



November 2010

Dear Friends,

The first term of the 2010-2011 school year is over, and we have just celebrated Diwali, the Hindu festival of light over darkness. The holiday is celebrated with joy by the lighting of multiple small glowing oil lamps and setting off firecrackers and fireworks.

As you know, we moved the school in early August. The main road into the new colony had been dug up to place a sewer line, and access routes were primitive at best with narrow, uneven, rocky, and muddy portions. We prayed against rain even though it was monsoon season, since it would have been literally impossible to shift all our books, benches, etc. if the roads had been any muddier than they were. The skies remained dry during the three days of our move, releasing their raindrops only after the last cycle trolley load had reached the new location.

The children did complain some of the longer walking distance (although the school is closer for some, it is about 5 minutes further for the majority of children), but most made the adjustment happily since the grounds are superior in many ways to the old location. During the hot season we enjoyed the cool breezes rising off the river. And, eating lunch in the back field felt like a daily picnic, surrounded as we were by trees and the river. We soon settled into the new feel of the school and established the new rules made necessary by the new location.

By and large, things were going smoothly although we were troubled regularly by the theft or misplacement of someone's shoes. These days, most, but not all, of our students wear shoes (actually thongs or sandals) to school. Occasionally a student might throw another's sandals over the fence (as a so-called joke) or might steal another's footwear. These shoes were sometimes recovered and sometimes not. Of course there were complaints by parents who had bought shoes with hard-earned money only to have them disappear at school. And discipline was often a concern, not so much because the children were naughtier but because there were more children. Finally, on a day on which yet someone else's shoes had gone missing, I announced that the children would not be allowed to wear shoes to school. They were shocked and almost beside themselves trying to figure out how to get around this new regulation.

The next morning was quite a scene and had the neighbors scratching their heads as students neared school then hid their shoes behind walls, under bushes, around the corner, etc. before entering the school gate. Some children actually remained absent that day rather than suffer the shame and discomfort of attending school barefoot.

I pondered a long night and day about what to do about the shoe stealing. At the end of the first day I told the children that they could wear shoes if they wanted, but the school would not be responsible for the disappearance of their shoes.

The next morning during assembly I choked up a bit as I tried to explain to the children about my dream of a school where they could study happily, a dream that maybe was a fool's dream as it didn't seem to be working. I tried to explain that if they wanted a school where everyone could be safe and happy, they would have to take personal responsibility for themselves and their actions. I said that I was not willing to stay on in a place where there was mistrust and purposeful indiscipline.

Later in the day, one of the older boys, someone you might call a good-natured troublemaker, came up to me and said, "Ma'am, I want to help you in your dream." I was very touched to have his support. I had some positive comments from a few of the other students too. And now, looking back, I realize that since that time, there hasn't been any complaint about missing shoes and the feel of the school has indeed improved. I should again address the students and tell them that I appreciate the efforts they have made to make the school a happier place.

Another incident worth reporting occurred during the first term exams. By a chain of events, somehow the 7th grade science exam paper got into the hands of a 7th grader ahead of the exam. The student himself brought the exam to the teacher and explained that it had ended up with him but that he hadn't looked at it. The teacher called me to ask my advice. After some consideration we decided that we trusted the student (I do believe that he hadn't looked at the paper) and that the exam could be given as it was. The exam was due to be given the next day and it would have been difficult to prepare a new exam before the holiday that was due to start in two days. I thought the matter was over.

But later that evening three other 7th graders came to my house and asked to talk. They said they knew about the "leak" and they wanted the teacher to write a new exam. I explained that we believed that the paper had not actually been compromised. They said they wanted to clear all doubt. They didn't want anyone to think that the paper had been shown around. They wanted their good scores to be recognized as the product of their hard work and nothing else. When I explained that it would take time to create a new paper, they said they were willing even to come in and give the exam during the holiday in order that their names would be clear.

At their insistence I called the teacher and explained that he would have to revise the exam. He was happy when he heard what had happened. Many students try as hard as they can to cheat and get away with it. Our students were trying as hard as they could not to cheat. The teacher said, "Now I know that what we are doing here really is making a difference."

In other news we recently had a teacher training weekend presented by Dr. Margaret Solomon, a woman that taught children for over 20 years, then got her PhD, became a school administrator, and went on to become a professor training teachers and principals at the university level. She is in India (her native home) for several months on a Fulbright scholarship studying ways to improve education to underprivileged children and educating national teachers along those lines. Her presentations brought some new ideas to my teachers; they later told me how they were implementing some of her teaching into their classrooms. Since the amount of information she shared was so overwhelming, I have begun slowly reviewing everything for our teachers so that we can all improve the quality of our teaching and take positive steps to becoming, as we desire, the best school in Varanasi.

Wishing you all a Happy Thanksgiving . . . we thank you so much for your support and count you among our blessings.

love,

Connie