



December 2016

Dear Friends,

Soon after the flood in August, we were worried about two of our students who were in very serious condition in the hospital. Thankfully, both recovered and eventually returned to the school. They've just given their 2nd term exams along with everyone else. The flood took away a few more feet of ground from the back of our playground and deposited it on top. We now have a two-foot layer of silt on top of the original clay base. It's fun to play on -- a giant (fine) sandbox! Since recovering from the flood, the last few months at Asha Deep have been good.

First of all, we were blessed with a gaggle of volunteers! I'm not quite sure how, but two separate organizations found out about Asha Deep this year. One directs students in a three-month study of Indian culture and language. As an elective, the students can choose to take an additional class or volunteer in the community 3 hours/week. Four students in this program chose to work in our school! One helped with public relations, two taught a music class in the school, and one supervised outdoor games sessions. Of these, two people also worked on updating our library catalog and getting recently donated books onto our library shelves. They've just left to be back with their families for Christmas!

We also are pleased to have a Princeton University volunteer with us this year. This program is a year-abroad option for their freshman students. Participants spend their time mainly in service, working full-time M-Th, October – April. Our volunteer, a vivacious and enthusiastic young woman, has been teaching 8th grade English and 4th grade computer, giving extra help to small groups of students who were behind in math, cataloging teacher's resources, and teaching a recorder class. It's been a treat to have her as part of our school this year!



Highlights of the past term included Teacher's and Children's Day celebrations. On Teacher's Day the kids planned and gave a series of performances. The teacher's were served cake which the kids pitched in to buy. On Children's Day, we all played games before watching a film (Kung Fu Panda 3) and eating a special snack – chaat -- which many of the older boys helped prepare. Just before Diwali, we had a rangoli making competition.



Besides holidays, highlights for me this term included the blossoming of Ankita and the breaking of the Nagwa/Bengali barrier.

Here's Ankita. I have written about her briefly before. Ankita was born with a cleft palate. At the time of her birth, the doctor told her parents that they should get oral surgery done. But they didn't understand the problem and didn't trust the doctor, so they never got it treated. Ankita learned to speak, but she was very hard to understand because she couldn't make consonant sounds properly. A few years ago, we helped her finally get her palate closed (through the organization Smile Train <https://www.smiletrainindia.org/>). She could have gone for free speech therapy, but the distance was great and her parents didn't have the time or dedication to take her. So, even though her palate is closed, Ankita is still hard to understand because she still makes sounds the way she made them before the surgery.



Naturally, she was very nervous in public speaking. But, in older classes, we require the kids to present the news by turn in our daily assembly. When her turn came, Ankita stood in front of the student body but just couldn't start talking. She just stood there full of nerves. A teacher came close and encouraged her. Finally, very softly, she read the headlines.



The rest of the students stood quietly and no one laughed at or insulted her, clapping, as usual, when she finished. Full of sympathy, we all took a big breath of relief when it was over.

But the whole picture has changed since then. A few weeks ago, when a teacher asked which student would like to give the "thought of the day" (also during morning assembly), no one raised their hand. We waited for a bit and suddenly everyone's eyes went wide. With a huff that said, "Well if none of the rest of you cowards have something to say, I do!," Ankita strode in front of everyone, grabbed the microphone and said, "I'll give it!" Raised

eyebrows changed to nodding heads as she proceeded to speak from her heart. Everyone was so surprised that she had something to say and that too, so sensible! When she finished, everyone gave a huge clap, not just for the words she had spoken but for the fact that she had conquered her fear. Since then, it's clear we have a leader on our hands. She sat quiet for so long; she has a lot of words piled up in there just waiting to get out!

Yesterday I asked her if she would like to work on improving her speech. (The people who know her can understand her, but her speech would be largely unintelligible to strangers.) She said yes. So, we worked on the "k" sound. I told her that after winter break, I would talk about her condition to her classmates and would explain to them how they could help her by reminding her when she mis-speaks, one sound at a time. She's in 7th grade now, so she has about 1 ½ years left in Asha Deep. If we keep working on it, she could show a big improvement before she goes on to high school. It would be the biggest gift her classmates could give her ever. This is the kind of school I am trying to create: a place where kids care for each other in extraordinary ways.

One story might be enough, but the second is also worth sharing. For years, the kids in our school have divided themselves into "Nagwa" kids and "Bengali" kids. The kids who live in Nagwa comprise the majority of our students. For the most part, these kids have lived in Nagwa all their lives or they have moved into the slum from nearby villages (typically villagers move to Varanasi looking for better jobs or better education for their children). They speak Bhojpuri, the dialect of Hindi used in this area. In addition to these kids, we have had a smaller population of students whose families have moved to Varanasi from West Bengal (for better jobs). These kids' homes are culturally different – they speak Bengali, eat lots of fish, and celebrate holidays differently. Although everyone gets along ok at school, I've never seen these two groups of kids hanging out together . . . definitely not after school! Sometimes a child would complain to me, "Ma'am, he called me a Bengali!" I tried to explain to them that even if the Nagwa boys were trying to insult them, they should be proud of the fact that they are from Bengal . . . Bengali's are known for their social activism, emphasis on education, more equal treatment of women, and high thinking. I've felt bad for years that my Asha Deep kids couldn't seem to get past the cultural divide.

But the whole picture has changed now! Last August I heard a report of all the 7th grade boys walking down the street together toward the fair. Nagwa and Bengali boys all in one laughing group! And a few weeks later I saw a Nagwa boy coming out of a compound where about 20 Bengali families live. "What were you doing in there?" I asked. "Oh, it was Mithun's birthday party!" The Bengali



boys had invited the Nagwa boys. And now I see them all the time playing games and walking around arm in arm like it really doesn't matter where their families came from. And of course it doesn't.

I'm pretty sure that now that the older boys have figured this out, the barrier has disappeared at Asha Deep. It's just one more way that we've managed to create a safer and happier community for our students and later for all the residents of Nagwa, both Bhojpuri and Bengali speakers. For me, it's one more reason to celebrate!

I would like to offer a special word of deep thanks to all those who have sent financial gifts over the past year. It cost us about \$53,000 to run the school this year . . . including rent, salaries, school lunch, books and educational supplies, arts and computer classes, and the costs of sending our graduates on to high school. Since the majority of contributions come from individual donors, that's a lot of generous people out there! If we get a few more donations before the end of the year, we will be able to cover our 2016 expenses! Thank you very, very much for your gifts big and small. We've needed them all to make a real difference for our kids!



Wishing you a Merry Christmas and fulfilling 2017!

love, Connie