

September 2018

Dear Friends,

Asha Deep is now one-third through the year; our 1st term exams started today! We survived the monsoon rains; the Ganges river rose to the brink but did not flood the city or enter the school ground. Now that the river has receded 12 feet or so, the paths leading to school have almost dried. What we are trying to survive now is dengue and other viral fevers. Much of the community is sick, some very seriously. Two of our fathers were admitted into the hospital last week, but, thankfully, both are better now. Many of our students and teachers have also been sick this past month. These severe fevers typically recede and give way to less serious respiratory illnesses as the weather cools toward winter.



Our first term has gone very well. I spent a lot of the first few weeks refining our new database. Asha Deep has finally gone digital! Student and teacher information and attendance, as well as student payments and grades are now managed on a computer. Special thanks to last year's volunteer, Jane Mentzinger, for getting this system off the ground and running! I can now easily tell you that we have exactly 95 boys and 95 girls at Asha Deep, a perfect 50-50 split. 60% of our students are dalit (untouchable caste) and 30% are from other backward castes. Our student attendance rate is about 80% but that includes absences recorded for students who weren't yet enrolled at the start of the year. I love having all this information (and more) at my fingertips! We are getting ready to issue computer generated grade reports for the first time at result distribution on October 6.



Besides the database, we are celebrating the addition of a new art class on Wednesdays. In addition to options of craft, drawing, dance, and music, our students can now choose to study tabla, traditional Indian drums. This exciting new offering was made possible by the supporters of the One Percent Scheme (<https://onepercentscheme.wordpress.com/>) We've got some happy drummers because of you folks, thank you!!!



Although we don't have any foreign volunteers this year (one key program was relocated due to the pollution I wrote about last year), we've been lucky to have some help from a few local university students. A group has been coming for two hours every Saturday to run a variety of activities like reading the newspaper, recycling paper to make paper bags, creating a short video, playing math games, etc.





We've already had a couple of nice celebrations, one on Aug 15 (Indian Independence Day) and one on September 5 (Teacher's Day). For the past few years, our 8th class students have been in charge of planning our Teacher's Day program. This year they did a great job organizing dance performances, snacks, and even a game of musical chairs for the teachers.



I was especially pleased to see Monu in one of the dances. Since she is nearly blind and finds reading and writing almost impossible, dance is a good way for her to get positive recognition. The Saturday following her performance, three of our teachers took her to an eye doctor to see if there were any possibility of correcting her vision. Completely blind in one eye with the second progressively whitening, we were hoping that some type of surgery might help give her a brighter future. The doctor said that she would need an cornea transplant and the success rate was about 50%. Incredibly, less than two weeks after her consultation (and now 5 days ago), a donor was found and Monu had the required surgery. She was just released from the hospital this morning but before going home she missed being here! I was told



she came directly to school (with her parents) to visit everyone; that it will take 3-4 months to know whether the surgery will ultimately be successful. Some light is entering her eye now (unlike before), but prayers are needed for her body's acceptance of the new cornea and full healing. We are happy to have been a small part of this chance for Monu's vision!

I would also like to mention Ankit Seth, the boy I wrote about last year who finally achieved a straight-B report card after years of failure at other schools. He started this year happily (he has sworn to never leave Asha Deep 😊), but after missing only one day in July, he suddenly went missing in August. After several days of absence, we heard that his parents had taken him to the village. We didn't know if it was a visit or a permanent move. Even more disturbing, I heard more about how he is treated at home. Certainly, he can be a naughty boy (although this has stopped completely here at school), but I was told that he was beaten daily and often severely at home. One of the teacher's saw that his parents had stripped him and tied him to a tree before one beating. The thought of that happy boy being beaten like this is just sickening; I was so worried about what his life would be like if he had in fact moved permanently away from Asha Deep. But after 20 days of absence, he was back at school, again with his signature smile. He was so happy to be back! I was happy to see him too. We both got a big hug. It's time for him to pay his school fees now, so I mentioned it to him. He said, "My father won't pay. He'll take me out of school and make me work in a shop. Please, don't say anything about this to my parents. Don't worry, I'll find the money somehow and pay it myself. Is that ok?"



We have another student whose parents refuse to pay (our negligible) fees. Last year, this 10-year-old boy decided that he would pay by himself. Whenever he got snack money from his dad, he would forego the snack and pay Rs. 5 to his teacher. After he had saved enough (Rs. 120/\$1.65 covers one term), the teacher came and gave me the money. It was the first time anyone from that family (three siblings study here) had paid.

I've had other moments which remind me about the stark financial reality of these kids' lives. One girl had paid most of her fees, Rs. 100 out of Rs. 120. A couple days later, she brought another Rs. 10. And the next day, Rs. 5. And finally, counting out carefully by ones (think pennies), she brought the last five rupees and gave it to me with a big, relieved smile.

Of course, it costs us much more than \$1.65 to cover the costs of educating one child for one term. Actual costs are \$83/term for children in kindergarten or 1st grade and \$96/term for children in 2nd-8th grades. (The older kids get a school lunch which boosts their costs.) If you can help fill in this gap, we would really appreciate it!



with love,
Connie