



May 2008

Dear Friends,

Despite temperatures soaring to 110 degrees and the usual Varanasi power cuts (read: no fans), we made it through the last few weeks of the school year and finished off a fantastic 2007-2008 session. This year was, without a doubt, the best yet. Accomplishments included getting accredited by the UP Board of Education, completing the first round of our immunization campaign, starting a popular after-school program, and holding our best-ever annual children's performance. On top of this and most exciting to me is finally being able to see real positive development in our students' personalities and behavior. I had a couple of chances to observe them as a group interacting with other children in the community. Our students were noticeably less violent, more polite, and more caring. I am so proud of them.

In January we started the first phase of our immunization program, giving 76 children vaccines against polio, measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, and tetanus. We also gave each child Vitamin A drops (to prevent night blindness) and a de-worming tablet. Most of the kids routinely have worms in their guts; the de-worming tablet helps to keep populations down when administered every 6 months. We plan to continue this program, giving boosters as necessary and immunizing new children who join the school in coming years.

In March we had a fantastic three-hour (!) children's performance. The dance items were favorites and the jokes interspersed throughout kept everyone in stitches. Our comedians were heartily hailed when they made their final appearance on stage at the end of the show. For me, the highlight was the performance of *Satarangi's Story*, a play written by our 3rd grade teacher, Siddharth Sir. Brilliantly staged with two comic storytellers who kept popping in and out to move the story along, the play showed the plight of a young girl who wanted to go to school but couldn't because she needed to work to supplement the family income. In the end, her employer, a well-to-do widow, finally realizes her social responsibility and encourages the girl to go to school. The play was performed with confidence and professionalism and packed real entertainment with a strong social message. I am hoping that we can re-stage the play at a more public venue sometime in the upcoming school year.

Of course, these successes haven't come without a lot of work and some worry. One of my students, a 12 year old boy with a sharp intellect and lovely personality, had some mental problems this term, going through two phases of depression, severe lethargy, and abnormal behavior. We took him to a psychiatrist and got him some medication; right now he is stable. He did well in his final exams and finished the year with straight As, despite missing two weeks of school only a couple of weeks before the end-of-term. As you might remember, another boy, Chandu, had, decided to quit school entirely. I was very much shaken by his decision because he has the potential even to enter a university; he is very bright. With a lot of effort and love, Chandu did end up finishing the school year and he is talking about going on next year. Just to have him finish this last month was touch and go, but in the end we've got a much happier boy. He smiles so much more than he did before. He is so sweet, I just wonder what happened to him to put him in the dark, hopeless place he was in a couple months ago.

Chandu was the first of our students to start reading just for fun. He started out slowly, but now reads voraciously and has gotten several other children turned on to the idea of leisure reading. I took him and a few other boys to the bookshop about a month ago to let them choose some books in Hindi for the school. (It was like a candy store for them -- they had never seen so many books before!) You can hardly find these books on the shelves of the school library -- they are all with students at home. Since that trip, I have made two more trips to the bookstore just trying to buy enough books to keep the kids occupied for the summer. It gives me a lot of joy to see these kids (children of illiterate parents you remember) sitting around reading books.

Now that summer vacation has started, I have been working on preparations for the upcoming school year. I've already rented some more rooms. I need to hire two more teachers. I need to order textbooks and other school supplies and have more writing tables and another blackboard made. Yesterday I purchased four more computers for our computer lab.

Our first graders took a field trip to a cottage industry that does embroidery and bead work on women's clothes. The kids were very interested and the men in the industry are eager to teach, so we have decided to purchase a large-scale embroidery frame (10-12 kids could sit around it and work and one time) so that the children can learn the skill. This could be a good extra source of income, especially for my girl students, most of whom will likely be stay-at-home moms. I have also decided to feed the students from 1st grade up a midday meal so that they can stay at school for more instruction in the afternoon. This will mean hiring a couple of cooks and buying a large size stove, pots, etc. We anticipate having at least 160 students next year (we already have about 40 new admissions). I expect our running expenses to be around \$1200/mo. starting in July.

love,  
Connie