

July 2021

Dear Friends,

[Note: to those of you who have actually visited Asha Deep, take a breath. It's very sad news.]

After having made it through this recent covid wave without the loss of any teachers, it has been a big blow to us to lose one of our longest serving teachers last Wednesday. Saroj Pandey joined Asha Deep in 2008 and has been the 5th grade class teacher ever since. When he joined, he had some teaching experience, but he was very shy and uncertain of himself. It was a joy to me to see how the environment at Asha Deep gave him the safety he needed to slowly open up and become more and more confident in himself. In the last few years, he had gained so much stature as a good and respected teacher. He also became the life of our parties and events as he laughed as hard as anyone at his goofy antics.



He had been attending our teacher trainings up until the 13th. For part of the training, the rest of the teachers were to act like students while one teacher practiced teaching from a storybook using our new document camera and projector technology. Saroj Sir asked some kid-like questions which brought chuckles to our session. He wasn't feeling well and didn't attend on the 14th, but on the 15th, he took Siddharth Sir (our vice principal) and I to see a school which is up for sale. He had a headache on that day and obviously needed to rest. He said that from there he was going to the doctor. I was happy that he was going; I thought he would get some medicine and be fine in a few days. It was the last time I saw him. Sir was diagnosed with dengue fever which later was complicated by pneumonia. He was admitted into a hospital on Saturday the 17th, and he passed away on the 21st.

The teachers had a remembrance gathering for him on Friday the 23rd. It was a time of tears and sharing our unbelief that he could have been taken from us so suddenly. During the meeting it came out that no one had ever seen him angry. He was friendly with each and every teacher. He was always ready to help when needed, taking on more responsibility than most. He helped serve lunch to the students every day. He did a great job leading our morning exercise sessions. He was the MC at all our school programs, making sure that everything flowed smoothly. He was happy most of the time, and he loved working at Asha Deep. That brings me comfort.

Saroj Sir taught me an important cultural lesson. In the US, no one looks askance in a workplace if you approach someone and immediately begin discussing some work-related matter. But in India, this is considered rude. It is important to greet someone properly and make sure they (and their family) are ok before moving on to business. Since Saroj Sir used to be in charge of morning assembly, I often would come in a rush to him just before the morning bell with some need or other. "Sir, [another teacher] won't be here today, can you please announce . . . ",

"Sir, have you seen [student]? I need someone to manage the speaker."
"Sir, [someone] is in hospital. Please give some time in the assembly for a special prayer." Etc. I would ask my question without any thought to a greeting. And Saroj Sir would smile at me very kindly and respectfully. He would hold his hands together in front of his heart and greet me very calmly saying, "Namaste, Ma'am." Of course, I would smile and rewind my interaction, greeting him properly and then addressing the matter at hand. I, being very task oriented, was a slow learner. But I eventually got it. I was always careful to greet him, and my other teachers, before any other interaction each day.



2008 - My first photo of Saroj Sir (on left), with our then 5th class kids and Sandeep Sir.



Giving Neeta Ma'am a ride.





With his wife ...

... and children.

Saroj Sir was only 38 years old. He leaves behind a wife and two children, a son and a daughter who will both be in 9th grade this year. We will miss him tremendously.

All of my employees are very close to each other, so events like Saroj Sir's death hits hard. We could not even think about getting back to business for several days. But tomorrow we will re-start the teacher's training sessions that have been going on since the beginning of July.



Kusum Ma'am using a document camera to teach during a training session.

Practicing formatting in MS Word

In a brief land update, we are currently in negotiations over a piece of land a couple miles southwest of our current location. We and the landowner are both consulting with our accountants and lawyers to see how to best arrange the deal with regard to new property selling and tax law. Yesterday, the owner was suddenly called away to another city, so talks will resume when he returns in a few days.

If you are the praying type, please do pray against sickness in our area. For over a year now, we've heard hardly a whisper about illnesses besides Covid-19. But this monsoon season (when germs always flourish), so many are sick. Several others of my teachers have also been sick and some of our students are seriously ill right now. Dengue fever, pneumonia, typhoid, malaria, viral fever, and stomach illnesses are all in the area right now.



love,
Connie