



Volunteer Information Pack



SABUJSANGHA

2019

Volunteer Information Pack

Dear Volunteer,

Welcome. Thank you for your interest in volunteering with Sabuj Sangha. Volunteering is an incredibly rewarding experience. It provides you with the opportunity to give something back while at the same time developing your own skills. Volunteering has always been a key part of Sabuj Sangha's work. For over three decades, Sabuj Sangha has been working with local and international volunteers. Volunteers play a vital role in fighting poverty. We work with volunteers from international NGOs as well as independent volunteers. To this day, volunteering is a major part of Sabuj Sangha's work with volunteers providing a range of skills and resources.

This information pack should provide you with all you need to know about volunteering with Sabuj Sangha. It contains information about Sabuj Sangha, the type of work you can get involved in and living in West Bengal.

We would also encourage you to go through our website, www.sabujsangha.org, in detail and make yourself familiar with our values and goals. If there is anything not covered in this information pack or on the website please do not hesitate to get in contact.

We look forward to hearing from you.

The Volunteer Team
Sabuj Sangha

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About Us

Sabuj Sangha is a non-profit, non-government development organisation working in West Bengal, India. It was established in 1954 in the Sunderban region of West Bengal. Its work has since spread north throughout South 24 Parganas and into Jalpaiguri. From its humble beginnings, Sabuj Sangha has grown into a vibrant organisation working with a range of people across multiple sectors. It currently works in the following areas:

- Health and Nutrition
- Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
- Education and Protection
- Livelihood and Women's Empowerment
- Environment and Disaster Response



Sabuj Sangha seeks to improve the lives of people less fortunate through participation and empowerment. We believe that partnership is key to breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring that all people are given a fair and equal chance. It works directly with over 10,000 women through Self-Help Groups and has also reached over 3,000 children through its education initiatives alone.

Aside from direct programme implementation, Sabuj Sangha is involved in research, documentation, advocacy and networking. It also lobbies and works with Government to enact change and ensure people have access to their most basic human rights.

Vision

Sabuj Sangha looks forward to an egalitarian society where people will enjoy equal rights and access to equal opportunities.

Mission

The sustainable development of marginalised and vulnerable people to ensure a quality life through empowerment, education, information, infrastructure development, healthcare service and economic self-reliance through convergence of services provided by local self governments.

History

Sabuj Sangha was established in 1954 at Nandakumarpur village of Mathurapur II block of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India. Nandakumarpur is located in the Sunderbans which is the world's largest delta region and home to over four million people. It consists of a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats, saltwater swamps and small islands of mangrove forests and is one of the most beautiful and



picturesque places in the world. However, despite its obvious beauty, the region and its populace are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods and cyclones

Initially, the main activities of Sabuj Sangha were to organise cultural and sports events, used to generate a sense of community within the area. Over time, the organisation began to grow, spurred on by the passion and enthusiasm of local people seeking to improve living conditions in the Sunderbans.

Sabuj Sangha began working as a development organisation in 1975 and was registered under the Societies Registration Act. It began undertaking a number of rural development projects, to improve quality of life in the region. In 1992, it was registered under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 1976.

After a decade of experimentation with top down project planning and implementation, the organisation shifted its focus and adopted a sustainable rural development process. This represented a change from project mode to programme mode, allowing them to adopt a more holistic approach to development using a multi sectoral development strategy.

From its humble beginnings in Nandakumarpur, Sabuj Sangha has grown into a vibrant organisation with over 200 staff and a further 100 volunteers. It works with thousands of families each year on a range of issues. It provides healthcare, education, livelihood, sanitation and emergency response to some of the world most vulnerable people.

Where We Work

Sabuj Sangha works in three areas, namely the Sunderbans, Suburban Kolkata and Alipurduar. It was founded in the Sunderban region of West Bengal in 1954. The Sunderbans, the world's largest delta region, is home to over a four million people. It consists of a complex network of tidal waterways, mudflats, saltwater swamps and small islands of mangrove forests and is one of the most beautiful and picturesque places in the world. However, despite its obvious beauty, the region and its populace are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters such as floods and cyclones.

Throughout the 1990s, Sabuj Sangha observed that many families were leaving the Sunderbans and migrating towards Kolkata city in search of work. These families began to settle along the southern railway line into the city. In the late 1990s, Ansuman Das, the director of Sabuj Sangha, visited these railway settlements and was concerned for the health, safety and security of many of the inhabitants, especially the children. In 2001 Sabuj Sangha commissioned a report entitled 'Railway Children', to determine the scale of the problem. Based on this report, Aalor Disha, the peri-urban unit of Sabuj Sangha was established in 2002. Aalor Disha is responsible for delivering health, education and livelihood programmes in these communities.

Sabuj Sangha has recently begun working in Alipurduar. Alipurduar is situated in the northern most part of West Bengal bordering with Bhutan and Assam. It is famous for its picturesque landscape, dominated by tea plantations. Many of the villagers are employed in these tea gardens, working very long days for very little pay. They have almost no additional source of income and many families live well below the poverty line with no access to health services.



There is high rate of malaria and malnutrition in the region. Sabuj Sangha, with its many years experience working as a development organisation, identified Alipurduar as a region requiring intervention to ensure the safety and well being of the people. Sabuj Sangha's work in the area currently focuses on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. It hopes to expand its operations in the coming months to provide the much needed support to the thousands of vulnerable people living in the region.



Your Placement

What Areas Can I Work In?

Sabuj Sangha has a range of programmes in which you can get involved, from working in our local hospital to teaching in our model primary school. We classify volunteers into two categories, Professional and Non-Professional.

Professional

Professional volunteers are generally qualified individuals with a number of years work experience looking for a different challenge. We are currently looking for professional volunteers in the following areas:

- Education
- Health (doctors, nurses, midwives, health managers)
- Social Work
- Community Mobilisation
- Engineers (water, environmental, civil)
- Business Management
- Advocacy
- Fundraising
- Marketing and Communication
- Monitoring and Evaluation
- Natural Resource Management



Non-Professional

Non-professional volunteers are usually recent school or university graduates looking to explore the world and gain experience of different cultures. Non-professional volunteers can work in a number of areas ranging from working as teaching assistants in our coaching centres to working in our central office. The typical age profile of non-professional volunteers is 18-30. Potential



- Classroom teaching
- Music instruction
- Creative or performing arts instruction
- Administrative work
- Fundraising
- Other extra-curricular activities
- One-on-one remedial tutoring

Please note that neither of these lists is exhaustive as there is a wide range of projects where volunteers can be of assistance.

Where Will I Work and Live

Sabuj Sangha has placements in two locations, rural Sunderbans and suburban Kolkata. The Sunderbans is located in the south of West Bengal in the South 24 Parganas district. This rural environment is incredibly scenic and peaceful. Volunteers working in the Sunderbans will stay out our residential campus and we will provide them with meals.

Sabuj Sangha works in three districts in suburban Kolkata, namely Canning, Baripur and Dakshin Barast. The peri-urban unit of Sabuj Sangha, Aalor Disha is located in Champahati. These placements offer volunteers the option of living in Kolkata city and commuting to work. Volunteers will travel to their placement via train. For suburban placements, volunteers will have to find their own accommodation but we can help you in this process.



How Do I Get There?

Volunteers are responsible for organising their own flights. Many international flights fly to Kolkata. From the airport, Sabuj Sangha will arrange to pick you up and bring you to our central office in Kolkata.

If you are working in the Sunderbans, we would encourage you to spend a few days in Kolkata so that you can experience the city and to pick up anything you might need for your placement.

If you are working in a suburban placement and have arranged accommodation in Kolkata, we will bring you to your accommodation and help you get settled in.

How Long Can I Volunteer For

Sabuj Sangha has both short-term and long-term volunteering options, ranging from two weeks to two years. Depending on your skills and interests, we will try to match a placement to suit your availability. We recommend volunteering for a minimum of two months as this will allow you time to adjust to the placement and have a significant impact.



Can I Bring a Friend(s)

Yes, Sabuj Sangha can accommodate volunteer groups. However, it depends on the need for volunteers in a particular area. We will do our best to coordinate it so that you and your friends will be able to work and live together.

How Much Does it Cost

The cost will very much vary depending on your placement. A more detailed breakdown of the cost will be given to you once details of your placement have been confirmed. In general, placements will cost approximately \$65 /€58 /£53 /4500 INR per week.

As a volunteer, you are encouraged to fundraise to meet the costs of your Participation Fee. Sabuj Sangha can issue receipts to individuals or companies for sponsorship monies received. Any money you raise above your placement fee will go into a programme support fund which goes directly to programme costs.

The cost of living in India is relatively low when compared to the western world. The amount of money you will spend during the week varies very much from person to person. On average approximately €58 - €100 a week is sufficient.



Pre-Departure

How Should I Prepare?

We ask volunteers to think seriously about why they want to volunteer. Volunteer is a very enjoyable and rewarding experience but it can also be physically and emotionally demanding. Please be realistic about what you expect to achieve and prepare yourself accordingly.

By prepare yourself we mean:

- Read up on all aspects of Sabuj Sangha via the website and any other materials provided to you.
- Make yourself familiar with all aspects of the placement.
- Understand the context of where you will be working.
- Understand the culture of India and prepare yourself adequately.
- Read up on Development and the many challenges that it poses.
- Ensure you are fit and healthy prior to travelling.
- Ensure you have consulted a doctor and have all the necessary medication required for the whole duration of your trip.
- Ensure you have adequate medical and travel insurance.
- Set realistic expectations of what you would like to achieve.
- Think about possible challenges you may encounter and how you would overcome them.
- Make sure your passport is in date and you have the right visa.



Challenges

Some of the challenges that previous volunteers have encountered are:

- Understanding the needs of those you will be working with: your team, the organisation, the communities overseas, the staff, teachers and children (esp. with challenges of understanding across distance & culture).
- Putting the needs of the organisation ahead of your own, at times, when making choices.
- Mentally, emotionally and physically challenging.
- Basic living conditions.
- Health, safety and security risks – working in an unfamiliar environment.
- Foreign country and culture, different climates.
- Living & working in a team – huge potential for achieving great things, but difficult at times.
- Many things will be unclear – especially at first.
- Learning as you go, in a new job, in a short period of time.
- Dealing with the things that go wrong – and learning from those.
- 'Success' of the programme is not guaranteed.

- See what difference you make is difficult, it takes time and may be in unexpected ways.
- 24 x 7: Volunteers & Ambassadors.

How to prepare for the Challenges? Pre-departure Preparation Framework

1. Understanding the context (history, background, needs, concerns, bigger picture) : of the organisation, India and Development, fellow volunteers, past, present, future, all stakeholders,
2. Working with others (our interactions within the context) to create change & learning the skills to do so effectively
 - Skills & tools: teaching, project management, language, planning, learning
 - Understanding needs & benefits
 - Leadership
 - Teamwork
3. Yourself (keeping well, getting there & back)
 - Health & Safety
 - Travel arrangements



Vaccinations

You should consult a doctor as to what vaccinations you require. In general, volunteers require the following vaccinations:

- Typhoid
- Polio
- Tetanus
- Hepatitis A and B
- Meningococcal Meningitis
- Anti-Malaria pills



Visa

Volunteers should note that they are responsible for organising their own Visa and ensure that they have the correct visa prior to travelling. Sabuj Sangha can provide you with a letter outlining your intentions to volunteer with our organisation for the agreed time. This should assist you in obtaining your visa.

The table below shows the different types of Visa's available and the duration they are valid for. Costs of visas vary depending on type and nationality. Speak with you local embassy for more details.

Type	Duration
Transit	Valid for 15 days – single/double entry
Tourist	Valid for 6 months – multiple entries
Business	Valid for more than 1 year – multiple entries (given only in exceptional cases on merits)
Student	Valid for duration of the course – multiple entries
Employment	Valid for 6 months – multiple entries Up to 1 year – multiple entries Valid for more than 1 year – multiple entries
Medical	Valid for 6 months Up to 1 year More than 1 year
Journalist	Valid for the period of visit or maximum 6 months
Conference	Valid for the period of conference
Transfer	Transfer of visa from old to new passport

Below is a description of each visa as given by the Indian Government:

Tourist Visa: A Tourist Visa is given to those visiting India for tourism or other non-business related purposes and is generally valid up to 6 months.

Business Visa: A Business Visa is given those who are doing business in India such as making sales or establishing contacts on behalf of a company outside of India. This type of Visa may be valid for one year or more with multiple entries. However, the period of stay in India (for each visit) under this category is limited to six months only.

Journalist Visa: A Journalist Visa is given to professional journalists and photographers for up to three months' stay in India. For applicants who to make a documentary in India, kindly contact the Press and Information wing in the Embassy/Consulate.

Conference Visa: This type of Visa is for international conferences, or on certain subjects, as decided by the Government of India from time to time. Such a Visa can be issued only after clearance for the said conference is received from the Government of India.

Transit Visa: A transit visa is granted for the sole purpose of enabling the holder to travel through India to reach his/her ultimate destination. Change of purpose is not allowed. The Transit visa is valid for direct transit only for a maximum period of 3 days. For a stay in India beyond 3 days, an appropriate visa should be obtained.

Entry Visa: An Entry Visa is issued to those of India origin visiting India for tourism or other non-business related purposes. Members of the family of a person employed in India are also eligible for Entry visa. In the latter case, documents establishing the employment of the spouse along with a copy of his/her Employment visa must be attached.

Employment Visa: An Employment Visa is granted to those who are an employee of an Indian company. The Embassy/Consulate may grant Employment visa valid for a year irrespective of the duration of the contract. Further extension up to 5 years could be obtained from MHA/FRRO in the concerned state in India.

Student Visa: Student visas are given to bona fide students to pursue regular studies at recognised institutions in India. The Visa has multiple entry options and is valid for the period of study as approved by the educational institution in India.

Missionaries Visa: Missionary Visas are granted for those going to India for religious purposes and a single entry visa is issued.

Research Visa: Research Visas are given to Research Professors or Scholars and to participants attending research Conferences/Seminars/Workshops. Applicants should apply for this Visa at least six weeks before their date of departure to India.

Sports Visa: This visa is for professional and amateur sportspeople, judges and adjudicators who want to come to India to participate in their field of sport. In fact, it's an invitation letter from India to the persons involved in sports.

What should I Bring?

Below of is a list of things that previous volunteers have suggested bringing. Please note that Kolkata is a big city and almost everything is available. We would advice against brining any heavy toiletries etc as you can get them here and they are a fraction of the price.



Clothes – For work, volunteers are requested to wear loose clothing that covers their shoulders, legs, stomach and chest. We recommend that you do not pack too much as you can buy most of your clothes in Kolkata relatively cheaply. Also, locals appreciate when volunteers make the effort and wear Indian style clothes.

- ❑ Female Volunteers - Tend to wear a comfortable Indian-style tunic (kurta) accompanied with jeans, leggings, or other such cotton pants. Western clothing (i.e. tee-shirts & jeans) is permissible; however shirts should not be low-cut or shoulder-bearing and short skirts and shorts would attract unwanted attention.
- ❑ Male Volunteers - Most Indian men as well as most wear Western clothing (i.e. collared shirts, tee-shirts, jeans, shorts).

It should be noted that jeans are not advisable during the hotter summer and monsoon seasons.

Shoes – a pair of sandals and/or flip-flops and a pair of sports shoes.

Medication – we recommend that you a visit a doctor prior to departure and they should be able to advice you on what medication to bring. Medications that volunteers usually bring include:

- ❑ Malaria Tablets – very important. Please ensure you have enough for the duration of your stay and for the specified period when you return home.
- ❑ Imodium - diarrhea
- ❑ Motilium – upset stomach
- ❑ Mosquito repellent – bring plenty

- Fucibet – relief from mosquito bites
- Pain killers
- A small first aid kit
- Dioralyhte – rehydration sachets
- Vitamins
- Hand Sanitizer

Other necessary medical equipment may include syringes, water sterilisation tablets, mosquito netting etc. Please also ensure that you have obtained the relevant vaccination prior to departure. Beware some vaccinations require a number of courses so be sure to plan this will in advance.

Mobile Phone - we recommend having a mobile phone. This will make your life at lot easier as it means that you will always be able to contact people. It is relatively easy to buy a SIM card. Please note that most mobiles are locked and therefore not compatible with foreign SIM cards. In order to unlock your phone, contact your network provider and request the phone to be unlocked. Alternatively, it is easy and relatively inexpensive to purchase a new handset in India if necessary. International calling cards are available as are recharge cards for domestic calls and text messages.



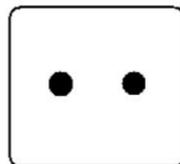
Laptop – this is entirely up to you. Some volunteers find it useful for work, internet, watching movies, listening to music etc but others find it more hassle than its worth.

Camera – we recommend you bring a camera. You will have many incredible moments which you want to capture. It's also a good way to update people at home on how you are getting on.

Photos – Everyone will be very interested in you and will love seeing photos from your home. We recommend you bring photos of friends, family as well as of the country you are from as local people will really appreciate it and it is a nice way to get to know each other.

Guide Book – always good to have one (Rough Guide, Lonely Planet etc).

Adapter – if you are bringing any electrical appliances from home be sure to bring the appropriate adapter. A typical Indian plug is shown below:



Photocopies – please bring 10 photocopies of your Passport and Visa. You'll be surprised how often you need them.

Passport Photos – Please bring 10 passport photos. Again you will need them for pretty much everything.

Life in West Bengal

West Bengal: At a glance

Date of formation:	01-05-1960
State Capital:	Kolkata
Area:	88,752km ²
Latitude (capital):	22.82° N
Longitude (capital):	88.2° E
Population (2001):	80,176,197
Population Density:	903persq. km
Male population:	41,465,985
Female population:	38,710,212
Sex Ratio:	934 females per 1000 males
Literacy rate:	69.22 %
No. of Districts:	19
No. of towns:	375
No. of Villages:	51,043
No. of Lok Sabha seats:	42
No. of Rajya Sabha seats:	16
No. of assembly seats:	294
Religion:	Hindu, Muslims, Christians and others
Official Language:	Bengali
Time zone:	IST (UTC+5:30)
Temperature:	Min. 12-150C; Max. 38-420C
Average Rainfall:	4170 mm



Introduction

West Bengal is located in the northeastern part of the country. It is bounded on the north by Bhutan and the state of Sikkim, on the east by Bangladesh, on the northeast by the state of Assam, on the south by the Bay of Bengal, on the southwest by the state of Orissa, on the northwest by Nepal, and on the west by the state of Bihar. The alluvial plain in the south is watered by the legendary River Hooghly and its tributaries - Mayurakshi, Damodar, Kangsabati and the Rupnarayan. The Himalayan north, comprising the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Bihar are watered by the swift flowing rivers Tista, Torsa, Jaldhaka and Ranjit. Variations in altitude result in great variety in the nature and climate of West Bengal. From the northern highlands at the feet of the Himalayas to the tropical forests of Sunderbans, West Bengal is a land of myriad beauty, each region different from the other.

Although in area West Bengal ranks as one of the smaller states of India, it is one of the largest in population. The capital is Kolkata, India's second largest city; other important cities and towns are Howrah, Asansol, Durgapur and Siliguri, Darjeeling, Kharagpur and Haldia.

History



Bengal finds a coveted place even in pre-historic times. At the time of Alexander's invasion a powerful kingdom called Gangaridai ruled over Bengal. Ascendancy of the Guptas and the Mauryas had somewhat little effect on Bengal. Later Sasanka became the king of Bengal and is said to have played an important role in the early half of the seventh century. He was succeeded by Gopala who founded the Pala dynasty which ruled for centuries and had created a huge empire. The Palas were followed by the Sena dynasty which was ended by Muslim rulers from Delhi. Bengal was ruled by various Muslim rulers and governors till the Mughal period in sixteenth century.

After the Mughals, history of Modern Bengal began with advent of European and English traders. Battle of Plassey in 1757 changed the course of history when the English first gained a strong foothold in Bengal and India. In 1905 it was partitioned to achieve some political returns but people's growing movement under the auspices of the Congress led to the reunion in 1911. This triggered off hectic movement for freedom which culminated with Independence in 1947, and partition.

After 1947, the merger of native settlement began which ended with its final reorganization in 1956 (as per Recommendation of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956) when some Bengali speaking areas of a neighbouring state was transferred to West Bengal.

West Bengal is now a prosperous state with more than two thirds of the population depending on agriculture. The people believe in "simple living and high thinking" policy. The state has been ruled by the left Front for the past 30 years making it a democratically elected communist government. In the more recent time, there is tremendous reformation going on in various sectors such as economy, education, transport and tourism etc.

Climate

There are four main seasons in West Bengal: summer, monsoon, autumn and winter. The summer season is from March to June with April being the hottest month.

Temperatures range from 38 °C (100 °F) to 45 °C (113 °F). The monsoon or rainy season as it is often referred to, stretches from June to the end of September. Most of the annual average rainfall of 175 cm about 125 cm occurs during this period. Temperatures range from 32 °C (90 °F) to 40 °C (104 °F). A short autumn period is experienced from October to November. The high pressure from the monsoon season is replaced with low pressure and temperatures gradually begin to decrease as it enters the Winter season. The winter season is experienced from mid-November to December, with January being the coldest month. Winter is mild with average minimum temperatures of 15 °C (59 °F).



Food

India has a rich variety of food. It is believed that rice is suitable for healthy living and you will therefore notice that our people eat a lot of rice. The food may not agree with you in the first few days but you will likely get accustomed to it quickly. While you adjust to the food here, you may want to bring biscuits or health bars with you to supplement your diet.

We advise you to take precautions with what you eat. Avoid eating fruits and vegetables that have been washed, cut or handled by street vendors. It is best to wash and cut fruits and vegetables on your own. Also avoid eating food, especially meat, from street stall vendors as preparations are questionable. In general, once you are here, you will figure out what food you are comfortable with as you try new things.

In eastern India, the Bengali and Assamese styles of cooking are noticeably different. The staple food of Bengalis is a combination of rice and fish. Usually the Bengalis love eating varieties of fishes. A special way of preparing the delicacy known as 'Hilsa' is by wrapping it in the pumpkin leaf and then cooking it. Another unusual ingredient that is commonly used in the Bengali cooking is the 'Bamboo Shoot'. Various sweets prepared in this region, by using milk include the 'Roshogollas', 'Sandesh', 'Cham-cham' and many more.

If you ever crave something familiar, Western or Continental food is readily available at restaurants throughout Kolkata. Food in India is fairly inexpensive and groceries are readily available from the many local markets. Depending upon where you eat, dinner at a restaurant could cost as little as Rs.70 (less than \$1) or as much as Rs. 700 (around \$10)

Bottled water is readily available in all shops. It is not advised to drink tap water.

About Kolkata

Fact and Figures:

State:	West Bengal
Population:	13.5 million
Summer temperature:	30°C-40°C
Winter temperature:	30°C-10°C
Dialing code:	+91 033



Introduction

Kolkata is 300 years old. Kolkata is the oldest major port in the country. It remains to be the capital of India till 1911 and also the main area for the activities of British. Kolkata was been selected as the trading center by the British. After the partition of India between India and Pakistan Kolkata became the capital of West Bengal. Now after a long time Kolkata had become a busy and flourishing town, the center of the cultural as well as the political and economic life of Bengal.

History

In 1690, Job Charnok, from East India Company selected Kolkata for a British trade settlement. He took the lease of the three villages- Sutanuti, Govindapur and Kolikata(Calcutta) as a trading post of British East India. The city came into limelight in 1756, when Siraj-Ud-Dawlah, the nawab of Bengal, captured the city. The British again captured it in 1757 under Robert Clive. The first Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings made it the place of the supreme courts of justice and then the Kolkata became the capital of British India in 1772. By 1800 Kolkata had become a busy and flourishing town, the center of the cultural as well as the political and economic life of Bengal.

Fairs & Festivals

There is a range of festivals celebrated throughout Kolkata and West Bengal.

Rathyatra: Legend has it that Jagannath, a reincarnation of Lord Vishnu, goes on this vacation with his brother Balaram and sister Subhadra. Religious fervor runs high and the streets of Kolkata turn into a mélange of colors. Devotees take turns to pull gigantic chariots bearing idols of the three divinities through the narrow bylanes of the city.



Saraswati Puja: Dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of learning, science, and the creative arts, this festival is for students. The youngest girl in every Bengali family is decked in yellow on this day, and students flock to the pandals to pray for their academic success.

Shivratri: For an all-night festive experience, catch the celebration of the "Night of Shiva". Devotees meditate, pray, sing and recite hymns in praise of Lord Shiva and offer milk, curd, honey and glossy green leaves of the bel tree in worship. Celebrated in February-March, the festival is also a time for the devotees to observe fasts.

Poila Baisakh: The first month of the Bengali calendar, Baishakh, marks the beginning of the crop cycle in Bengal. A lot of Bengali weddings are held in this month, and new businesses started. The first day of this month, called Poila Baisakh is celebrated as the Bengali new year. Chances are, if you step into a shop in Calcutta on this day, you'll be offered sweets and maybe the odd gift or two.

Id-ul-Fitr: Id-ul-Fitr marks the end of the holy Islamic month of Ramzan. Take a walk down the path alongside the Maidan on this day and watch the young, middle-aged and old alike gathering here for their prayers, harkening to the call of the muezzin from the Shahid Minar.

Muharram: The solemnity of Muharram is best experienced by following an "Ashoura" procession in the city. Led by a snow-white horse, the procession of tazias and the devout wends its way through areas such as Metiabruz and Khiderpore.

Kali Puja: A festival to propitiate the dark goddess Kali, Kali Puja is held in the dark of a new moon night. With her blue-black skin, blood-smeared face, terrifying third eye, Kali wears little other than necklaces of snakes and skulls. In her four hands, she bears weapons and blessings for her followers. This is one festival that is seldom performed within a home, and is often marked by animal sacrifices.



Makar Sankranti: A festival that marks the winter solstice, the Makar Sankranti festival is marked by two melas or fairs, both held a little distance from CKolkata. The maidan in Kolkata, however, plays host to the hordes of faithfuls thronging to the three-day Ganga Sagar

Mela held on Sagardwip to commemorate this festival. Even as the Ganga Sagar Mela winds down, bauls - a cult of minstrels - wend their way to nearby Bolpur for the Baul mela.

Lakshmi Puja: Durga Puja is closely followed by Lakshmi Puja - the festival honoring the goddess of wealth, peace and prosperity. Every home celebrates this festival as a chance to welcome the goddess of wealth to their homes. A day or two before the festival, the bazaars of Kolkata are packed with vendors selling idols of the gracious Lakshmi, seated on a lotus.

Durga Puja: For four days in September-October, Calcutta comes to a standstill as almost everyone in the city throngs its streets, visiting the pandals dressed in their festive best and fêting their taste buds with food from the stalls that spring up on the roadsides. Incense, drumbeats, chants, laughter, the sizzle and smell of food characterize this festival dedicated to Goddess Durga. Durga Puja is a chance to meet old friends, rub shoulders with the young and eligible, buy new clothes, walk the streets of the city till the wee hours of the morning, and, of course, admire the oeuvre of idol makers who craft beautiful idols of Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesh and Kartik out of bamboo, straw, jute, clay and paint.

Joydev Mela: Strictly speaking, the Joydev Mela is held at Kenduli, a small village near Tagore's Shantiniketan, and not in Calcutta. However, this fair-cum-festival held in the early half of January and commemorating the birth of the Bhakti cult poet Jaydev is a wonderful way to connect with rural India. For three days, Baul minstrels, spiritual shoppers and city slickers seeking a high flock to this festival and lose themselves to the trance-like magic of baul songs.

Bhai Phota: This is the day brothers and sisters put aside their family squabbles and celebrate their familial ties. Women maintain a fast through the morning and break it by applying a dab of sandalwood to their brothers' foreheads, praying for their safety and welfare and plying them with sweets. In turn they receive gifts from their brothers. Do wangle an invite to a Bengali house on this day if you can - it's a day when the kitchen turns out some of its best fare of the year!



Dol Purnima: A festival of spring, Dol Purnima is marked by people on the streets, smearing each other with color, drinking milk laces with marijuana (locally called bhang) and ambushing unsuspecting passers-by with water balloons. Some of the celebrations can get pretty rowdy and some of the colors can get pretty artificial, so stay in your

room if your skin's sensitive.

Vishwakarma Puja: Dedicated to the God of Creation, Vishwakarma, the true spirit of the festival is seen in the homes of craftsmen and in industrial houses. Machines are oiled, cleaned and painted, and tools scrubbed and polished till they reflect the idol of the god, holding a hammer in his hand.

Volunteer Testimonials

To all of the wonderful staff of Sabuj Sangha,

Firstly, thank you so much for all of the amazing work you do for the poorest of the poor people in West Bengal. I have been unbelievably privileged to be able to travel over to Kolkata and volunteer with Sabuj Sangha. Every person I have met in Sabuj Sangha has been warm, welcoming and inspirational. Thank you for such great hospitality. The children I worked with in Ghutiari Sharif are the most fantastic kids; their energy, exuberance and sense of fun is just wonderful, they are an inspiration to everyone. Our visit to the Sundarbans was such a highlight too. I so enjoyed seeing where Sabuj Sangha was founded and learning all about the areas you work in. It was inspiring.



Thanks you so much for the most amazing summer of my life. I know I will be back again, no question. Until then, take care, keep up the good work and keep smiling.

Le Gra,

Catherine Stacey

Suas Volunteer



To all the Sabuj Sangha staff,

I'm so grateful to be given this opportunity to volunteer with you all. All of the Sabuj Sangha staff are a huge inspiration to me and the work that you do is amazing. I loved volunteering in Sabuj Kunri in Dakshin Barasat, the teachers are fantastic – so passionate and dedicated to their job. Seeing the impact Sabuj Sangha has on the kids and families is huge inspiration. The Sundarbans was an amazing experience; I loved seeing all the areas and the incredible work that you all do and witnessing all that has definitely influenced how I see my future and I know for sure this definitely will not be my last time in India.

Thank you for letting me be a part of your wonderful organisation, the memories will stay with me forever. I look forward to hopefully seeing you in the near future.

Slan,

Julie

Suas Volunteer

What's the Next Step?

If you would like to volunteer with Sabuj Sangha, please send a completed application form to director@sabujsangha.org.

As soon as we have received your application, we will contact you and begin the process of finding a suitable placement. Once terms of your placement have been finalized, we will send you a confirmation letter, contract and child protection policy. The contract should be signed and returned to us. We will also furnish you with details our bank account so you can transfer the required deposit.

We look forward to receiving you application.

