

SWANIRVAR

ANNUAL REPORT 2003 - 2004

**ANDHARMANIK
NORTH 24 PARGANAS
WEST BENGAL , INDIA 743401**

Looking back, and looking forward :

This is our 15th annual report, meaning we have completed 15 years of work on certain aspects of development in this geographical area, even though the first few of them saw more preparation than experimentation and/or implementation. We hope that never in this period have we lost sight of or strayed from our goal of developing some sustainable alternative models in some chosen fields. The idea was certainly ambitious, but was as certainly achievable, even if, more certainly, neither easily nor quickly so. We had hoped that as information about our ideas, experiments, and successes spread, others would come to find out and discuss how they could replicate these. Recognition that we are doing something meaningful is certainly pleasing but not worth much if it does not lead to others trying out such things. This could be the year, which we shall in future look back upon as when such requests for replication took concrete forms. Also, the gestures of recognition and appreciation were more frequent and came from diverse directions.

In 1999 the Government of India started the Swarnajayanti Gramin Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) scheme to encourage those below the poverty line to save and to meet their own credit needs by forming themselves into self-help groups (SHGs). NGOs and banks have been doing this sort of work for a number of years all over the world, particularly in the developing countries, but the SGSY was planned as a totally Government-run programme. After about four years the Government realized things were not going too well. In West Bengal, the records showed that some 70,000 SHGs had been formed, but quite a few of these possibly existed only on paper and many were limping along. And it would be very hard to find out the true situation.

At a meeting in August the State Panchayat and Rural Development Ministry asked CARE and its partner NGOs in the CASHE project, among them Swanirvar, to take complete charge of these groups. This was too big a responsibility for the NGOs who presented an alternative plan. This was accepted and the position at the end of the year was that five NGOs would each take charge of a district for three years. (One of these NGOs would look after two districts.) There would be 4 workers associated with the district office, and their main task would be to develop a system to strengthen the building-nurturing-monitoring process of the SHGs in that district. In December we were informed that the Government of India had approved of the plan. The State Government now had to persuade the concerned Zilla Parishads (district governments) to agree to work with the NGOs. This was done and the State Government signed a memorandum of understanding with Swanirvar, making us the District Technical Agency for North 24 Parganas.

It was certainly recognition of our past work but the future was daunting. Our own microfinance programme covered around 400 groups in four blocks but now we would have to work with something like 6000 groups in 22 blocks. We would need new workers and to train them and would constantly have to interact with sensitive sections like local politicians, middle-level bureaucrats, and other NGOs.

On 15 March we signed an agreement with the concerned department in our district to complete within two months a situation analysis of the existing SGSY delivery mechanism. Based on this we would then prepare an action plan on how to strengthen the government machinery over the next two years. This is a challenging assignment for us, and will test to the full our technical expertise as well as diplomatic skills.

Another such act of recognition also pertains to the microfinance programme. For long we had been looking for money at a reasonable rate of interest for our revolving loan fund. Finally UCO Bank sanctioned us a loan limit of Rs 50 lakh (= 5 million) in the form of cash credit. This is one of the biggest such deals in West Bengal between a commercial bank and an NGO acting as intermediary for giving loans to SHGs.

PME innovation

PME (Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation) is now considered to be an important tool in development work. One of our SHG leaders received training from CARE and PRISM and was taken on a study tour to some Kerala NGOs to develop her skills in how to apply it effectively with non-literate women. Over time, this has been honed to be more effective and is now used by some 10 of our SHGs. In essence, it involves putting information on a chart that uses, instead of words and figures, various indicators marked with colours and symbols. All the women involved in the exercise know what the colours and/or symbols stand for, and so they can easily refer to the chart and discuss the situation of each member and of the group as well. This innovation has attracted attention. A visitor from CARE South Africa who was in India on work, got to hear of this and came to us with senior colleagues from Kolkata and Delhi, to see the women use the method. CARE funded a film showing in detail how this works, and this film is being used by many SHGs in West Bengal as part of their training material.

Arsenic: moving to Nadia

The All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, which supervises the planning and implementation in various West Bengal districts of the arsenic mitigation project funded by the India-Canada Environment Facility, has asked us to take responsibility for the work in one block in Nadia district in the third phase of the work, to begin early in the financial year 2004-2005. It is difficult for an NGO to establish grassroots bases in an unknown area at such short notice, but the need for the work being too important, we overlooked our own convenience, and accepted the request. We went there and made some preliminary surveys.

In December there was a high-powered workshop on arsenic, with senior people from the State and Central governments, institutions working in the community health sector, and NGOs participating. Our successful work in that sector had led to our being asked to present the keynote paper on Community Participation. This our coordinator did.

SSK: ensuring quality education

The West Bengal Government has set up, mainly in small villages, more than 10,000 Sishu Siksha Kendras (SSKs) for primary-school-age children. These are the responsibility of the Panchayat Department, which does not have a support structure for such activities, unlike the Education Department which runs the existing primary schools. Also, the teachers' formal academic qualifications and salaries are much less than those of their counterparts in the older schools. All this means that there is some uncertainty about and little control over the quality of the teaching done at the SSKs. Recently UNICEF has agreed to pay for a few Quality Managers in every district to take care of this lacuna. Our coordinator was involved in formulating the training programmes for these managers, and as part of their training, 15 of them spent 5 days at Swanirvar, where they showed keen interest in our workshops with parents.

SUMMARY OF ACCOUNTS

Now for an account of our activities in 2003-2004, beginning with a brief summary of our accounts.

This year we received money from the following.

	Name of donor/donor agency	Amount in Rs
#	AllH&PH -- All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health	8,13,075.00
#	ASHA for Education, Stanford & Seattle, USA	8,00,705.00
#	CARE West Bengal	7,54,920.00
#	CRY -- Child Relief and You	7,14,810.00
#	FoS -- Friends of Swanirvar, Worcester, England	12,12,828.40
#	IFA -- Indian Friends Association, USA	2,28,806.00
#	S&C-- Share and Care Foundation for India, USA (this is mainly money raised by friends in and around Los Angeles)	2,91,975.00
#	Tirthankar Mukherjee	50,000.00
TOTAL		48,67,119.40
Apart from these we earned money from the following sources.		
#	Rent for guest accommodation	3,200.00
#	Subscription	490.00
#	Bank interest	28,533.56
TOTAL INCOME		48,99,342.96
We took the following loans during the course of the year.		
#	From CARE for women's self- help groups	18,50,000.00
#	From the West Bengal Minorities Development Finance Corporation, also for women's SHGs	1,00,000.00
#	UCO Bank, as cash credit for women's SHGs	46,88,804.00
TOTAL LOANS		66,38,804.00
TOTAL RECEIPTS		1,15,38,146.96

Our expenses, under three main heads, are given below.

A. Capital	Amount in Rs	Source of funds
Building	3,13,976.50	FoS
Furniture	15,831.00	CARE, ASHA
Equipment	18,925.00	S&C
Cycle	5,830.00	S&C
Motor cycle	88,290.00	CARE
TOTAL	4,42,852.50	
B. Programme		
Pre-primary education	6,14,287.00	CRY, S&C
Primary education	5,17,813.95	ASHA, CRY
Microfinance	6,75,331.50	CARE, IFA
Loan to SHGs	66,38,804.00	CARE, WMFDC, UCO Bank
Youth & culture	3,53,272.85	FoS, CRY
Agriculture	3,55,401.73	FoS
Health and Arsenic	6,23,096.20	AIH&PH, AID
Organization	25,493.40	S&C
Panchayat	26,650.80	S&C
Meetings & trainings	1,03,453.20	AIH&PH, CRY, S&C
Travelling	1,11,902.40	S&C, CARE, AIH&PH
Printing & stationery	84,109.35	CARE, AIH&PH, S&C
Publication, Documentation	38,721.50	CRY, CARE, Domestic, S&C,
TOTAL	1,01,68,337.88	
C. Administration		
Salaries, Fees	61,180.00	CRY, S&C, Dom, CARE
Bank charges	5,512.00	Dom, S&C
Electricity & Telephone	66,407.35	S&C, CARE, AIH&PH
Repairs	68,783.55	S&C, CARE, AIH&PH
Loan repayment	93,000.00	Domestic
TOTAL	2,94,882.90	
TOTAL PAYMENTS	1,09,06,073.28	

EDUCATION: Pre-primary

Basic statistics

An amicable solution to the Uttar Media imbroglio still eluding us, we have not resumed working there, so this year too we ran 14 centres for 3-5-year-old children in as many villages. The total number of "students" was 937 at the end of the year, 468 boys and 469 girls. More had joined initially but some, usually with parental encouragement, stopped coming after a while. There are 10 physically challenged children coming to these centres.

The average number of working days was 223 and attendance was 80%. There were 35 meetings with parents with altogether 1223 of them attending. At these, and also at other times, some parents offered some interesting suggestions about how the centres could be run to better effect, and we have implemented them at some places. Some 40 children from these centres participated in the Sahitya Sabhas organized and managed by our primary schools.

Supervise or perish?

The teachers organized and attended workshops throughout the year, held at both our administrative centre and various villages. The agenda at these was: making teaching/learning material, and/or discussion of national and global issues thrown up by The West Bengal Education Network (WBEN) and The National Alliance for Fundamental Rights to Education (NAFRE). The supervisor attended most of these workshops but he did not visit any school. This was part of our strategy to depend for continuous evaluation entirely on internal visits by peer groups, of which there were 126 during the year. A section of the teachers did not react favourably to this almost total withdrawal of the supervisor from the scene, and while they may have a point when they stress a sort of moral effect the supervisor's visit has on keeping them on their toes, we feel their resentment was more an expression of their lack of self-confidence, and of their inability to adjust to or accept a changing pattern.

The teachers have started interacting with those who run the Government's Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) centres at five places with 133 children. It is slow going but some of the inputs we offer are being accepted.

There is little to write on the progress of our planned work with the Village Education Committees (VECs). All of these were disbanded after the Panchayat elections in May and at most places new ones were yet to be formed when the year ended. We can join such a process or, at best, hasten it only after it is started, but we cannot initiate it. Seven of our teachers have become members of VECs in 5 villages and whether this number increases or not as more VECs are formed we hope to have more influence on the contents and style of functioning of the new committees.

WBEN: long road ahead

WBEN, of which we have been an active member since its inception in 1996, continues to function enthusiastically and this year the North 24 Parganas district unit has been strengthened by the addition of new members. It now comprises 23 community-based organizations (CBOs), 3 NGOs, and 7 individuals. WBEN's main agenda is the spread of universal child education, and we attended a number of meetings and workshops, both local and national, throughout the year, devoted to this. Right now our strategy is to generate widespread public awareness through campaigning and advocacy, in close cooperation with NAFRE. For this we took part in marches, visited a large number of households, talked to whatever VECs were there, to Panchayat members and Government officials, and urged politicians to make our agenda theirs also. Some of these activities attracted the attention of newspapers.

Honestly, not much has been achieved. In villages, education, in both its contents and quality, remains a low-priority area, an almost inessential component of survival among a population that has lost the confidence to think of life as anything more than that. Most panchayats do not take a single resolution on improving the quality of education in the schools in its area. People are agitated over the lack of or the condition of roads, over erratic or non-existent electricity, over distant or non-functioning tube wells etc., but express little concern about the absence of schools, or their decrepit condition, or the generally poor quality of the "education" available to their children. It will be a long and arduous way for us in WBEN to surmount individual, community, and Government apathy to quality universal primary education and widespread disregard for a child's right to a better life with more possibilities and fewer compulsions.

EDUCATION: Primary

Basic statistics

We are now running four primary schools. The ones at Chandalati, Andharmanik, and Fatullyapur teach children from Class I to Class IV, and the Matia centre has provision for Classes I and II. In most other ways also, particularly relating to the very important ones of facilities and resources, the Matia centre lacks many things that the older three have, but we persist with it because it is the only school in the area which will take and then care for children of the sex workers of Matia and we have to respect the desperate plea of these mothers to allow their children access to some formal education.

At the four centres together this year there were 512 students -- down 18 from the 530 on the rolls when the school year began -- with 267 boys and 245 girls. Of them seven had some physical disability or the other. Attendance was 87.5% and the schools worked for 223 days on an average, but the teachers continued with their practice of working on chores other than taking classes, on days when the students were on holiday and their working year included 250 days on an average.

Less of both roti and kapda

This year there was no specific funding for giving any food to the children, nor for uniforms, so we had to dip into our own limited resources. We could thus give only one set of uniform to the students, instead of the minimum necessary two, and no food could be given. Happily, neither affected attendance, but we do hope we have funds for more on both counts next year. Altogether 103 children finished Class IV and they have all gone on to one or the other of the 12 local high schools.

The children had a day out on 5 occasions. This is primarily to let them have some fun, but we try to plan the trips in a way that they, particularly the older children, also get to learn something new. Those in Classes I to III of Fatullyapur were taken to a pleasure park in another village across the Ichhamati. There they studied the leaves of the various trees, some of them not too common in the area, learnt about how big trees became sources of fossil fuel, and about the history of the park. The children of these three classes at Andharmanik went to a nearby village, where three elderly persons told the Class III children details of the "biography" of an ancient tree, while the younger children studied leaves and branches of other trees and also learnt about how trees provide fuel.

The Matia children were taken to a place with two well-known temples, and they also observed the various differences among many trees. The Chandalati school sent its Class III children, who are all Muslim, to visit a nearby Hindu temple, the area around which has been the venue of a large fair during a Vaishnava festival for many decades now, and they learnt about the history of the place, the temple, and the fair. The younger children went to a market town, where they saw the many shops, and observed the local flora. The Class IV children in all the schools were taken to Kolkata zoo. Many of them later wrote about the trip and about how the sight of animals never before seen in the flesh had moved them, and some of these essays and poems were read out at the Sahitya Sabhas.

Activities in school

The system of evaluation through the traditional two formal examinations on all subjects continues, though we have always tried to see that the emphasis shifts from the usual sadistic test of what the student does not know to a sympathetic exploration of what he has actually learnt. The innovation this year has been the introduction of continuous classroom evaluation. The phrase comes more easily than its practice, but the teachers are courageously adjusting themselves to various conceptual problems related to both what is to be evaluated and how this is to be done.

The reading habit is slowly catching up. Altogether 296 children borrowed books from the school libraries 952 times. Maybe they would read more if we could offer more titles on more subjects, but apart from the monetary constraint, there does not seem to be enough books of good quality that would appeal to rural children, whose areas of interest and curiosity are not necessarily the same as those of their urban counterparts who are the main targets of the organized book trade.

The annual sports meet was held in every village.

The translation of all the five books in Digantar's *Apne Aas Paas* series has now been finally published with some changes to adapt themselves to local conditions. Two are already in use in Classes I and II, and the other three will be used in Classes III and IV from next year. Teachers' and students' feedbacks are being collected and recorded and

we hope to discuss this with Digantar to improve the contents and presentation, if the need is felt.

Children's committees have been strengthened and there are now five of them in three schools. There are groups, each responsible for one or more of the following.

- ✓ Ensuring that everybody pours water after using the toilets, and also keeping them clean;
- ✓ Keeping the premises and classroom materials clean and in order;
- ✓ Taking care of all games material, bringing them when needed, and then collecting them back,
- ✓ Collecting the manuscripts submitted for use at the Sahitya Sabhas;
- ✓ Collecting various seeds which will be used in discussions on nature and nurture of various crops and plants;
- ✓ Running the library.

Each committee has a child as coordinator, and works for the full year, at the end of which, based on the judgement of all students, the individuals and groups with the best performance are given prizes.

Teachers' activities

The teachers held 14 meetings this year to review past performance, and to prepare future lesson plans. They also held four workshops, two of which were on setting questions according to the new principles of evaluation, one on preparing new kinds of teaching-learning material, and the last on preparing a detailed plan for cooperating with teachers of Government schools. The supervisor was present at most of these workshops and meetings.

All the teachers together visited each school twice in the year to compare notes to improve their own performance and skills. The supervisor visited the schools 80 times in the year, watching teachers and children at work, taking a class, attending parents' workshops, and discussing problems.

Our efforts to give a new direction to the teaching and learning of Bengali continued this year. The stress is on the development of four basic skills -- attentive listening, fluency in speech, reading, and writing. Our feeling that the children are indeed doing better was bolstered by the reaction of the teachers at Government schools who attended our Sahitya Sabhas. However, the general improvement has not made us blind to the fact that every year about 30% of the children fail to acquire the minimum competence in one or more of these four components of linguistic skill.

Involvement of parents and the community

The teachers made 1763 home visits, most of them at Andharmanik and Matia. At Matia the families usually have more problems than elsewhere with the children's schooling and need constant reassurance and encouragement. At Andharmanik, a rumour was floated that children passing out from our schools would not be accepted in the local high schools. Some parents panicked and started to withdraw their children and put

them elsewhere. To counter the motivated propaganda and allay parents' fears, we made many individual house visits, and held neighbourhood meetings also. At the other two villages, such visits were usually made only when the teachers felt the parents needed to be told about some problem with a child's progress or behaviour. This we have always done, as the informal atmosphere at home encourages uninhibited discussion in which the child may also take part.

There were five general meetings with parents held at the schools, two at Matia and one each at the other three places. Altogether 350 parents attended these meetings, with the mothers vastly outnumbering the fathers. These meetings usually discussed how parents can help the schools work better, and how they can make sure that children observe at home what they have learnt at school. Among the decisions were that parents should watch over the children's personal hygiene and cleanliness, should see to it that they do some study at home, that every mother should come to the school at least once a month to see her child at work, that the parents should themselves come to pay the fees every month - the amount, fixed by the village organization, usually after discussions with parents, varies from school to school between Rs 5 and Rs 10 a month, and nowhere is there any pressure on parents whose circumstances are known to be difficult.

Since such general parents-teachers meetings are now a regular feature of our schools, parents of those in Classes II to IV know what is expected of them. New mothers at all places felt that the meeting should be held as soon as possible after the school year begins so that they get to understand what their role is to be and what they should do at home with their children in Class I. We agree with this, and in the coming years might restrict the scope of these meetings to an orientation for new parents, laying stress on the parents' workshops instead.

Parents as also local persons are invited to address a class if they have any special knowledge or interesting information to share with the children. This year 19 such guest speakers came to talk to the children. Some were expert story tellers, some had things to say about the local environment, some knew unusual facts about the village's past, some had interesting and educative anecdotes to narrate from their own life -- but all managed to arouse the children's curiosity about life and the locality.

Parents as "students"

Workshops with parents were begun last year, and generated so much enthusiasm among the participants and demand among those who had not been able to attend that this year we organized 14 of them in the four villages. 146 fathers and 467 mothers who were divided into 91 groups came to these. Last year's report gave details of what happens at these workshops. This year a number of work cards prepared by parents were actually later used in class. There were discussions on local festivals -- how things have changed not only in what is observed but also in how it is observed -- on varieties of rice -- how so many have disappeared because the green revolution demanded standardization -- on games played, mostly by children, and some other topics that gave us invaluable information on local history, the sort of creative input we want for our History syllabus.

Towards the very end of the year, 28 mothers from all four villages met our teachers and the supervisor at Andharmanik for a workshop. These "resource mothers" discussed

how they could help produce better and more effective teaching/learning material, and how they could help other mothers get more involved in the schools' affairs and in their children's development.

This kind of community participation is very encouraging but now we have to see to it that the enthusiasm does not flag and that some positive results are achieved.

Aiming at the mainstream

For the last few years we have maintained close and regular contact with some teachers in some primary schools, trying to persuade them to get involved with our curricular and pedagogic experiments, hoping that they would find these interesting and effective enough to create a bottom-up pressure within the system. Joint Rakhi Bandhan celebrations with government schools, their numbers rising every year, have been taking place for quite some years. This year, apart from our own schools' Sahitya Sabhas, there were 5 such Sabhas -- two each at Fatullyapur and Andharmanik, and one at Chandalati — where children from other schools also participated. As usual, children did everything to do with putting up the programmes. The total number of children who went up on the stage was 372, and about 2000 children and 2000 adults watched them.

We had hoped this kind of joint activity would be a major thrust of our work during the year but this did not happen. It is not simply a case of our having been too ambitious, which in the Swanirvar scheme of things, is not at all bad for a development organization. What actually happened was that, first, many of the Panchayat reforms, on which depended the implementation of our ideas, never materialized, and, second, we could not control the performance of "external" actors in our draft screenplay, and this, despite our best efforts, was not good enough.

Right from the beginning of the year we started holding meetings with teachers in selected Government primary schools, panchayat members, members of VECs (Village Education Committees which, unfortunately, are almost everywhere non-functional) and finally we could organize parents' workshops at four schools. A total of 81 fathers, 112 mothers, 12 teachers, 28 VEC members, and 10 Swanirvar workers participated in these. At one place some high school-going older siblings of the children at the primary school also joined the workshop. Ensuring that the children acquire a regular school going habit, and preventing them from dropping out were the two major concerns.

Finally, a joint workshop

After prolonged preparatory work finally a joint workshop, attended by the two education supervisors of Swanirvar and its secretary, all its primary teachers, and 25 teachers — 17 of them headmasters -- from 23 Government schools, was held at Fatullyapur in February. There were 3 women in this 25 and the schools were from four Gram Panchayats and one municipality. Two of these teachers are also resource persons for the Government's official training programme and they are now using some of the ideas discussed at the workshop. One Gram Panchayat Pradhan and a Panchayat Samiti member sat at the workshop for some time.

The workshop aimed at devising new methods of (i) teaching in general, (ii) planning lessons better, and (iii) involving more parents, VEC members, and other interested outsiders in school work. The participants broke up into six groups, each given a particular subject and a class like, say, Class II Bangla, Class IV Geography, etc. Their tasks were (i) to list the competencies that they expect students to acquire, (ii) to decide on the activities/processes through which this acquisition will come, and (iii) to identify the teaching aids that would be most effective. Our teachers were instructed to keep a low profile, and a government teacher also presented the outcome of a group's deliberations.

One thing our teachers did do was to emphasize the need to incorporate the local angle wherever and whenever possible, especially in history, geography, and environment studies. Our teachers also got some new ideas from the discussions and some quite interesting sample teaching aids were made and presented.

This linking of competencies to the teaching/learning process and to designing aids -- and doing everything hands on -- was certainly a challenge to the government teachers, even though the concepts might not have been all that novel to them. The difference was between hearing something in a training course and getting the opportunity to do it themselves. Some of them did show a fair amount of rigidity but mostly they were innovative and good.

The most important thing was that most were enthusiastic and wanted this to be a continuous process. To bypass the need to seek formal permission from their departmental superiors to attend another workshop on a working day, they even said they would come during a vacation.

Points to ponder

But before that happens, we have to decide on a few things.

Should we do another such workshop with a new set of teachers?

Should we ask the more receptive and innovative of these participants to come for a more advanced workshop?

Should we ask only Government resource persons to a workshop, hoping they would then be impressed enough to use many of our ideas in the official training programmes?

Instead of having our teachers as low-key resource persons, should we ask some well-known and high-profile names to conduct the workshop?

Whatever our choice it is a long and hard process to organize something like this, requiring a lot of personal contacting. Indeed, we first thought of such a workshop in 2001 and it took us almost three years to arrange this, but we most certainly cannot afford to take that long before the next one.

MICROFINANCE

CARE West Bengal continues to support us in various ways in running this programme, which has now been extended to villages in four blocks -- Baduria, Deganga, Habra I, and Swarupnagar. The following tables tell the story of our progress in the past year.

Five basic figures

	2002-2003	2003-2004
# No.of villages	45	54
# No.of groups	360	463
# Total members (all women)	4926	6017
# Total savings of the groups	Rs 21,76,766	Rs 36,53,374
# Repayment rate	91%	93%

Relative progress during the year

	2002-2003	2003-2004
No. of new groups formed	78	116
No. of new members	862	1328
No. of groups disbanded	21	13
No. of members leaving	754	237
No. of loans	1923	2799
Total loans from Swanirvar's revolving fund	Rs 56,72,500	Rs 1,22,41,500
Interest rate paid by groups	12%	12%
Loans given by groups from their own savings	Rs 21,92,206	Rs 35,00,247
Interest income earned by Swanirvar	Rs 3,04,788	Rs 6,87,888
"Service charge" paid to Swanirvar	Rs 53,530	Rs 1,22,370
Loans taken by Swanirvar for revolving fund	Rs 18,38,000	From CARE Rs 18,55,000 From WBMDFC Rs 1,00,000 From UCO Bank Rs 50,00,000 in the form of cash/credit Total Rs 69,55,000
Number of loan products	3	3

Notes

1. **Groups' number and membership:** We have meticulously kept track of the activities of every group, to identify the incompetent, and evaluated the sincerity and performance of every member to single out the incorrigible underachievers. Such weeding out is essential for both immediate results and long-term morale. This year's number of new groups formed as also of new women joining is higher than last year's. In both cases we have to keep in mind the number of those who left. Thus, the figures in the first table give the number of new groups this year as 103 (463-360), but this should actually be 116, as mentioned in the second table, because 13 groups were derecognized. Similarly the number of new members according to the first table would be 6017 - 4926, or 1091, but the 237 women who resigned their membership during the year should also be counted, that is why the number of new members given in the second table is 1328. Also important is the fact that this year's

number of both groups and individuals leaving was considerably fewer than last year's.

- 2. Borrowing for the revolving fund:** At the beginning of the year this was one of our major worries. CARE lent us Rs 18,55,000 at 10.5% which was pretty steep. The West Bengal Minorities Development and Finance Corporation's rate, at 4.5%, was much more manageable but it could lend us only Rs 1,00,000 which was too little for our needs. At long last we were able to persuade UCO Bank to let us open a cash/credit account with them for Rs 50,00,000 at 9% interest. We have paid back what was due to CARE, and the UCO Bank arrangement, with scope for raising the credit limit further, should see us through the coming years until the women's self-help groups (SHGs) form their own Federation and all financial transactions cease to be Swanirvar's responsibility.
- 3. Size of loans:** There is no hard and fast rule about this, but on an average the first time a member got a loan, it used to be for around Rs 3000, while her second loan was for between Rs 4500 and Rs 5000, the third for between Rs 5000 and Rs 10,000, and the fourth for between Rs 10,000 and Rs 15,000. All these figures have gone up this year, as the borrowers felt the amounts they used to sanction themselves previously did not really meet their needs, particularly as experience has made them better at using the loan more profitably. The good repayment rates must also have been a factor behind the groups' deciding to release such bigger loans.

Capacity building

We now have 22 clusters, each comprising 15 to 20 groups. Every group selects two of its members to represent it at the cluster level. Each cluster in its turn sends two members to the Federation which thus has 44 members now. They in turn elect five members to the governing body, which also includes five women chosen by SHG members from among themselves, three representatives from Swanirvar, and two outside experts.

We have taken various steps to strengthen the competence, resolve, and capacity of the groups, the clusters, the federation, and their respective individual members to progressively become responsible for local development and for themselves in the programme. We give below some details of what we did in this sphere.

- 1. Bookkeeping training:** Each group has a member to work as its cashier. We arranged for brief training courses for all of them, divided into teams, to help them improve their accountancy skills. Altogether 17 such courses were held. Quite a few group leaders also attended these courses.
- 2. Cluster-level trainings:** Altogether 144 members of different clusters attended 5 training courses arranged at Swanirvar to enable them hone their existing skills and to learn new ones in various areas of administration, group management, financial transactions, etc.
- 3. Cluster-level workshops:** Altogether 148 women from the clusters participated in 6 workshops where the agenda was a detailed discussion of the various internal and external problems faced by the groups and finding out the most effective ways of resolving them.

4. **Workshops for federation members:** All federation members took part in 3 workshops to identify their roles and responsibilities, and to acquire more skills in doing their job. Two other issues discussed were the absolute and relative status of the 20 clusters, and planning for the future.
5. **Networking and establishing linkages:** The time should soon come when individual SHGs are seen to establish contact with local government institutions and the bureaucracy at various levels. Six formal meetings were arranged when group members could interact with functionaries like Panchayat members, Pradhans, BLDOs, ADOs, BDOs, etc., to gain self-confidence.
6. **Internal visits:** We have always had these but this year certain modifications were effected. First, instead of one group visiting another, a team was formed with two or three members from several groups and this team visited one of the better-functioning groups. This year was also the first time that members of a cluster went to see what another cluster was doing and how. Altogether 20 such visits were made, at both levels, this year.

Annual conferences

Every cluster held its own conference where every affiliated group's successes and failures were identified, problems analyzed, solutions recommended, plans for the next year adopted, and all elections held.

The Federation held its annual conference at the end of February. The four area offices sent 4500 members of SHGs, and they were joined at Kolsur High School by cluster representatives. Such a large non-political gathering had not been held in the area before and more marvellous to the onlookers was the fact that it was all women.

Among visitors to the day-long deliberations were the local MP, the local MLA, members and the Saha Sabhadhipati (deputy chief) of the Zilla Parishad, the chairman of Baduria Municipality, Panchayat members and Pradhans, BDOs, officials from the UCO Bank and the Minorities Development and Finance Corporation, heads of local high schools, and local notables. Many of them addressed the women.

Each cluster presented an analytical report of its work during the year, and there was an exhibition of material produced by SHG members to describe their activities. Elections to the Federation governing body were held. It was not all work and no play. Throughout the day, the SHG women broke the monotony of speeches and elections and reports by presenting various items of entertainment. Prizes for good performance were given to some field workers, known as social animators in this programme. The conference was reported by the Kolkata centre of Doordarshan in all its three evening news bulletins.

HEALTH

Shift in programme emphasis

Our health programme has two basic thrusts - arsenic mitigation, and mother and child care. We started with the second but in the course of the past few years, with the presence of arsenic in drinking water everywhere in our work area assuming lethal proportions, the first became our priority. We work 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 totally funded by the India-Canada Environment Facility. This year we worked in 15 villages in the second phase of the project.

We made good use of our experience in the first phase when we had covered 10 villages. People are not easily convinced of the dangers of ingesting arsenic as these remain invisible and unfelt for a long time, but it is imperative that they take preventive measures, for when the symptoms are finally seen it is usually too late to do anything about them. Thus we spread awareness by disseminating information through various methods. The table below summarizes our efforts in this direction. While most of the work was done in the 15 villages covered by the second phase, some contact was still kept with those in the first, to make sure that maintenance work was not neglected.

	Number Attendance		M	W
Meetings with beneficiaries' committees	13	724	575	149
Sittings with residents of a neighbourhood	84	2366	1190	1176
Meetings with Panchayat members	1	9	9	0
Workshop	1	33	27	6
Putting up street plays	14	5076		
Magic shows	3	2500		
Marches by primary school children	1	270		
Home visits	715			
PRA meetings	2	156	152	4

Awareness was spread also by distribution of various types of instructional, educational, and communication (IEC) material in villages, and to private medical practitioners in the area, health centre doctors and other staff, high school and primary school students, workers at places like banks and post offices, and to selected members of the general public. The material included both table and wall calendars, banners, tin boards, rain-and-sun-guards, jerseys, caps, normal umbrellas, and garden umbrellas for use at gatherings or fairs.

There were 1620 tube wells in the 15 villages, and we tested the water of 920 of them. Of these 593 were found to be dangerous beyond usable level -- and 436 have been marked as such -- 170 just about usable, and 157 were free of arsenic. Even though they did not fall in our work area we tested water from 547 tube wells, 90 of them in Government establishments and 457 at private places, in 22 villages in the three blocks of Baduria, Deganga, and Swarupnagar. On Saturdays villagers can get water from their tube wells tested for a small fee if they bring it to our office, and this year 281 such samples were received.

Removal techniques

This year arsenic removal plants were installed in 10 of the 15 villages in the second phase. The villagers' committees chose their own model from a variety available. In the other five we were still distributing domestic filters when the year ended. These filters were designed and developed by us and were approved for efficacy by the AIH & PH after rigorous and prolonged testing during which it made some suggestions for improved functioning which we incorporated. Since they are for use by a household they have to be cheap. With some subsidy from the project we give it for Rs 80 each to families below the poverty line, and for Rs 100 to those above it. Altogether 60 filters have been distributed in nine villages, 34 to families below the poverty line, and 26 to those above.

We organized medical camps in 14 villages to identify victims of arsenicosis. Altogether 843 persons came with symptoms like various forms of skin lesions or eruptions, asthma or some other chronic breathing problem, long-term digestive problems etc., and 46 of them were diagnosed as suffering from the disease, in its various stages and showing diverse symptoms.

Film made on our work

When ICEF wanted a film made on the project it chose Swanirvar as the location. In February, a filming team from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation came here, along with officials of ICEF and AIH & PH.

We have not seen the final edited version of the documentary, but the following situations were filmed at Bhojpara village.

- # the inauguration of an arsenic removal plant, during which street theatre and magic shows by Swanirvar teams were used as awareness raising tools,
- # Interviews with a trained doctor and an arsenic patient,
- # interview with a water user group.

Then the team went to another village, Sarfarajpur, and filmed another plant, of a different model, and interviewed the water user group there.

Community health

Even with all our health workers deeply involved in the arsenic mitigation project, we did not allow our usual activities relating to mother and child care and general health and public hygiene to languish in the villages of Chandalati, Bajitpur, Fatullyapur, and Parpatna-Beliyakhali-Baxirhati. They looked after the contraceptive needs of the 1752 eligible couples there, were always on hand when any of the 177 pregnant women needed advice and information, kept birth weights, and recorded all the 153 births in the villages. Of these 153, 30 took place at a health centre, 119 at home and assisted by untrained women, and 4 were assisted by a trained birth attendant. Of the newborn, 86 were male, and 67 female. Our workers provided various kinds of assistance at the six vaccination camps held in the area. Six other proposed camps could not be held, as there was no vaccine at the time. There were six pulse polio camps.

There were 4 cases of natural miscarriage, and 4 women chose to have their pregnancy medically terminated. In family planning 15 women went for ligation or sterilization, 18 for a copper T, 448 were on the pill, and five preferred injections. Among men, there was no

sterilization, but 160 regularly used condoms. There were five stillborn children, six died in their first 12 months, one between 1 and 5 years of age, and 47 deaths occurred after age 5.

We held 16 blood donation camps and collected 949 units of blood. This could be more if we followed the common practice of organizing such camps in the pleasanter months of winter, but since summer is when there is an acute shortage of blood, we try to procure as much then as is possible. Our habit of winning the West Bengal Voluntary Blood Donors' Association trophy for the organization to collect most blood units in a year was not broken this year too.

YOUTH and CULTURE

Our workers continued to teach the children in our schools -- and besides them, other interested children in the villages -- songs, dances, action recitations and some other mediums of creative entertainment, as also yoga and some other forms of physical exercise, and the children continued to be invited to perform at many places. This has become routine for our workers, but that does not mean they approach it with less enthusiasm or care. Indeed, the children would not let them do so even if they wanted.

However, our thrust in this department has over the years very much shifted to our work with older children in the villages, those attending the local high schools.

This year 244 such teenagers were actively involved in Kishor Kishori Bahini work in 7 villages. Previous years' reports explain in detail why we found it necessary to form the KKB and gave details of the usual activities of this very innovative, committed, and competent group. The present report will not repeat these and will talk about new developments only.

“Give us more to do”

We have only one worker in most villages, and two in some, and it is often too much work for them to run existing activities, and at the same time to devise and implement new ones. Senior KKB members relieved the workers of some responsibility. The 21 who are now more involved have formed a network of their own to coordinate work in the 7 villages. This usually meets once every two months.

They have formed Eco Groups to facilitate growth of awareness of ecological issues among high school students in the outlying areas of their villages. The response has been good, and 173 children have joined these groups in the 7 villages. The job of nurturing them is totally the seniors'.

The environment-related activities of the KKB as part of their work for the State-level Ecology and Natural Resources Education (ENRE) network formed the basis of two books published this year by Service Centre, the environment and agriculture resource NGO that leads the network. One of them was on water and the other on medicinal herbs.

The KKB seniors have also become good trainers. Apart from training the Eco Groups' members, they conducted a first aid training successfully

Recycle and decorate

KKB members have started producing some handicraft items. They recycled used paper to make wall hangings, paper bags, and greeting cards. These were sold locally as well as in Kolkata. It will take better and longer efforts to make something commercially viable out of this but the youngsters have got the confidence that they will be able to do this. One big boost to their morale came when some decorative items they had made with similarly recycled paper and with waste plastics were chosen for display at an exhibition in Japan.

They do not produce items to appeal only to the buyer's aesthetic needs. They have also become good at making mango and lemon squash, tomato sauce, and mango jelly. Some have been sold in Kolkata but it is difficult for amateur village producers to conform to the standardized urban taste for flavour and sweetness. It was easier to sell the stuff locally, and, indeed, the demand this year outran the supply.

Last year we wrote that putting the KKB in charge of the village libraries we set up, mostly for children and young adults, was proving to be a good idea. Things have continued to improve. There are now 1386 volumes in the 7 libraries and the total number of borrowings this year was 1949. Many of the books have been received as donation, and quite a number of them were in poor condition. We arranged to train some KKB members in the basics of book binding. After this, they repaired many of the books. The quality of their work was good enough to persuade some local people to ask them to bind their books, and some of the youths managed to make some money this way.

KKB members from three villages organized a big event to generate awareness of the hazards of plastic. Kolsur Boys' High School very kindly allowed us to use its building. Its students, as also those from Kolsur Girls' High School, joined KKB members in various activities throughout the day. These included processions, wall writings, an anti-plastic puppet show, a debate competition, exhibition of various items made with recycled plastic and recycled paper, charts prepared by the KKB following surveys it conducted on various local problems, and such things. There was an emphasis on the use of paper as an alternative to plastic and on the need to recycle both plastic and paper. Teachers from both schools lent a helping hand. We very much hope some of them will be induced to incorporate some of the KKB activities in their classroom transactions.

Among these surveys was one on the different varieties of rice grown in our area and an analysis of the data gathered. This was mentioned in an issue of *The Gobar Times*, a journal published from New Delhi.

Varying the routine

Some routine activities were pursued a little differently this year. Before embarking on the annual Clean Your Village campaign on Gandhi's birthday, KKB members held meetings with general villagers, to involve them also in the community activity and also to collect some money. Unfortunately but predictably, the older people's enthusiastic verbal support was not translated into active practical cooperation in most places.

Detailed and careful financial accounts are now being kept of the transactions in the kitchen gardens and nurseries for which KKB members are responsible, so that their environmental utility can be backed up by financial viability.

On several occasions KKB members arranged shows for villagers to explain to them how apparent supernatural powers are actually sleight of hand, or can be attained by rigorous practice by just about anybody. Rational and scientific arguments were used to dispel various common and popular superstitions.

Some parents have seemed uncertain about the worth and merit of, and the need for, what the KKB does. It could also be that their sympathies lie with the status quo. Some parents, on the other hand, are enthusiastic about what they perceive their children to be doing and would like to help them, if they knew how. In some villages, therefore, our workers held a formal meeting with parents to exchange ideas. Many cobwebs were removed and many windows opened.

Many parents must have been greatly heartened by what happened at Beliyakhali and at Bajitpur. Work on electrification at the former, and some work on small irrigation at the latter were held up because nobody had a clear idea of how the land lay, literally. Mouza maps prepared by KKB members came in handy and saved the Government a lot of work and time.

The usual trainings were held, including on topics like adolescence, life skills, and mediation.

“PEOPLE’S PANCHAYAT”

In limbo

Last year’s report mentioned how Swanirvar was able to persuade the Bajitpur Gram Panchayat in Baduria block to activate and implement a process which would lead to a “people’s plan”. That report also gave details of our work with about 3000 families in 12 booths /Sansads (a panchayat constituency) towards this end and what we were able to achieve.

Some kind of a plan had emerged but before anything more could be done fresh panchayat elections were held in May, 2003. Political control of this particular panchayat passed on to a new group, which immediately ordered cancellation of all the work done so far by the villagers with our help. There the matter rests now.

Can you rightly claim your rights?

However, many of the large number of villagers -- specially women from the many self-help-groups of the area -- who had been thrilled with their newly discovered rights as citizens wished to exercise their responsibilities seriously. This was shown at the various Sansad meetings in November, 2003. A Sansad meeting is where all voters in a booth are supposed to come to discuss the working of the panchayat and ask questions of its functionaries. Usually very little publicity is given to the date and time of these meetings, with the result that few villagers manage to come, with few or none of them caring or daring to ask questions. Accountability has never been a feature of the Indian body politic where all parties in power prefer a pliant passive voter to a nosey participatory citizen. This is against the basic principles of local self-government, and the planning

exercise has made many villagers aware of the difference their changed attitude can make.

At several such Sansad meetings in that panchayat area, villagers came in large numbers, and many of them were women, particularly from the self-help groups. They put pressure on the panchayat authorities to place a formal report on the work done in the previous months, to present a statement of accounts, and to involve people in general when deciding on who would be the beneficiaries of schemes to be taken up for implementation. Such expressions of the democratic spirit in action usually led to the authorities declaring the meeting to be over without taking any decision. At one such meeting the Panchayat Executive Assistant gave his word that the list of beneficiaries prepared with popular consent would be adhered to and villagers could take legal action against him in case this was not done.

After their months of participation in the planning process, the villagers are naturally feeling frustrated at having to return to their position of a silent onlooker. This is particularly true of the members of our women's self-help groups who now feel equal to handling a number of and different kinds of responsibilities.

There are some lessons for us in this. First, participatory exercises can lead to rising expectations and, then and thus, to stronger disappointments. Second, organized women can spearhead demands for accountability, but apart from political unease, this can lead to severe gender-oriented tension in a small community. Third, it is absolutely essential to have a neutral authority to ensure that villagers' statutory rights are not ignored.

Our co-ordinator was part of the team set up to design the Civil Society Strengthening Programme in West Bengal, to be funded by the British Government. In December he chaired a big meeting in Kolkata called to discuss in detail the draft of the design. Those who attended the meeting included representatives of around 40 major NGOs, and officials from both the British and the West Bengal Governments.

CASA, a large Church-based funding agency, asked our co-ordinator and a senior faculty at the West Bengal Government's State Institute of Panchayats and Rural Development to conduct a workshop for panchayats for about 25 of their partner NGOs working in various districts. Service Centre, another big NGO, asked the same two persons to conduct a workshop on West Bengal panchayats for a visiting team from Bangladesh.

AGRICULTURE

Swanirvar continued to work for the promotion of ecologically and economically sustainable agriculture. We remain a member of the State-wide Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) led by the Development Communication Research and Service Centre -- Service Centre for short -- but from this year there has been a change in the relationship. For many years Service Centre funded our entire agriculture and kitchen garden work, but there are no longer any financial ties between us, though it continues to be a very helpful network partner and well-endowed resource organization. The ever-generous

Friends of Swanirvar in Worcester, England came forward to meet most of our financial needs.

“The morrow will take care of itself”

We have been working, and working very hard too, on this programme for more than 10 years now but cannot claim to have as yet had any remarkable impact on the agricultural practices in a widespread area. The theoretical concept of sustainability, its goals, and the means to achieve it appeals easily and largely to the non-farmer consumer, but to the men who are working on the field, particularly the small and marginal farmers who are the majority of landowners in our area, no matter how badly they suffer from the ill effects of the almost entirely chemical-based farming that they are forced to do, a changeover to bio-farming practices threatens disaster. Few have the resources or means to adopt long-term views in place of immediate gain or survival.

This makes our work difficult, but we knew it would be so, and are prepared to wait for results as we keep on working to spread the message. More and more farmers in the small area where we work are showing interest, but their number is of no consequence in terms of the district, let alone the State or the country. Happily the Government departments are gradually, if ever so slowly, adopting some of the things we and others have been trying to popularize and experiment with for years.

Our work in agriculture has two main areas -- field crops and kitchen gardens. We work in 25 villages, in 9 of these only with kitchen gardens, in 8 only with field crops, and in the other 8 with both. There are 21 farmers' groups with 290 members, all men, and 22 kitchen gardeners' groups with 286 members, all women.

There are two kinds of kitchen gardens — ordinary gardens and system gardens. There are 80 of the first variety in 17 villages and 21 of the second in 8. The main goal in both is to utilize all available space, not use any chemicals, and to get something to eat throughout the year, but there are some differences of detail between them. An ordinary garden will be using any land close to the house, big trees and/or frames for creeper vegetables, and the roof. A system garden must in addition have at least five kinds of vegetables, a live hedge, and use various techniques.

In field crops we have 10 system plots on high land in 10 villages, and 4 on low land in 2 villages. The first follows mixed cropping so that there will be something standing on the land the year round, making for more income for the farmer, more food security, more independence as he can keep his own seeds, and for more fertility for the soil following exclusively organic inputs. In the second our goal is to help the farmer get three crops a year, and raise his income by utilizing the low land to grow rice, vegetables, and fish.

Capacity building

Propagating sustainability in agriculture involves convincing farmers to change their mindset about all aspects of their work. They have to question everything. What crops are best for me in the long run? Why should I change/persist with what I grow? How shall I grow enough to maintain the fine balance between immediate productivity, short-term monetary gain, and long-term ecological health? These and other such questions are not easy to answer -- indeed it is often difficult to know what questions to ask. We too may have a fair idea of the broad outlines but cannot claim to know either all the little

questions, many of which keep cropping up as work progresses, or all the answers. To help farmers in both, our workers and the farmers and kitchen gardeners all have to be kept informed of all kinds of development.

For this we have a number of training courses devised for different levels of workers, and for farmers in different stages of work and on different aspects of agriculture and its economics. Extension work is carried on through various means and methods, and experiments are regularly designed and practised, and meticulously documented. Group activities are encouraged and assisted, and supervision and evaluation are regular, constant, participatory, and, we can only hope, effective

People are taken on visits to places where similar practical work is being done, and on our part we too receive visitors who come to exchange experience and ideas. Apart from the information gained, such interaction gives our farmers, who may sometimes feel themselves out of the mainstream because of their adoption of differing agricultural practices, the confidence that others elsewhere too are going their way.

Successes this year

Poyra: Concurrent farming, known locally as Poyra, is basically sowing a second crop even before the first one is harvested. This allows the new plants to utilize all the moisture in the land, which tends to evaporate once harvesting makes the land lose the cover of the standing first crop. Earlier only khesari was sown in Poyra, but our efforts have led to more and more farmers trying out more and more crops like linseed, mustard, wheat, coriander, lentils, etc. This year a little more than 1200 bighas (400 acres) of land in 10 villages were cultivated in this method.

Growing sunflower: About 1400 bighas (465 acres) of land that used to be kept fallow until jute was planted were this year used to cultivate sunflower. Unlike in many other areas of the State there was no problem here with the quality of the seeds supplied, and the farmers we persuaded to go for this new crop have been happy with productivity and prices.

Joint IPM programmes: Pesticides destroy insects indiscriminately, not sparing those that are actually beneficial or at least harmless. The integrated pest management approach, on the other hand, uses various natural agents and methods to control harmful insects only, thus preserving biodiversity. During the Boro season — which is the dry, pre-monsoon months — we cooperated with the Agriculture Development Office to practise various forms of IPM in 160 bighas (a little less than 55 acres) of land.

Replacing Boro rice with wheat: Considering the rising cost of inputs for the Boro rice, we have been trying to persuade farmers to grow wheat instead in that season. This year during Boro, 200 plots of land in 2 villages changed over from rice to wheat.

Increasing use of TDV, micronutrients: One reason for the depletion of soil fertility following the use of chemicals has been the steady loss of living microorganisms in it. We have long been trying to redress the situation by culturing micronutrients in our biolab for use in fields. A new addition this year was *Trichoderma viridae* (TDV),

bacteria that destroy harmful fungus and have been found effective in jute and chilli. We produced and sold between 40 and 45 kg, with a 250-gm packet priced at Rs.15. The old favourites — Phospho Solubilising Bacteria (PSB) and Azotobacter - sold at Rs 5 for a 300-gm packet. Apart from use in land, people have started putting these in fishery ponds.

Coordination with Government staff: We have very good relations with the agriculture department and its officials here and extension work among farmers is often a cooperative effort, with our complementary strong points. Now that the Government staff also recommend measures for sustainability, the farmers do not get contradictory suggestions and advice and thus the cause of organic farming is getting a boost.

Good system plots: Two of our workers, at Bajitpur and Fatullyapur, have very successful system plots on their own land. Local farmers are encouraged by these, and visitors impressed.

Media coverage: Newspapers, particularly those in Bengali, now give more attention and coverage to rural conditions and news. Our benefit from this change of attitude has been that our efforts to change agricultural practices have found several mentions in widely-read newspapers.

Maximizing use of dew as irrigation agent: A simple device has been found effective for irrigating wheat plants in the early days of their growth. All it needs is two persons and some rope to distribute all along the land the dew that accumulates on top of the young plants during the night. In unirrigated areas this considerably minimizes watering needs.

Mushroom spawn: This product of our biolab has at long last come into its own. Last year we produced and sold only 125 packets, each containing 200 gm, but this year the number was 415. One reason is that now we offer two varieties — one for the cold November-to-March season and the other for the hot remaining months of the year. Therefore the production period has doubled. Second, some local entrepreneurs are trying to start commercial production of mushroom and therefore the demand for spawn has gone up. A 200-gm packet of spawn that we sell for Rs 6 can produce three crops totalling 1 kg of mushroom, which fetches about Rs. 40. Third, the bird flu crisis led many people to start eating mushroom.

Documentation

To convince others about the viability of our experiments it is essential to keep meticulous records about all the work done at all stages. We have finally been able to do a lot of very useful and thorough documentation work on various and diverse areas of local systems, situations, opportunities, etc. Some of these areas on which we have extensive and well-arranged data are the following:

- | production costs and profits of main crops,
- | village-wise agri-land analysis,
- | month-wise disease patterns,
- | weeds and their uses,
- | green leafy vegetables available free and their calendar.

We have also documented many of the trials carried out and systems developed by farmers under our workers' guidance. Closely linked with this has been a rigorous evaluation of the various farmers' and kitchen gardeners' groups to get a clear idea of what is needed to design better capacity-building packages for them.

Farmers' meeting

To involve more farmers from a wider area, other sections of the rural population, other NGOs working in agriculture, and government officials, we organized a large meeting on 17 February at Fatullyapur, between 11 and 4. More than 600 people attended this. They included about 200 members of our own groups, 315 farmers from outside these, government staff, and guests.

Four of the farmers who work with us talked about their experience. One spoke on how they work in groups, another on landshaping experiments, the third on intensive kitchen gardens, and the last on rice trial work done with the government. The Principal Agricultural Officer of the district spoke on crop diversity, while the Subdivisional Agricultural Officer, Basirhat detailed the ill effects of indiscriminate use of pesticides, and the Agriculture Development Officer of Baduria block talked about biofertilizers, The Deputy Director of the IPM Centre conducted a very lively question-and-answer session on integrated pest management with farmers who practise it with his centre's help and ours. The head of the subdivisional research farm spoke on seeds, and the final speaker was from Service Centre who critically appraised the contents and the processes of the State Government's agricultural policy.

Among those who came but did not speak were some local bank managers, the local Gram Panchayat Pradhan, and at least 10 agricultural field workers of the government. All visitors were surprised at the attendance figures, but we have always known how eager the local farmers are for information and ideas and how limited our own resources are to fulfil their curiosity. We can now only hope that some means will be found to give them access to information, both theoretical and practical.

It was a successful day for our agricultural workers and we were all happy when the largest circulated daily newspaper of the State reported the event.

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