

July 2023

Dear Friends,

This summer I had a great time visiting my two children who are now settled in Europe. While there I received daily photos of our school construction in progress. Although some work was going on, it appeared to be moving at a very slow pace. Indeed, upon my return on June 6, I could see we still had a long way to go to get the building in shape for our planned opening on the 22nd. The walls, roofs, and ground floor flooring had been completed, but there were still no windows or doors in place. No work had been done on the electrical wiring or plumbing.



आशा दीप विद्याश्रम



The school one month before opening. Walls complete, but not much else. (this photo taken from back facing front)



In this heat, these windows provide the right amount of light and shade.



Deep thanks to our architect who designed from the heart. Beautiful shapes and spaces in this building. What a lovely place to grow up! (rear of building)

After a firm (desperate?) talk with the contractor, he called in more workers and the pace picked up. Every day there were about 20 workers on site: welders, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, cement layers, and painters. Even then, the pace was too slow to meet the looming deadline. Thankfully, we got some reprieve since the government delayed all schools' opening until July 3 due to excessive heat. Imagine, we were trying madly to complete the building in 110 degree temperatures,

Finally, some things started to fall into place. They completed the flooring of the 2nd floor. The doors of the first two floors were set and painted. With wiring in place, ceiling fans and lights were hung. Toilets and plumbing pipes were installed. The windows were painted and fixed with fiber sheets. (We were wary of using glass because, (don't you agree?) it would be pretty fun to stand in the adjoining field with rocks in the middle of the night just to see how many of those

hundreds of windows you could break.)



Our windows will be in shades of blue and green. They open on a central pivot like a shutter. The upper windows in each floor will be clear fiber sheets.



The first doors painted



This cool green window (as yet without fiber) will be installed in the large arch opening at the front of our school.

We were still far from ready though. The windows had not been placed in the walls. Electricity had not yet been brought into the building. We had assumed that we would be able to connect to the existing sewer line that runs in front of our property but were forbidden to do so by the villagers who feared (maybe rightly so) that the load would be too great. Now we suddenly had to build a septic tank and soak pit.

Septic tank in progress



In the meantime, my vice principal, Siddharth Sir. and I were sitting in our unfinished office every day attending to business and admitting new students.

It has been heartbreaking doing admissions this year. Most of the village kids have had to step back two or three years to come into our school. The parents and students were willing though; they knew that they were not getting a proper education in the local schools. At the nearby government (public) school, the children were



allowed to show up to school for attendance and then play most of the day until it was time to go home. Rimjhim had already passed 8th class but tested at 5th grade level. When I told her, tears ran down her cheeks. I told her and her mother that it may be fine for her to continue to study in 9th grade at another school. Most girls her age marry in a few years and then stay at home for the rest of their lives. I told them to go home and think about their decision. They returned in three days. "I want to study here," Rimjhim said. "I want to learn." She was present on opening day.

Most of the children who had already studied in 6th, 7th, or 8th class, tested at 4th or 5th class level. Some of them (partly due to their own lack of effort I suspect) did not even know all their Hindi letters. Math skills barely surpassed the multiplication level. Only two children knew long division. No one had studied fractions. In English, the majority of students had not learned more than the names of the letters. Over half could not read the word, PEN.

Although the building was not fully ready, I was determined to open on time to assure our families that Asha Deep would be running this year. So, on June 29-30, I called some of our older students to come help move benches, chalkboards, chairs, mats, shelves, and boxes and boxes of books and supplies into appropriate classrooms. Our teachers came on July 3 to set up their classrooms. And we opened on July 4.



Our teachers the day before school opening



Morning assembly on our first day

No windows in place. No electricity (thankfully, the temperatures have cooled to the high 90s 😊, and thankfully our building is well ventilated). Only one functioning toilet. But, it was a great day. Our existing students were so glad to be back with their friends and done with the boredom of summer. And our new students were clearly happy to be in a school where the teachers actually teach.



Kids play during recess. They loved climbing the pile of dirt now sitting next to our septic tank.



*Above:
Our kindergarteners love to learn!*

Our new classrooms have considerably more space (5th grade).

Someone donated student desks! We have reserved these for the 18 students now studying in 9th grade at Asha Deep.

Everyone received a sweet treat to celebrate our opening! Thank you Benares Schoolfund Foundation!

On the first day, we had over 70 students in attendance. This number rose to 106 on the second day, with more showing up for enrollment. And that was when three teachers from the nearby government (public) school came for a visit. I knew, of course, that many children would leave that school to study at Asha Deep, but I didn't think it would trouble them much. I thought that they would continue to get their salaries (government jobs are quite permanent here). Maybe they would be transferred to another location. But, when they found out that our school is serving the poor, they became quite agitated. Without being able to say much, they left.

Within an hour, a state education officer, along with two assistants were in our office. I need to give some background here. The fact is that, although we have been accredited in the past, we were not able to renew our accreditation when it expired a few years ago because we did not own our own property. To renew, we either had to show a 30-year lease (which we didn't have) or our landlord had to provide certain bank documents which he was unwilling to do because then he would have had to pay tax on the rent we were paying. We were forced to wait until our building was ready to re-apply.

Many schools here run without accreditation, and we have been able to do so for the past few years without any problem. Our students have transferred to other schools and registered for their 10th and 12th class board exams without any problem. But now, with a complaint from the nearby school, we faced closure until we could get our renewal processed.



I had to announce to the students that school would be closed for a few days in the hope that the matter would be sorted out quickly. Siddharth Sir got on the phone right away and began seeing if we could find someone with enough clout to keep our school open while our renewal is pending and someone who could expedite the renewal.

Miraculously, he has done the job. We will be meeting with a middleman tomorrow whose job is to get these renewals processed speedily. And we have others who have assured us that we can re-open on Tuesday (Monday would have been a holiday in any case) without worry. Hopefully, we will soon be accredited and this hiccup will be behind us.



The rear of our school in the distance with the government (public) school at left. We're a three-minute walk away.

I have been encouraged by the local support. I had to tell a mother, just after the education officer left, that I would not be able to admit her son that day. I asked her to come back and try again in a few days. She said, "I will send my son to this school. I don't care what the world says [about accreditation]; he will study here. I will pray. Don't worry. God will take care of this school." And I trust she is right. At this point we have every intention of opening on Tuesday and hopefully we will be able to remain open normally thereafter.



Asha Deep student body, day 2

Wishing you all the very best,
love,
Connie