

Jan 2024

Dear Friends,

We're now in the coldest time of our year with temperatures ranging from 7-20 degrees Celsius (mid forties - mid sixties Fahrenheit). You may laugh, but when your body is used to temperatures more like 38-42 C (95-110 F), the low temperatures, combined with heavy fog and no heating besides fires, make it difficult to do even simple tasks like washing clothes. (Clothes are washed by hand here. Available water feels like it has come out of a refrigerator.) Due to the cold, the state government has ordered schools to remain closed up to grade 8. Reduced timing has also been ordered for higher grades, so our new 9th class is open this week only from 10 a.m. - 2 p.m. This gives me a chance to catch you up on what has happened since I last wrote.



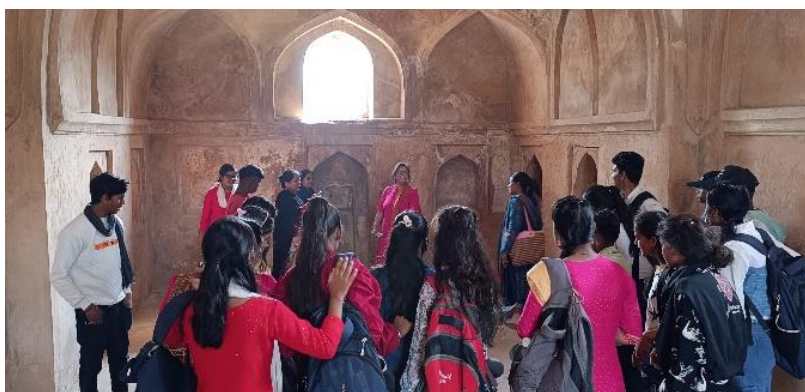
Varanasi winters feature heavy fog

At the end of November, with help from Chances4Children (<https://chances4children.nl/>) which donated funds for the bus fare, we celebrated Children's Day by taking our students 70 km (43 miles) to the city of Jaunpur where we visited Shahi Fort, first built by Firoz Shah Tughlaq in 1362. It was my favorite Children's Day destination yet: a well-maintained large enclosed space with plenty of wide lawns for playing or picnics and buildings of historical interest including a well-preserved full-size replica of a Turkish bath house. The only hitch was that we had thought

the trip, going and coming, would take 3 hours (Google Maps estimate), but it actually took 6 hours. We cut our visit short so that we didn't arrive back home too late, but of course we were much later than we had told the parents. Imagine coming back from a field trip three hours late in the West! I expected that we would get a scolding from the parents, but no. This is India. They were perfectly relaxed about it and said they expected as much. They were just happy that their children had had the chance to get out of the city and see something new.



Students standing outside the main fort entrance and, after entering the main gate, forming a line to proceed inside.



A teacher explains some of the history behind this room in the Turkish bath



Our teachers also enjoyed a day out! (some of them are shown here)

Just three days after that, we had a visit from 17 students (ages 14-17) and three teachers from Maurick College (www.maurickcollege.nl/) in the Netherlands. After long planning, the group arrived in India to get a taste of how different one's life can be. They spent some time in Delhi and visited the Taj Mahal, but the cornerstone of their trip was the day they spent with us at Asha Deep. They arrived mid-morning and learned a bit of our history before mingling with our students during recess. Then they broke into three groups to share with our 6th-9th grade students. We learned about each others' lives; then we shared lunch and then played outdoor games together.



Maurick students and Asha Deep students learn and share a meal together.



Near the end of the school day, some of our students went with the Maurick group to show them where they live. It was eye-opening for the



Annapurna's house. A family of four lives and cooks in this room

Maurick students to see our students' homes where entire families live in one-room dwellings. Many students came to me and asked wide-eyed, "How can the whole family live in there?"

deeply moving to see the look of pride and joy on their faces as they told us what they had done and how much money they had raised. I'm sure the memory of that service will stay with them for the rest of their lives. We are so grateful for their generous gift!

Maurick students presenting their gift to Asha Deep

The group caused our jaws to drop open when they announced that they had raised funds to help pay for upgrading our computer labs. Prior to their trip, the group had researched online, found some Indian recipes, and planned a banquet for family and friends. They spent a day shopping for ingredients and another day cooking. Tickets for the dinner brought in an incredible Rs. 4,25,000 (nearly 5000 euros, over 5000 USD)! It was



By early December temperatures had already started dropping. Our classrooms, primarily designed to stay cool (cement floors, thick brick walls, gaps in window installation), were indeed quite cool. Teachers and students took to corners at the south end of our building to teach in the sun's warmth.



Kindergarteners shifted class to our sunny entryway



Students eating a snack during recess

Cooler temperatures also brought a rise in physical activity.



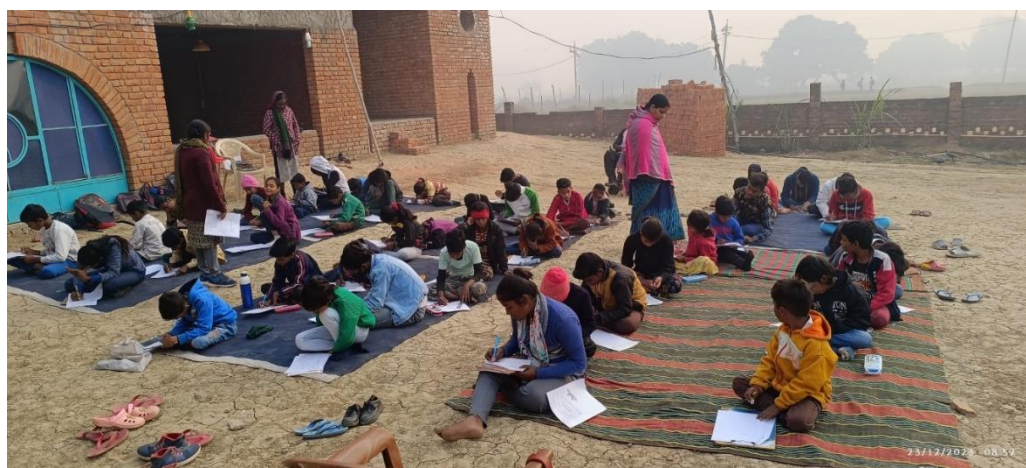
When temperatures allow, we incorporate exercise into our morning assembly routine.



Kids ran to check out badminton rackets, hula hoops, and balls during recess and lunch.



Exams, given during the week just before Christmas, were written as kids sat on mats spread out in our playground.



The week after Christmas was mixed study and preparation for our annual bonfire party which was held on December 30. We counted as well as we could and estimated that 180 would attend, including students of both our school and evening coaching center, teachers, former students, and construction workers living on-site. As it turned out, about 250 people showed up. Thankfully we had enough food for everyone although we had to rush out in the middle to buy more plates and sweets. We had underestimated the astonishing number of former students who made their way out to our new school to see old friends and our new building. It was wonderful to see everyone!



Our new building allowed for spectacular decoration and balcony seating for the dramas and dances that were presented. The fire nicely warmed up our courtyard!



work on the roof. The next steps will be external plastering and the completion of our wheelchair ramp.

As far as accreditation goes, we re-applied for approval up to 8th grade. A second inspection was made two weeks ago, and we heard that our school was the first that this relatively new inspector had positively recommended since she was transferred to our district three months ago. We still have not been approved by the board office, but we remain hopeful.



The current state of our building. Waterproofing of our roof as well as a top structure, a screen for our water tanks, was finally completed last week. Just one simple grill remains to be placed at the very top. Scaffolding has begun to be erected to allow for exterior plastering.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you who bought a goat calendar and to those of you who added a donation to the purchase price. Those sales and extra gifts really add up. I heard from Christy, the photographer behind this annual project, that over \$10,000 came in for Asha Deep this year. These purchases and gifts never fail to give a great boost to our general fund as we start the new calendar year. Thank you so much for this and to all of you who sent in donations in December. We are deeply grateful that you have given us this chance to bring light and hope to our students.

love,
Connie

Bonus photos:



This peek window into our office has proven to be quite popular, with young students and old. These two pictures were taken on the same day!