

September 2015

Dear Friends,

Our school year got off to a good start on July 1. This year admissions went very smoothly; nearly all classes filled without my having to turn away too many hopeful applicants. The only heartbreak was having to place a fair number of students in classes well below the



This is one of our kindergarten classes. Ankit and Vikas, standing in back with the teacher, are studying with much younger children.

grades they had passed in previous schools. One boy, Sandeep, expected to go into 4th grade (he had passed 3rd grade) but ended up in kindergarten in our school. He did not yet know all his letters (even in Hindi). Soni expected to study in 7th grade but, based on her entrance test, she had to be placed in 4th grade. These are some of our more extreme examples, but children coming into our school commonly lose a year or more having to repeat a class they had previously completed. Many local schools, especially those that serve the poor, have an abysmal standard of education. Having taught little, they routinely pass their students year by year no matter what they have learned or not learned. When I have to tell new students the results of their entrance test, I often brace myself for the flow of tears that twist the children's faces. They cry on the outside; I cry on the inside. From my point of view, some of these school administrators and teachers should be held criminally responsible for wasting the minds and time of India's children. At least, if the children are willing to humble themselves and sit in classes with younger children, they can get a real education at Asha Deep. We now have a 12- and a 13-year old boy studying in kindergarten.

Our total enrollment this year is 238 students in kindergarten through 8th grade. We have 13 full-time and 5 part-time teachers, 3 cooks, 1 janitor, and 1 all-purpose helper (procurement, repairing, cleaning, etc.). We also supervise the education of our 34 graduates as they continue their studies in local high schools.



This year's student body (and teachers in the back)

A week after school started we judged the entries of our first ever summer competitions. Although we had hoped for better participation, we were pleased with many of the entries. Hopefully the prizes we awarded will spur others to participate next year.





Teachers judging two park models. Both parks included battery-powered water fountains.

So far this year have celebrated Independence Day (Aug 15th) and Teacher's Day (Sept 5th). Our first General Knowledge competition (questions from science and social studies) will be held tomorrow.

We had to close the school on four separate days on account of heavy rain and mud, but this year, while the river rose threateningly during monsoon, it did not reach the level of our playground. Now the river is receding.

Most recently, we are grieving the death of the husband of our Hindi and Sanskrit teacher. Those of you who have been reading my letters for a long time may remember that he had heart surgery in 2010. He died on Aug 25th due to complications of a heart attack leaving his wife and two teenage children.

Lately I've been thinking about the parable of the lost sheep. It's a story about going after sheep (or people) who have strayed. How much effort should we put into (in my case) kids who have had a chance at Asha Deep but are still making wrong decisions? Kids who are not living up to our expectations and dreams. Kids whom it would be easy to get angry with (they are wasting our resources) or to give up on. I am thinking about kids like:



Mukesh with flags on Independence Day



- Shivani. She has below-average intelligence and had to repeat 6th grade. Even though she wasn't really ready, we didn't have the heart to keep her in 6th grade a third year, so she went into 7th grade. Now she is sitting in 7th grade a second year. We have tried to convince her to get vocational training, but she wants to come to school. She does learn at school but very slowly.
- Pawan. This boy, who has studied with us for many years, was a 6th grader last year. He came to school with attitude; I had to call him into the office regularly. Near the end of the year, he got in a big fight outside the school. Since he had already been warned about fighting, we suspended him for the remainder of the year. This year, he asked to come back but not because he wanted to study in Asha Deep. He would have preferred to study somewhere else but his family cannot afford typical school fees. We allowed him to return after giving strict warnings about behavior. We had to kick him out again this year (already!) for repeated disobedience.

- Babu. This is the boy I was helping with addictions last year. We knew it would be hard for him to get through the boring summer months, but we had assumed that the routine of going to school would help him feel happy

and productive. Instead, due to his long absence from school, he was reluctant to re-start. When he finally went, he was (naturally) behind and he got shouted out and shamed in front of the whole class. He said he would not go back. We convinced him to try again, but, due to an insulting comment by another school boy, he ended up getting in a fight. He has been kicked out of school.

- Vikas and Sunil. These 8th graders were unhappy with their school placement when they transferred to 9th grade in an outside school. We placed them according to their efforts and abilities, but they don't trust our decision. Their attendance is sporadic.

When is it right to give up on these kids? It takes a lot of energy -- physical and emotional -- to keep them on the right track. It would be a lot easier to ditch the problem children, to say, "Look, I'm taking care of 265 other kids who are studying hard and taking advantage of the opportunities at Asha Deep. Just go your own way now. Good luck in life!" Yes, it is sometimes tempting to cross these kids off the list once and for all. But then of course there are the kids like:

- Jaya. Got kicked out of 9th class last year. After a few months of profligate behavior she came asking for help to register for a program that would allow her to study on her own and pass a national 10th class exam. We believed in her and found a sponsor (who knew her personally) to pay her minimal costs. She studied hard and passed! She is now registered in 11th grade in another high school and doing well.
- Suraj. Got kicked out of 10th class last year. The school allowed him to give his final exams, but would not let him attend classes. We stopped paying his school fees but did not lose track of him. Like Jaya, he managed to study on his own and passed his exams. We have again agreed to sponsor him as he studies 11th grade in another high school. His behavior has improved and he seems to be doing well.
- Sanjay. Even though he was enrolled at Asha Deep, he had not been studying well for the previous three years. (His home situation is difficult because of his alcoholic father.) He was very behind. With difficulty, we convinced him to repeat 8th grade. By November, he finally started studying hard. But, he was so far behind, we didn't know if he could really pull it off. Because of his continued efforts, we enrolled him in 9th grade in a local high school. He is still behind and struggles, but continues to attend school and try. His efforts have made him more successful at the school transition than some of our brighter graduates that transferred to the same school.



It's a lot of work to chase after them with the shepherd's crook, a lot of pleading, explaining, cajoling, scolding, whatever it takes! I cringed when I heard that Babu had been kicked out of school. But when I talked to him later, we made some plans for what he could accomplish in life without a high school education. Babu is smart, especially in math. When we talked about options, Babu said he wanted to work in a bakery for a few years to learn the ropes so that later he can open his own take-out bakery. He didn't make it in school, but at least he is not drinking or gambling, and now he has a new plan. Remaining hopeful, realizing that now is not the end of the story, I try to keep tabs on my flock and work to bring back those who have strayed.

On a financial note, we had received a surplus of funds back in May, but for the last three months, we have only received donations of about \$1200 per month. Our running costs are \$3,000 per month. If you could consider becoming a monthly donor we would really appreciate the extra support. We are also happy to receive any one-time gifts.

love,
Connie