

July 2013

Dear Friends,

I have now returned and (with difficulty!) recovered from jet lag after my month-long trip to Varanasi. Wow -- it was an amazing trip! Everything went incredibly well. It is impossible to have so many things go so right in Banaras! Here is my diary entry from day one:



आशा दीप विद्याश्रम

Jun 20 - While coming into town in the auto rickshaw, I saw one of my teachers, Neeta Ma'am! Just a block away from my destination, the narrow road was blocked by a group of water buffalo. The auto driver was astonished when I greeted the owner of the buffalo so familiarly. The owner nudged the buffalo to the side of the road opening the way before me. I put my luggage in the room in which I was to stay, but since there was no electricity, cleaning was impossible. I decided to leave everything packed, grabbed a small purse, and headed out to the community. I stopped at Kavita's, the first student home I came to. Met with Kavita and Pallavi (both students) and their family. Her mother loaned me a sari to use for the month. They are laying a HUGE sewer line right down the middle of the Nagwa road. When I asked how long the road had been dug up, they told me six months. It was barely passable by foot. Navigating the tricky path, I arrived on safe ground to meet Sunil, Anusha, Sandhya, Deepa, Salome, Shivani (all students). We were soon joined by Sanjay, Umesh, and Sunny (also students). After talking to them a bit, I moved up the street and met Kaushal and his grandmother. I visited one of the women who cooks for the school and with her children. She also loaned me a sari. I walked in the back alley meeting more students, stopping at Chandu's house. Back on the main road, I met Manish and we took a walk together. I had lunch with Siddharth Sir. We tried to avoid school talk during this first meeting! From there I walked to meet Eric and Wilma, friends who had agreed to loan me a phone while I was in Banaras. Phone in hand, I again headed toward Nagwa. As I was passing my old house, I decided to stop in and greet my landlord. He was happy to see me and said I should stay there for the month. It turned out that the current tenants (who are actually using some of my stuff) were going to be away for most of the time I was in India. The landlord gave them a call. They came over right away and urged me to stay in their (my) place. It would be nice to be in my own place with my own stuff including iron, oven, and internet connection! Ok, I'll do it. I went back to Chandu's house to ask for help moving my luggage into a cycle rickshaw. He, along with three other boys, walked the 1/2 mile to where my luggage was and said they would carry it (forget about paying a rickshaw driver) back to my house. Me walking along with my small purse back through Nagwa while the boys lugged the luggage. Felt like a queen. Dropped off the luggage. Headed to Chandu's for dinner. Saw Guddu (a former student) on the way and talked to him [that was my only chance to meet him since he actually lives quite far from that area now]. Visited Jyoti and her family in their home (another student). Hung out with several students on Chandu's roof before dinner. Had a good talk with Anil (student). A beautiful day and wonderful welcome home.

And that was just the first day!!!!

Highlights of the trip included:

Getting to stay rent-free in my own place. I got along so well with the couple that is staying there now. They are helping out in the school also: she teaching two classes and he taking photos, holding English conversation sessions for older boys, and supervising the computer lab after school.

Having so much quality time with Siddharth Sir. After our first no-business meeting, we had many discussions about various topics related to the school. We covered much that needed to be talked about while I was there.

Seeing and encouraging my old teachers again and meeting the teachers that had been hired since I had left. I held five teacher's meeting while I was there, doing some training and addressing issues related to the daily running of the school. I am very happy with the present teaching team.

The overlap of my trip with the presence of the founder in Banaras. Although unplanned, this turned out to be absolutely critical since she had decided to completely pull out of the non-profit organization and the school. Our signatures were both required on papers allowing her to resign and on bank documents revising authorized signatures. With her departure, we were required to reconstitute the board of the NGO. We also had to become informed about the work she had been doing to secure government permission to receive foreign contributions (this has been in process for many years now). We met with the chartered accountant and filed stacks of papers to move this process along.

On a Saturday, I felt that I should meet Sheila who runs a local center for mentally disabled children. I called her, but there was no answer. Neither did she return my call. So, having no other firm plan, I walked out of my apartment in the evening to see what would happen. I didn't even get out of the gate! The wives of the property were sitting around chatting and I joined them for tea and snacks. It was a good thing I did because it soon started pouring, and I had walked out the door without my umbrella! When the rain stopped, I took my leave and headed out into the unknown. I ended up at a teacher's house (I needed to ask her a question) and asked if she had Sheila's number. She said, "Do you know that Sheila has moved? She lives right down the street. I'll show you her house." Sheila was home and happy to see me. Amidst the visiting I found out that her husband had been through the process of getting the government permission that we are seeking and was in need of work. In the end, we hired him to help us with this task.

I had the pleasure of being there for the first days of the school year, being with my old students and admitting dozens of new students. Our enrollment is now a healthy 260 children. I love singing in morning assembly.

We called a meeting of the 9th and 10th graders -- our graduates -- so that the 10th graders could pass on their experience to the students starting high school this year. This paid off. Our newest graduates are off to a much more confident start than our first batch of graduates last year. It was so fulfilling to see them dressed in their new uniforms and happily going to their new school.

Meeting Baldav. This was the boy that had been expelled from several schools before he arrived at Asha Deep. Our teachers had been tearing their hair out too because of this boy's behavioral problems. But we were determined to keep working with him. I had been expecting to sit him down in my office and have a serious talk with him . . . but I could find no complaint against him! He was a stellar student the whole time I was there. In the end, I called him in anyway. "I've heard all kinds of stories about you," I said. "What happened to all that? Are you finished with it?" "Yes," he said, "I won't be doing that any more." "You know," I replied, "if you keep this up, I think you will become one of our model students." "What's that?" he said. I explained that he could be someone that the other students would look up to and try to copy. He had the biggest smile. I think he just might do it.

Going to Suraj' house. I went in the evening; it was still light outside. But when I stepped into their house, it was pitch dark. I couldn't even tell who was in there. Normally, if I show up, people will turn on conveniences such as lights and a fan. But these people remained in the dark. After some time, I saw that they were thinking about lighting a small kerosene lamp, but they didn't. I thought, "Wow, these people don't even have money for a light. And their son is now starting in a prestigious high school. Their daughter is a top student in 4th grade, a girl with a promising future. These children, armed with an education, will be able to turn this family around." Their son, Suraj, by the way, had the hero role in the drama we presented at our huge performance in March. I found out while I was there that during the performance he was spotted by some people involved in the local Bhojpuri film industry. They found out who he was and tracked him down. He has since acted in a Bhojpuri film and has been invited to act in a second film to be shot in the state capitol next summer. He wants to be a politician. (He was so shy when he joined our school.)

Seeing the sights, hearing the noises, smelling the smells, eating the food, laughing with the people of Banaras.

Well, this isn't all, but maybe it's enough. I cooked for myself one time during the month, ate at a restaurant with friends three times, ate 11 school lunches, and had the rest of my meals at others' houses. I feel very good about the way the school is being taken care of and think that we will have another successful and fruitful year ahead.

I've put a few photos from my trip below. Also, if you are interested, I have just posted video of our public performance on Facebook. I managed (with difficulty, you can imagine!) to whittle the 3.5 hour program down to 15 minutes!!! It's just a taste, but definitely worth taking a look. I was unable to include the drama in the 15 minute version, so I have posted a separate video of a shortened and subtitled version of the play. The kids did a fantastic job . . . if you watch it, you can see Suraj in the lead male role.

15 minute teaser: [Asha Deep Spring Extravanga highlights](#)

drama: ["A Girl's Life"](#)

in joy,

Connie



Teaching kindergarten:
"Nice to meet you!"



*morning
assembly*



with a few boys; Baldav is the tallest