

# Saakshar School Appeal Newsletter - March 2016

Registered Charity No.1136311 [www.saaksharschoolappeal.uk](http://www.saaksharschoolappeal.uk)

**What is Saakshar?** Saakshar is a project run by a small Indian NGO or charity in SW Delhi (The Vigyan Vijay Foundation), which gets children into school and supports them throughout their education. It operates from rented schoolrooms serving Nasirpur slum near Palam, and three slum resettlement colonies nearby in Manglapuri and Matiyala. VVF was founded in 2002 by Asha Kumar and her daughter Lipika, and they established Saakshar to address the issues of school non-attendance and dropout, which blight the lives of children in these poor communities. Illiterate parents often avoid formal education, having been excluded from it themselves, and having suffered a lifetime of discrimination from teachers, officials and higher caste people. Men struggle to find day labour in construction, and the work is dangerous and poorly paid, while women work long hours as cleaners. Families move between the city and their home villages at harvest time, breaking the continuity of school, even if their children have attended, which also leads to dropout. Girl children are often expected to look after siblings or have to work with their mothers from an early age and may never get the chance to go to school. For these people life is very insecure. Illness, accident, or any number of other challenges can destroy the fragile existence which people



After school in Nasirpur slum.



Urmila was a toddler in the slum when I first met her - she joined Saakshar's pre-school class, is now starting her fourth year at mainstream school, and attends Saakshar's afternoon classes too. She has two older brothers, in years 7 and 8 at school, and an older sister who did not go to school, and helps her mother at home.



The sign outside our third Saakshar school room.

struggle to protect, and in the fight to survive, education is frequently neglected.

Saakshar's aim is to give children the skills they need to cope at school alongside more privileged children, to sign them up and get them attending their local school regularly, and to support them so that they do not drop out. To do this, Saakshar provides a year of pre-school education for the tiny and mostly undernourished children from these communities. At the end of the year they are enthusiastic learners and ready for school. Saakshar's teachers sign them

up for local state schools (and try hard to get them into the best available) and support them from then onwards with afternoon homework and remedial sessions for those who can come. Saakshar's involvement in the communities has gradually deepened, especially in Nasirpur slum, with health and nutritional interventions, regular dental checks, mentoring and skills training for older children, and literacy sessions for parents too. But it is still a challenge is to persuade parents that school is going to help their children and their families. In the resettlement colonies, established at the time of slum clearances twenty or more years ago, this is understood, and many



At the entrance to Nasirpur slum, a water tanker supplies 'drinkable' water and everyone fills their buckets and containers. In the background is our little silver Saakshar minibus, and behind the tanker is the Saakshar 1 classroom.

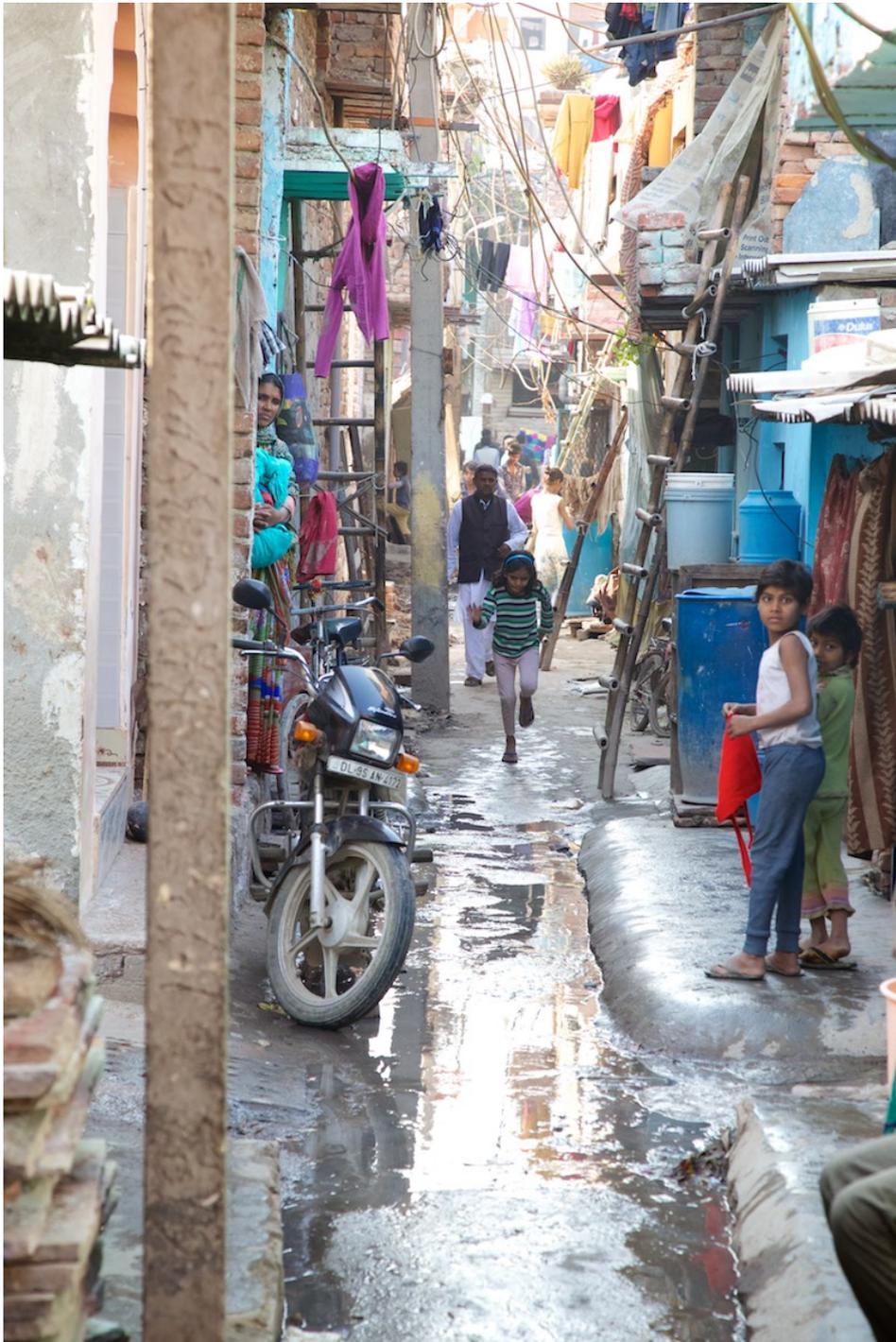
parents are keen to send their children to Saakshar to give them the best possible start. They value the care of Saakshar's teachers, who come from the same communities and understand the challenges their children face. They value the clear educational goals and interactive teaching methods which make Saakshar children such enthusiastic students.

In Nasirpur slum, however, it remains an challenge to persuade parents that education is worthwhile. Many children are still not in school, and newcomers from the villages bring with them older children who have never attended formal education. It remains an ongoing challenge for Saakshar's teachers and for children in the community to persuade parents that education matters.

Saakshar rents four small schoolrooms, employs eight teachers and a Coordinator. It also employs Antosh and Anita, both of whom live in Nasirpur slum and have been supported by Saakshar since they were small children. Both completed their education at '12th Class', and are being trained in teaching, driving and administration, while pursuing college courses by correspondence. Saakshar also provides lunch for the



At Saakshar 1, children and their teacher Sikha enjoy afternoon remedial lessons.



One of the main alleys in Nasirpur slum.

children from Nasirpur slum, and crèche facilities to enable older siblings to study while caring for younger ones. The cost of running Saakshar's four schoolrooms all together is about £13,000 a year, which is incredibly little for such effective work, transforming the lives of a hundred children every year. For its founder Asha, for her four daughters, who are also great supporters, and for our team, it is a work of love. Every hundred rupees (£1) is spent carefully on the education of the children. But in Delhi costs are rising, with rents increasing by about 10% a year. Inflation is high and we need to pay our teachers more each year and reward them for their commitment. We also need to replace equipment and are constantly looking for more suitable premises.

I became involved with Saakshar through a retired academic in Delhi, in 2003. I raised some funds to help them, which led to the opening of the second schoolroom ('Saakshar 2') in Manglapuri. I visited them in 2009, along with my wife Rachel and our two teenage daughters, and then on

returning to UK, a generous donor gave £5,000 to buy Saakshar a little minibus - which is still invaluable and used every day.

We registered Saakshar School Appeal as a charity in the UK in 2009, to raise more support and reclaim Gift Aid on donations too. With a worldwide recession at that time, Saakshar had lost its partial funding from a Canadian charity, and since then we have tried to provide the bulk of the income they need. Saakshar School Appeal has no costs - my regular visits are not a cost to the charity and the trustees all give their time and advice freely. In a world where charities have considerable management expenses, Saakshar is very unusual in being able to spend all that we give them on their low-cost but highly effective work, which is changing children's lives for good.



Kajal's family - younger sister, mother, married sister, grandma, and friends. You are never alone in Nasirpur slum.



A family outside their home in Nasirpur slum. Families gradually improve their homes, adding electricity and second hand appliances, often given by the people who employ women to clean. In time, upstairs rooms are added as every space is precious.



The courtyard outside Kajari's house, shared with her uncle's family and other members of a large extended family. Her expectant aunt is on the left. As it is one of the larger open spaces in the community, it is used for social gatherings and festivals too. It is not glamorous, but all the children in the family have been helped by Saakshar, attend school, and are happy and welcoming.

**Saakshar in 2016** I landed in Delhi on the 26th of January this year, and emerged from the airport into the smoke which often shrouds the city. It is claimed that Delhi is the most polluted city in the world, and you can feel it in your throat, your nose and your eyes, but it does not deter anyone who lives there from going about their business. People still heave heavy loads around on cycle rickshaws, walk in the road and young professionals run marathons through the city. Often in Delhi there is no wind, and the smoke from vehicle pollution, domestic fires (often burning plastic to keep warm), farms and power stations does not move away for days. Red dust covers everything with minutes, making the task of wiping and sweeping floors, tables, cars and windows unending. I often wonder what it must be like for the delicate lungs of children to develop in this heavily polluted haze.

Having landed in the morning, I dropped my case at the small hotel where I was staying and headed to the Saakshar office on Palam Dabri Marg. Saakshar is the largest project of the Vigyan Vijay Foundation, which Asha established in memory of her husband. The other VVF projects include some environmental consultancy and computer training, both of which help to pay the office costs. After a lunch of vegetable curry and chapatis with Asha and our Coordinator, Preeti, I went in the minibus with Antosh, our driver, computer teacher and star student, to visit his community, Nasirpur slum. The little minibus is ideal for the potholed and crowded lanes which lead to the slum, filled with cycles, people and animals, and brought us there safely after about five minutes. There were plenty of people around in the late afternoon, and entering the slum through a small entrance we found many of the people I know there, and caught up on the news. Antosh translated for me, in his broken but fast improving English. Noone in the slum speaks any English, except the children, who form an immediate crowd of welcomers and call out, "hello", "how are



Children play in front of Nasirpur slum's only water tap. In the foreground is Antosh and Sonu's sister Monu, and their house is at the end of this lane.

you!" and "photo photo," enthusiastically. We had coffee at the house of Kajari, a teenage former Saakshar student, and spoke to her aunt, who lives with their joint family in a cluster of rooms, and is due to give birth any day.

## Life in the Slum

The slum has had drainage since 2012, but it does not seem to be working very well. There was a lot of water on the ground everywhere, and it was not fresh. Flies

abounded, and people said that the toilet block in the middle of the slum, which is not nice at the best of times, is still blocking and overflows into people's homes. Water continues to be a problem. The community has one tap,

which the people are very proud of, as they fitted the piping themselves. This tap supplies water most mornings for an hour or so, but it meets the needs of 2000 people, and its water is not drinkable. Water which can be drunk (though best not consumed by foreigners!) comes by tanker to the street outside the slum, at some time most afternoons. When it is there, everyone, especially the girls, must run with all the containers they can find, to fill and carry back to their homes. I find it astonishing that the daily curse of carrying heavy pots and buckets of water from distant and frustratingly unreliable sources, which is the daily burden of girls and women across rural India and throughout much of the world, is still the daily challenge for girls and women in the capital city of the world's biggest democracy.



Outside our Saakshar school room, opposite Nasirpur slum.

In February this year the water supply for the whole of west Delhi was sabotaged by caste protesters and the BBC reported that 10 million people were without water for 24 hours. In the area of Nasirpur slum, there was actually no water for a whole week, and I am unsure about how people managed. Bottled water, although it costs pennies, is beyond the budget of people living on

£1 a day. In addition, there seems to be little labouring work for men in Delhi at the moment. Women go cleaning from early until late, but men seem to find little and can be at home for days at a time. Many chose to spend their time playing cards, or drinking if they can, which helps no one. This is the community where we are trying to persuade parents to send their children to Saakshar and to school. Sadly, mothers are often not there and unable to do much, while men can be apathetic, fatalistic and or unwilling to move out of the limitations of their own narrow experience.



One afternoon in Manglapuri, near Saakshar 2, we met some of our Nasirpur slum children on their way home from school. Now at the end of their final year they were taking '12th Class' exams, the equivalent of A levels. From second on the left, Kajal, Asha Kumar, Kajari and Sonya, all of whom are friends from the slum, and studied with Saakshar's support. I have known them since they were ten years old, and feel very proud of their achievements, wisdom and maturity.

**Growing up** Many of the children and young people in the slum are inspiring. Kajari is one of the older girls who has been involved with Saakshar since she was tiny, and all her siblings have been taught by Saakshar's teachers too. This year she is seventeen and has just taken her final school exams, like several of her Saakshar friends. I wonder what they will do next. Will they follow their mothers into cleaning work in middle class homes, train as beauticians, or take correspondence college courses? Kajari always wanted to be a dancer, and although she is bright she has not wanted to take a very academic path. We have tried to encourage her to learn as much English as possible, and I hope she will carry on studying. With luck she will get some more training before she has to marry, and her parents will find her an educated boy with a job.

After a few days at Saakshar I invited a group of ten of these older teenagers to come to the office and discuss their experience, and our conversation was fascinating. For a couple of hours we had a wide ranging discussion about growing up in the slum, fate, jobs, family and parental attitudes, choices, attitudes, relationships and arranged marriages, love and gender. All these young people have little freedom, and must abide by the will of their parents and the demands of their

community. The possibility of escaping from the likelihood of an early marriage and lifelong drudgery seems far fetched for many, and some are fatalistic. Bharti (second on the left in the photo below) felt there was nothing she could do. Her mother decided that Bharti has to withdraw from school and work full time as a cleaner, and Bharti had to accept this. 'My family need the money', she said, and she expects to be married soon, to a boy she has never met. Others, with



Our hardworking and articulate teenagers, facing difficult choices at the end of their formal education. They have to satisfy the expectations and wishes of their families without losing sight of their own hopes and dreams.

more supportive or courageous parents, felt that through education they could change their lives. Rupa, soon to be 17 (far left in the photo above), said that her parents supported her desire to go on studying and she believed that she could have a different life if she works hard. It seems that parental attitudes will largely determine these children's fates. I said to them that these two views represented contrasting attitudes across India today, as ancient fatalism meets the go-ahead entrepreneurial attitudes of the modern world. I hope that these young people, who I have known for half their lives, will have the chance to benefit from India's new prosperity, and may, through education, find opportunities to lead more fulfilling lives. One or two of the older boys who began with Saakshar have now found good work and their studies and training are reaping a modest reward, even if their earnings must be given to their families to pay for the marriages of sisters and cousins. They earn far more than their parents do, and at Saakshar we are working hard to give our other teenagers the personal skills, confidence and opportunities to succeed in the highly competitive job market, or to continue in education after 18.

Many families worry about the experience of girls growing up in the slum. If a girl were to be accused of over familiarity with local boys, it would ruin the reputation of the whole family, making it much harder and more expensive for girls to marry, and reducing the prospects of boys too. Traditional values are still very important, and Delhi is not a safe place for young women. Some parents, concerned for the safety of their daughters, send them back to the villages to be married early. Marriage before 18 is illegal, but common. With no privacy in crowded slum homes and a

very close knit community, they have no freedom and little choice in what happens to them. Other parents, rather than marry them young, try to send them away to other towns, to work for middle class families, where it is hoped they will be safer. Antosh's sister, Sonu (below), was sent away to a distant town to work for a middle class family last year, as her father felt that she would have a better life and more opportunity to study there. After several months she was allowed to visit her family in Delhi, and she came with her brother to meet me the day before she was due to return. She had not wanted to go, she said, but understood why her father had sent her there. She went to school in the mornings and did domestic work for the family in the afternoons, helping with children and housework. Now she has finished Class 12 exams she will study by correspondence and work for them full time. The mother is kind, she said, though Sonu had been very homesick. I asked if she felt safe there, and she paused, and said, yes, the men in the family are out at work during the day... It is not an easy life for girls in India. Sonu's parents were worried about her safety and her future if she stayed with them in the slum. They took a risk in sending her away, as who knows whether it will be safer or not? But she is benefiting from her ordeal - working hard at a better school, learning a lot from her employers, and all being well she will return to Delhi in a year or so a stronger and more capable young woman.



Sonu, sister of Antosh, who is living and studying with a family far away from Delhi.





Some of our teachers are themselves bright examples of how India is changing. Though young and from equally poor backgrounds as the Saakshar children, they work hard, they value the training which Preeti, the Saakshar Coordinator, gives them all one Saturday a month, and with Saakshar's help several have taken formal nursery qualifications. I am keen that we should reward them better and encourage them to stay with us, although I am conscious that training them so that they can leave and take better paid jobs is itself a part of Saakshar's work.

Happy children learning colours at Saakshar 4

We continue to struggle to find suitable premises for each of the schools. Saakshar 1 recently moved, as the owner of the old building wanted to redevelop it. Preeti found a very good building right opposite the slum entrance, which is now fully functional. It has two reasonable rooms and a western toilet, which causes much confusion for the tiny children who have not seen one before! We hope that the new location will act as an incentive for more children to come, but men from the



The bright learning environment for little children at Saakshar 4 who are taught with care and great enthusiasm by Ghazala and Sandhya. On the day Asha and I visited there was a power cut.

community sit outside smoking and drinking every day. The three other Saakshar school rooms are much smaller and darker, but in the resettlement colonies there are no buildings big enough to become a proper classroom. In the long term, it would be wonderful to have our own building, but property prices are very high and this is unlikely, unless a very generous donor can help us.



Pooja with her brother, Shiva, and another child at Saakshar 1.

**Girls miss out** Visiting Saakshar 1 on the second day of my visit I met two children who are examples of the way girls miss out on education, and thereby face a life of ignorance and poverty. The first was a shy girl called Pooja, who is 11, and was wearing a beige top with a hood, sitting at the back, in the morning class along with much younger children. I asked why she was not in school - and recognised her from last year. She only managed to have two years at school and then had to drop out because her parents need her to look after their other

two children, one of whom was sitting beside her while the other was in the nursery class. She will need to look after them for a while, yet, and will never have the chance to go back to school, but she can keep coming to Saakshar, where she and they will be safe, and she can continue to learn. In two years, when the youngest is old enough to go to school, it will be difficult for Pooja to go too, as she would have to join classes with the very young ones. She wants to go to school, but cannot.

The second was Khushboo, a tiny girl who said she was 6, although the teacher Seema thinks she is 8. To me she looked malnourished. She is there with her 2 year old sister, whom she looks after. Her father goes off early to work as a labourer, and her mother leaves to clean houses at 4am, leaving Khushboo to look after the baby all day, including making food (and of course getting her own). Her mother comes home at 1pm, for a few hours, and then has to go cleaning again. Khushboo has never been to school. She wants to. She is very good with her little baby sister, holding her when she cries, giving her milk from a small and very grubby bottle, and putting her down to sleep on the floor, when she can carry on with her studies again. I asked what makes her baby sister happy, as she was crying a lot. Khushboo said, "Only seeing our mother makes her happy".



Khushboo and her baby sister at Saakshar 1



**Learning together** In all the Saakshar schoolrooms there is a common curriculum and teaching pattern. On the day I visited Saakshar 2, 17 children were present, and 13 absent, some away for family events like weddings, and others off sick with winter ailments. The children seem very young, some are just 4, and tiny. Most were smiling and chirpy, a few others were in their own worlds, like little children everywhere! Teaching is well organised, with circle time, and teachers showing numbers and fruits and animals, with the children responding to names, numbers and letters in English and in Hindi. They had stories, and the teachers sit on the floor with the children much of the time - there is no space for chairs or desks. At Saakshar 2 and Saakshar 4, the children bring their own lunches. At Saakshar 1 lunch is cooked at the office and served by our staff, while at Saakshar 3 a local school meals facility run by a charity send lunch for the children as a donation every day. As the Saakshar 2 children opened their lunches (typically one folded chapati and a spoonful of vegetable), the lady who owns the house came to visit - Asha urged me to tell her not to raise the rent! The lady has five children and brought her baby granddaughter in too. She will raise the rent -



Lunchtime at Saakshar 3 - healthy rice and daal

rents are rising and we need her room, which in the evening becomes the room where her family sleep. I thanked her for helping to change the children's lives.



Learning about fruits in Hindi and English with teacher Sikha at Saakshar 2 - "Kaisi hai, what is this?", "Grapes! Agur! "

**Please help!** Our continued support for Saakshar is dependent on the generosity of our supporters.

Less than half the income we need each year comes from regular monthly giving, and the rest has to come from fundraising events and collections.

A small amount of money goes a very long way in a Delhi slum community, and we are very grateful for the kindness of many of you which enables this invaluable project to continue.



Simple prayers are said to give thanks before lunch every day

Please could you consider supporting these children with a small donation to Saakshar each month, if you do not already do so?

Regular giving and Gift Aid forms are on our website here, along with much more information too:  
<http://www.saaksharschoolappeal.uk/support/>

On your behalf I wish all our students and families success in the coming year, and thank Saakshar's dedicated teachers and staff for their hard work. I thank our Saakshar School Appeal Trustees, and all our supporters for their encouragement and invaluable help.



Ralph Williamson, March 2016

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