



June 2010

Dear Friends,

Asha Deep Vidyashram has completed its 7th academic year, finishing the year with 180 students. Although we lose some students every year, percentage-wise this year had the lowest attrition rate ever. Almost all of the kids who made it through the first term went on to complete the year.

Theft

After the successful song, drama, and dance performance by our students in March, I was planning to write. But just a couple days after the program, when I was still basking in the joy brought by the good reviews, I discovered that one of our students had stolen a large amount of money from my home. I had kept additional cash specifically to pay for the extra costs related to the kids' performance. This incident kept me on overtime for awhile.

We almost immediately identified the primary culprit; it took longer to find out that a second child had also indirectly participated in the theft. We were unwilling to prosecute these students through the court system because the likely prison sentences would have been years and, taking into consideration the judiciary and penal system here, a formal sentence would have completely ruined their lives. However, the students were not being honest about the theft, nor were they repentant. In the end they were taken to the police station for questioning and held informally for a few hours. This made a big impact on their families and the community. Also, we cut their names from the school rolls. Both students had been caught stealing before and had been warned of this consequence if they were caught again.

It is hard to state in a short letter the impact this incident had on the school. It was emotionally hard on me personally as well as on all the teachers. Just coming to school and getting through the day was difficult. In the midst of trying to find out the truth and trying to decide what would be the best response, we daily heard gossip from the community about my incompetence and bad comments about the school in general. At that time I had thought that we would probably lose several students over the issue. As it turned out, most of the gossipers must have been people who didn't really know the school. Not one student stopped coming; even the siblings of the two children involved continued to attend. I received a lot of emotional support from both the teachers and students and we all managed to get back to work and complete a successful year. Of course, we learned a lot from this incident. It helped initiate even greater openness and a team spirit among the staff. We changed some rules, and hopefully this sort of thing will not happen again.

PWB

Moving on to happier news, when I last wrote we were looking forward to the arrival of the Performers Without Borders (PWB) team. This is a non-profit organization based in England. Every other year, they bring a team of performers, people with circus skills, to India to teach students such as ours. Like they did two years ago, they taught our students for a month and then, in December, our students put on a public performance showcasing their newly-learned skills. We were able to move to higher levels this year because some of our students had participated in the program before and could add advanced techniques to previously acquired knowledge. To see some of our students in action I would encourage you to go to: www.performerswithoutborders.org.uk and follow the link to Videos, India 2009/10, Varanasi.

Annual Day Performance

Temperatures at the beginning of the year were so low that the District Magistrate ordered schools closed most of the month. We were only open 7 half-days in January. This left us scant time to prepare for our annual public performance in March. February was a bit chaotic trying to continue with academic pursuits while practicing lines, dance moves, jokes, poems, and songs. But, things came together, and, as I said, the program was a big success. We again held it on

the bank of the Ganges River and had an even bigger crowd than last year with over 1000 people in attendance. The seating area was absolutely packed; even the standing area was packed. Many parents came, and everyone was amazed at the great job the kids did. Given the chance, these kids really shine!

Year End

After the show, we got down to serious studies in preparation for final exams at the end of April. Attendance and the feel of the school were good as we wrapped up the year. The last day of school was a celebration of accomplishments. Ten students received prizes for excellent attendance; they missed 6 or less days of school for the whole year. Students also received prizes for punctuality, top marks in our General Knowledge competition, and straight As.

Finally, we awarded our annual Shining Light Scholarship to Anil Kumar Rao, an outstanding student who was studying in 8th grade with us as an exceptional case. Anil, a curious boy, soaks up information like a sponge. He gets along well with his schoolmates and positively responds to suggestions for improvement. We didn't want to lose him, but, since we are not yet equipped to teach at the high school level, we helped him enroll in another local school. It is a big accomplishment for him to have gained admission in a reputed English-medium school. His \$200 scholarship, given by Jeanie Miller of International Ambassadors of Music in memory of Harsha, a student who died three years ago, will pay his school fees for the coming year.

Dreams Coming True

After I had been working in this school for a couple of years, I realized that many of the dreams I had for it would probably not be realized for many, many years, maybe not even until our current students grew up and had children of their own. Because, while we work hard to provide quality education to poor children, education is only the means to achieve our higher goal of transforming the community into a caring, enlightened, and financially stable neighborhood. Our first batches of students were difficult to teach because they had no help at home. The importance of regular attendance and strategies of learning were foreign concepts to them. But this year I have seen that our older students are helping to teach their younger brothers, sisters, and classmates. As a result, the academic level of our lower classes has come up. Also, many of our students have gone home and encouraged their neighborhood friends to join the school so that a great percentage of children in that neighborhood are now studying. Of course, after they have been in school a few years, they bring back information to their parents, and changes have already begun to occur in the thinking of the whole community (in areas such as environmental responsibility and mutual understanding for example). I cannot say that there has been a big change, only that change has, in small ways, begun. This has been a happy and encouraging surprise. One concrete example of change is a service club that was formed by some of our older students. Entirely their own idea, they charge a small monthly fee to members and plan to use the money to complete social service projects such as fixing a leaking public tap or helping someone in need. Started a few months ago, the club now has about 20 members, mostly students from our school. I believe the club is a direct result of the influence of education and the caring philosophy of the teachers in our school.

Financial Needs

Because I do not normally dwell much on this topic, I am sure not many of you know much about the financial needs of the school. To date, we have always had ample funds, but right now the school is extremely short on money.

In July, our existing students will move into higher classes and I will need to admit a new batch of children into kindergarten. Other children can be absorbed into existing classes. As usual, I anticipate adding another 50-70 children to the school, bringing the total to around 250 students. Since my running costs are around \$10/child/month, I will need to have \$2500/month to keep the school going. This is up from the \$2000/month that was required last year.

Taking into account student fees, (\$125/month), the \$800 per month recently pledged by some local Indian friends, and the typical donations we receive from the US, we can expect around \$1400 in regular monthly income. As you can see, this is far short of our needs. The good news is that, although we cannot provide a tax-deductible receipt, we are now able to accept donations through PayPal. If you would like to contribute, you may go to the [How To Help](#) page and click on the PayPal link to specify an amount.

I have seen so many, many positive changes in so many little lives. One student who failed last year and had to be held back in 3rd grade got all A's in the recent exams (except for English in which he got a C). I was so proud of him for moving from Ds and Fs to As. He is now a 4th grader! Another boy who just 2 years ago scored 17/100 on his English exam worked hard, hard, and harder. Last year he got a B, but he still wasn't happy. Determined to get that A, he studied hard all year and just now he got the highest score in the class – an A! I hope we can keep encouraging these children.

love, Connie