

November 2011

Dear Friends,

Due to my international move (I am now living in California), it has been longer than usual since my last letter. It has taken some time to get my new home set up and get settled into new routines, but, all in all, with the help of many friends, things are going well. At least I didn't have to learn the language!!



I am happy to report that, as ever, **Asha Deep Vidyashram continues its mission** to educate and nurture needy children. This year we have thirteen full-time teachers and about 225 students. Before my departure, I appointed two teachers as Vice Principals; one is in charge of the lower classes and the other supervises the upper classes. Incredibly, a young American woman offered to volunteer full-time in the school this year to teach English. The children love her; it has been a comfort to me to know that they are getting good English instruction in my absence. I receive daily reports of the happenings in the school and send regular advice and instruction to those in charge. It has cheered me to hear how the teachers continue to work together to solve the various problems that have confronted the school.

Two days before I left India, I spoke to one friend of the school and said that what we really needed there was an extra-curricular program that would give the children a **safe place to play** when school was out of session. Within a week, that friend gathered up other interested people and began planning. Their ambitious agenda included sports, dancing, art, guest lectures (geared to kids), homework help, and a weekly film showing that would be open to entire families. They named the program "*Masti ki Pathshala*" which means something like "*Cool School*." A pilot summer program ran in June; an after-school program started in August. Although it is now on break during the winter, the program was running three days a week and was attended by about 60 kids.



Throughout this year, a man named Anna Hazare has been garnering immense popular support for his public agitation against corruption in India. In August he was front-page news. Some of our older students said they wanted to add their voice by holding a **procession against corruption**. After some planning and a meeting with the children to discuss the meaning of what they were doing, students from 2nd – 8th grade, accompanied by several teachers, participated in an after-school march. They carried handmade signs that said things like, "Save the Nation; Wipe out Corruption". While doing their best not to hurt flow of traffic, they walked about a mile, starting at the school, through their neighborhood, and finally through



the largest nearby shopping area. The march focused on qualities like honesty, good citizenship, and selflessness to eliminate corruption. It was a good opportunity to teach the children about social responsibility and get them involved in changing the country for good. The kids were enthusiastic but disciplined during the march. One teacher said, "The weather was hot, but the kids were cool."



Of course, academics continue as a staple at the school. So do our efforts at transforming lives. Here's one story I heard of recently:



Baldau Verma is the only son in a family of seven. Since his sisters will eventually be married out of the family, Baldau is literally the whole hope for the future for his father (who works as a mason in the mornings and a guard at night) and his mother (who works as a sweeper). This past July, when he joined our school at age 12, a teacher asked him, "Why do you want to study?" He said, "Who wants to study?" Right then, the teacher knew that he had a challenge on his hands. He was admitted into fourth grade and, observing his behavior, the teacher understood that this was a child whose life had gone terribly wrong. Baldau was in conflict with every other child in class, and it wasn't long before he was in trouble with all the teachers. The two teachers in charge of the school decided to call him in for a talk. Baldau was defiant, answering "no" to every question. They found out that the boy had previously been expelled from three schools because they hadn't been willing to put up with his anti-social and willfully disobedient behavior.

Our school called his parents and held a conference with them to try to seek a solution. The next day, Baldau did not show up. On the following day we found out why. He arrived at school black and blue, still recovering from a severe beating by his father. He said that his mother was cursing herself for having such a son. On that day and for the following week, Baldau was an absolute terror, but it had been decided that whatever it took, Baldau would never be asked to leave the school. The teachers dug in for the trademark of Asha Deep: the long haul of patient encouragement, repeated forgiveness, begging grace from other offended students, risking trust, the deep desire for transformation through love.

The teachers told Baldau many times and in various ways that he was not alone, that the world was not his enemy, and that they believed he was a good kid inside. They also pleaded with his parents not to beat their son. And after two months of consistent, unified effort, they could finally see some progress in Baldau. At first they saw glimpses that he could in fact be good. And then, a couple times a week they noticed Baldau playing with other kids. They saw that he was trying to prove to teachers that he was good. Of course, the old Baldau was still there throwing his school bag at somebody's face because they had laughed while looking in his direction. There was more discipline, more counsel. But the patience and effort has paid off. In Saturday teacher's meetings the teachers now comment, "Do you remember how Baldau used to be?" The process is still ongoing, but oh the joy the teachers feel when they see Baldau laughing with other kids.

If you like this story and would like to help continue the work of Asha Deep Vidyashram, I wish you would consider making a special year-end gift or even consider becoming a regular monthly donor. For the last couple years, the school has been struggling financially. We have been able to offer only the barest necessities to our students. (Thankfully they *have* gotten some extras through the efforts of volunteers.) Although we would hate to do this, at this point we are considering shortening school hours and ending the school lunch solely due to financial considerations. For some points of reference, we are currently running the school (including lunch) on about \$2500/month. This works out to \$12 per child per month. Teacher salaries range from \$100 - \$125/month. You can see that even small gifts can make a big difference for us. **If you can help with these expenses, we would really appreciate it!**



Thank you for the support you have already been, through encouraging notes, prayers, and financial gifts. We wish you a happy Christmas season and a wonderful 2012!

love, Connie