

SAAKSHAR SCHOOL APPEAL

Newsletter – January 2018

Saakshar means “Literate” - Supporting children in Delhi’s slum communities through VVF’s Saakshar educational programme

Registered Charity No.1136311 www.saksharschoolappeal.uk



Singing at Saakshar 1, 2017

Thank you!

Dear friends and supporters of Saakshar, as 2018 is about to begin I am delighted to send you news of Saakshar’s activities. Our teachers and staff have been working hard all through the last year to build a brighter future for the underprivileged children whom Saakshar helps, and some of their inspiring stories are below. The lives of these children and their families are being changed for the better through Saakshar’s education, careful mentoring and ongoing support.

So first, a very big “**Thank You**” to all of you who have supported the children of Saakshar during the last year. As costs rise in Delhi and we seek to do more each year to help and guide our children, we are so grateful to all who have responded to the effectiveness of this dedicated little charity by raising money for us and donating generously. Among many gifts, three couples who got married this year have given donations to Saakshar, Lego has donated education sets to our children, and we have been supported by collections and fundraising events at several churches and schools, small trusts and many individual or regular

donations. Through your generosity we have raised the £24,000 Saakshar needed to operate in 2017. This money rented four school rooms, paid ten teachers and our Coordinator, ran the Saakshar minibus, gave lunch to about 60 children daily and sponsored for two of our female students from Nasirpur slum to train professionally as teachers. I'm sure you will agree that this is an amazingly effective use of money. This year we have prepared about a hundred of Delhi's least privileged young children for mainstream school and have given mentoring and remedial help to many more, saving them from dropping out of education, guiding and teaching them so that they can complete their schooling and find rewarding work.



Saakshar Coordinator Preeti Jha visiting children and their families in Nasirpur slum 2017. All these children began their school careers through Saakshar's pre-school classes and benefit now from remedial help and mentoring.

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 do not currently support Saakshar with a regular gift, please consider supporting us in 2018 if you can. 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 one or two newsletters a year - please let me know if you would rather not receive it.

Here in the UK we have been telling people about Saakshar. Ralph has visited several primary school and several secondary schools for assemblies and study sessions to talk about Saakshar, and to explain what life is like for children growing up in Delhi's slum communities. We have also built and launched a new website, hence the new style logo on this newsletter - if you have not seen the website yet please have a good look at its photographs and helpful information, send links to others and send us feedback if you can.



Life in Nasirpur slum has many challenges and the life of girls is particularly hard.

What is Saakshar, VVF and Saakshar School Appeal?

Saakshar School Appeal is a UK registered charity which supports the work of Saakshar in Delhi. We registered in 2009 and raise awareness and funds for Saakshar's moving work.

Saakshar is the major project of an Indian NGO called **Vigyan Vijay Foundation, VVF**, established in 2002 by Asha Kumar and her daughter Lipika in memory of her husband, and it is run with dedication and absolute transparency, for the benefit of the children it serves.

Saakshar helps poor children in Delhi to attend school. It serves families in Nasirpur slum near Palam in SW Delhi, and three slum 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, mostly illiterate, have faced a lifetime of discrimination and lack of opportunity but they want a better life for their children. Few have permanent jobs. Men mostly gather on street corners in the early morning in the hope of being hired as day labourers. Most women from the Nasirpur slum work long hours as domestic cleaners. This work for both men and women can be



dangerous, and life in these communities is precarious. For many reasons lots of children do not attend school, they start school late, or have disrupted education - often they drop out because of all kinds of pressures, practical, economic, social and academic.



Saakshar is a secular charity which teaches the spiritual values of love and respect for life, which are shared by all. Saakshar teaches girls and boys from both Hindu and Muslim families, who learn happily together. Our teachers are also from different faith communities.

A Difficult Life for Girls

Girls suffer many adverse consequences of a lack of literacy, numeracy and formal qualifications. Girls have traditionally been seen as a cost, while boys are a blessing. From an early age they share the burden of domestic work and childcare with their mothers, and are expected to be obedient and hardworking, but are less likely to be allowed to study than boys. They struggle with poor sanitation, have no freedom or privacy, and their health, education and happiness are the lowest priority in the use of the family's finances. Yet most of these girls and young women are highly able, resilient, and resourceful. While men in the community who have lost hope of a better life and gamble and drink, their wives and daughters manage to provide for others, still hoping for something better. Without completing their education, girls are married off early 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 among families and among boys and men too.



A girl sits on a charpoy (rope bed) and cleans grain for her mother, outside her home at the entrance to Nasirpur slum. During the daytime, beds are moved out into the lane to make space inside. Commercial flour is not trusted and so grain is cleaned the traditionally way and taken to be milled. Girls carry the burden of domestic work, reducing their time to play and to study.



Saakshar teaches children to respect themselves and one another, reinforcing traditional family values of respect for elders and care for children, and helping young men and women to value one another as equals.

Asha insists that Saakshar's role is to teach positive values for the whole community and we have seen a deep change in attitudes in Nasirpur slum over the last ten years. Today most families treat daughters well, although they fear for their safety and for the marriage prospects of other family members if daughters do not behave with complete modesty, and they still see boys as a priority.

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. Saakshar's effectiveness in helping girls to complete their secondary education and find good work or vocational training is challenging deeply held prejudices, and enabling girls to achieve their dreams.

What does Saakshar do?

Each day 100 tiny children attend pre-school lessons in the morning at Saakshar's 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 study sessions each afternoon, to catch up, keep up, or for all who have nowhere to study in their challenging home environments.

Saakshar provides creche facilities for younger siblings, health checks, primary health care and nutrition support, and some literacy classes for mothers too. Having built a close relationship and deep trust with families in these struggling communities, we try to respond to the changing needs of the children we serve. As children reach the end of their '12th class' school studies, Saakshar provides vocational support. Seeing their children complete their education and find training and work afterwards is a powerful catalyst for change in these poor communities, which has many positive effects.



We aim to expand our support with scholarships to cover the cost of training in teaching and other professions, and our first two sponsored young women, Roopa and Kajal, will qualify as teachers in 2018 after two years of full-time training.

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, the environment and relationships. There are trips to broaden the children's experience as they might otherwise rarely leave their own small communities. Places like the airport, zoo, railway museum or TV studios are very popular, and sports days and celebration events help children to learn new skills and to grow in confidence. All students are given the opportunity to learn basic computer skills.



Pre-school children start craft education with plasticine modelling - which is as much fun in Delhi as in London!

Saakshar's teachers come from humble backgrounds and understand the challenges faced by their students. Dedicated young women with good basic education come to Saakshar as paid teaching assistants, and can take formal qualifications as they work, progressing to become valued teachers. Every month they come together for a training day, to ensure consistency of good practice and to extend the curriculum with new approaches. Training nursery teachers like this is really valuable in itself as it gives skills and qualifications to local young women, who can use this experience throughout their lives.



Saakshar's dedicated teachers, with Coordinator Preeti Jha (fifth from left)



Boys enjoying holiday classes at Saakshar 1, near Nasirpur slum.



Saakshar teachers and students perform a simple play about the value of education at the entrance to the slum.



Happy learners at Saakshar 1 during the school holidays.



This two year old comes to Saakshar 1 with her older sister, so that her sister can study.



Saakshar teacher Rachna inspires her class

Funding and Awareness Raising

Saakshar is funded by supporters in the UK (and a few in other countries) through the UK charity Saakshar School Appeal, which we founded in 2009. **We expect that in 2018 we will need to raise about £26,000 to pay for Saakshar's work.**

Having worked closely with Saakshar since it began, we have absolute confidence in the integrity and effectiveness of our staff and operation. Administrative costs in Delhi are negligible, with office costs partly covered by income from computer teaching for local people, while in the UK we have no administrative costs at all - all the money we raise is transferred to pay Saakshar teachers and classroom rents. As Chair of the Saakshar School Appeal trustees I visit Saakshar each year and will be there with Rachel Williamson my wife in February 2018, to meet and interview children, teachers and families, and to provide encouragement to Saakshar's dedicated team.

A Day in the Life of Roopa

Roopa & Kajal, both from Nasirpur slum, have nearly completed their two year teacher training courses, sponsored through Saakshar School Appeal. In March they showed me their course books and report sheets which confirmed how well they are doing, gaining high marks despite their lowly social backgrounds compared to other students. There are some videos of them teaching on the Saakshar School Appeal website if you would like to see them in action.

Both began their studies at Saakshar and have been part of Saakshar events and support throughout their schooling, and their success in gaining professional teacher status is a hugely important step for them, for their families, for Saakshar, and their community. By taking this professional training their English has greatly improved, and with WhatsApp on their phones they sometimes telephone us in UK from their homes, to share their experience and excitement. They will take final exams in June, and will qualify three months later, after which they can apply for real jobs in government elementary schools, and expect to earn twice as much as their fathers.

It is not easy. Both young women live in cramped conditions. Neither have a desk at which to study, or much time to prepare their lessons, and have many domestic responsibilities too. But they are bold advocates for education in their community and are changing attitudes towards girls.

Earlier this year I asked Rupa to describe her day, and she wrote,

Sir, I get up early in the morning at 6 o'clock. I wash and prepare breakfast for the family, but sometimes after I have eaten breakfast, I and Kajal go to make a survey of the community, to make parents aware of how important education is in our life and to encourage them also to bring their children as students to Saakshar. Sir, we are doing our best to make the parents aware, so that they will understand how their children can get a bright future. I come back home around 9am. I do household work and homework after that, and at 12:30 Kajal and I both go to the Teacher Training Institute. I reach home again at 6pm and then I teach English to two girls of 9th class [age 14] and also help my mother. After dinner I do my course work which is very lengthy work, and read a book, and then at 2am I go to sleep.



Roopa with her parents in their small but well kept home.



Roopa and Kajal at the VVF / Saakshar office.



Young learners come to Saakshar in school holidays for extra lessons and activities. Saakshar 1, 2017.



Children from all four communities we serve came together for a dramatic storytelling session in 2017.



Preeti Jha, who trained and taught in Australia before returning to India, teaching at Saakshar 1

Saakshar Coordinator Preeti Jha introduces Saakshar's children

Dear Friends and Patrons,

Saakshar has been able to make that special difference in the lives of all its wards with your contributions. We are now giving a little extra attention to those bright but needy children who with a sustained moral and financial support will make a mark on their own and may someday give back something big to humankind. Not every child gets a cradled childhood of comfort. Many are born in poverty with the only dream of successfully sourcing the next meal. But among them, there are a handful of parents who strive to work hard and make the lives of their children a bit different. Here I would like to share the stories of some of these little stars.

Saakshar I

Born to parents who are daily labourers, life was never easy for Seema. Her father is a mason and her mother works as a domestic help. Her childhood was full of adversity. Though she went to school with her three younger brothers, she knew it was very difficult for her parents to send their children to school. But her self-confidence and motivation has helped her to win her parent's hearts and she has been able to get support from Saakshar. She has attended Saakshar's remedial classes for the past year. Her life has changed drastically and even though Seema still does a lot of household chores and cooking, she loves her studies and is looking at a future she could never have imagined.





Vineeta is a 9 years old girl who studies in 4th standard. She lives in a small house with her parents and two siblings. Financial constraints are the major reasons for the pitiable condition of her family. Her father is a vegetable seller and mother works as a domestic help. With uneducated parents, she really values her studies. Her parents don't want their children to be deprived of their basic education. Saakshar is helping Vineeta in providing her quality education and motivates her to participate in extracurricular activities.

Saakshar II

Rihan is a six year old class I student of Saheed Captain Sumit Rai, a private school near his community. He has a younger brother and an elder sister who go to the same school. He has been coming to Saakshar's remedial classes for the past year. His father works as a cab driver and mother is a homemaker. They came to Delhi almost nine years back from Bihar to give a better life to their kids. Rihan shows promise and with a continued remedial support may rise to pick up a good education to earn a position in society and realise the dreams of his parents, both of whom are keen for a good education for their son.



Saakshar III

Mannat is an eight year boy studying in class III at Sat Saheb Public (state) school. He is the son of our very own Saakshar teacher Sonia. She is the sole bread earner since her husband left home never to return almost five years ago. Mannat is a very sincere child who shows great promise. He is fond of dance and music and likes to make new friends. He is a sincere student always eager to learn new things. His mother is unable to support his dreams due to lack of finances as she earns a meager salary, but Saakshar is keen to extend all support so that Mannat can pursue his dreams and make his mother proud.

Sujal is a nine year old boy studying in Class III in Sat Saheb Public (state) School. He is the son of our Saakshar teacher Smt Babita. Sujal's father runs an electronics rented shop near the community. Sujal suffers from kidney problems and is often in hospital. His parents do everything they can to give him medical care and a normal life. They are keen that with education, Sujal will grow up to have an independent and happy life. Saakshar realises that Sujal will need not only educational guidance but also a sustained medical support and therefore will require further financial help from patrons and donors.



Tanisha is a six year old girl studying in Class II in a nearby government school. Tanisha was abandoned by her mother when she lost her dad at the age of 3. She is being reared by her paternal grandparents. Tanisha's grandmother earns a meagre living by tailoring clothes for

people in the community, which is hardly enough to run the household. Tanisha is a bright student who will excel in her studies and shows a promise to take up a profession with our support.

Saakshar IV

Latasha is a seven year old student of class II in a government school. She is a sincere girl who has been coming to the Saakshar Centre for the past four years. Sadly, her dad abandoned this daughter of his just because of her dark complexion. She has an elder and a younger sister living with their parents but she is in the care of her maternal grandparents. Her grandfather is a clerk and her grandmother works as domestic help to support Latasha's education. Her grandmother is a worried woman who hopes that her intelligent granddaughter grows into an independent woman. She hopes that Latasha will have all support even after her grandparents are no more. Latasha is a bright and diligent student with a warm and loving heart. She is a gem waiting to be transformed. Saakshar is fortunate to have her and hopes to be the wings of her dreams with support from its patrons.



Can you Help?

Saakshar 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.

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 and see the information about supporting us on the website:

www.saaksharschoolappeal.uk/giving

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.





Saakshar teacher Ghazala celebrates 'Children's Day' with her class

Once again, thank you for all your interest and for your support.
Ralph Williamson, January 2018

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.

To contact Saakshar School Appeal and to donate please email: saaksharschoolappeal@gmail.com

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