

# SAAKSHAR SCHOOL APPEAL

## Newsletter - May 2020

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

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



Learning is fun at Saakshar - the pre-school class at Saakshar 4 in Manglarpuri, March 2020

### Thank you once again to all our supporters!

Dear Saakshar friends and supporters, I returned from my most recent visit to Saakshar at the start of March, and am delighted to share with you the latest news about Saakshar’s work in Delhi. I visited all four school rooms and saw teaching and learning which was characterised by joy, dedication, and by the values of community and integrity. The work of our dedicated teachers was reflected in beautiful classrooms and great learning, while parents sang the praises of Saakshar’s work on behalf of their children. The background to the visit, however, was unusual, as Delhi was gripped that week by communal violence, mostly against Muslims, which left 53 people dead. Some schools were closed and members of the four communities where we work were nervous in case the violence came to their neighbourhoods too. This was soon followed by fears about the coronavirus, which just days after I left led to more school closures, first primary schools, and then in the middle of March once exams were over, the closure of all secondary schools and the general lockdown too. As in so many other places, the poor are most vulnerable in every way, and cannot afford illness or loss of employment. In the struggle to survive, education often takes a back seat. During

the lockdown, while better off children access online resources from private schools, children from slum communities rarely can, but our creative Saakshar teachers have continued to support their students through WhatsApp and calls and videos (see p.17-18 below).

## Asha Rani - 20th January 1953 - 4th May 2020

We are very sad to report that Asha Kumar, Founder and Director of the Vigyan Vijay Foundation and its Saakshar programme, passed away at her home in Vikaspuri, Delhi, on the 4th of May. Asha's compassion for the vulnerable and needy, and especially for the poor children served by Saakshar, was both inspiring and life changing for the thousands of people touched by Saakshar's work. Married young, she brought up and educated four daughters before going to college herself, then nursed her husband after he suffered a severe stroke. After his death she founded Vigyan Vijay Foundation in his memory along with her daughter Lipika. Saakshar was their response to the need of poor local people for education, and Asha dedicated her life to its work, often using her own income to pay the bills when support was too little. She was full of life and had a wonderful sense of humour. In recent years she suffered from Parkinson's and this severely limited her activities but she never gave up her commitment to the people Saakshar serves. She will be badly missed by all who knew her. Here in UK we send our deepest sympathy to her daughters and to the trustees of the Vigyan Vijay Foundation.



Asha visiting Pushpa and her family in Nasirpur slum community, 2014

## What is 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 educational work.

**Saakshar** is the major project of the Indian NGO, **Vigyan Vijay Foundation** (or VVF), established in Delhi in 2002 by Asha Kumar and her daughter Lipika. It is run with dedication and absolute transparency, for the benefit of the children it serves. Saakshar helps poor children from slum and slum resettlement communities in Delhi to attend and complete school by providing a year of pre-school preparation, then ongoing learning support for young people who may have no one literate at home to help them. It serves families in the Nasirpur slum community near Palam in SW Delhi (Saakshar 1), and slum resettlement colonies nearby in Manglapuri (Saakshar 2 and 4) and Matiyala (Saakshar 3).

## Joyful Learning

Saakshar's four classrooms serve different communities, but our teachers train together each month and communicate daily to share best practice. Their classrooms are filled with fantastic displays and great learning activities. Our teachers work in different Saakshar schools every few years so that they grow in experience. Saakshar 1 serves the poorest community, and



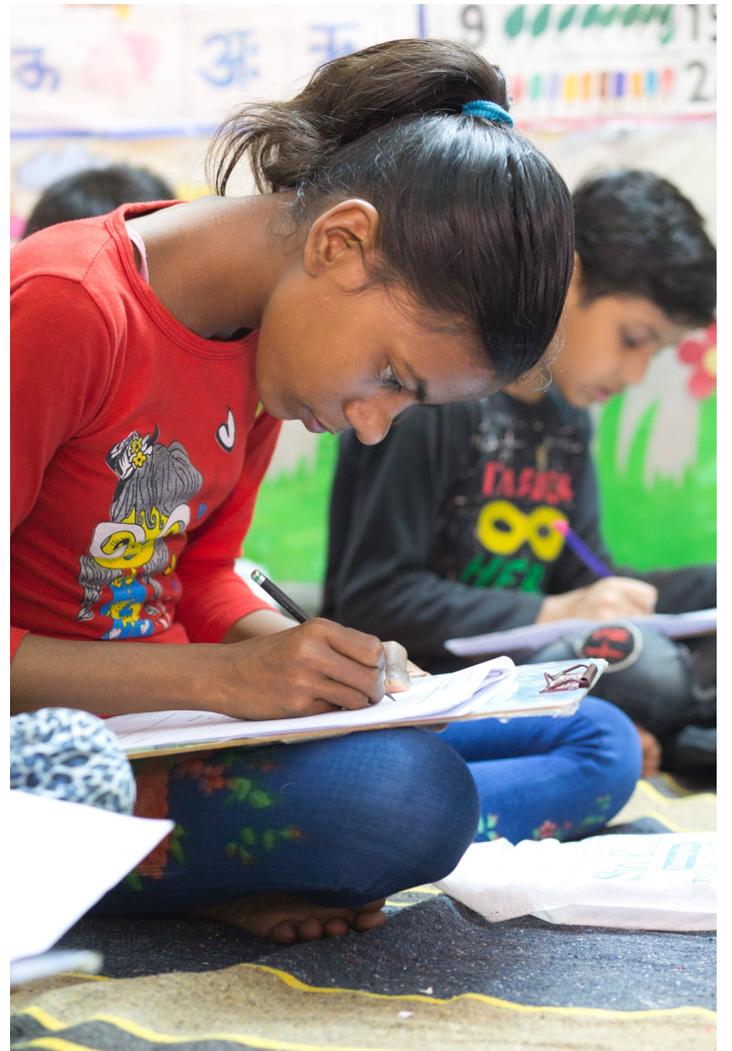
Plastic shoes on the step outside Saakshar 1. Our four school rooms are downstairs rooms in private homes. The families rent them to us as classrooms during the day, and sleep in them themselves at night.



Above, two young children are captivated by the attention of their teacher Sunita at Saakshar 1, who goes each day with her colleague Chanchal to the children's homes to call them to Saakshar. These children thrive on the interaction and the care they find at Saakshar, and are inspired to go on learning. Their positive response encourages parents to let them study, which paves the way for their success as older students.

Right, older students come to Saakshar 1 to prepare for their end of year exams.

has the biggest challenges. Every morning the teachers there go into the community twice, to call the little pre-school children and take them to Saakshar, as their working parents often do not send them. They tell them to brush their teeth, put on clothes and shoes and come to learn. The other three Saakshar schoolrooms serve communities ('slum resettlement colonies') where the parents, though poor, appreciate the value of learning more and are eager to bring their children. We equip all our teachers with the experience and skills they need - we train them, pay for outside courses, and steadily increase their salaries as they take on more responsibility.





Above - Joyful young learners at Saakshar 4 interact with their teachers and learn to think for themselves.

Below - A family in the Nasirpur community. A single room may be home to six or more people so residents add extra rooms above, accessed by bamboo ladders, then as work allows, with concrete steps.





Above and below - Students learning in the afternoon at Saakshar 1. They also receive mentoring and advice about the next stage of their life, and our staff speak to parents about delaying marriage so that they can complete their studies.

Saakshar's pattern is the same every morning for all our pre-school children, whose learning is filled with joy and fun. They are thrilled to be treated with love and care, and respond enthusiastically to the games, songs, stories and activities through which they learn their alphabet, numbers, vegetables and fruits, animals, days of the week, and so much more. They learn about hygiene, about caring for themselves and respecting one another. They get exercise for their bodies as well as their minds, and learn to be friends. They learn about the importance of sharing, and working together. At the the end of the morning session, after washing their hands and a prayer of thanks, the little ones have their lunch (brought from the



Saakshar office to Saakshar 1, or brought from home at Saakshar 2, 3, and 4) before collection by parents or siblings. Then older children come after finishing for the day at government schools (at 2pm or earlier), and our teachers tutor them in Maths and Science, English, Hindi and Social Studies. The learning these children enjoy very different to the pattern of most government schools in India, where large classes learn by rote and have little interaction with teachers. Worse still,



Above - The entrance to the Nasirpur community. As violence against women seems to go unchecked and communal violence is fuelled by political propoganda, the recently fitted gates suggest a new level of anxiety about safety for the 2000 people whose homes make up a walled community inside. This is the only way in or out.

Below - With some education, most boys and young men in Nasirpur community will manage to get jobs as security guards, drivers or shop workers. Some, like our student Bablu (at the very back) achieve better employment in offices, because of their better literacy, numeracy and English language.





Above - Children love to learn at Saakshar 3. Below - Pre-school children learn through play at Saakshar 2 in Manglapuri



government “Anganwadi centres” which provide day care for over a hundred million pre-school children are often bare rooms with no learning, no resources and no interaction.

## Changing Communities - Transforming Lives

The people served by Saakshar face multiple layers of discrimination. Ancient caste prejudice towards the people now called ‘scheduled castes’ - those at the bottom of the social and religious status hierarchy - persists in poor access to education, health and employment. Over the last few decades, many people from low or ‘scheduled’ castes have moved from countryside areas into the city seeking employment. They moved to “homegrown neighbourhoods” which seem to replicate the life of the village more often than the city. Cut off from their better off urban neighbours by a wall, their communities are separate and provide a pool of cheap labour for local businesses and homes. Poor education, low literacy and meagre skills mean a lifetime of crushingly low income and employment in the lowest level of services - cleaning and labouring, often on daily wages with high risk of injury and no security.

For those in these communities who are more fortunate or literate, their hope for is for a job in a shop or as a security guard. People who do this work and live in these communities are still stigmatised by the better off and often not treated with respect. For women there are additional burdens and prejudices. Across India a large number of girl children are simply absent - the result of selective abortion in urban areas, and deliberate neglect in rural communities, and boys will be better fed and treated when sick. Girls are a cost and a liability - expensive to marry off, and always a potential source of shame if they are accused of not conforming to conservative patterns of behaviour. Laws rules banning dowry,



Above - A boy in Nasirpur community. Top - After school learning classes and exam preparation at Saakshar 1



Above, girls at Saakshar 1 love learning, and are finding opportunities to complete their learning which were previously not allowed. Below, parents from Nasirpur community listen to Anita, one of their neighbours until she was married last year, encouraging them to let their daughters study.



prohibiting marriage before the age of 18, and outlawing untouchability are observed in name, but not in practice. All the children Saakshar serves begin life with huge disadvantages, and girls in particular face challenges which can seem insurmountable. But in the communities where we work, there are signs of change.

Since my first visit to the Nasirpur slum community served by Saakshar's first classroom, I have seen many changes. The community has become more densely occupied. People improved their one room dwellings, added upper rooms (often accessed by bamboo ladder) and gained erratic electricity. The muddy lanes, awash with dirty water and navigated by stepping stones, were greatly improved with basic drainage in 2012. Two years ago piped water was given, though 'drinkable' water still comes by tanker. Now some people have their own toilets, as families pool their income and older children at work contribute to improving the home, as well as saving for family weddings.



Saakshar Coordinator Preeti Jha visits each community, and encourages older students to reconsider their education options, and how Saakshar can help.



Above - Successful young women from Nasirpur community inspire their neighbours and cousins. Rupa, Aarti, Anita and Kajal have succeeded with Saakshar's help, and came to say thank you to Asha, and to our UK supporters.

A few years ago almost all the girls who attended Saakshar 1 did the domestic work in their homes - girls had to bring water, wash clothes and dishes, help prepare food and clean the house. By the age of 12 many were out cleaning other homes with their mothers. In the past, our girl students found it impossible to give time to their studies, because of the burden of domestic work and paid cleaning. Often they stopped trying, and dropped out of school. This year, however, I met several who said they are not expected to do much household work, and that their parents expect them to use their free time to study. This is a huge breakthrough, and a big change in attitudes. The reason for it, in my opinion, is the outstanding example offered by a number of Saakshar girls we have helped to complete their school education, and sometimes more. The community now sees some girls completing their studies at 18, and who are, as a result, confident, capable, employable, and eligible for a much better (and sometimes less costly) marriage. Few of the girls who finish class 12 at school marry labourers any more - the boys their families find for them are literate and employed as drivers or office workers, which means a considerable improvement in income, status and security. In our community, some parents of younger girls are seeing these examples and giving their daughters time to study. This is partly the result of 18 years of Saakshar's consistent work in Nasirpur community, changing attitudes of parents, building the expectations of children, raising self-esteem and teaching respect for all.

At the beginning of my visit, fifteen mothers of children at Saakshar 1 came from Nasirpur community to discuss their children's learning. They told of the lack of support from some of their husbands, and problems with toilet and washing facilities. But they also spoke



Hard working student Bubby learning Excel. She lives in Nasirpur community and would like to train as a police officer.

enthusiastically about the school success of daughters as well as sons, and were particularly attentive to Anita, formerly their neighbour, whose desire to learn was thwarted again and again by the traditional attitudes of her family. Despite the burden of family responsibilities, Anita persevered with her learning and is now happily married, and living in a new part of Delhi with her kind husband and in-laws. She has earned the respect of the community where she grew up, who have seen her struggle and succeed.

## Reluctant Learners and High Fliers, Adult Learners and Sewers

At the VVF office, where there is a modest computer suite and a small teaching classroom, I met two groups of girls from the Nasirpur community to whom we are giving special help. The first group are school drop-outs, who for one reason or another have given up on studying. Some are children we have known since birth (Payal in the photo below has been a regular attender at Saakshar, and her brother has done well at school) and we are sad that they have given in to the pressure to drop out. For these teenaged girls, our Saakshar coordinator Preeti Jha has arranged a beautician training course to give them usable skills and to keep them occupied, while we endeavour to rekindle a love of learning where possible. They are taught each afternoon by Jyoti, the sister of one of our teachers and afterwards they will be able to find employment in local beauty parlours and help neighbours and friends.

Another group of young women are in their last year of school and have the potential to go on studying afterwards, and these are being given additional tutoring, including computer



Above, some of the beautician training course practice 'threading' for their teacher Jyoti, in the rooftop classroom at VVF.



Above - Priya, Jyoti, Aarti, Bubbly and Seema are the 6th form computer and English class at VVF.

Below - Adult literacy class at Saakshar 3 in Matiyala.



classes at the VVF office. Former Saakshar student Aarti is their tutor, and daily contact with them enables us to speak to them and their parents about their potential and hopes. We would like to sponsor some of them to complete further study if possible, but the threat or the hope of marriage is always present - one of these girls was recently saved from an unsuitable marriage at 18 when the boy's family demanded too much money, while another hopes to marry a successful boy she knows, but in three years time.

Whenever possible, Saakshar runs adult literacy classes for parents. At the moment, mothers from the Matiyala neighbourhood come to Saakshar 3 for an hour of learning each lunchtime while their children eat and play. The classes are moving, as I have seen before how liberating it is for illiterate women to discover the ability to read signs and labels, school notes or official notices, where before they felt humiliated and worthless. Our teacher Karishma, teaches the adult literacy class. As other space becomes vacant in the house we aim to expand our tutoring for older students there. The area is very mixed, with Hindu and Muslim families living together in a sometimes volatile slum resettlement colony. The people there share a desire to do well, and are very enthusiastic about the support Saakshar offers their children. This is our busiest school, and it is always packed with happy young learners.

For many years Saakshar 2 in Manglapuri has hosted a sewing class for 'cutting and tailoring'. Our teacher Vimla is an experienced tailor and a wonderful tutor, and the class has always been popular and oversubscribed. It enables local women and Saakshar parents to develop useable skills, and is a precious link to the wider community, whose help we need.



Above - learning dressmaking skills at Saakshar 2



Above - Muslim twins, Mahazabeen and Sahazavi come to study at Saakshar 3 every afternoon. They are frightened by the communal violence which has targeted Muslim homes. Sahazavi is interested in art and would love to be a sculptor or artist but her sister wants to join the police. They say their parents will let them study until they are 18.

Below - teacher Rachna helps young learners at Saakshar 2



# Lockdown Learning



With regular phone and WhatsApp contact from Saakshar's teachers, many of our children are managing to learn at home, especially if they have older siblings. Coordinator Preeti Jha sent videos from the children where they demonstrate their lockdown learning at home in April and May. Here are some snapshots from their videos.





Above - Saakshar's dedicated teachers gathered in March at the end of Ralph Williamson's visit, to present their teaching.

Below, creative teaching through WhatsApp videos for Saakshar's children during lockdown.



## Dedicated Teachers

In recent years we have expected more and more of our teachers and they have risen to every challenge. We extended the working day to provide longer afternoon sessions for secondary age children, and our schoolrooms are now open until 5pm each day. Our teachers are from humble backgrounds and are trusted by our families, but some also have degree level qualifications, which enables them to tutor older students and to persuade parents that girls can do well in education. Our teachers are supported daily by our Saakshar Coordinator Preeti Jha, who cares for each of them and their families, and helps them to achieve their fullest potential in their teaching.

## Fundraising

Once again, a very big **“Thank You”** to all of you who have supported the children of Saakshar during the last year by raising money for us and donating generously. Thank you for all your gifts, small and large - every pound and rupee is put to good use. Your donations have rented four school rooms, paid ten full time teachers and our Coordinator, run the Saakshar minibus, and given lunch to about 30 or more children daily. This is an amazingly effective use of money. If you have supported 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 2020 if you can. Please see our website for options.



Here in the UK Ralph continues to promote the work of Saakshar, especially through school assemblies and visits. We especially appreciate the support over the last year from St Peter's Church and the children and families of St Peter's Primary School.

## Can you Help?

Saakshar has changed the lives of many hundreds of India's poorest children. 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 a fundraising event, 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](http://www.saaksharschoolappeal.uk/giving)**

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.



Singing and dancing at Saakshar 4

Once again, thank you for all your interest and for your support.

*Ralph Williamson, May 2020*

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](mailto:saaksharschoolappeal@gmail.com)**

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