

# Saakshar School Appeal Newsletter - January 2017

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Enquiring young minds at Saakshar III, 2016

Dear friends, as 2017 begins I am delighted to send you news from Saakshar ('literate') about its work with some of Delhi's least privileged children. If you have been able to support Saakshar over the last year, may I take this opportunity to say a huge thank you!

If you have not received this newsletter before, I have sent it to you as I hope you will be interested in Saakshar's life changing work. I try to send two newsletters a year - please let me know if you would rather not receive it.

## What is Saakshar?

Saakshar is the major project of an Indian charity called Vigyan Vijay Foundation, VVF, which exists to help children in slum and slum resettlement communities in Delhi to attend school. It serves the families of Nasirpur slum near Palam in SW Delhi, and three slum



Tree planting activity - 2016



Learning through actions, movement, poetry and dance

resettlement colonies nearby in Manglapuri and Matiyala. Education is the most effective way to improve the lives of children and families in poor communities. Parents in these social groups in Delhi are mostly illiterate. They have faced a lifetime of discrimination and lack of opportunity - they are wary of institutions and have poor experience of education themselves, but wish a better life for their children. Few of them have permanent jobs. Men mostly seek work as day labourers or are vegetable sellers, while most

women work long hours as domestic cleaners. This work can be dangerous, and life for the whole family is precarious and insecure.

Families move from villages to the city slums seeking better opportunities, and often return to rural villages for respite from the fierce heat in summer and to help with the harvest. For many reasons their children often do not attend school, start late, or have disrupted education - having started they frequently drop out because of all kinds of pressures, practical, economic, social and academic.



Asha (centre) visiting Pushpa and her profoundly deaf daughter Mona in Nasirpur slum.



Teacher Ghazala and some of her class.

VVF was established in 2002 by Asha Kumar and her daughter Lipika in memory of her husband, and Saakshar has now been running for 13 years, to address these problems of non-attendance and drop out, to enable children from these poor communities to complete their education, giving them the chance of a better life.

Girls are least likely to be sent to school, suffering many adverse consequences of a lack of literacy, numeracy and formal qualifications. In India there is a large gap between the number of girls and boys born, due to sexual selection before birth. Girls have traditionally been seen as a cost, while boys are a blessing. Without



Learning about hygiene and cleanliness

Completing their education, girls may be sent back to villages for early marriage to uneducated boys, and their families must pay a lot in gifts to in-laws, who may treat the girl badly for her ignorance. Unable to read and without confidence with numbers, life can be a misery of dependence and shame. Saakshar has worked consistently to encourage the education of girls, and to build a positive attitude and behaviour towards girl children in the communities it serves, in association with government

programmes. Asha insists that Saakshar's role is to teach positive values for the whole community as well as reading and writing. We have seen a real change in attitudes in Nasirpur slum over the last ten years, and today most families treat daughters well, and value them - although they fear for their safety and for the prospects of other family members if daughters do not behave with complete modesty. Girls are caught between the pressures of modern life, the reality of their hard life in slum communities and the strict expectations of their parents.



Dr Monica Yadev provides twice yearly medical checks. Many children are undernourished. Health supplements, vitamins and minerals are given to parents to help their development.



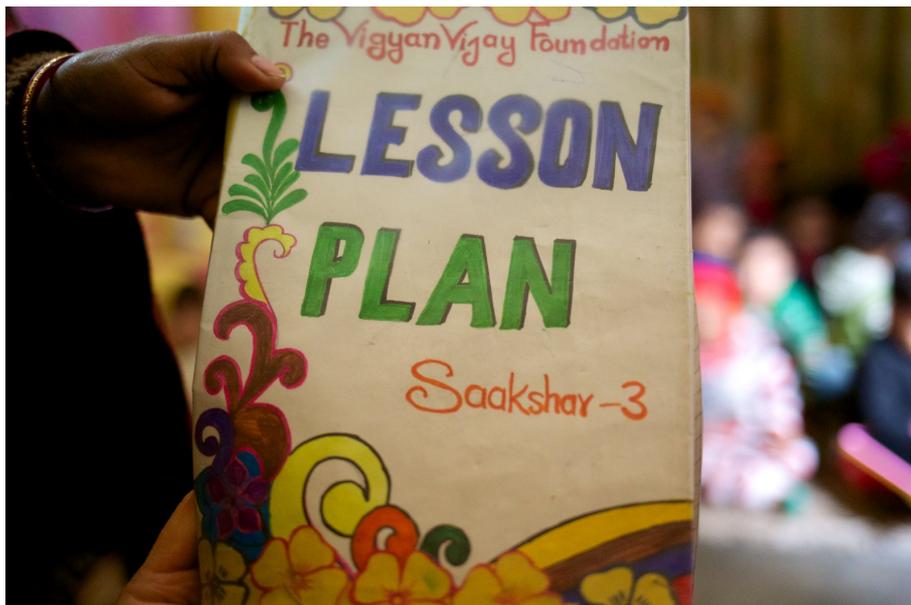
Older children from Nasirpur slum have computer lessons at the VVF office and each classroom has a donated laptop.

### **What does Saakshar do?**

Saakshar rents four small school rooms, employs ten teachers and two other staff, and runs a small minibus. Each day 100 tiny children attend pre-school lessons in the morning at the four classrooms, and at the end of the year they are signed up by Saakshar teachers for local mainstream schools. During their school years they are offered homework and remedial sessions each afternoon, to catch

up, keep up, or for all who have nowhere to study in their challenging home environments. Saakshar is an entirely secular organisation in which the views and religious practice of all are respected. Saakshar's children are mostly Hindu, with some Muslims too, but other cultural and religious festivals (like Christmas and Easter) are marked and celebrated too.

As well as the core pre-school work, Saakshar provides creche facilities for children who have to care for younger siblings so that they can still come to learn. For example, a family recently moved from a village may have a seven year old daughter who has never been to school and who is expected to care for two younger children while her parents work. A girl in this position can attend Saakshar with her siblings, and if possible, join mainstream school at the end of a year, before its too late. Saakshar also provides health checks, primary health care and nutrition support for the children of these slum communities, as well as literacy classes for mothers.



Lessons are carefully planned and a broad curriculum is followed

As some children who began learning with Saakshar have (wonderfully) reached the end of their '12th class' school studies, Saakshar is now providing vocational support too, helping the small group of older children who we have known over the last decade to find suitable training, work and opportunity, sometimes with scholarship support. Seeing their children complete their education and find training and work afterwards is a dramatic and powerful catalyst for change in these poor communities, which has many positive effects. More news of these older students is below.

Classroom based learning for Saakshar's pre-school children uses songs and dance, art and craft activities, games and storytelling, and always incorporates teaching about values, health, hygiene and relationships. In addition there are trips to broaden the experience of these and older children, who would otherwise rarely leave their own small communities. Places like the airport, zoo, railway museum or TV studios are very popular, and simply travelling in a minibus is a great adventure for very underprivileged children. Sports days, and celebration events and performances help children to learn new skills and to grow in confidence, and all students are given the opportunity to learn about computers and to learn basic computer skills.



Playing with shapes and colours in Hindi and English

As well as training children for school and supporting them during their studies, we are also training our own teachers. Young women from the local communities are taken on as trainees, and are given on the job training by Preeti our coordinator, and they progress on to become valued teachers. Coming from relatively poor backgrounds themselves, they can understand the challenges faced by parents and children, and are trusted by them. If they show promise and commitment, we give them the chance to undertake formal part time nursery teacher and creche qualifications too. Every month the teachers from all for schools come together for a training day, ensuring good practice and consistency across the four sites, and extending the curriculum with new ideas and approaches. This in itself is really valuable work, giving skills and qualifications to young women, who can use this experience throughout their lives, in their communities and their families.



One of the alleys in Nasirpur slum, which is always filled with people

## **Funding and Awareness Raising**

Saakshar is funded by supporters in the UK (and a few in the USA) through a UK charity Saakshar School Appeal, which we founded in 2009. Currently we raise about £14,000 each year which pays for the bulk of Saakshar's costs. Having worked closely with Saakshar since it began, we have absolute confidence in the integrity and effectiveness of their staff and operation. Administrative costs are negligible, and office costs are largely covered by other income generation like computer teaching, while in the UK we have no administrative costs - all the money we raise is transferred to pay Saakshar teachers and classroom rents.



Asha Kumar with young learners at Saakshar IV

As chair of the Saakshar School Appeal trustees I visit Saakshar each year (next in March 2017) to learn about their work, meet and interview children, teachers and families, and to provide encouragement to Saakshar's dedicated team.



Songs and movement at Saakshar III

Here in Britain I speak to church and school groups about Saakshar, both to raise awareness of life in Delhi's slum communities and to encourage support. Its a wonderful little charity which has changed the lives of many hundreds of India's poorest children, and we are privileged to be part of its work - if you know of a school, church or community group who would like to know about its work, please let me know.

This year we have benefitted from a kind bequest, a generous donation from a friend in California, a fundraising event at St Peter's Eaton Square, two other church donations and the sponsorship of two of our older students. In the year ahead we hope to



Payal lives at the entrance to Nasirpur slum, and she attends Saakshar 1's supportive school homework sessions

benefit from a collaboration with Tateossian jewellers in London who have been marketing a unique range of bracelets to raise money for Saakshar too (see below).

Less than half our income comes from monthly giving, and we are in need of much more regular support. If you could help these poor children to have a better life through a monthly donation, please get in touch. Your help will be used carefully and very effectively.

The rest of our income is from fundraising events or gifts. If you would like to hold an event - a meeting, coffee morning, concert or any other kind of fundraiser, if you would like to remember Saakshar's children in your will, or make a one-off gift, please do get in touch.

### **Latest News from Saakshar**

As in any educational organisation, staff sometimes move on, and for our female staff in Delhi, getting married often means moving to a different area, or giving up paid work to concentrate on domestic life and children. In November one of our best loved and most dedicated teachers, Kamlesh, got married and moved away to her husband's home. We are very grateful for all her work with us and wish her every happiness. Saakshar coordinator Preeti is now searching for a suitable replacement.

Saakshar I, the first of our schools, which serves Nasirpur slum, relocated last year to a slightly larger and better room, just across the lane from the slum entrance. A new staff team with three young teachers has seen the attendance there rise steadily in recent months, with up to 40 children also attending remedial sessions in the afternoons. Teachers are available to help both younger and older students with their studies, and provide valuable pastoral support too.

Saakshar II & IV in nearby Manglapuri are both doing well, with their small classrooms full to capacity, and busy remedial classes in the afternoons. At Saakshar II there are also well established cutting and tailoring classes run by our beloved teacher Bimla in the later afternoon, providing valuable skills and earning potential to young women from the resettlement colony. Saakshar III in Matiyala has been oversubscribed for some years and we have been seeking a bigger building to rent. On a recent visit there Asha Kumar was met by many parents asking her to open a bigger school so that they can also send their children. In this resettlement colony there are private creches and pre-school, but they do not provide the care and rich experience given by Saakshar - parents know that a year at Saakshar will give their children the preparation they need to cope and succeed at school. For us, finding a better schoolroom for Saakshar III (in Matiyala) will be a priority in 2017.



Vegetable sellers and children outside the new Saakshar 1 classroom

### One young star - Anshu

Just one example of the sort of child we are helping is Anshu, a nine year old girl who is now in her fourth year (Class-IV) in a government (state primary) school. Anshu's parents came to Delhi from a rural community in Uttar Pradesh. She has two brothers and one sister. Needing support and encouragement, she joined Saakshar's remedial classes when she was in her first year at school, and has proved to be a bright and sparky girl who is academically able too. Her Saakshar teachers noticed her dedication to her studies and Anshu is steadily improving, with their support. She actively participates in all the co-curricular activities conducted by Saakshar, and this has helped to build her self-confidence. VVF's Saakshar teachers are keen to help her to fulfil her dream to become a teacher too. In the past this would have seemed impossible, but now she has successful role models in her community to follow.



Anshu - 2016

### Saakshar Bracelets from Tateossian - A Bracelet can make a Future

Launched 29th November 2016, top London jeweller Tateossian is supporting Saakshar School Appeal by producing a limited range of bracelets for men, women and children. 30% of the proceeds from the sale of each beautiful bracelet goes to Saakshar School Appeal, to fund children through education in Delhi, in association with St Peter's Church, Eaton Square.

Robert Tateossian, CEO at Tateossian, writes:

*“Being able to give back is one of the reasons I became my own boss in the first place so I’m delighted to be working with Saakshar School Appeal. I think the work they do is so important and as a result I wanted to create something really beautiful and unique for them but also something that would sell well and raise some money.”*



Re-working the style of their best-selling beaded bracelets, Robert Tateossian has designed an exclusive range that comprises spherical beads of semi-precious stone interspersed with the occasional rhodium plated sterling silver bead and nugget. Each design is branded with a sterling silver tag. Available in black agate, tiger eye, turquoise, sodalite and malachite. To learn more click [here](#) or see the Tateossian website [here](#).

### Vocational Training

This year for the first time two Saakshar students from Nasirpur slum, Rupa & Kajal, were admitted to teacher training college courses. Having begun their studies with Saakshar 1 and remained supporters and participants of Saakshar events and programmes throughout their schooling, they were both helped to find a suitable two year course, and offered bursaries to pay the modest fees and costs. Both have now completed their first term and are making good progress. They are dedicated, intelligent and hardworking young women who I have interviewed each year since they were at Primary School, and it is wonderful to see videos of them taking a classes on teaching practice. Coordinator Preeti keeps in regular contact with them and will mentor them through their training. Meeting them last week, Preeti said that they are happy and look very grown up. Rupa said that she already feels “like a teacher”. To have a daughter training professionally like this is a very significant step for families from their background, and for Saakshar, and we are immensely proud of them.

Other young people are also succeeding, with Saakshar’s guidance and encouragement. Anita, a keen young woman who has been a great advocate for Saakshar in Nasirpur Slum, left school last year but had not passed all her final exams. Since then she has worked for Saakshar, and then took a well paid position in a call centre but has



Rupa on teaching practice



Kajal and Rupa, from Nasirpur slum, on teacher training placement. Both have been sponsored by supporters in UK.

now left that post to concentrate of her exams in April, as she is determined to complete her studies successfully.



Older Saakshar students Khushboo, Anita, Rupa, Anish and Akash at the VVF office, 2016

Our student Sonya, whose moving story has been used in several of my presentations to schools here, passed her exams and left school last year. She received some beautician training with Saakshar's help, and has now got married (several years later than she might have, and with a full education behind her). She still lives in SW Delhi and is looking for suitable work. I look forward to meeting her and her husband on my next visit. Another valued Saakshar student, Kajri, is working in a departmental store as a Sales Assistant for the time being and is happy. These are just a few of the success stories and I am aware that without the support they have received, their young lives might well have gone very differently. Now they are successful and respected members of their communities, with earning power and an influence for good in the lives of others.

On my next visit I will be keen to find out how families are responding to their children's success. We really hope it will encourage others to send their children to Saakshar and to school.

Once again, thank you for all your interest and for your support, which is making a real difference.

***Ralph Williamson, January 2017***



Kajal with her father outside her family home in the slum.

**To contact Saakshar School Appeal please email: [saaksharschoolappeal@gmail.com](mailto:saaksharschoolappeal@gmail.com)**

Ralph Williamson is the Chair of trustees for Saakshar School Appeal and Vicar of St Peter's Church, Eaton Square, London SW1 9AL

The other trustees are: Mr John Briggs, Mr Edwin Simpson, Professor Graham Ward, and Mrs Rachel Williamson.