

# SCAW

## NEWSLETTER



28 Pinehurst Crescent  
Islington, Ontario, Canada M9A 3A5

Toll Free #: 1-866-321-1841

Phone: (416) 231-1841

Fax: (416) 231-0120

E-mail: [scaw@bellnet.ca](mailto:scaw@bellnet.ca)

Web Address: [www.scaw.org](http://www.scaw.org)

A charitable organization founded by Margaret and Murray Dryden

February, 2005

## KOLKATA, INDIA: January 22 - 31, 2005: 6,000 Bedkits

BY PETER NEWTON  
TORONTO, ONTARIO

Our SCAW partner in Kolkata is the Rotary Club of Dum Dum, which has 53 members, and this is their seventh year on the SCAW program.

Day 1 - After an 8am pick-up, our SUV rounded past the Victoria Memorial in central Kolkata, crossed the broad Hugli River on the striking new steel Hoara Bridge, and headed north on the west side of the river for our first distribution to 320 children at Begampur. Child selection had been made by teachers in the surrounding villages with the site, planning, and coordination being volunteered by the management, and proprietor, Mr. M. Manna, of a plastic factory who is a client of Rotarian/lawyer S.B.Das.

The afternoon's distribution of 580 bedkits was an hour's drive north to Chadannagar, formerly a small French trading colony at the site of the former governor's house, now a museum. History buffs will remember that Britain's military secured two great victories during the Seven-Years-War with France – Bengal in 1757, and Quebec in 1759. Chadannagar, like St. Pierre/Miquelon in Canada, remained a French trading colony, but unlike in Canada, India claimed it upon independence in 1947.

Day 2 - Two hour's drive north, this time on the east side of the river, the morning's distribution of 312 bedkits is at a high school at Kakinara. Recipients were selected by a committee of teachers from 17 local primary schools and two high schools. After a quick tour of some

classrooms – all sparse, dark, and basic – we photographed with the truck that transported the bedkits in the background.



I was pleased to meet Rotarian Doctor H. Bagchi again this year, and inquired how he was enjoying retirement. Most week days he volunteers his time at a free clinic, one-plus hour train ride north of the city, treating kids. I was interested to find out if malaria was a big problem in the area, but he said no because the type of malaria in the region is quite 'benign', unlike the African types. Having spent 15 years in Nigeria years back, Dr. Bagchi said the biggest health problems for children in rural West Bengal are gastroenteritis/diarrhea and PCM [protein calorie malnutrition]. The former is treated simply with ORS [oral rehydration solution – three teaspoons sugar, one teaspoon salt, in a glass of water]. The latter is treated by an improved quality diet, but this is a tall order for many families living near or below the poverty line.

Barrackpore Rotary Club ran the afternoon's distribution of 432 bedkits in a beautiful garden at the Gandhi Museum right on the bank of the river. There were 48 kids of sex workers who have formed a society, Durbar Malila Samity, to empower the women on a number of social issues, the most important being the use of condoms to limit the spread of AIDS.

Day 3 - We packed our overnight bags, and after a three hour drive north-east, we set up for a distribution of 300 bedkits at a farm courtyard – under a grove of large mango trees – provided by a wonderful humanitarian fellow, Mr. Dinesh Chowdhury. He recruited the two state MLA's – both members of the Communist Party of India – Marxist – in the region to select most of the children through their organizations according to SCAW and Rotary criteria. Interviewing parents in the crowd outside the bamboo pole boundary, one happy mother explained that her child had been selected for a bedkit by a teacher in their village of Niyal Bapatala about 8km and a 40 rupee peddle-rickshaw ride away. She worked as

a 'day laborer' for about 30 rupees a day and she was thrilled about today's good fortune. The next lady was very disappointed that her child was not chosen for a bedkit. Her oldest son (of six kids) – my guess he was around 11 or 12 years – worked in a brick yard near their village of Koshpur after school for 150 rupees [C\$4] per week, and her husband only worked seasonally as a climber for coconuts.

We drove an hour west to Taki, and spent the night at the government water authority's guest house beside the Ichimoti River, which separates this part of India from Bangladesh.

Day 4 - Donors receiving a photo with a white jeep in the background, might be interested to know that this is the Municipality of Taki's mortuary vehicle which has a glass case in the back used for displaying the body on its way to the *ghats* for cremation. The mayor – called Chairman in communist-run West Bengal – explained that his 16 councilors chose today's 746 needy children with most coming from the four poorest wards. With over 10-million Bangladeshi economic refugees in West Bengal, many pass through the Taki region on their way to Kolkata. But many have stayed and the town's 37,000 residents are about 15-17% Muslim, most originally from Bangladesh.

Day 5 - We're just north of the Kolkata Airport near Dum Dum at Rotarian Subrata Battacharya's private English medium high school where the Dum Dum Rotarians have previously assembled all 6,000 bedkits. Just imagine 156,000 separate items being assembled into 6,000 bedkits (each bedkit has 26 components). Also imagine the large cast of volunteers/parents/guardians here for today's 1,213 bedkit distribution. The crowd was huge, but clearly standing out were three kindly Roman Catholic nuns with their 55 kids from their Auxilium Convent School. They

(continued on page 2)

**MURRAY'S DREAM 1,000,000 BEDKITS - TO DATE 747,850!**

(Kolkata, India by Peter Newton, Toronto, Ontario, continued from page 1)

operate an evening class for kids that work during the day to teach them basic numbers, literacy, and health. Sadly, these kids all are obliged to work – most as house boys or field workers – to help by bringing money into the family. Boycotting goods from Asia won't reduce child labor – education and self-sufficiency will.

Day 6 - A seniors' compound for aged 'freedom fighters' is today's venue for 380 bedkits at Chandpur – a village sponsored by Rotary Dum Dum. On hand to assist are about 25 RCC's [Rural Community Corps] sponsored by Rotary. Gandhi's non-violent independence movement was contrasted by the guerilla tactics of the 'freedom fighters' who would fight the British in violent pursuit of their goals. This is the place where my wife, Claire's, newsletter story is situated. After the distribution, we visited both the primary and high schools and created quite a commotion with so many happy children recognizing us in their community. We drove back for a late lunch in Kolkata, then across the Hugli for a long three hour drive west to Kahragpur, where we arrive at the Tata Steel Company's, Bearing division, guest house, our home for the night. Three Kahragpur Rotarians arrive to take us on a short drive off-road on a dark moonless night to a tribal village where we are greeted by the sound of drums, and the sight of many joyous tribals dancing to welcome us. We joined in. Round and round the fire we danced in a spirit of fellowship and international goodwill. About a dozen wives of Tata executives sponsor the village and are active doing social work – including setting up their primary school – with the tribals. Only one of the very well educated Tata women worked, and the rest lived in this company compound in a very distant rural location. No Stepford Wives here.

Day 7 - Rotarian Nikul is this year's Kahragpur Club president, and he played the pivotal role to organize the day, including the child selection of 380 of today's total of 854. Nikul selected nine primary schools, in nine poor areas, and went to visit each. But who to choose, he wondered, because they were all so poor. He struck on a brilliant idea. Not the smartest. Not the servants of friends. Not the ones without shoes. He chose the one's with the best attendance record in school, and just as important, he explained to all those not receiving a bedkit, that he would be back next year to give bedkits to every child with a 70%,

or better, attendance record. Most – 50 out of 90 – of the kids attending the Disha school received a bedkit. This place is run by Hansa Nundy, a Canadian from Whitby, who returns annually to her native country for half of the year to run this school where rural tribal kids can learn entrepreneurship skills. "Our goal is to develop job makers, not job seekers" said Hansa, about her boarding school of 120 kids in three classrooms, and two boarding rooms. Interested to learn more? You can e-mail Hansa at [nundyhansa@hotmail.com](mailto:nundyhansa@hotmail.com)

Day 8 - It's Sunday, and in Iraq it is Election Day. Here at Doltala, we're back at Subrata Battacharya's school to distribute the last 970 bedkits. After five straight hours of lining up kids for registration, dressing in classrooms for privacy, lining up, photography, counting labels, lining up, counting tickets, lining up, counting and handing out bedkits, lining up, handing out a boxed lunch, re-connecting with parents or guardians, the 6,000 bedkits were all distributed.

This was my sixth SCAW trip to India, and tenth in total, since Claire and I joined up with Gordon 'Flash' Brown, and Richmond Chandler, for our first SCAW trip in 1987. I have resigned from further overseas travelling for SCAW. It has been such a wonderful experience to have the opportunity to meet so many community-active, caring and involved individuals over the years. They have all enriched my life. Thank you SCAW for the wonderful memories.

## BY CLAIRE NEWTON TORONTO, ONTARIO

### Kolkata - A day in the life of a child.

Allow me to introduce you to a young girl, Suravi Biswas, a child selected at random as they were lining up to receive their bedkits. Suravi's responses to my questions were kindly translated from Bengali to English by the President of the Rotarian Club of Dum Dum, Mr. Tapas Bhattacharya.

- Suravi is 11 years old. She is pretty and shy (see photo).
- She lives with her mother and father, and her grandparents.



Note: 2005 Kolkata bedkit contents can be viewed on SCAW's Website

- She has one sister who is 12 (who we did not meet), and a four-year-old brother (who has an adorable smile).
- Their religion is Hindi.
- She walks to school, which we visited (most basic), and is now in class four.
- They live in the village of Bagu, a rural area 12 kilometers north of Kolkata (population maybe 1,000 or 2,000).
- Her father works at home as a silver artisan who makes small ornaments for ladies to wear. He is presently in Kolkata for the day selling his wares and picking up a little more silver.
- Her mother assists her husband in his work.
- Her parents had an arranged marriage, when she was 14 and he was 18.
- They have been married 13 years.
- There will be no more children, asserted her mother.
- Suravi opened her bedkit and was pleased with the contents. She liked the new pretty dress that she was wearing.
- We walked to her house, and her mother graciously invited us in.
- It has a tile roof and a cement floor and consists of two rooms for sleeping and one smaller one, the kitchen.
- In one small room, Suravi sleeps with her sister and her grandmother, and her parents and her little brother sleep in the bed beside them.
- The grandfather sleeps by himself in the other room as he is not well.
- The home has electricity, as I saw one naked light bulb suspended from the ceiling.
- The family owns their little house and the land that it is on.
- They also own three chickens.
- The laundry is done in the local green water pond.
- Sanitation is apparently somewhere at the back.
- Suravi gets up each morning at 6 a.m.
- Her breakfast consist of a *muri*, a fried rice patty.
- She walks back home for lunch, usually, rice with *dahl* (lentils) and vegetables, sometimes fish.
- School is finished by three.
- After school, she has a snack and plays outside.
- She helps her mom bring in the water (from an outdoor pump) and does her



Suravi Biswas(r), age 11, with mother(l) and 4 year-old brother - Photo by Claire Newton, Toronto, Ontario

leaders should be accountable to the people... we have 500 million illiterates, 700 million without sanitation. If this is not lack of accountability, what is?"

We owe many thanks to all our friends of the Rotary Club of Dum Dum, who along with their families, worked tirelessly, some taking their yearly holidays to ensure one of the best distributions possible. They are a remarkable and dedicated bunch and I have heard many of them say "We are happy to serve", proving it with their actions.

completed an application to be an overseas traveller. In the spring of 2004, I had a personal interview with Laura Harper. In the summer we received a call to invite us to participate in the Kolkata, India, distribution in January, 2005.

It has been busy since our acceptance. We were arranging the flights, reading the SCAW information, receiving the necessary medical vaccinations, ensuring our passports were valid, obtaining the necessary Indian Government Visa, and selecting and packing clothes. We also spent a day at SCAW Headquarters arranging the name labels as well as obtaining the signs, cameras and other contact information.

It has been exciting to plan the trip and to meet the dedicated Rotarians in the Dum Dum (Kolkata) Rotary club. It has also been interesting to experience the Indian food and customs with our co-leaders Claire and Peter Newton.

Finally the most exciting part; the reason for all the previous work in Canada and in Kolkata: it was wonderful to see the pleasure in the faces of the children when I said "Hello, this bedkit is for you. Sleep Well."

Yes it was all worthwhile. I brought back 6,000 Thank You's from the children of Kolkata. That is 6,000 Thank You's to you, the donors, for making this possible.

**BY JOYCE POTH  
MILTON, ONTARIO**

Many years ago, Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has. And, never doubt that a small group of students can make the world a more just and humane place. Indeed, they already have."

What a meaningful quotation this is as I sit in our Kolkata hotel composing my newsletter story. My daughter e-mailed this quotation just as we were leaving for India, and little did she realize I'd be using it as a basis for my story.

I had wanted to go on another SCAW distribution, and was delighted to be asked to go to India with my husband Richard. But as January 20<sup>th</sup> neared, the December 26<sup>th</sup> Tsunami occurred, and India flooded the

homework in the evening.

- She has been to Kolkata twice, once to visit, and once more to go to the hospital for an operation to remove a lump from her throat.

- She was seriously ill and was in the hospital for a week and it was funded by the government of Bengal.

- Medication was necessary for about one year.

- The doctors recommended that she should eat *roti* for her evening meal as it is more nutritious (it is made of wheat).

- The rest of the family eats rice.

- She is a good student.

- School is funded by the government until class four.

- Next year, for class five, it will cost 2,000 rupees a year (about sixty-six dollars).

- She would love to go to school up to grade twelve and it is available in the village (read Joyce's descriptions of local schools).

- Her mother is doubtful that they will be able to afford it.

- Suravi said that she cannot dream of what she wants to do except to be a good human being.

- If she could dream, she would like to become a doctor.

This is her story, and from what we saw, she is one of the luckier ones.

We saw 6,000 such children and each has a story, some more heartbreaking than others.

As was quoted in the Rotary Club of Barrackpore's monthly bulletin: "Our

*Dhonyabad* (thank you) to you all.

Many thanks also to Richard and Joyce Poth for working hard and always seeing the positive side, and to my co-leader, Peter Newton, as sharing the task really lightens the load.

Finally, without you, our donors, there would be no distribution. Thank you very much!

**BY RICHARD POTH  
MILTON, ONTARIO**

I woke about 6 am. It was just getting light. I heard birds – it was quiet. Where was I?

I opened my eyes. There was a high ceiling with a fan and huge gray coloured doors. Then I remembered. I was in India on a SCAW Distribution with my wife, Joyce, and Claire and Peter Newton.

I went to the window and looked across a garden of flowers to the river. There was a boat floating on the river and in the haze I could see land – Bangladesh on the other side. It was a wide river, over a kilometer across.

It was strangely quiet. Yesterday and the day before, I heard a constant din of horns and traffic on the street in Kolkata.

Now I remember how this adventure started. I had heard about the wonderful idea started by Murray Dryden. Joyce (my wife) had used the idea of donating a bedkit for a needy child in her teaching career. The cost is only \$30.00 and the Canadian children can see the contents and relate to giving to another child in a foreign country.

My involvement started with attending an information meeting at the SCAW office. I had

media. I became more apprehensive, and wondered if what we were about to do was really worthwhile.

I found many thoughtful citizens in India, including the Rotarians, their wives, children and volunteers at the distribution sites; the teachers, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Guides and members of several women's organizations.

Geritranjale Rai, the wife of an executive of Tata, (one of the biggest trucking companies), and several other ladies in the Tata compound, decided to ask a nearby tribal village how they could help them. The answer was, "Educate our children". These ladies built a small building out of scrap materials, hired teachers and started a school for children with classes ranging one through four. Now the West Bengal government has taken over the costs of the school, but these women still help with tuition costs for the tribal children when they move up to classes five, and on. I asked Mrs. Rai why she did this good work, and she answered: "God has blessed me and I must give back." She also told me it's important to live in the moment and enjoy each day. Good advice!

I met some ladies from the Satabdi Women's Organization that has set up a school for spastic and mentally challenged children. They raise money and run the school for these forgotten children of the world.

Another special lady from a well-off family volunteers full time as the director of a school for poor children, and she hopes to make it an all girls' school. They realize in India how important education is to the female, but also how difficult it is for girls to get that education.

These special people truly are changing India little by little.

**NEXT SCHEDULED  
DISTRIBUTION TRIPS**

**March, 2005  
KENYA - 3,000 BEDKITS**

**April, 2005  
PHILIPPINES - 5,000 BEDKITS**

The second half of the quotation about a small group of students making the world a better place also tugged at my heartstrings and rang true. As a retired teacher, I am constantly looking to meet fellow teachers and comparing our school systems. What a contrast between Canada and India!

I met some unforgettable teachers that are giving their students at least a chance at changing their lives.

Many of our distributions took place in private school grounds, where even their classrooms were dark, dingy, sparsely furnished rooms of grey concrete. There were tattered rhymes and alphabets hanging on the walls, but not a book was visible—only a blackboard for the teacher to use. I did see some projects about the Tsunami and its devastation.

Public schools are one big classroom with two chairs and two tables for the two teachers, and the bare floor where up to 100 students would sit. Rote learning of numbers, reading in English and Bengali were the main methods of teaching.

From speaking with the teachers through an interpreter, I learned that their hope is that the education they impart will help enable the children to change their destinies, and thus make the world a better place.

One special group of bedkit recipient students gave our team our most poignant memories, and I'd like to share this with you. We were brought to their one-room school of sheet metal and bamboo walls, given a traditional tribal welcome ceremony necklace of flowers, then invited to join their welcome dance around the campfire to the sounds of beating drums. Inside, several children sang a welcome song, did a dance recital, yoga demonstrations and ended with this prayer: "We have come to *Shesha, Shuika Kendra* to acquire knowledge, study and learn. We will learn everything while playing. We will be engrossed in dances and songs. Thus start our studies joyfully. We pay our due respect to our teachers, to our parents and the elders, tune by tune."

Dear donors, these are just a sample of some of the Indian children that received one of your bedkits, and just might be one of those students that can later make India a more just and humane place. Indeed, they already have. Thank you for your donations and the chance for me to meet these special people.

**Kolkata Bedkit January 2005**

1 nylon mat  
1 mattress  
1 pillow  
1 pillow cover  
1 bed sheet  
1 mosquito net  
1 woolen blanket  
2 sets clothes for boys  
2 sets clothes for girls  
1 wind cheater  
1 pair *Kito* shoes (Rubber Sandals with Velcro closures)  
1 *gamcha* (Cotton Towel)  
1 woolen shawl  
1 school bag  
1 set water bottle and *tiffin* (lunch) box  
1 napkin  
1 set of school stationary: (2 52-page exercise books, 1 pen, 1 6" ruler, 1 eraser)  
1 set Stainless Steel *thala, bati* and glass (Plate, Bowl and Cup)  
1 set tooth paste and tooth brush  
1 pair socks  
1 plastic bag

**THANK YOU  
for your  
contribution to this  
Kolkata, India trip**

**Black's Photography for  
photofinishing**

**Champion Photochemistry  
Limited** for continuously  
funding film and photofinishing  
costs since 1986.

**Konica Canada Inc.** for  
donating film

**The Printing House  
(Russ Cosman)  
5120 Dundas Street West  
Etobicoke, Ontario** for the  
printing of this newsletter

**Kay Kelly,  
Harry Keating and  
Maurice Kowanetz**  
for publishing this newsletter

**Donors and Volunteers!**