



October 2009

Dear Friends,

This year, Asha Deep Vidyashram got off to a much smoother start than last year. School opened on July 1st with about 50 children in attendance; numbers swelled to around 200 in a couple of weeks. With classes packed (one teacher sits with her chair just outside the door to teach), I had to turn away many hopeful applicants. We now have ten classes ranging from kindergarten to 6th grade, with an average of 20 students per class.

The students that got admission are happy to be coming to school. We have had some attendance setbacks due to sickness; fevers were prevalent in the monsoon and now cold season has started. However September saw the highest-ever number of perfect attendees. Eighty-seven students attended every school day with an additional 30 students missing just one day. Students with perfect attendance do not have to pay fees in the following month. Also, they receive a token worth money in our newly opened school store.

Yes! We launched the ADV Kids Store on August 1st. It is stocked and run by our 6th class students, selling items only to students and teachers of the school. The store offers several benefits: I can accept local donations of almost anything (used clothes, books, games, etc.) and sell them to students at affordable prices; I no longer have to give each student the same prize – they can choose something they like from the store; and the 6th graders get good business experience in keeping inventory, stocking, and accounting. Their Excel project this year will be based on real data from the store. Besides sales generated by students who have won prizes in the school, many students buy a small snack at recess. For many students, this snack, consumed at the 10 o'clock break, is the first food they will have eaten in the day.

You may remember that last year we had multiple problems absorbing the large number of new students. This year we took proactive measures to prevent some of these problems (theft, interpersonal conflict, integration into our at-school learning approach). As a result, this year's growing pains were not as painful as last year's. We have had to add one new practice – that of silence. With so many children, we were having trouble keeping them quiet during assembly and prayer. Now, the assembly bell means, "Keep silent!" The children are supposed to come quietly to assemble and must stay silent until they are dismissed. This happens twice a day and I don't know about the children, but I treasure these few minutes of peace and calm!

We have been blessed to have several volunteers helping in various ways this year. Two American girls donated 3 weeks of time, spending the entire school day with us mainly teaching drawing and painting in all the classes. It was a great opportunity for the children; the classrooms are now decorated with the results of their creativity. In August a group from Seattle came and helped by taking school photos and playing organized games with the children in the afternoons for a week. Another young man taught computer to our 6th graders for six weeks. This month we have had another volunteer teaching art.

In November members from Performers Without Borders (PWB - www.performerswithoutborders.org.uk) will again come to teach circus skills to our students after school. After a month, the children will put on a public performance displaying their new skills. This same organization worked with our students two years ago with wonderful results and benefits to the school. We are looking forward to having them again.

On the home front, my landlord has said that he will prohibit the school children from coming to my house. The main reason for this is that so many children come and go from my house, other residents on the compound feel that their security is compromised. I pointed out that since the children started coming a year and a half ago, no untoward

incident has occurred. But the other residents have no way of knowing which kids go to my school and which kids may be trying to enter the property for malicious reasons. This is a valid concern.

The landlord's ultimatum was hard to stomach, but understandable. What really hurt was hearing his solid conviction that my school kids won't change, they will be gamblers and drunkards, just like their parents. He essentially said that I was deluded and was naively working from my heart, not my head. I have already seen huge changes in many of the children; I know they are trying hard to break out of the situation in which they are being raised, and I have full faith that they will be different from their parents. Still it is disheartening to hear this attitude (common here) that one shouldn't put effort into dalit (low-caste) children; it's a waste of time.

My landlord also said, "Do you think one woman can really make any difference?" Well, faced with this kind of opposition, one might lose hope. But then again, I know I'm not alone. I have a strong team of teachers and many of you have strongly stated your support. Your words of encouragement help so much, especially when faced with this kind of attitude here. Thank you for standing with me.

It has been lovely to get to know so many new children and their families this year. Each one is a precious creation and a wonder to behold. They are very dear; many are very earnest in their studies. Thank you for the support that enables me to give these kids a chance in life.

love,
Connie