

November 2023

Dear Friends,

After an extremely rough start this school year, we are finally settling back into normal routines. All of our students are now studying in our new building. We've been serving school lunch for over a month now which has allowed us to return to our normal 8-3 teaching schedule. Our computer lab is up and running. Our arts classes (craft, drawing, singing, tabla, and dance) are running. Our librarian is back to cataloging new books and reading stories in classrooms.

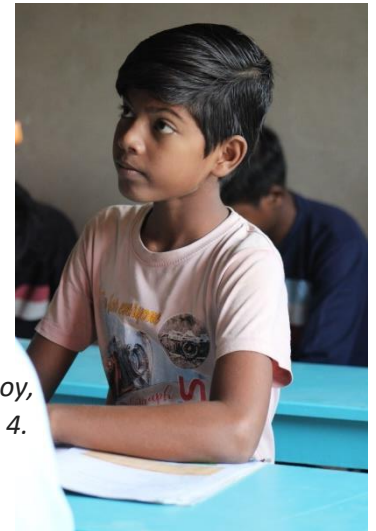


Guided by a teacher, little ones teach their kindergarten classmates.



Class 5, enjoying much more space than we had at our previous location

Lucky, a local boy, has joined Class 4.



We were finally allowed to re-open at our new site two months after our forced closure in July. Although our younger students had a long break, we managed to teach students from 5th grade up at a remote location. On re-opening day, only a dozen children showed up to study, but we now have a steady 104 students attending. 41 of those had studied with us at our previous location. We are helping those students pay transportation costs if they take an auto rickshaw (tuk-tuk) to school and, to help reduce our costs, we are giving an incentive payment to students who ride their cycles (a 40-minute ride one-way). About 20 kids are taking advantage of that bonus, earning a bit of pocket money, cutting down on fossil fuel use and pollution, and strengthening their bodies as well.



Smiling boys: Ashutosh, Vishwas, Ravi

What touched me deeply was the number of students who fought to study at our school. A number of local children tried various and clever stratagems (with mixed success) to get admission into our school. Since we were not permitted to admit students who had already enrolled in the nearby government school, we could not accept all



Taking advantage of our rural environment. Our 5th grade teacher took the kids out to observe and take notes about animals that live nearby.

who wanted to study with us. We have now expanded our transportation subsidies to all the students who previously studied with us, but initially I had not committed to helping children below grade 6 with the costs of



Reconstituted Asha Deep

coming and going. Khushi studied with us in 3rd grade last year; her parents said the distance to our new school was too great. But, even though she is a little wisp of a girl, Khushi said she would get there herself. She sometimes rode a bicycle and sometimes caught a ride with our teachers. Another boy, studying in first grade, walked close to a mile to school every day, coming barefoot until we gave him a pair of shoes. Shristi studied with us in first grade last year. When we moved, her parents enrolled her in another school. She hated it there and begged her parents to let her study at Asha Deep. Over a few weeks she became so emotionally upset, that her parents finally agreed to let her return to us. She had the biggest smile the first day she showed up at our new location. It hasn't disappeared yet.

In addition to our regular school, we have been running 2-hour evening tuition classes for about 40 neighbourhood children. These kids include many who wanted to take admission with us but were not permitted to do so. They are likely to join us for normal classes next year. Their English teacher teaches the older batch a question to ask me each day as they leave. So the children and I have a small English conversation each evening as they leave the school to go home. They are quite a happy lot of children.



A financial dispute with the contractor has caused significant delays in bringing our building project to a close. We hired an independent consultant to measure the building and help with negotiations. We are close to agreement now on the remaining amount to be paid. The current hitch is that the contractor wants us to make a payment now, but we are adamant that he complete the work before we pay the final 5% of the total cost (a stipulation that was included in the original agreement). So work is now being done in fits and starts. The two biggest jobs left are finishing work on the roof and the installation of a wheelchair ramp. Except for those, there are just a few more bits remaining. Now that the building is nearly complete, we are really enjoying our new space!

As far as accreditation goes, we have been approved to teach up to grade 5, but we still have not received official permission to teach grades 6-8. The educational board office changed the rules for receiving accreditation subsequent to accepting our application. According to the new requirements, our classrooms are too small. There is some dispute in the office whether the new rules should apply backward to previously submitted applications. So we continue to wait. In the meantime, we are teaching our older students under our new official status as a "coaching (tuition) center." Hopefully this matter will be resolved favorably and soon.

For the rest of the story, I'll let photos do most of the talking:



Smiling girls (Roshni, Anshika, Ujala, Goldee) at lunchtime.

(The scaffolding has now been removed.)





A former student teaches tabla, classical Indian drums.

Another former student, who now has a Bachelor's in Fine Art, teaches students to use scales and compasses in drawing class.

Also in drawing class, the students below critique each other's work.



Our central courtyard, outdoor yet shaded, is a great space for our dance class!

Just yesterday our 5th-9th graders finished taking their mid-term exams, sitting on the top floor walkway to do so.

Now they are free to enjoy their Diwali holiday which started today.

While our older students wrote exams, our younger students had time to create Diwali decorations.



Here are some Class 4 students standing beneath lanterns they made. That's natural lighting!

In this photo I'm also showing the wall that we have finally painted white, one white wall per class which can be used as a projection screen.

(Khushi, mentioned above, is second from right in this photo.)



2nd-4th graders just before they left to enjoy their holiday

We also had some special fun for our neighborhood tuition students yesterday evening. Some children painted small clay lamps, some made paper lamps, and some made rangolis (colored powder designs) on the ground. The one shown here is only half complete.



I love the lighting in the photo. Taken at dusk, it shows the warm glow of Asha Deep (aided by a light bulb at this time of the evening) contrasted with the village in the background. The boys are also getting in on Diwali decorations.



From us to you, warm wishes at the start of the holiday season. I hope you enjoy good time with family and friends and find some way to bring more light into your corner of the world.

love,
Connie