



September 2008

Dear Friends,

Asha Deep Vidyashram has just finished up its first term exams. The 2008-2009 session started on July 1st, and it's been quite a ride getting through the initial trimester.

As usual, new admissions started trickling in at the beginning of July, rising to a flood by mid-month as word about the school spread further afield. By the end of July I was having to turn away potential students because some classes were over-full. Again during the admission process I was stunned and angered at how much education is not given in other local schools. The nearest government (public) school is notorious for its failure to teach; still I was so saddened to have to place a girl who had studied through 4th grade in that school in the 1st grade in our school. This girl had actually studied in our school during my first year of involvement; she was so bright. Now, four years later, she struggles to keep up in class. Her "education" experience has stunted even her ability to learn. I admitted some other students from another private school who, having passed 2nd grade, could not name the letters of the alphabet. People taking fees from parents who can scarcely afford to give them and then letting their precious children rot in the classroom – this makes me angry.

We lost about 60 kids who had been planning to attend our school. They were being housed in a local hostel for homeless children. But the hostel ran into financial difficulties and had to move to another location across town. Since they are so far away, the children are going to another school. Even still, new admissions almost made up for the loss. We now have about 145 children in classes from kindergarten through 5th grade. To guide their education we have nine full-time teachers plus a part-time music teacher and a volunteer who supervises crafts. I am very pleased with my teaching team this year. They all seem happy to be at the school and are dedicated to their work.

As planned, I have started serving lunch to the older children (from 2nd – 5th grade). Their school day has been lengthened from 8 am – 12 pm to 8 am – 3 pm. Some of the children stay longer than this to play games, read books, or use the computer lab in after-school hours.

Most of the problems in the first term were related to the large number of new students. Students who came from other schools made the adjustment fairly easily although, because our teaching methods are different, even this took some time. But, since my main aim is to educate students who are not going to school at all, most of our new admissions had never been to school before. Coming from illiterate families, they really don't even understand the concept of learning. It took one boy a month of trying (with difficulty) to sit still in class, gazing vacantly here and there, to finally figure out that he was supposed to be learning the names of those funny shapes (letters) that the teacher kept pointing at on the chart. It was an eye-opener to watch the realization dawn on him.

We had the usual problems of kids calling each other names and hitting each other. Only in the past couple of weeks have we gotten to the place where there have been some days that I have not even once heard, "Ma'am, he hit me!" Carelessness with school property (walls, pencils, books, toys, etc.) has been another problem. These kids just don't know how to take care of things. Sometimes things are broken out of ignorance; sometimes out of recklessness, sometimes it is sheer vandalism. It's hard to watch your carefully chosen purchases or donated toys get ruined. We dealt with several weeks of kids throwing other kids' shoes over the wall or even worse stealing them. We finally started locking the kids' shoes in a small enclosure. They can retrieve their shoes only when it is time to go home. Besides shoes, other items were also being stolen: pencils, colors, books, money from the school cash box.

The theft was emotionally hard to deal with. For four years I have never had to worry about theft. Everyone knew where the cash box was, but no one touched it. This year, things were disappearing so fast. We tried, but never caught the kids who were stealing from the school. This was petty theft. Eventually we put locks on the doors and started

conducting periodic, unannounced bag checks. This was a hard decision for me because the school has always been a place of trust. But, in the end, I suppose we had to go the way of all schools. Maybe removing temptation is the best solution.

The theft that almost broke my heart happened at my home. I've got a core group of about six boys who come to my home daily. It is such a pleasure to have them. They are like a part of the family, playing especially with Arjun and sharing meals with us. In addition to these there are another 6-8 boys that come more occasionally. The whole story is long and contains much pain, but the short version is this: someone stole the entire wallet of school cash from my bedroom. It contained about \$150. I was so hurt because I could narrow down the theft to five boys, and worse, these weren't the new kids, these were the boys that knew me and were close to me.

Many people here think I am wasting my time trying to educate these low-caste children. They believe they are dirty, rough, uncivilized children with low intelligence and treacherous hearts fit only to be sweepers and rickshaw pullers and thieves and rogues. They have told me point blank I should not trust these kids. I have always believed that these children are the way they are because they have never been shown another way. Through my work I wanted to show everyone, "Look, these are good, intelligent kids. They have just not been given a chance."

But having these boys steal from me tempted me to think, "Maybe these people are right. If these kids are going to take all this education and love and trust and turn around later and stab me in the back maybe I should just stop all this right now."

When the time was right, I gathered the boys who were possible culprits and poured out my sorrow and disappointment to them. No one confessed, and no one confessed, and I passed through a terrible week of looking into these boys' faces knowing that at least one of them did it but not knowing who. It was a hard week for everybody. By asking around I finally narrowed it down to two boys. In the end I got a confession. The boy had already spent all the money (he bought a bicycle, an MP4 player, and some other goodies), but we have worked out a plan for him to compensate the school for at least part of the amount stolen. I was surprised at the end of the talk in which he finally confessed, the boy very quietly said, "Thank you, Ma'am." I hugged him and he cried. He has been working without complaining and still comes to my house regularly to play and eat.

The other top suspect was Chandu. You may remember him – he was the boy we tried so hard to keep in school last year. (He is still coming by the way and is doing very, very well in studies.) He went through the fire and came out shining and pure. He was the one I had trusted the most; he knows where I keep my money and I had allowed him free reign in the house even to the point of letting him stay alone here on a few occasions. He had been devastated that I had suspected him. At one point he was sobbing his heart out thinking he had lost his second home. When he was proven innocent, all my faith in these boys was restored. One boy made a mistake, but it is over now and for all the trust I have placed in these boys, they have, for the most part, proven trustworthy.

As far as the other problems in the school, they have finally, by and large, straightened out. We are finally getting back to that family feel we had last year. With such an influx of new kids, an adjustment period is inevitable. Now, by God's grace, maybe we will have two semesters of productive learning and growing together.

For your information, current expenses are about \$1500/month or \$10/child/month. Right now, thanks to your previous generosity, we have enough resources to last through the end of the year. Thank you so much for your support.

Love,
Connie