

Making our Mark

– Spreading the Shikshamitra Initiative –

Shikshamitra was conceived in 2005 as an answer to the acute need for a modern and appropriate curriculum for 9-15 year olds. Emphasis was on first-generation school goers, who frequented the government schools.

To begin with, it was necessary to understand and redefine the very concept and purpose of a school for such children. Needless to say, understanding the children and finding teachers who would fit in and develop themselves to harmonize with the children were the very first steps in creating the school. Moreover the search continued to understand the whole process (and perhaps still continues).

Working from 2005 – 2011 in the school, evolving suitable responses to different learning needs, aptitudes, methods and speeds of various learners (8-16 years), a new system of education emerged. It emphasized interactive explorations, connectedness, creativity and equal respect for both humans and the natural environment. Our school embodied this system and developed it further.



The concepts of Geography, History, Science and concern for the environment were nurtured outside the classrooms – in the community lanes, streets, in parks, art galleries and even in a theatre. Cooking, Art, Current Issues and problem-solving sessions found their place within the curriculum inside the classroom.

Art became the invisible thread of happiness that held the learning process together. In all its fronts, Art brought out the unspoken, helping every person to look within and spreading a love for aesthetics and sustainability.



People have been asking us to share our expertise since 2007. From 2011, after the school officially closed, we in Shikshamitra have been proactively sharing our vision and expertise with people in diversified education programs and learning environments, not restricting ourselves to schools only.

In particular, the curriculum, materials, teaching-learning techniques and class-management solutions developed by Shikshamitra, along with our techniques for assessing children, began to find their way into many kinds of communities.

• Art Outreach

SNEGAM was one of the first official programs we did to bring art to children who had very little in their usual curriculum. The children were all taking part in an after-school slot for the underprivileged at St. Anthony's school. The Shikshamitra classes were geared toward trying to expose the children to new materials as well as new concepts by doing a wide variety of crafts and painting, along with movement, storytelling and some music. The children were all a bit rigid in the beginning as they didn't know what to expect but slowly, they stopped drawing the usual kinds of things like mountains, suns and flowerpots and felt free enough to experiment with colours and themes – they visibly began to open up to art. The consistent level of attendance showed they were getting something out of the experience. We had an exhibition at the end of the ten-week session where parents, mostly mothers, asked that more of these types of classes could be offered. Shikshamitra also did the 10-week art program at **PARICHITI**, working in a large slum community with the daughters of women who work as domestic help. Most of the girls were going to school and were very bright; they quickly caught the ideas our teacher Maura was trying to convey. This allowed her to do a higher level of class here. In particular, the lives of Henri Matisse, Frida Kahlo and William Carlos Williams were introduced and art classes were created based on their lives: students tried "painting with scissors" after learning about Matisse, "Self-portraits" based on how Frida painted pictures of herself in order to express her sorrows, and they made cloth-covered diaries so that they could write and glue and doodle like William Carlos Williams. Maura also introduced movement (mirror game and stretching) and songs in English, which were very popular. Lastly, over the past years, Maura has conducted various workshops for **EMPOWER THE CHILDREN**, an organization that invites volunteers from around the world to come and work at the various schools they run. The projects involve art (i.e. papier mache, stitching small pouches with embroidery, song & dance, a patachitra workshop and woodblock printing, etc.) and also other kinds of hands-on learning (neighborhood cleanup and planting). The art program has reached a wide audience with great response and enthusiasm from everyone who has taken part so far.

• New Materials in Languages and Maths

This area emerged out of a glaring need for new concepts here, as well as the fact that some of our Shikshamitra teachers were especially skilled in these areas and eager to develop materials and curriculum. We are still emerging as we conduct workshops and interact with teachers and others. We have developed various materials which we are getting ready to introduce on a larger scale later on. There is still much more to be done in this area and it will continue to flow into the future.

• Language Arts

This program proved to be effective for acquisition of basic Bangla and English among government school children that have missed out in these subjects in their primary years.

Shikshamitra's English Program

1) was introduced in **10 government schools** in the Baduria block of North 24 Parganas. 3 schools made good use of the program. In one school, the English teacher was not only successful but was also able to correlate the program with the textbooks for each of the different class levels (5-9). She also introduced it in parts as remedial measures.

2) The program was found useful and greatly accepted in other **support centres by both NGOs (Murshidabad, South 24 Parganas)** and also in **private schools**.



3) One **resource person** used the program as a guideline for **teaching English to teachers of an NGO in Birbhum** that works with adivasis.



Shikshamitra's Bangla Program has also seen acceptance where it has been presented. Young girls and children from homes of bidi workers could acquire Bangla with much ease, thanks to the NGO **MARFAT**; so did youngsters on the railway platform who come to the Drop-In Centres run by **PRAJAAK**. Moreover they learnt to aspire to a more balanced life, which they had lost and had begun to shun.

Shikshamitra's language learning practices, and materials in Bangla in particular (in reading comprehension, creative and critical thinking, writing, remediation of language errors), have earned deep acceptance among teachers, students (in government, non-government and private schools) and also among NGO workers. They were enabled to connect with their own selves, feel encouraged to think creatively and express themselves in different forms, apart from reading and writing.

Labeling the language program as "rich in psycho-social content," the director of Praajak, along with the staff at Shikshamitra, discovered how effective this style of learning could be. The Praajak director has since recommended the Shikshamitra program materials to be included in the self-development workshops for NGO personnel.

ANJALI is a well known NGO intervening for empowerment, better living and revitalization of adults suffering from mental illness and living in government mental hospitals. The patients here have been deserted by their families. In July 2012, the Bangla materials and learning methods offered by Shikshamitra attracted Anjali. Since then Shikshamitra has been helping the Anjali facilitator with material and technical support, and with inspiration, and the patients seem to be responding well.

Once more, the Shikshamitra experience was found to be useful in sharing appropriate management and communication skills among the caregivers at a home for destitute girls, **MAHILA SEVA SAMITY**. Language materials and the use of them in sessions here once again helped to break down barriers, open communication and instill new ways of management and understanding.



On request, the impact of good class management techniques and use of interesting and appropriate materials were demonstrated with 70 children in different groups, in a support centre run by the NGO **TOMORROW'S FOUNDATION**. 50 teachers from the organization were present to observe and interact.



Publication of *Galpo Niye* Reading Cards

This set of 25 reading cards in Bengali has been developed to regenerate interest in Bangla reading and comprehension. It is aimed at children and adults who can read simple Bangla with very few conjunct letters on their own. The cards are characterized by a front page with a story that is anywhere from 6-7 lines to one page. On the flip side is a set of open-style questions and thoughtful activities. Besides reinforcing comprehension, there are open-ended questions

that get users writing their views, commenting and initiating discussions in general. Sometimes, users are also left free to comment on the artwork on the cards and suggest changes.

Small libraries and activity centres are busily incorporating these cards. They have become a hit among children of all ages, be it in formal schools, home-schools, workshops, and even at a birthday party! They have found their way into government and mainstream private schools. Big school librarians have found the card set useful in conducting interesting sessions during library time.

Galpo Niye has been used with children and the process has been witnessed by enthusiastic teachers in a Bangla workshop.

Recently the cards have been recommended for use by some staff at **PATHA BHAVANA**, a prestigious school in Santiniketan.



– small libraries here and there –



Sajahan, one of our students who passed the secondary exam in 2011, took the initiative to continue with the Shikshamitra library session in the local community club room. It was once started by Shikshamitra in 2010. Choosing activities that got the children speaking, writing, reading and very importantly, listening to one another, Sajahan completed a full year of his **Little Library**. He organized an exhibition where the children's work was presented for the community. Held every Saturday from 2:30 – 5:30 pm, it has a strength of 25 students. Interestingly, most students go to formal schools. Yet when asked to fill up particulars about oneself, many wrote "Little Library" as the name of their school! Requests are flooding in to 'admit' more children to the library and make it run twice a week. Many guardians visit the library to understand what is going on and end up enjoying themselves in the process!



Shikshamitra librarian, Mahua Dutta nurtured the wish to introduce the Shikshamitra activities to the children in her neighbourhood. Mahua knew that these children, who are a mix of first and second generation school goers coming from not so affluent homes, go through a miserable school life. Her library was to be “a venture to create a safe place where members can unwind, discover their own selves and talents and listen to others, while cooperating with each other.”

Beginning in May, children have started trickling in. Every Friday, at 5.30 pm, Mahua’s house welcomes a group of children who attend local government schools gathering to write, paint and interact. They mull over issues, debate and often seek the ‘quiet’ they find there. One mother is also a regular member enjoying every bit of the evening session!



The notion of a safe space where one is heard, respected and cared for without being “judged” develops a sense of trust and love among the children. By and by the numbers increased, helping Mahua to become more confident. This has reinforced her belief in the Shikshamitra way.

Maura Hurley, the art teacher at Shikshamitra has been running a Sunday library called Mustard Seeds in her house for many years. Introducing the *Galpo Niye* Cards and the associated exercises led to a rich interaction. Maura has invited teachers and ex-students of Shikshamitra to come and conduct classes in dance and creative writing. The Shikshamitra spirit, once more, was passed on among other kids. They wrote, they spoke or they danced with full confidence, knowing for sure that acceptance and love was at the core of these sessions!



Where have all the grown-up students (17+) of Shikshamitra gone? What happened to them?

As our school closed, some of the Shikshamitra students (16+) enrolled for the Class X exam through the Open School Board while some chose not to.

• SAJAHAN

Passing Class X in 2011, Sajahan (Age 19) pursues his Higher Secondary studies through Open Board. At the same time, he helps with his family business and runs his community library every Saturday. In between, he finds time for theatre, participates in workshops and also works at Shikshamitra twice a week! He continues to be a good writer, questioning his surroundings as he grows up.



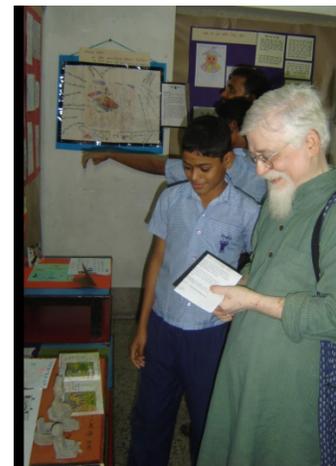
• HASNA

Hasna Banu Khatun (Age 19) was supported by her parents to continue studies till she was 18 – this was a rare move by a Muslim family! However, once she was 18, the family was hell bent on marrying her. Hasna had enrolled for the Class X exam and wanted to complete it before she got married. That did not work so she settled for a family and a groom who would allow her to study after marriage. They were lucky to find such a family. The would-be husband had passed class XII! Life was not to be so favourable for her though, and despite the promises, the family disliked the idea of her taking the exam. Her husband found her to be arrogant and beat her up regularly. Hasna endured for less than a month. She returned to her parents and was adamant she would not go back. Hell broke loose: Hasna's own parents found their family prestige ruined and started beating her up. Hasna braved it all and resumed her studies, preparing for her Class X exam. She continues to try to pass – a few subjects at a time. She studies at an education support centre, frequently coming to Shikshamitra seeking support and mentoring. She also helps Sajahan in running Little Library running whenever she can find the time. Hasna types and helps in making materials at Shikshamitra, proudly earning her dues.



• BIKEY

Bikey Sardar (Age 18) is our first student to pass the School-Leaving Secondary Exam. He had to leave his studies half-way through in Class XI due to family pressures, financial and parental, that forced him to take up a job in sales. He has proved his worth and is the youngest leader of a team within his company. He is confident and quite happy with his life. Keeping in touch with us, he loves sharing his achievements and failures.



• ADOR

Ador Naiya (Age 18) is a very promising young man who has passed five papers of the Open School Class X exam. He has three more subjects yet to take. Continuous rote preparation for the exam and simultaneous financial pressures at home pushed him away from “studies.” His aversion grew and even scholarship did not help. He left for a job with a travel agency. He was immediately recognized for his varied skills and talents: company supervisors soon recognized that he was well mannered and responsible, could manage accounts with ease, was fairly good with computers, could communicate in English and was also good at binding (books, diaries etc.). These fetched him and his school Shikshamitra much praise and his prospects at the office look bright. Interestingly, his ‘boss’ suggests that he gradually complete his Class X exam. Ador is willing!

It is also worthwhile to mention that Ador uses his soft skills well in the workplace. When in conflict with colleagues or the boss; Ador could convince them to sit down and talk things out instead of creating “ugly scenes” or fights.



• NOOR

Noor Islam (Age 18) is an artist to the core. Gifted with talents in music, dance and writing while also being good at academics, it is to art finally that he chooses to be married. He began preparing for his Class X exam (Open School) but started losing interest in due course. Rote learning and the bulk of study materials, along with the fact that he has to take an exam, disheartened him. He struggled between studies and art. Counseling helped for a short while. He pleaded his failure to remain focused to the books. Having earned appreciation for his art from many people, Noor has showcased his work in some exhibitions and has successfully sold quite a few pieces. Although he tried to devote himself full time to drawing and painting, and also pursuing art classes, Noor finally had to take up a blue collar job at a marble polishing unit. The family needed him to earn! The owner of the marble unit watched Noor, talked to Noor and soon found out what Noor really cherished. He allows Noor to dream and sing amidst his work. He continues working, but takes days off when he starts painting or ‘collaging’ ... as the passion grips him! We are trying our best to arrange an apprenticeship with an artist for Noor.



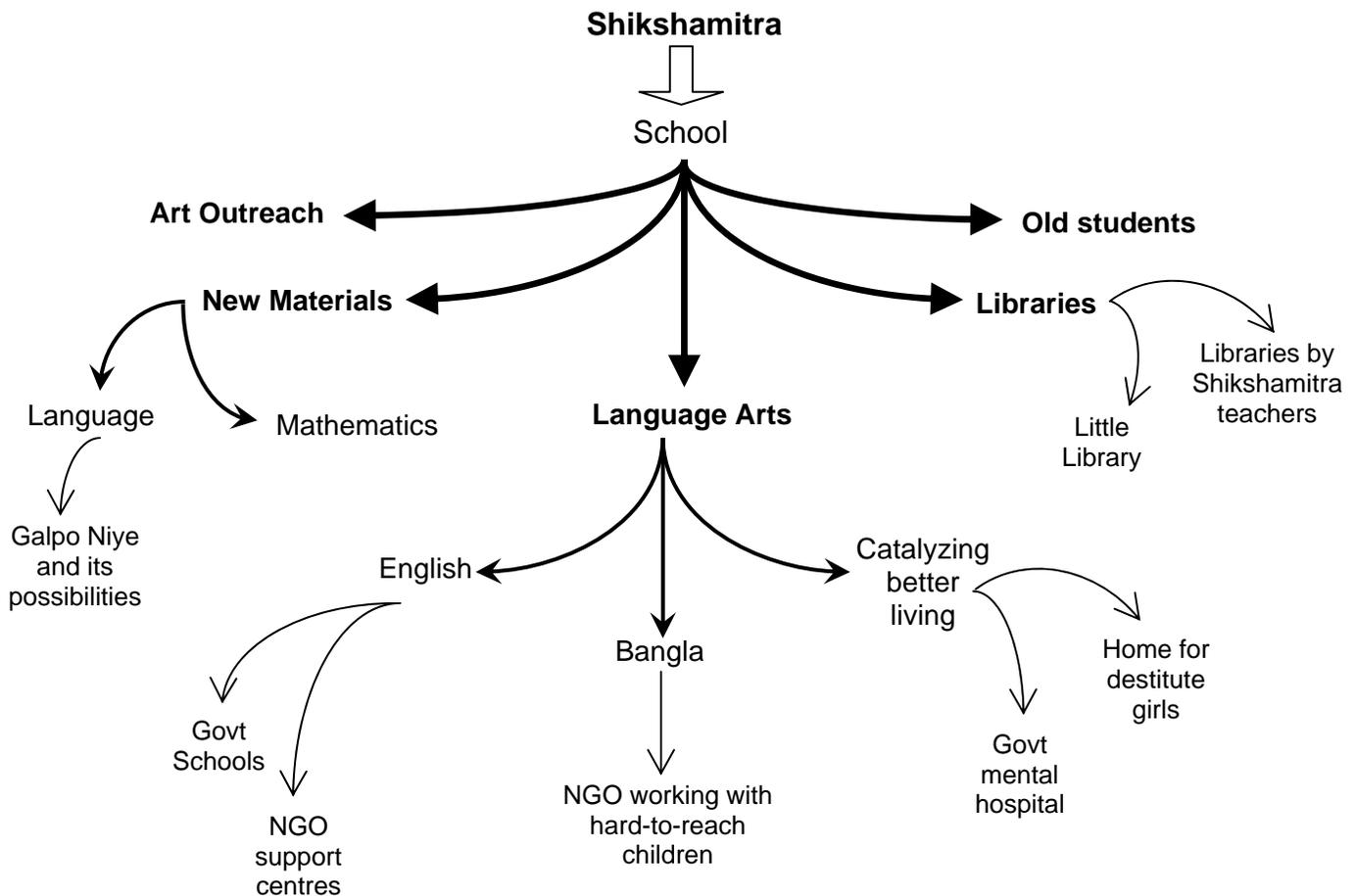
• BABAI



All children cannot pursue academics. Babai Das (Age 17) was one such bright and gifted child with dyslexia. He was magical with craft and a good artist. Looking after his little sister, alcoholic father and his terminally-ill mother, Babai managed his home and school. He picked up very basic language and maths and good communication skills.

When his mother passed away all the responsibilities fell upon him. Getting better and better with handiwork and with book-binding classes, Babai was placed as an apprentice in the art & craft manufacturing unit of an NGO called Tomorrow's Foundation. He was 15. After a basic course for 10 months, he was offered a job there. Family debts, conflicts and interests forced him to give up the job and manage his uncle's shop, dressing and selling chickens in the market. Enduring it for few months, Babai called it a day. But then, the people from the craft unit approached him again as they had started a separate venture and needed his skills. Now 17, Babai works as a full-time craftsman, enjoying every bit of it as he cycles back and forth from his workplace.

SHIKSHAMITRA'S RANGE





SHIKSHAMITRA is a process for learning to live better. It is a space where one learns to keep well and to help others keep well too.

Shikshamitra has an address. However, it goes beyond this – permeating into the lives of many, influencing one’s choices in life and ways of life.

To be associated with Shikshamitra is to assume the responsibility of trying to live better. It is a continuous attempt to search for activities that inspire life and build trust, or, it is an attempt to keep away from anything to the contrary.

Shikshamitra is a means toward becoming aware of how much one can be and knowing exactly what one’s limitations are.