

May 2021

Dear Friends,

I am sure that most of you will have heard of the desperate situation with regard to Covid-19 in India in the last few weeks. Indeed, it has been a grim time. The number of cases in this second wave has dwarfed the total number of cases experienced in India's first wave last September. Here in Varanasi, nearly every home was affected with illness. At this point, everyone personally knows at least one person who died of the disease. Those closest to me include the man who first invited me to join Asha Deep, in the early days before the school even had a name. A few months after my joining, it was he who proposed the name by which we are now known: Asha Deep Vidyashram meaning Lamp of Hope School. Just a couple years older than I, he passed away on April 18. A couple days later I got word that the husband of our upper grade social studies teacher had passed away, also of covid.



Due to overwhelming numbers of bodies being brought to the two existing cremation sites in the city, a third temporary cremation site was created just outside my house in the empty space between my home and the river. It has been sobering over the last month to watch a nearly endless stream of vehicles bring bodies to be burnt at the riverside here. Typically a dead body would be brought from the hospital to the family home where it would be mourned and prepared for traditional cremation rites. But these bodies are being brought straight from the hospital, covered not in the typical colorful cloth and flowers which drape the dead but in plain white body bags. And instead of being attended by a group of male relatives and friends, they are mostly attended by just one or two relatives and may be carried down to the burning ground by strangers. Instead of the bright colors of the wrapped body, instead of the smell of incense, instead of the usual chant which announces the procession of a dead body, these cremations are carried out quickly and quietly with senses numbed.

Typically, women are not allowed to attend the cremation of a loved one. They mourn at home with dramatic wailing and loving preparation of the body. These days, although heart-wrenching to observe, I have been pleased to see that in some cases women, who would not have seen their loved one since the day they were admitted into the hospital, are being allowed to be near in the brief time between the body being unloaded from the vehicle until the lighting of the fire. They are being given the right of psychological closure and space for the expression of grief.

Thankfully, the number of cases and deaths per day has begun to decrease nationally. We are all hopeful that this downward trend will continue. For those of you interested to see the happenings behind my house, here is a link to a CNN news report that was published four days ago: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bwGVZi5d-0I>. It's a bit long, but you may be interested to watch the 90 second segment between 2:10-3:40 which was shot just below my house (my house is the last on the left showing at 2:10). Here are a couple photos of the scene:



Of course, all schools and colleges have been closed throughout the worst of this wave. Most of everything else (except for banks, grocery, and medical shops) has also been closed. Our streets are again mostly empty as people stay home as much as possible. The lockdowns and the virus itself continues to put our land purchase on hold. The landowners (four brothers) were all infected by covid-19, and they lost both their grandmother and grandfather to the disease. The mourning period is not yet over. When things settle down some, we will get back to this work.

In the midst of all this, I do have some wonderful news. In response to the covid crisis, Asha Deep received some special, generous donations specifically to help families that have been hit hard by this pandemic. Since the contributions added up to a sizable amount, we decided to give a cash gift to each of our students' families. We had already been helping some families pay for rent and food, but at this point, with the loss of work over the long lockdown last year and again in these recent months, all of our families are struggling just to pay for basic needs. However, your generosity allowed us to give most families Rs. 4000 (\$54), an amount that will typically cover a month of expenses. A few families that were in lesser need received half that amount and some that are in greater need, received more, up to Rs. 10,000 (\$136). In total, we have given Rs. 465,800 (\$6,330) and are planning to give another Rs. 31,000 to families that were unable to come in the last few days.

We called one person from each family to come to the school in time slots spread over five days. There was only one period when we had four people show up at one time (we spread them out in the hallway), but otherwise the distribution went very well with gaps between people coming. It was good to be in touch with each and every family. We had time to ask about each one and get a feel for how our community has been affected by the corona virus. Many family members had been covid positive (among the hundreds of thousands of unreported cases in India), but very few had gone to the hospital. Out of our families, only three elderly or previously ill have died. Like I said earlier, most have been hit hard by many months of lost wages. Several were visibly touched by the financial boost. It was a joy to be able to help in this way, allowing our families to catch up on rent, or to buy food or natural gas for cooking.



Here are a few photos from the distribution. If you look carefully at the signature pages, you'll note some different kinds of marks from thumbprints (those who cannot write their own name), to shaky signatures (those who learned their letters but never perfected writing), to English (without exception our older students who came as representatives of their families).



The distribution also allowed us to hand out study

guides for our students. Those brief weeks of in-person classes in January – March did at least allow us to give this year's textbooks to all the kids and enough instruction to help in some self-study. We've motivated them by asking them to prepare for entrance exams as we move into the coming 21-22 school year.

Hopefully we will be able to begin instruction again in July which would be the usual time to start a new school year.

One grateful widow "signs" with her thumb.

To all of you who, with special gifts, made this money distribution possible, thank you very, very much. And to those others of you who have continued to give, allowing us to make our own rent payments and pay our teachers' salaries, much gratitude to you also. We are completely indebted to you all.

love,
Connie