. Now that they know and understand what we want their children to do and how, they are taking much more interest in the children’s work at home, and are showing much more initiative in helping them with information. Many are discussing with the teachers the contents and methods of classroom teaching, and when, particularly in Environmental Studies, controversies arise, the parents are taking part in resolving these.

One man talked to children in class about his family’s migration history, and another about the changes in profession his family has had to adopt over generations because of changing socio-economic contexts.

We are very happy at the success of this experiment, as we have always wanted our schools not just to educate children but to become learning centres for adults/parents also. Our hope is to make everybody understand that

- i) Education does not consist in memorizing text books;
- ii) Anybody can learn a number of things by watching their own environment and comparing received wisdom with what they see;
- iii) Education does not have to be a contest among individuals; even classroom learning can be a combined effort, with the fun of participation getting precedence over the individual compulsion to excel;
- iv) Most questions/issues do not have to have one single and straightforward answer/solution which a book gives and the teacher approves;
- v) A system can be put in place where some parents will come to school on pre-scheduled dates to share their expertise in some particular field - which no present textbook may ever mention - and tell the children whatever they want to know about it. A man can be motivated and trained to become a more relevant source of knowledge than prescribed texts full of eminently forgettable

information.

2. Producing and using new text books: We are not alone in having serious reservations about both the philosophy behind our presently followed textbooks and their contents and style. There are many “alternative” educationists in various parts of India trying to develop textbooks that school children would find exciting and relevant and that would help them grasp the inner workings underlying any subject. In history, the goal is to develop a child’s skills to understand and appreciate how and why historical changes take place, instead of just memorizing facts and dates along the course of the change. We would also like the children to ask, before they are forced to plunge into the depths of Indian history, “What is the history of my family?” “What is the history of my city/village?”

Last year’s report mentioned that we had produced such a book, written by Sandip Bandyopadhyay who is not a professional historian or teacher of history. This book, “Ki, Kobe, Keno” (What, When, and Why) was this year used in the Swanirvar schools and in schools run by two other organizations. We have now received chapter-wise detailed feedback and a workshop with the author would be organized to make the contents more locally relevant.

This year we also began but could not finish work on a five-volume set of books meant to develop a child’s observational, analytic, and practical skills in a rural surrounding.

3. Devising new methods of teaching Bengali: A two-day workshop in July, conducted by Sudeshna Sinha and attended by the 13 primary school teachers and their supervisor, explored ways to help teachers look beyond the traditional aims of teaching the mother tongue; to list and critically discuss the activities already being done; and to design activities to match the new, beyond-the-ordinary objectives.

Four basic language skills were identified: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Then a set of expanded aims was evolved around each, and matching activities designed. These have been followed in all classes since then. At the end of the year, a summary of the teachers’ feedback found that children now showed more concentration while listening to others; they were getting better at listening to a story and later answering written questions on it; their writing skills had improved; they now read newspapers more regularly and there was more exchange of national and international information; and many had started reading so many non-text books that some parents were unhappy.

4. Putting a new evaluation system in place: The innovation is in four areas. First, over and above the general and comprehensive evaluation following the usual half-yearly and annual examinations, there is now a system of occasional evaluation, done mainly by teachers from other schools during their group visits. Second, the report card now deals with actual competencies and not just subjects, so everybody knows what exactly is evaluated and what is imparted also. Third, apart from individuals, groups, which stay together for the whole academic year, are also being evaluated. Fourth, non-academic facets are also being sought to be evaluated, like a child’s sensitivity to others, leadership qualities, commitment to cooperation, health awareness, sense of discipline, etc.

5. Field trips: Earlier when we managed to take the children somewhere it was to give them a break from routine, with fun and entertainment the main goals. This year we decided to mix some business with the pleasure. Children of classes I and II in the three schools were taken to some place where they certainly played games and had fun, but there were also activities related to Environmental Studies. Children of classes III and IV from Chandalati and Fatullyapur visited an old temple complex at Taragunia and a nearby memorial to a saintly Muslim woman. A local high school teacher and a journalist had been asked to talk to them about the history and importance of both and to answer questions. The senior children from Andharmanik went to the palatial house of the zamindars of Gobardanga where a member of the family and a local high school teacher talked to them about the history of the family, and showed them some of the gear and equipment used during hunting expeditions. The children are expected to prepare reports on what they saw and learnt at both places.

6. Children’s committees: These have been formed specifically to take care of school stationery, charts, maps etc, to ensure that school premises are kept clean and the facilities are in good order, and to help in the making of teaching aids. They are working well.

Interacting with the mainstream

The Government schools form the mainstream and cater to the overwhelming majority of local children so it is essential that our experiments be replicated there. To that end, we try all the time to involve as many local schools as possible in our work, and participate in State-level developments to the best of our ability. Some of this year’s highlights in both spheres are given below.

1. Activating village education committees: These VECs have now been formed everywhere but they are popularly known as “government committees”, in denial of their planned participatory nature. They, too, usually prefer to exist on paper and show some life only when they receive funds for some construction.

We are committed to changing this state of affairs and in 15 villages our teachers - both primary and pre-primary - have been trying through constant discussions to activate the 22 such committees there. It has been difficult to persuade them even to hold meetings and to take simple decisions. Only four committees in the Bajitpur area have become fairly active.

2. Rakhi celebrations: For the last few years we have taken the initiative to involve children of more and more Government schools, as also Panchayats, in observing Rakhi Day, mainly by arranging for the children to make the rakhis, and by persuading the Panchayats to release some funds to meet some of the expenses inherent in mass participation. This year we were able to work with altogether 47 Government schools -- 17 in the Bajitpur panchayat, six in Shayestanagar II, 12 in Nayabastia, and 12 more in the Baduria municipal area.

3. Sahitya Sabha: In this only children are on the stage, reciting poems, performing plays, reading stories - all written by themselves - and presenting other examples of their creativity to an audience of other children and, more important, adults, most pleasantly surprising them with their talent and efficiency. In the past years the Swanirvar schools had presented quite a few such programmes, and this year we persuaded children of 12 other primary schools to jointly hold one.

A lot of preparation was necessary. On 16 March our workers met 22 teachers from the schools and two representatives of the concerned school inspector. The teachers agreed to help the students in choosing the performers and the items to be presented. Swanirvar workers were always there to lend them a hand during rehearsals. On 22 May there was another meeting with all the 12 headmasters and the SI's representatives to finalize the budget and arrangements. On 27 May between 8.20 a.m. and 11.30 a.m., with a class IV student conducting the proceedings, 87 children recited poems, sang, danced, told stories, acted out mimes, produced skits, presented local news, etc., watched by a large audience at Punra High School grounds. Each performer was given a pen, and there were some snacks for them and the teachers. This and the production costs amounted to Rs 1500, of which Swanirvar gave Rs 1,000, and the teachers the rest.

We hope that in the near future, when we have been able to really activate the VECs, they would organize such functions more widely and more regularly, so that children get more and more chance to discover and express their own latent creative talent.

4. Teaching aids: This year, a Government primary school joined one of our workshops on making teaching aids, a significant first. Two members of the concerned VEC also came on their own. Some other schools also made inquiries about how they could participate in such activities. We consider this an important breakthrough.

5. Contributing to State-level activities: Our supervisors in the primary and the pre-primary sections are members of the State Resource Group in the Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan programme of the Central Government. Two important assignments came their way this year. First, they were in a team sent to Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts to evaluate the quality of the Government primary schools there and the functioning of VECs. Second, and more important, they were selected as State trainers to train the district trainers who would motivate and mould the VECs and the proposed mother-teacher associations. We expect our workers to play such roles oftener in the coming years.

EDUCATION: Pre-primary

Our activities at Uttar Media continuing to remain suspended, with the local contradictions showing no signs of amicable resolution, the pre-primary school there did not function at all throughout the year as Swanirvar stuck to its decision not to go for any ad hoc compromise with any group. Thus this year we ran 14 pre-primary schools in as many villages, with 953 children in all, 464 boys and 489 girls. The average number of working days was 222, with 79% average attendance. There were altogether 37 meetings with parents, with a total attendance of 1,143.

Bigger role for teachers

Teachers regularly met to discuss the progress of their work and to plan additions/alterations in the light of common experience. Teaching/learning material continued to be made with locally available stuff. The teachers kept in regular contact with parents, especially mothers, whose interest in how their children were improving their sensory coordination, and also learning to exercise their thinking abilities while apparently having fun, continue to grow every year. So does their involvement in the schools' work.

The sectional supervisor now has to devote much of his time to Swanirvar's work with strengthening the mass participatory component in the Panchayati system of local government, as also to fulfilling his responsibilities as a member of the State Resource Group of the Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan, so he cannot visit

the schools as frequently as earlier. Yet, constant and comprehensive supervision was one of the principal reasons behind the success of our pre-primary education programme, and so, in place of the supervisor's visits we now have more frequent group visits. In this form of peer review, teachers of a few schools together visit another school, and both the agenda and the methods have been better defined and better refined.

The children have continued to impress with their cultural skills, and have been in demand at public functions, winning prizes at some places. A sports meet was held at seven villages. In the village-cleaning operations at three places, the small children were seen taking part, of course with more enthusiasm than real usefulness.

Infrastructure

The school at Bagjola began working at its new building this year, and that at Hyderpur finally got its tubewell and toilets. Thanks to the generosity of Friends of Swanirvar, all our pre-primary schools now have their own building, which also doubles as the village organization's office, except for Gokulpur and Belyakhali where land has already been bought, and Punra, where Swanirvar still does not want any investment in land and building. The school at Bhojpara however needs some repair and extension.

YOUTH and CULTURE

The workers of this department, as also those with whom they work - our "teen brigade" or the Kishor Kishori Bahini (KKB in short) - were a busy lot this year, as before, and a happy lot also, happier than usual. One of the country's leading newsmagazines, India Today, which is published from New Delhi, devoted one full page to the KKB in a June issue, and only a few weeks later, The Telegraph, Kolkata's leading English-language daily newspaper, chose Swanirvar for one of its "awards of excellence", mainly because of what we have achieved through the KKB. In a glittering ceremony at Kolkata's Science City, one of the KKB received the trophy, and even his beaming face could not hide what was apparent, that a village boy was very much out of place there. We were not sad or surprised; anything to do with a rural development NGO is bound to appear as an incongruity in our self-centred, urban society.

Libraries

Despite our best efforts, we have not been successful in developing the reading habit among our children, but things may be changing following a recent development. We have to thank Kiran Kumar for putting the idea into our head. While visiting us in January 2002 he told us about the library owned and run by adolescents in a rural project in Andhra Pradesh with which he, and two of his friends in AID Maryland, Ravi and Aravinda, are involved. This gave us the idea to involve the KKB in running the libraries in the villages, instead of having our adult workers in charge. The KKB has achieved good results from this chance to work for and by themselves.

Such libraries are now there in seven villages. In the Andhra project, the boxes that hold the books are moved from one child's house to another, but we have kept the books in our village organization's building everywhere except in Bajitpur where, because of the size of the village, one private house at another end of the village also has some books. In Fatullyapur and Chandalati, the books are taken from neighbourhood to neighbourhood to make access easier. In some villages old textbooks are being collected for use by and distribution to very poor children. At the end of the year there were 1,257 books in the seven villages.

Activities old and new

The KKB is active in 7 villages and in all of these it does more or less the same work, in a spirit of healthy competition. There are some seasonal or occasional activities, like, say, doing minor but very necessary and effective repairs to roads, purifying the water coming from tube wells; and there are some that are carried on throughout the year, like vaccinating livestock and poultry birds. Another such activity that benefits the community as a whole is tending nurseries from which medicinal herbs, and seedlings, saplings, and grafts of fruit trees are supplied. Many KKB members have a kitchen garden at home, some of them of excellent quality. We found special merit in the work of 12 such gardeners because apart from following all the scientific principles of making a good kitchen garden, they kept meticulous records of their income and expenses.

There is a very large number of activities that are taken up from time to time in one village or more, such as making bags, new paper from old, hay boxes, natural dyes; preparing surveys of the comparative

economics of hybrid cattle and local breeds, the foodstuff sold at shops and their seasonal variation, selected facets of the local economy, fuels in domestic use, livestock, agricultural pests, vegetables eaten at home in a week, birds found at various times of the year, lists of birds according to their diet, list of fish in a village, their diseases, keeping temperature and rainfall charts etc.

Actually the list of the KKB's activities is too long to be given in full here. This is only natural for we want them to take charge of all local development in the future, and so these middle-level and senior students of high schools must grow up with a clear idea of local socio-economic conditions, problems, their causes, ramifications, and possible solutions. For this, they have to do hands-on work instead of just memorizing facts, go to the roots of certain problems previously identified so that a permanent solution can be devised, learn to work in groups, make wise use of natural resources, collect data and analyze them to reach some conclusion. Unless they learn these how shall we have a generation of rational, committed and socially aware citizens?

Training and exposure

To do all this efficiently and effectively, the children, and new ones join every year, have to be trained and guided regularly. For this, we used to call resource persons from outside, but these days the responsibility has fallen on the very capable shoulders of Swanirvar workers and senior KKB members themselves. Such training or classes are held throughout the year and embrace a wide sphere of subjects, from sex (life) education for adolescents, particularly girls, participatory local government, vegetable and fruits preservation, medication through herbs, first aid, combating superstition, and such diverse areas of an active and vibrant rural existence. As part of an environmental education network ENRE run under the aegis of Service Centre, Swanirvar hosted a camp for NGOs from other districts where KKB members participated. They have also attended such camps organized by these other NGOs. ENRE this year brought out two books on trees and insects in which, apart from information, a number of hands-on activities are suggested. Much of this information and many of the experiments are based on what the KKB had done in the past three years. A magazine, *Prithibir Diary*, frequently published reports of the activities of the KKB in different areas of environmental studies. In January ENRE organized a 2-day exhibition at Nari Seba Sangha, Kolkata where we sent a team of 12. The things the KKB had made were displayed -- and they sold also -- music was presented, and visitors' questions answered.

Prabir Guha came for a three-day workshop to produce a play on the arsenic problem. Special Days of secular national importance were observed, usually before the whole village. Sports meets were held, with everybody in the village participating, educational trips arranged. Life in the KKB is not all work and no games.

This section is also responsible for teaching children at our pre-primary and primary schools, and also some outside them, songs, dances, small games, yoga, bratachari, puppetry etc.

HEALTH

This year saw a radical shift in the thrust of our work in this section. All our village-level health workers were active in the arsenic programme and most of them also devoted time to the many self-help-groups in many villages where we have no other presence. Both of this meant that only in four villages could they carry on with the sort of community health work that had been their main activity all these years, and even in these four they could give less time to their traditional responsibilities. Still, 2376 households were covered, 238 pregnant women were given extensive primary advice on how to take care of themselves, 102 of them were checked regularly, 42 of them were referred to the local health centre or somewhere else for proper medical intervention. Altogether 139 pregnant women were told in detail about ante- and post-natal care, and we recorded the birth weight on 68 occasions.

Immunization and family planning

Despite their involvement in the arsenic program our workers did not at all neglect the immunization activities in the area. As usual they mobilized mothers and children to attend the 29 camps organized in our 4 villages, and also the 64 in the other project villages, and rendered help to the Government staff in all ways to make a success of these. The pulse polio campaign to cover under-5 children held five camps in our area in the first phase and three in the second, with 1187 and 611 doses given respectively. In family planning, there are altogether 1663 eligible couples in our 4 villages. Our workers help them with

information, means, and, when needed, moral support in going against the illogic of tradition. Briefly, this is the family planning scene:

Permanent sterilization - 9 women;

IUCD (or loop) - 8 women;

Contraceptive pills - 225 women;

Condoms - 57 men;

Homeopathic contraceptives - 65 women;

Injections - 12 women;

Medical termination of pregnancy - 12 women.

Of these last 12, five went to qualified doctors, and the other seven trusted themselves to the hands of the local quack.

In the last few years we have been able to generate tremendous popularity for herbal medicines in all our villages, with help from our workers in many departments and KKB members, and this is reflected in the fall in the number of people asking our workers for allopathic medicine for common ailments. Only 348 such people are recorded during the year. Fewer people, only 35 actually, came to ask for herbal remedies, but this is because many households now grow common medicinal herbs and also know how and when to use what, so they do not need our workers' help.

Trainings and capacity building

For the past few years we have been holding camps for adolescents to teach them about reproductive health and to discuss the various psychological aspects special to this stage of human life. This year too we organized two such camps, one for boys and the other for girls. Each was for two days, and 20 girls and 27 boys attended.

Our workers organized 19 meetings with 843 participants, where they discussed various issues of public health and hygiene with general villagers in an informal setting. There was another meeting with 26 women whose children go to our school on some problem that affected only such children.

This year we decided to develop 50 of our self-help groups into model groups. Members of these were to know something about family health. Our health workers were given the job of talking to them about diarrhoea, its causes and management, in two phases, the second to probe the impact of the first. Not all 50 groups could be covered this year, but the first meeting was held with 45 groups with 529 women attending, and the second with 32 groups, with 365 present. We distributed deworming, vitamin, and iron tablets to 198 children in our schools, and motivated 13 households to build semi-pucca toilets.

Blood donation

We helped organize 15 blood donation camps. One of these was organized entirely by women and all the 41 donors were women too. The 14 other camps collected 770 units of blood. This is somewhat less than our achievement in the past few years but that is mainly because of our decision this year not to hold camps during the winter months, but to concentrate on the hot period when blood is in short supply. This year, too, we won the trophy given by the West Bengal Voluntary Blood Donors Association to the organization collecting most blood in a year.

Arsenic mitigation

We are one of a number of NGOs working in several districts of the State for the "Community-based Project to Mitigate Arsenic Pollution in West Bengal" under the supervision of the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health. The project is funded by the India-Canada Environment Facility. This year we completed the first phase of the project, in which we had chosen to work in 10 villages, and began working on the second phase, in which we shall cover 15 new villages. The mode of work remains the same in both phases.

Detailed surveys are made of the villages, particularly its water sources that are tested for the level of arsenic. Health care facilities available are noted. The villages are usually chosen because of the number of people reported to be suffering from arsenicosis there, but house-to-house visits are now made to check the health status of individuals. Since the ill effects of arsenic take years to clearly show themselves, it is never easy to convince people of the danger of using water that looks clean and good, particularly when it is near home. Regular meetings are held with villagers to raise their awareness of the problem, to tell them of the various ways in which they can free the water of arsenic, not all of them equally or fully efficacious. Villagers' committees are formed and the members trained in various aspects of the mitigation work. They are shown different models of arsenic removal plants and asked to choose the one they think will be most apt for their locality. The project pays for the installation of the plant, but its maintenance, which includes

employing a villager to watch over the plant and its use/abuse, is the financial and practical responsibility of the consumers.

Capacity building in the community

This summary does not indicate the amount and extent of time our workers have to give to interacting with the villagers at every stage. In the months this year before the first phase of the project was completed, 58 meetings were held with the committees in the 10 villages to finalize the modalities of the maintenance of the plants; 55 meetings were held in the 15 villages where we started working this year to tell them of the committees they would have to form. Along with these formal meetings, there is always the work of publicity, awareness building, extensive and intensive surveying, etc. We train the villagers on how to identify possible victims of arsenic pollution, how to protect themselves against the dangers posed by the ingestion of arsenic, hold workshops for local doctors, most of them without any formal medical education, on the treatment of patients of arsenicosis, at various stages of the disease. We have a team of workers trained to test water and determine the level of arsenic in it.

Impact

Even after all this, we cannot honestly claim everything works well. Each of the ten plants, attached to a tube well to filter the arsenic and store it somewhere to be cleaned later, has been built and installed by reputable companies, and maintenance is the responsibility of trained and “motivated” villagers. Yet each has had to stop functioning, for varying periods and various reasons. On an average every plant has been out of action on 8% of the days since its installation. This has to change.

We cannot also be very happy with the efficaciousness of the plants. We have no control over the quality of their functioning, but we regularly test the water where these have been installed, and while laboratory tests have not found any of them to contain arsenic above the danger level, only five can be said to give “safe” water, the other five giving water only “usable”. Tests with field kits have even found water from four of these plants occasionally polluted. There is little we can do about this except keep the supervising institution informed. Plants installed by the local municipality and other authorities have shown even worse results. This does not make us happy by comparison; indeed it makes us more worried about how the problem will be solved.

Our water-testing unit, apart from its own work of testing samples of water from the same tube wells in our project area at regular intervals, tests water samples submitted by anybody. It has also demonstrated its methods at exhibitions and fairs.

MICROFINANCE

Our work on this programme, in which we are guided by CARE West Bengal under its CASHE project, has now spread to four blocks -- Baduria, Deganga, Habra, and Swarupnagar. The basic statistics at the end of the year were:

	<u>2001-02</u>	<u>2002-03</u>
# Total number of villages	34	40
# Total number of groups	313	360
# Total number of members (all are women) :	5164	4926
# Total savings of the groups -	12,43,385	22,68,975
# Repayment rate	86%	91%
<u>Progress during the year</u>		
# New groups formed	189	77
# New members joining	3024	862
# No.of loans	1183	2300
# Total loans from the Swanirvar Revolving Fund	29,85,700	56,72,500
# Interest rate charged to the groups	10%	12%
# Loans disbursed by the groups from their own savings -	7,35,123	21,92,206
# Interest income earned by Swanirvar	80,000	3,65,000
# Loans taken by Swanirvar for the Revolving Fund	Nil	18,38,000
# Number of loan products	One	Three

Notes

1. Groups' number and membership: This year was the year of consolidation. There are two apparent anomalies in the tables above. Even as we detail all-round growth both the number of new groups formed this year and the number of women joining are less than what they were last year. On top of that 30 of the existing groups were disbanded this year, so the actual increase in the number of groups is 47, from 313 to 360. Even more significant is the fact that the total number of member women has actually gone down from 5164 to 4916. This bit of weeding was found necessary for efficiency and integrity. We hope there are now more genuine "groups" and "members", something which had suffered during the expansion phase of last year.

2. Savings: As a result of better training and monitoring, both the regularity and the total amount of monthly savings have gone up. This is reflected in the almost 90% increase in the total savings at the end of the year from Rs 12,43,385 to Rs.22,68,975. This has long-term significance for the groups as the interest paid by members to their group on loans taken from their own savings is added to the group's capital. The rate of this interest varies from group to group but is never less than 14%. The more members save, the more money is available for disbursement as loans, and the more the members borrow, the more they contribute to the group's capital by way of interest. This year, borrowing increased almost threefold - from Rs 7,35,123 to Rs 21,92,206.

3. Loan offtake: The total loan offtake, from both the revolving fund and the groups' savings, has almost doubled -- from Rs 37,20,823 to Rs.78,64,706.

4. Kinds of loans: Until last year Swanirvar had only one loan product -- a 50-week loan for productive purposes to be repaid in 25/50 equal instalments. This year two new kinds of loans were started -- a seasonal agricultural loan to be repaid in one instalment at the end of the season, and a 50-week consumption loan. This last has amounted to about 10% of the total loans.

5. Borrowing for the revolving fund: This is the first time since the inception of the programme that Swanirvar has had to take loans from others for the programme's revolving fund. CARE gave a loan of Rs.14,88,000 in 3 instalments at an interest rate of 10.5%. The second source was The National Minorities Development Finance Corporation which gave Rs.3,50,000 in two instalments at 4.5%.

6. Financial sustainability: This year Swanirvar was able to increase its total interest earnings more than fourfold, from Rs. 80,000 to Rs 3,65,000, progressing significantly towards financial sustainability. The larger loan, from CARE, is too expensive. After a long search we managed to find the NMDFC, but the amount they can give is restricted

Capacity building

Our hope is that one day not very far away these women will take the lead in working for their local development. For this they have to become more aware of social and economic issues that impinge on their daily life and throughout the year we tried to help them in this. Since the number of groups is so large, we selected 50 of them to develop as model groups.

1. Health and nutrition: 714 members of these 50 groups were told about health and hygiene issues, and taught how to make oral rehydration solutions at home. They were also trained on the basic concepts behind and essential skills needed for kitchen gardens.

2. Clusters and federation of SHGs: Their competence to run the financial aspects of their groups remains the priority. Six trainings were held for 165 group leaders, and 120 women were trained on the formation and functioning of clusters and then the apex federation. Of the 20 clusters that are in place now, 19 held their general conference to elect office bearers. The enthusiasm was not limited to members but was seen to pervade the villages in general. The sessions were full of robust and fearless discussions.

On 16 February, 382 women -- 342 representing the self-help groups, and the other 40 from the 20 clusters -- met at Magurkhali to discuss the formation of the proposed apex federation. A governing body with 15 members -- 5 representing the clusters, 5 the general members of the SHGs, 2 from Swanirvar, and 3 outside experts -- was elected. In all this we have been keeping to the time schedule of the business development plan we signed with CARE but we have serious doubts if an active Federation run independently by these women, as envisaged in this agreement, can be structured within the proposed period. True, the SHG members have displayed a remarkable capacity to learn, to raise their awareness level, but the skills and competence needed for the effective functioning of a community-run and community-managed microfinance institution will take longer to achieve.

3. State network of NGOs: We are a member of the West Bengal Microfinance Promotional Forum and have received visitors from other member organizations, and also from Afghanistan and Turkey. These last were very interested in how all members of one village group had come together to lease a pond and were

now commercially breeding fish. Our workers have similarly gone to see the work done in other organizations, both in and outside West Bengal. We sent 30 women to Kolkata to attend the 2-day Second State Conference of the Forum.

4. PMES (Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation System): This is a system whereby a group -- whether an SHG or their cluster -- can monitor and evaluate themselves. This year 8 groups have started using this. If this is effective, we expect this to have a potentially tremendous impact.

5. Film on the SHG experience: CARE commissioned Roopkala Kendro, a Government film-making unit, to make a film on self-help groups in a microfinance programme. This unit chose to do the filming here, and selected some of our groups to act out a story line it had developed from discussions with SHGs all over West Bengal, including ours. The film has been a great hit wherever it has been shown to SHGs.

Impact

The most common question we hear about this programme is, "So, have all these loans changed the face of the village?" We have to say that we do not know, simply because there is no way to find out. In monetary terms, the total economic activity in even a medium-sized village works out to a very large sum, and what we are putting in through the groups does not have the capacity to effect any immediate macro-level and tangible change. Individual situations are of course improving, and the empowerment of women has already brought about certain clear changes in social and intra-family equations.

The SHG members' growing confidence in themselves and concern for things beyond their own family were unequivocally expressed when 1456 of them attended various Gram Sansad meetings in the course of the year. Often it was they who put real content into discussions on local development and at Bajitpur some of them found a place in various Panchayat subcommittees.

AGRICULTURE

We continued to propagate and practise the principles of sustainable agriculture as part of a State-level network. This year we worked with and through 320 farmers in 21 groups in 14 villages in three blocks, our goal being to ensure food security and to improve people's standard of living, through organic farming.

Interaction with farmers

1. Agricultural fair: This year's most exciting extension work was done through a 3-day agricultural fair held at Andharmanik in late October, where three organizations from South 24 Parganas, one from North 24 Parganas, Swanirvar, and Service Centre took part. Altogether 170 farmers and kitchen gardeners -- some individually, some with others -- put up stalls where they displayed imaginatively and intelligently made models of applications of various SA principles. Almost 2000 people visited the stalls, asked detailed questions and heard the answers from those who had actually done the work. The fair also gave farmers involved in SA a chance to exchange notes among themselves. Every day there were panel discussions, with Panchayat members, Government agriculture officials, and experts from Kolkata participating.

2. Trainings: Our phased training programme continued as usual. There was one awareness programme in which 29 farmers, who had earlier shown interest, were given an idea of the basics of SA. More detailed information is given at concept camps, and there were 3 of these for 70 farmers. Forty farmers attended two primary trainings which were mostly about area-specific problems and how these could be tackled by SA techniques. Forty farmers practising SA met at 3 follow-up trainings to learn from one another's experience on the field. Two trainings were held on how to run and strengthen a group.

Our workers regularly visit the villages where the farmers' groups have their fields and can answer any question an individual has, or try to find a solution together with him to any problem he has faced on the job. When such problems involve a number of farmers, something like a joint meeting is held which we call a study circle. This year we held 272 of these, and 2269 farmers were present at them. Earlier only discussions were held, but now some practical work is also done in these meetings.

3. Information boards: An innovation in extension work this year was the putting up of boards in 16 villages where various items of information are written or pasted. Altogether 1408 newly designed leaflets were distributed among members of 44 groups.

4. Visits and exposure trips: There were 13 occasions when a total of 98 farmers and gardeners visited another village to see what their counterparts there were doing and how, and to exchange experience. Such peer group visits are very fruitful, particularly for those who might have been feeling dissatisfied with their own achievement. In a similar exercise 13 farmers visited a fellow organization in Medinipur to get a first hand idea of SA in a somewhat different agro-climatic region. They say they also learnt a few things from the way the groups worked there.

Capacity building

To ensure that our workers' constant interaction with farmers is meaningful we have to see to it that the former is always in a position to help the latter with information and suggestions. This is done in a number of ways. There were 47 workers' meetings in the year, where work plans were made for different seasons, progress constantly evaluated, and achievement of goals assessed. Several of our workers went to Kolkata to receive training on Integrated Pest Management (IPM), Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PME), Biolab work, Photographic documentation, Nursery, Medicinal herbs etc. On coming back they shared their new learning with their colleagues. Trainings were organized at Swanirvar on food preservation and IPM. There were five meetings of the trainers' network that we have and altogether 32 of our workers attended these to hone their skills. Altogether 14 of our workers attended the six trainings that Service Centre organized for project leaders.

We had two visiting teams this year. First, there were 23 persons from Orissa, and then 10 from Bangladesh. Trainings were organized for them jointly by Service Centre and Swanirvar, on SA and the Panchayat system respectively.

Trials

This is the overall term we use for experiments on the farmers' field. These could be to test the viability of crops that we wish to introduce in the area, or of some untried variety of something that is already grown, of bio-inputs, of new techniques in anything to do with farming in general, or with reference to a particular crop or season. The aspect to notice, document, and evaluate could be the monetary returns, the growth potential, yield vis-a-vis care, replication and quite a few other things. Trials are just what they are called; they do not have to be successful and a season or two will never be enough to come to a firm decision. Very careful documentation is however kept of all trials for comparison.

Trials usually are of two types. In technique trials something is attempted for a particular season, after which the farmer is free to use that plot for traditional production. Eleven farmers carried out 8 kinds of technique trials, including one on using water hyacinth as fertilizer. Thirty-one worked on 14 crop trials, including some trying to replace jute with some vegetables. Eleven grew altogether nine new varieties of three popular crops. Paddy, coriander, potato and Patal -- these four were grown in two ways for comparison. In one, following the general practice, chemicals were liberally used as fertilizer and pesticide, and in the other only organic inputs were used. Seven culinary spices were tried as possible cash crops to replace the Rabi paddy.

The other kind is systems trials where a plot of land is farmed according to SA principles for at least a year. Twelve such systems trials were held this year, six of them on high, level ground. Farmers are somewhat wary of mortgaging their total land to experiments like this, and we also find that our SA principles are perhaps not yet fully developed to conduct such experiments with people's livelihood.

Earlier trials had indicated that certain new varieties of paddy might be popular and successful in our area, so this year 20 farmers produced 182 kg of seeds for them, for use by interested growers.

In another programme farmers/gardeners were given 150 packets of vegetable seeds for use in their plots.

After some seasons of trials, relay cropping has now caught on in a fairly big way in the area. This year wheat, pulses, oilseeds, spices etc. were grown in about 100 acres of land in 12 villages.

We do not have a full-time worker for our laboratory which is thus somewhat underutilized. Still, this year we produced 169 packets of azotobactor, and 165 packets of PSB, as well as 112 packets of mushroom spawn.

The Agriculture Development Officer, Baduria block, has been of great help to us and has used our reach and goodwill to carry information and suggestion to local farmers. At a joint meeting attended by him and his staff, Panchayat members and functionaries, and our workers, it was decided to popularize sunflower in our area. The ADO arranged for the seeds and gave us extension material which we distributed. Sunflower was successfully grown in about 100 acres in 7 villages

Documentation and survey

The work of pushing for an alternative to the universally accepted system of agriculture is not done only in the field. It is easy to tell a farmer what is wrong with the way he farms at present, for he knows much of it through his own experience, but it is far more difficult to convince him to change over to something he has not done before. A lot of facts and data have to be prepared to counter his legitimate misgivings, to dispel his doubts. Agriculture is always an uncertain investment, and much more so if one is to grow new crops in a new way. That is why both thorough surveys of local conditions, and meticulous documentation of our experiments, are so necessary in our extension activities. As a matter of fact, our

workers spend half their time on these things.

This year the following documentation work was done.

1. Survey of weeds - 20 villages were covered.
2. Listing the special local features of the ecosystem - every area where a farmers' group has most of its land has been covered.
3. Detailed land use maps were made of 4 villages.
4. Detailed data base of 56 crops were prepared, from seed to seed.
5. Herbaria housing weeds as also medicinal herbs have been set up, for easy identification.
6. In 20 villages, different varieties of 40 crops have been closely watched to keep records of pests etc.
7. A detailed list of material that can be used for compost at different seasons has been prepared in 6 villages.
8. In 7 villages a calendar has been prepared giving details of various techniques that can be followed to get the best results.
9. Sowing/planting and harvesting calendars have been prepared in 20 villages.
10. The most advantageous crop pattern for wetlands has been prepared. A group of students from a Kolkata college came and surveyed marine flora and fauna in water bodies and wetlands in our area.
11. Profiles have been prepared of 34 groups in 20 villages.
12. Case studies of interesting developments and achievements have been made.
13. Photographic documentation has been made of stages in various trials, of work on system plots and of experiments with some crops. We ourselves made a video recording of the fair in October.

Cooperative ventures

At Fatullyapur 10 farmers are commercially breeding fish. At Purba Shimulia one group has set up a nursery.

At Bhojpara, Fatullyapur, and Sarfrajpur groups have established rice stores where they deposit rice when they can spare it, to be sold at times of need to members.

Members of altogether 16 groups have formed sort of self-help groups to save money.

KITCHEN GARDEN

This is very much a part of our agriculture section, with the same person acting as supervisor, so there is no reason why it should be written about separately, except that we have every year done so. This programme runs in 12 villages in the three blocks of Deganga, Swarupnagar, and Baduria, through the 332 women who comprise 23 groups. Their main work is to utilize all the space available around the house and on the roof, to plant vegetable and medicinal herbs there according to a detailed plan, and use no chemicals so that the family can have some non-toxic vegetable every day, and use herbs for common ailments. Apart from this, the groups encourage saving by members, and generally use that money to do some productive work that brings some income to each member. They also acquire expertise in the proper use of medicinal herbs, to help neighbours, and are expected to work for development of their respective localities or the village.

Capacity building

The 23 groups altogether held 337 meetings where 2931 of their members were present. The discussion in these usually centres on how to improve their gardens, how to make and use organic fertilizer (mainly compost) and pesticide, how to keep better record of their work and trials, but public issues are also considered and the women often take part in the resolution of local problems of all types.

As we have for farmers who work in fields, for kitchen gardener women also there are graded training schedules. First, there are concept camps for the curious. Some of them might start something around their house and look for some more information. For 70 such women three primary trainings were held. Follow-up trainings are for those who have managed to develop a reasonably good garden but have some problem or the other or would like to know how to do better. Two such trainings were organized for 27 women. The free exchange of experience here helps the not-so-successful regain their enthusiasm. A training for group leaders was attended by 18 women.

Two women from England, one of them from Friends of Swanirvar, came for a week's visit. Both are enthusiastic organic farmers at home and both offered a lot of suggestions which we would like to follow up.

Trials

There were seven technique trials, done in 17 of our workers' gardens. Different types of mulch were compared, as were compost and fresh manure, fresh manure and pond sludge. A mixed cropping trial found that tomatoes and onions grown together helps both.

New crops were also tried, with mixed results.

Getting seeds, particularly of varieties that have escaped genetic modification, is always a problem, so we try to produce our own seeds. This year, 20 gardeners produced seeds for 7 vegetables that can be used next year.

Model gardens

This year our target was to have 20 model gardens. To qualify as one, a kitchen garden must be able to give something to the family kitchen almost round the year, following all the principles of SA. In addition, detailed records are to be kept of the progress of the garden, its produce, the economics of the work, how much money is spent on buying vegetables from the market now as compared with when the household had no garden, of medical expenses for the family now that medicinal herbs are available, nutrition is regular, and there is no toxicity in what the family now eats. On all these counts, the families record savings now, and a healthier life.

Through our efforts over the years, use of herbs for common ailments has grown rapidly in the villages and many people now know what herb is useful when. Still, some come to our gardeners who know more about these herbs. This year, there were 282 such patients who suffered from 23 ailments and they were treated, usually successfully, with 22 herbal products.

Savings

Women in each group save money regularly with the group to be used for some productive purpose later. For example, at Gokulpur two groups are trading in selected grocery items, at Rudrapur one group has chosen to make some snacks, and at Bajitpur one group is running a seed bank. At Belyakhali the group saves rice instead of money.

“PEOPLE’S” PANCHAYATS

In West Bengal, as in the rest of India with the honourable exception of Kerala since 1997, the three-tier Panchayats have never been allowed to assume the character of self-governing institutions that they were meant to be. They were not given any of the three Fs - Functions, Functionaries, or Finance - essential to get the people really involved in their own governance. The Gram Panchayat, the elected body at the lowest level, could have been a vehicle of direct democracy in action, but its representative aspect was all that was permitted to matter. The established tradition was unprepared for decentralization and all talk of villagers getting together to make their own plans remained just talk. Year after year, election after election, Panchayats continued to be just delivery agents of development schemes formulated in far-off capitals of an obsessively centralized structure.

We were not alone in dreaming about ideal Panchayats where all villagers would get involved in making a total development plan for themselves and their area, but we were one of the first, if not the first, in West Bengal, to try to transform the dream into actuality. Our previous years' reports bear this out. We were heartened when, in 2000, the West Bengal Government chose four out of the 350 blocks in the State for an experiment: it wanted models of people's plans to be created there. In 2001 the scope of the experiment was enlarged to cover 40 blocks, two from each district. One of the 40 was Baduria, where most of our work is.

Our thrill however was short-lived. Government manuals and orders had been talking unequivocally about taking all kinds of measures to involve the people in making the plan, but most Panchayats appeared to be more interested in making a “good” plan, undermining the people's participation bit. By June, 2002 we felt sure and sad we would have no role to play. Then, around 20 June, 2002 Bajitpur Gram Panchayat, in whose area Swanirvar had worked intensively for 10 years, invited us to help them with formulating a people's plan. Our earlier efforts had finally persuaded them that it was more important to ensure people's ownership of the plan rather than collect a lot of data, as was being forcefully recommended by a team from

the State Planning Board. This team's rationale was that a "good" plan will automatically lead to the emergence at a later stage of comprehensive "people's plan". We had begged to differ, and this GP was willing to give our ideas a try.

The Bajitpur Gram Panchayat represented about 3000 households in 12 booths (=Sansads) which is how a Panchayat constituency is called in our area. We started work with them in July and we give below a brief chronological summary of what we achieved in the rest of the year.

1. A planning committee was formed at every booth, with representation from every political party and every "para" (neighbourhood).
2. Each and every family was sent a letter inviting it to join in the process.
3. A Panchayat planning committee was formed with 4-5 persons from each booth committee.
4. The GP had around 40 "paras" in all and a meeting was held in each of them.
5. A slogan writing workshop was held, and about 50 walls were covered with slogans enjoining people's active participation as a means to effective empowerment.
6. Festoons were put up at important places.
7. Several notice boards were put up at every booth, where information found a secure and formal home.
8. A workshop was held to identify some easy activities for the people. A similar exercise was done then at every booth, identifying the issues and possible activities there.
9. Finally, in January some kind of a plan for the GP emerged.

The Swanirvar co-ordinator, Sujit Sinha, passionately involved in every stage of the work detailed above, was chosen by the State Government in November to be part of an 8-member team to design an ambitious 7-year project to revamp the whole Panchayat system at all three levels. It was named Strengthening Rural Decentralization and its entire cost of Rs 1,100 crore was to be borne by the British Government. It will encompass all the 3,300 GPs in the State, the 340 blocks/Panchayat Samitis and the 18 Zilla Parishads.

Some of the things we have done at Swanirvar should find a place in this State-wide design. More important, if village planning by villagers becomes a reality, it will mean that many of the things that Swanirvar and some other NGOs have developed over the years will have many takers. The very role of NGOs will change, besides just getting larger.

Swanirvar in 2002-2003

The working committee:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Sm Sandhya Mandal | President |
| 2. Shri Niranjan Paik | Secretary |
| 3. Shri Swapan Bhattacharya | Treasurer |
| 4. Shri Abdul Hannan | Member |
| 5. Shri Salahuddin Sardar | Member |
| 6. Shri Samir Biswas | Member |
| 7. Shri Prasanta Mandal | Member |
| 8. Shri Jiaul Haq. | Member |
| 9. Shri Sujit Sinha | Member |
| 10. Shri Tirthankar Mukherjee | Member |
| 11. Shri Debraj Bhattacharya | Special permanent invitee |

Administrative functionaries

- | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Shri Sujit Sinha | Co-ordinator |
| 2. Shri Debraj Bhattacharya | Deputy co-ordinator |
| 3. Shri Subhas Gain | Accountant-cum-cashier |

Staff break-up

<i>Department</i>	<i>No. of workers</i>	<i>No. of villages</i>	<i>Name of supervisor</i>
Agriculture and kitchen garden	24	32	Sandhya Mandal
Health and arsenic mitigation	10	25	Abdul Hannan
Primary education	14	4	Prasanta Mandal
Pre-primary education	33	14	Salahuddin Sardar
Microfinance	6 + 25 animators	35	Niranjan Paik
Youth and culture	13	7	Samir Biswas

How to contact Swanirvar

From the Kolkata area, call 953217 237446

From outside the Kolkata area, call 03217 237446

From outside India, call 91 3217 237446

Email addresses sujit568@cal3.vsnl.net.in

bhulutmyu@vsnl.net

Webpage <http://www.swanirvarbengal.org>