

# Asha Kiran

July 2003

Volume 9 - Issue 3

The idea of Abacus was conceived in 1952 on the banks of the Narmada river by Smt Shanta Gandhi, their founder. She was working with adivasi and non-advasi children in an atmosphere which was totally informal, nothing was pre-planned and no curriculum. She started with their questions relating to their surroundings. In exploring answers to these questions through drama, dance, songs, she began discussing various themes, various topics like evolution, how life emerged, why we are what we are and how we have reached here. This was the beginning that was taken up by Bal Bhavan New Delhi. In 1990, Aveshi – a resource center in Mumbai took up this program and called it Abacus. The team decided consciously to work with the system. Unless it is incorporated in the existing system, it may die out when the first set of people leave. They wanted the content to reach as many people as possible. It has been a long process. The project has had 3 phases since then.

## **Phase 1**

In 1991-95 the municipal corporation gave them permission to implement it in one Hindi medium municipal school, a 5 year program for children from class 3 to class 7. The feedback from the educators, children and teachers helped modify and refine the program.

## **Phase 2**

In 1995-2000, the second phase they got permission to expand it to 25 different schools in 2 wards in Bombay; 10,000 children and 500 teachers were involved. In addition there were 35 NFE centers with children of construction workers, street children and children of sex workers.

## **Phase 3**

At the end of this 5-year program, the research wing of education board, sanctioned Abacus to work with 2 wards – in the current third phase which comprises 180 schools - B South and B North. The original 5 year program had to be adapted to a 3 year course now called “*Sangati*”. Sangati is a kit of 6 different themes. 3 kits have been completed, the fourth is in progress and 2 kits are yet to be produced. Unicef has recently sanctioned expansion of the work in two more districts of Yawatmal and Chandrapur in eastern Maharashtra.

Manuals for teachers are produced in Hindi and Marathi. The worksheet for children is in 8 languages – Hindi, Marathi, Urdu, Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, English and Gujarati. Currently Sangati reaches children in 5th and 6th class. Next year it will be reaching children in 5th, 6th and 7<sup>th</sup> standards.

## ***Sangati Curriculum & Methodology***

Sangati means “Togetherness, Relevance and Harmony”. It is a series of 6 kits that aim to make school education more relevant and vibrant by addressing both what is taught and how things are taught. The curriculum addresses the current vacuum in school curriculum that helps prepare children with knowledge of the world around them, current issues in society and the values that will help them take care of themselves and contribute to the society around them. Education needs to give children skills that they require, skill to make decisions, weigh options, skills to find out information (rather than just giving information, since it keeps changing). Learning not only happens at school, but also at home, with parents and in their surroundings.

Sangati approaches topics with this type of philosophy guiding the curriculum. Sangati emphasises the links between themes aimed to help the child analyze and develop understanding in the process, rather than treat information in isolated pieces. The curriculum opens up the classroom environment to greater exploration. The child develops better analytical and communication skills. Sangati draws upon a wide variety of visual and art aids including flipcharts, posters, art works, games, songs, stories and group discussions. Assignments/worksheets aim to help the child understand aspects relevant to the child's life by exploring subjects in the child's environment.

The six interlinked themes are:

***Myself, My Body, Our Needs – I am unique and yet share*** something with every human being. Explores understanding the potential and limitations of the human body. Regardless of all differences human beings have the same needs.

***Our earth and the web of life – Provides the resources*** that make it possible for us to fulfil our needs. The web of life – all life has evolved a complex, interlinked and continuing process.

***How societies developed*** – Will help understand our own lives better.

***The way we live today*** – Continuing changes in technology and different social, economic, political and cultural institutions which influence how we live today.

***Understanding change*** – which characterizes our relationships, with all forms of life and the environment. It is only by understanding these changes and their impact that we can learn to deal with them and create the kind of lives and society we want.

***Preparing For Our Future*** – Exploring alternatives for ourselves as well as our society and earth.

I have found that Sangati clearly tries to bring in values that promote greater sensitivity to society around us. The underlying values promote equality of all people independent of caste, gender, varying abilities or religion. It encourages greater social justice by exploring aspects of development and social prejudices via discussions among children. The themes are developed very well – encouraging children to talk about

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*Asha, PPI and Ragmala presents*

## "Mukabhinaya"

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lowest level of hierarchy. They themselves are subjected to authority and cannot question. This simply passes down to students. Interactive material like Sangati tries to open up the spaces for teaching creativity more.

### **Visits to Municipal Schools**

I visited BMC schools in the following areas – Dadar, Mahim, Dharavi (2 schools) with Seema different supervisors for each school. These schools are in 2 different wards of BMC. Classes are held twice a week for a total of 2 hours. Classes are held on Mon-Wed in one ward and Tues-Thurs in another ward.

The first session we (Sima and myself) attended was in the Dadar school with decent infrastructure. The first class we attended was for the 6<sup>th</sup> standard children - the teacher (male) was covering a session "How agriculture/farming changed our lives". The session was in Hindi with 35 students. The session went over the importance of learning history. It then described the early stages evolution of humans, evolution of agriculture, domestication of animals, storage of food and how life transformed in the early years because of this. This teacher was very earnest, affectionate and the children seemed to like him a lot. He spoke fast and his speed certainly tested my own slightly outdated Hindi knowledge. He would ask children questions in between and did ensure that all the children got a chance to see the material. This session can certainly impact the children's history lessons and encourage them to learn history with more interest. The interaction in this class was very good. The children seemed to really learn the lesson.

We talked to the children after this class and asked them what they liked/did not like about it. In this class they told me they loved the teacher, pictures of the Sangati sessions, music in other Sangati sessions, gave me the names of their favorite stories. The girls told me that they were irritated by boys in the class who sometimes don't listen properly and ask silly questions. One girl likes her lesson so much she wishes some boys would be quiet and appreciate it! Some children wistfully said they wished their other classes were as nice as Sangati.

We then visited the 5<sup>th</sup> standard session in the same school. This session was an introductory or important. The teacher (female) in this session was unprepared. She was very nice and patient with the children but did not know the lesson very well. The children seemed to take over the class – going over the material and prompting the teacher/coming up with their own versions. The atmosphere/openness in the class was lively but not much of the material was covered.

As we were leaving the school – the principal stopped us and asked me why I was recording the session. I explained that this is just for our reference later and apologized for not taking permission earlier. We were very careful about this from the next time onwards.

The next school we visited was in Mahim which had a very poor infrastructure and little or no room for the children to play. The school premises were stinking and it was difficult to sit in class. There was no drinking water and the children brought their own water to school. Amidst this stench what I witnessed in class was pure teacher magic. This teacher (female) is one of the best ones I have experienced. She took the Sangati session to its highest potential using her own creativity and children's unlimited thirst for exploration and story telling. The session covered the topic of schools – why there are schools, what each child experiences when she first comes to school, what she likes best, what she would like to change. Under her skillful/loving care I found children who could really open up and gain confidence.

I had to ask the supervisor how often one finds teachers like this (in her experience) – she told me that it is actually not that uncommon. BMC pays well and is able to get some really good teachers. At least 1/3 of the teachers are good, a larger number average and the remaining are lacking. I do feel that investing in good aids is worthwhile just to help the good/average teachers take their classes to a high potential.

The last set of schools we visited were in Dharavi including one Tamil medium class. The school building here was huge and different language schools were on different floors of the same building. The Tamil medium class covered a session on disabilities and special needs. The teacher explored what each organ helps achieve and asked the children how they would adapt without one of them. He talked about facilities available in the media for persons with special requirements (such as news broadcast hearing impaired). The class was fairly interactive and the teacher well prepared. The children followed the stories well and later came up with a few examples from within their own communities.

The teacher likes Sangati and can see it is worthwhile. He mentioned that he found it difficult to learn the material in Hindi/English and then teach it in Tamil (note that some of the material is only available in Hindi). His request was that Sangati makes all materials available in Tamil or in English at least and this will be useful for non-Hindi speaking teachers.

Simantini (the abacus coordinator) mentioned that it is difficult for them to create material in English since they don't believe in just translating. Their material has to be written in the language that will have full impact. The effort and cost involved is high. They would like to make an English only version in the future which may help address some of this.

The last session I attended was by a male teacher (Hindi session) who was well prepared. He was very methodical and conducted the class at a very good and careful pace pausing for children's responses and

viewing of the material. The class interaction was excellent. The topics he covered were to do with health, health care, sickness, preventive health care, taking care of ourselves well. The children gave examples of illnesses in their families, of themselves being ill. At this stage the children also gave lots of examples of home remedies followed in their own homes by their mothers when they are sick. First aid was explored as well.

The teacher made it a point to applaud children's answers and tried to give many children a chance to answer. Each teacher's personality makes the Sangati material assume a different personality.

I think that the Abacus project is unique in its goals and what it is trying to achieve. The philosophy, curriculum material and team commitment to this cause is excellent. The fact that Abacus work is being taken up for wider implementation by Unicef in other parts of Maharashtra is a fantastic achievement for the team and their dedication.

The curriculum addresses sensitive issues in a very skillful way.

Sangati is able to bring in discussions on society and values based on equality of gender, religion, caste, different abilities in very well. This may still cause their work to get undue attention given the socio-political climate of the country but I believe this is all the more reason why Abacus needs support. They are able to converse about issues that and do it in a manner that encourages greater sensitivity and analytical thinking.

## Asha for Education Announces Work An Hour 2003

*- Just an hour of your time; a world of hope for a child...*

Asha For Education, a non-profit, non-partisan, secular organization committed to improving the quality of education for underprivileged children in India launches Work An Hour (WAH) 2003; the 6<sup>th</sup> international fundraiser held between July 4<sup>th</sup> and September 5<sup>th</sup> each year. WAH is Asha's largest global event, where volunteers from around the world come together in a show of great human spirit, to educate the underprivileged in India. The event symbolically asks everyone to contribute one hour of their time towards the cause of children's education donating an hour's worth of their salary or more.

WAH 2003 aims to focus on disabled children and children at risk, including orphans, street children, children of sex-workers, children of convicts, physically/mentally challenged children. The project partners chosen for WAH support require larger sums of money to facilitate fixed expenditure on items such as infrastructure, construction and other one-time costs.

After a stringent review process, the project partners selected this year are:

**Odanadi Seva Samsthe:** Based in Mysore (Karnataka), Odanadi runs a relentless campaign to expose and curb the flesh trade. The organization is a powerful voice advocating the cause of women sex workers in India: They have rescued many girls, most of them minors, from the clutches of the flesh trade in various parts of Karnataka. As many as 350 women have been rehabilitated into society with an alternative livelihood. Their immediate goal is to build a rehabilitation center to accommodate young girls rescued from the flesh trade.

**National Association for Blind (NAB):** Based in Valsad (Gujarat), NAB aims to help visually impaired kids lead regular lives. They provide their students education; training in Braille and computers, vocational training and medical assistance. NAB also helps students find jobs in the community. Presently, dire need of a girls' hostel.

**Street to School:** Tomorrow's Foundation based in Kalighat, (West Bengal) works with local street children and children of commercial sex workers. In formal schooling, the Foundation seeks to provide a caring and supportive environment to these children and reintegrate them into mainstream schooling. They plan to build a "Half-Way-Home" as a temporary shelter for vulnerable children. The home will provide the kids with education, cultural and vocational training, recreation and health care in a healthy environment.

**VOICE (Voluntary Organization In Community Enterprise):** Based in Mumbai (Maharashtra), VOICE works towards the overall development of street children. Funds generated through WAH 2003 will be used to construct a residential center for female street children. This place that will provide an academically stimulating environment while giving the girls the benefits of education and vocational training

WAH 2003 seeks to bring together people from all over the world to help ensure that every child receives the care and education required to live a successful life. This year we have a target to raise over \$125,000 across the globe.

*To participate in WAH 2003, all you need to do is donate one hour's worth of your annual salary to Asha for Education. It does not cost too much to educate a child! \$10-\$20 can support a child's education and living expenses for one whole month! You can make a big difference!!*

Participation in WAH 2003 is just a click away. Asha for Education has a simplified and secure online donation process for credit card payments.

<http://www.workanhour.com> Please send an email to: [wah@ashanet.org](mailto:wah@ashanet.org) if your company participates in matching donations. You can also make donations through checks to "Asha for Education" by mailing them to:

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ie: Kane Hall, University of Washington  
: 20th September, 2003, 5 pm onwards

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