

Annual Report 2011-12

Beginning as an alternative middle school in 2005, we also started donning the “training” hat since 2007. 2011 was our 1st year when Education Resource Centre (ERC) became our primary focus.

It was a year of reorientation and reorganization. The year was devoted to preparing and accepting oneself in the new role of trainers and orienteers. Teaching and interacting with students of Shikshamitra every morning, innovating and creating new materials for them were things of the past. Yet it was a good year.

So does this mean the school is no more?

Technically yes, but a small part has remained thanks to the 3 Madhyamik aspirants who took their 1st 5 exams in Feb 2012. It was a trying experience both for them as students and for us as teachers to restrict ourselves to a very exam-oriented studying with typical textbooks full off dry factual details. We continue teaching them the remaining 3 subjects while awaiting the results.

Old Students and Reading out

Older students in quest of livelihoods, further academics kept sharing their dilemmas, trepidations and achievements in the world outside. This indirectly was an assessment of Shikshamitra’s efforts in these many years (2005 – 2011). We served as a sounding board and often animated debates and discussions emerged, throwing light upon new avenues and angles to our perspective.

It was this year when we saw our 2nd student Sajahan clear his Madhyamik and join RMV for higher secondary. He has also taken up a hardwire course and got involved with a theater group. But most interestingly he has re-opened the library that ran from May 2010 – Feb 2011 (more later). He also helps us in multiple ways and assists in some of the workshops.

Bikey, the 1st Madhyamik graduate from Shikshamitra, had joined a regular school for Class XI and became an enterprising student bringing fresh energy to the schools cultural environment. But he had to put a pause in his studies and shoulder family responsibilities under circumstances. He enjoys his new venture where he now leads a team including people older than him!

Families of many students (ex and current) needed counseling and help. Crises faced by their parents, siblings and neighbors had to be dealt with and outside office hours. During the initial phase of adjustment in the typical school set up, our ex students required a lot of mental support.

That trust in Shikshamitra was deep and that the students and their families were extremely vulnerable was clear. It also projected that Shikshamitra’s role as counselor was to continue in years to come. Students continued to help and stand by each other and their families even after the school did not exist.

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Shikshamitra’s Community Library

Shikshamitra’s Community Library – Boi Hoi Choi – was closed after Shikshamitra terminated its school and community efforts in Feb 2011. It was hoped that some students might take over and continue running the library. That did not happen immediately. It happened only in Sep 2011, that Sajahan took it



upon himself to run the show. The library re-

emerged as “The Little Library” and continues drawing 12-17 boys and girls (11-14 yrs) every Saturday afternoon.

Sajahan has a co-facilitator to run the library. It is Hasna, another ex Shikshamitra student who is equally responsible for the library. She is to take the Madhyamik Exam through the open school board this year.



Interactive sessions around books, topics like self, current affairs, art, creative writing, reading, games and meditation highlight the library program. It's like Shikshamitra school in some of its elements.

Are we moving again?

We indeed are considering that. It is chiefly because our current premise is insufficient for residential training or meeting of decent attendance. Once our students take their remaining exams in Aug, we should be able to move out a bit as long as it is commutable for older ex-Shikshamitra students. They surely don't want to lose touch with us!

Self development

It was this 7th year of Shikshamitra when we **changed gears from primarily being a school to evolving into a resource center**. So discussions related to our strength, scope to deliver and areas to grow took place at a regular basis. Being a small organization, we felt that it's important for each of us to understand where we are, where we want to be and what we need to do to reach there. In addition, we did self and peer assessment with the full timers as well as had a sharing session with everyone reflecting on each other's development and areas that need further growth. The process is still on as we gauge where each of our strength and passion lies and where we are needed and attempt to find the right blend.

Training

- The year, filled with training programs, gave us a chance to review our training capacities and intervention techniques, upgrade our skills and reconstruct our training modules. Training logistics needed to be learnt afresh.
- Different training sites, demands from the trainees and hazards during training challenged us constantly to come up with appropriate solutions. The teachers excited over the newly acquired skills, and teachers innovating also came as great rewarding experiences. Praise as good and effective communicators and innovators boosted our confidence. Most of our trainings were acclaimed as need based and appropriate.

Self Development

- Since the regular school activities ceased to exist, more time could be devoted to
 - consolidate learning and teaching methods
 - develop TLMs
 - discover and research
 - write
 - read (magazines, articles, books)
 - attend events and seminars
- We looked deep into our own abilities, attitudes, aspirations, matching them with the new objectives of Shikshamitra and tried to understand how effective and appropriate each one of us was in the new set up.

Training

Coming to the main focus of Shikshamitra, our year began and ended with interventions in govt sponsored high schools.

[With Govt (sponsored) High Schools]

Jabbar was in Class V for few years. He hadn't picked up any reading-writing in Bangla, not even the letters. So he was not promoted. But then 2 teachers came to take special classes twice a week for 2 months. Jabbar used to sit at the back. But soon he started picking up letters and much more. After few weeks he sat at the front of the class and responded to questions. He even brought along his friend who like Jabbar hadn't picked up any reading-writing. After 16 such classes Jabbar was able to read and write small sentences. Approximately 80 children in Class V benefitted from these special classes which were part of our intervention in **Mandra Hazer Ali Smriti Bidyapith**, in N 24 Parganas. In Mar-Apr 2011 these children picked up **basic reading, writing and word formation in Bangla** through the Accelerated Reading Program.

We ended with a **need assessment** of Class V and a brief input to some teachers of **Ghola Girls' High School**. The focus of the intervention was to understand and bridge the learning gaps in math.

English and math intervention with Swanirvar

The math and English interventions with Swanirvar culminated in an exhibition cum presentation attended by 20 HMs and secretaries of local high schools.

Math

The intervention began in Jun 2009 with 30 teachers from over 20 govt (sponsored) high schools around Swanirvar. Main focus was Classes V-VIII and the aim was to enrich the teachers with fresh ideas, hands on activities, innovative TLMs and also expose them to what was available from other math resource groups. We had 17 meetings and visited 5 schools and a tuition center from Jun 2009 to Nov 2011. In addition, there were a couple of workshops with children in 2 schools.

Lot of TLMs were made by the teachers and then used in classroom teaching. Some of teachers were fantastic in designing charts, which were then appreciated and replicated by others. The teachers found the TLMs to be the biggest gain from the network. These helped them get the immediate attention of the class and thus saved precious 5 minutes (which were previously spent to quiet the children). Also children who took no interest in math came forward to help fortify the charts. In some schools the children used the materials themselves on the blackboard and were corrected by other students if they made any error.



But the best part was exhibitions by children in different schools. Having exhibitions by children has become a growing trend in the high school of this area. In one school the students confidently faced questions and answered them to the visitors' satisfaction in the absence of their teacher. While in another school, the models and charts prepared got regularly used in class for teaching and learning. Moreover junior classes especially those who were not so strong in math, flocked to see the exhibits and explained them to each other. They even made their own models following their elders' footsteps!

The final exhibition in Jan 2012 showcased all these materials and charts made by the teachers and their students. It was worth noting that the teachers used whatever material they could find and which served purpose rather than go for fancy stuff.

However, most teachers are reluctant to think and innovate on their own and prefer to replicate what is already developed. They also turned out to be as regular with their "homework" (usually some math problem or puzzle) as they complain their students are! Nevertheless, none of them objected to making things – cutting, pasting, drawing etc.

Towards the end we felt that these teachers can support each other and may not need regular intervention of an external resource person. They expressed that they would however need Swanirvar to act as the cement in this effort to periodically bring them together.

Finally, though this intervention (of almost monthly sessions for over 2 years) was far better than a one shot workshop / training for few days, some of the problems remained.

- It is difficult to get things going unless both the HM and the teacher(s) are interested

- Even if the HM and the participating teacher are both serious, the remaining math teachers may not be. That jeopardizes the overall math intervention to a great extent.
- The main focus of the network was Classes V-VIII. The schools tried to send their best or most mathematically qualified teachers. However they often did not take any classes below IX-X and barely had any chance to apply what they learnt from the network meetings.

English

A survey conducted by us in 23 govt (sponsored) high schools in 2009 had revealed very poor levels of English among the students of Classes V-VIII. Naturally there was a big concern regarding the phobia of English, pronunciation and illegible handwriting and a growing need among the teachers to provide the students with effective reading, writing and speaking skills.

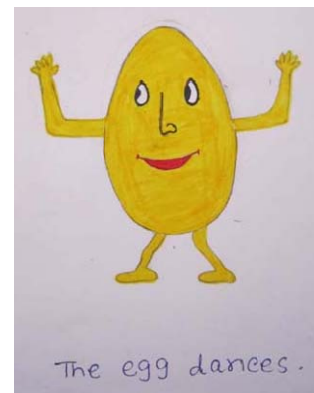
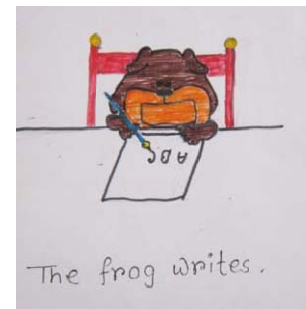
10 English teachers from 12 schools regularly attended 7 workshops from Nov 2009 to Dec 2010 focused on helping them find necessary remedies for the problems mentioned above mainly for Class V. There was a stress on making English fun to eliminate the fear. 2 sessions were especially devoted to material making while the rest were devoted to introduction of concepts, demonstration by teachers and sharing of their experiences and difficulties in the classes. This was followed up by visits to 4 schools.

The implementation was satisfactory in 3 schools and most successful in Media High School. A Foundation Course in English also got developed through this. Swanirvar managed to convince some of the HMs so that the English teachers



in those schools could continue with their Class V in 2010 as Class VI in 2011. So part II was initiated for Class VI with some new teachers as well some old ones in Feb 2011. Another 2-day session in Aug summed up the achievements while further input was provided on sentence construction and how to handle texts.

In the exhibition, the teachers, Rumi Ganguly from Media and Rumpa Das from Mandra, displayed materials they made and used in class and also shared their experiences. Rumi in particular did an excellent job in explaining the exhibits, sharing her classroom experiences and responding to questions from the audience. She has compiled how this Foundation Course can be incorporated in the existing WBBPE Class V syllabus. She was later felicitated by the locality around her school and requested not to relocate elsewhere.



[With School-going Children at Support Centers]

When workshops in Creative Writing in Bangla were so successful similar workshops in English could be possible too. The 1st generation school goers with some amount of English could surely participate and develop oneself in serious for creative writing in English. **Nibedita Seva Mandir** Tuition Centre came to us asking for English creative writing session for their students (classes V – IX). It was intriguing. It was fun. It was done in 5 evenings, an hour each, in Apr-May 2011. Given such a short time, we decided not to address children's difficulties with sentence and word structures. The students were encouraged to write happily, confidently. They were not at awe with English, they did not struggle. They just wrote as it came to them, naturally. They



Rajib – We are the ants. We are collecting our food.

Arpita – Carry on ants!

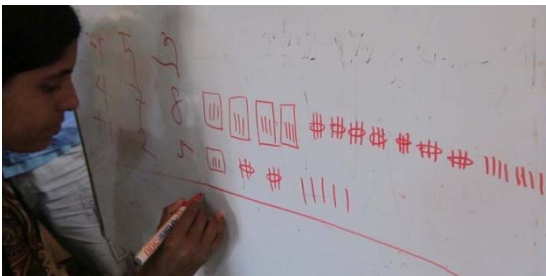
Surojit – Ants go home with the sandwich.

wrote in English, as much as they could. **Focus:** Pictures, situations, word lists and drawings were the chief tools, to enthuse children to write.

In Sep, there was a 2-day workshop with the teachers in **Shamil**, an alternative school in Kolkata, on quick acquisition of reading and writing in **English**. With practicing teachers, the discussion naturally spilled over to various aspects of children.

With **Jabala**, our training this year included **English** along with inputs in **Bangla and math**. We had a follow up on Bangla and math in Apr, training on English in July, a 2nd follow up cum training in Oct (Bangla, English and math) and the final evaluation in Dec.

Mukti, an organization working in Sundarban, heard of us through one of our common funder – Asha for Education. They run 8 tuition centers for Class V-X for **English and math**. We have initiated a year long program with them to **bridge the learning gaps for Class V**. The phase 1 training in Jan 2012 had 3 days of English and 1 day of math. The teachers shed their shyness and took active part in polishing their pronunciation, making phonetic (but possibly meaningless) words, enacting verbs and making fun sentences. One must add the funny twist to shoo away the fear! They found this approach to English new and refreshing. The coordinator of this program, who happens to be a retired HM and an English teacher himself, got very impressed by the sentences made by these teachers. He felt how such fun twists transform us to a “wonderland”. Similarly in math the teachers got a very colorful glimpse at divisibility.



Young teachers in **Suchana** – an organization working mainly with the Adibashi children near Shantiniketan – wanted to know why do we put a \times at the beginning (i.e. at the right end) of the 2nd line when we multiply by say 23 or what do we really mean when we say “1 in hand” while adding say $17 + 25$. They also did not have a clear idea how to include activities in class to improve mathematical understanding. So we had a 2-day workshop with them to address such specific queries. We used materials in activities

and games tied to mathematical concepts and in each case transitioned to pen and paper math often with worksheets. We covered numbers, fractions and decimals. Fortunately few children showed up and immediately joined the game we were playing. They needed no instructions! One of the teachers had her daughter accompany her. This young lady helped us a lot with game arrangements and did a lot of the worksheets on her own. The teachers got a feel of how children respond to such materials and activities. Finally when we made materials for decimals and used them for addition, one teacher mentioned that only now she understood what decimals really mean. She had finished her schooling and tackled decimal problems so far without really grasping what they meant.

In addition, our involvement with **JBNSTS** continued. The **math kits** prepared by Shikshamitra students were distributed to ~30 teachers along with introduction and demo. Our children, who took part in the making, were also introduced to the teachers. In addition, there were 3 **workshops with children** in Bethune, Garfa Boys and Hooghly Collegiate schools organized by JBNSTS and conducted by Shikshamitra trainer. There were 2 more of such workshops organized by **CPSM** and **ALM** where our trainers were invited.

The **CPSM** workshop was a very short one for Class VI on types of triangles. The classification was illustrated by specific activities that bring out common characteristics of each type. Also the 2 standard types of classify triangles were intermixed.

Symmetry was included in the WBBSE (or WBBPE) math syllabus for the 1st time this academic year (in Class VII). But hardly any teacher knew how to teach this new inclusion. So **ALM** decided to conduct a workshop with Classes VII-VIII on symmetry. For 2 days the children had a great time cutting, coloring and folding. There was no right or wrong way to explore symmetry. Symmetry was applied to explore properties of triangles and quadrilaterals and used to create various tessellating designs. There was a group of older children (of Class IX-XII) helping out logistically. We had questions for them as well and one of them in fact took a brief session on day 2! The session also got covered by one of the local TV channels.

[With Hard to Reach Children]

Marfat works with children, adolescence girls and women in Dhuliyán, Murshidabad. The main occupation there is bidi-making. Our 1st intervention with Marfat was for these working women from the Muslim community. They came to 6 NFE centers to pick up basic language skills. There were 2 trainings and 3 follow ups between Jun 2010 and Sep 2011 on the Accelerated Reading program in Bangla. The teachers, who were young college girls from the same community, along with the supervisors and the coordinator took the training.

As a result, the entire organization got familiar with the methods. Even new teachers were exposed to the technique by others. Most of the girls picked up reading stories and writing sentences. In some centers they even made and wrote their own stories within a remarkably short time. The impact was so deep that Marfat decided to shift their main focus from health to education.



In 2012, they approached us once again but this time for the school going children who apparently are not learning much. We decided to work with Classes III-IV. A need assessment conducted in Mar 2012 revealed the wide and deep gaps that need to be addressed. Training along with demonstrations with children has been planned for in early Apr.

We also had a 2-day exposure on the **Barah-khari** method attended by various NGO teachers, staff and individuals in June (yes, during our Move!).

Other meetings and events

This year we attended a number of meetings and events around public education. These include

- A public hearing on the status of implementation of RTE in Kolkata Town Hall by NCPDR
- A meeting by ETMA and other orgs regarding a vision of West Bengal Education 2025
- A meeting to hear the perspectives of various teachers' organizations regarding the recommendations by the Syllabus Committee by Pratichi and Vikramshila

We also shared our views on the curriculum part of the Syllabus Committee Report in a meeting with likeminded groups organized by Vikramshila.

In addition, we did a review of the suggested syllabus by the Committee – mainly for Bangla, math and EVE – and shared them with the committee. We attended few of the meetings and gave them sample of our work in Bangla at the middle school level. Our recommendations for math in particular were incorporated in their final report.

In light of the RTE recommendations

To understand our role better rereading and reviewing the RTE act continued. Finding out areas where Shikshamitra shines, generated long discussions, arguments and critiques. It still continues. End of the year 2011-2012, we in Shikshamitra were able to draw out our strengths and the probable contributions in the field of education. These would lay the foundation for the nature of our work in future. The possible areas were –

- Offering academic, nonacademic and class-management techniques support for the 1st generation school going children (10-14 yrs) in different schools (especially govt)
- Concentrating on and creating resources for teaching and learning language and math for 8-16 yrs old
- Offering a basic education program for hard to reach children (in railway platforms, who are labourers, drop outs) who are 8-15 yrs of age, so that they can live life better