

SAAKSHAR SCHOOL APPEAL

Newsletter - March 2019

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

Registered Charity No.1136311 www.saksharschoolappeal.uk



Happy young learners - pre-school class at Saakshar 3, February 2019

Thank you to all our friends and supporters!

Dear Saakshar friends and supporters, I am delighted to share with you the latest news about Saakshar’s work in Delhi. My trip to Saakshar at the end of February 2019 marked ten years since my first visit in 2009, and the foundation of Saakshar School Appeal in the UK. Over the last decade I have seen many transformations - for the children, their families, the communities where they live, and for our work too. Below are some really inspiring stories about individual students ten years on, whose lives show how effective Saakshar has been in changing the experience of children in these poor communities.

In the last decade I have watched Nasirpur slum grow - not outwards, but up - with simple huts turning into stronger buildings with upper rooms, making the lanes darker and more congested. When I first visited there were no drains, but we encouraged the local people to petition the authorities for drainage, and this made a big difference, along with the more recent delivery of piped drinkable water to most homes. Yet the challenges remain the same - the cost of living in Delhi is very high and the work available to people without good education



Nasirpur slum in 2009 above, and below, in 2019.

is limited. The answer to the constraints of poverty, prejudice and ignorance is education, and Saakshar continues to work in difficult circumstances to ensure that the children we support are able to succeed in their studies.

This year everyone is talking about the arrival of a metro station nearby, connecting Nasirpur and Mahavir Enclave to the rest of Delhi. But some children still move to the slum from villages in the countryside without much education, and as everyone needs to earn, girls are still routinely sent out to work as cleaners and boys take up work in shops and workshops. It is tempting for the illiterate parents in Nasirpur slum to allow their children to drop out of school early and work, without seeing the value of them completing their studies. Every morning our dedicated young teachers Bhavana and Chanchal visit the slum to call children from their homes, after their parents have gone off to work in cleaning and construction.

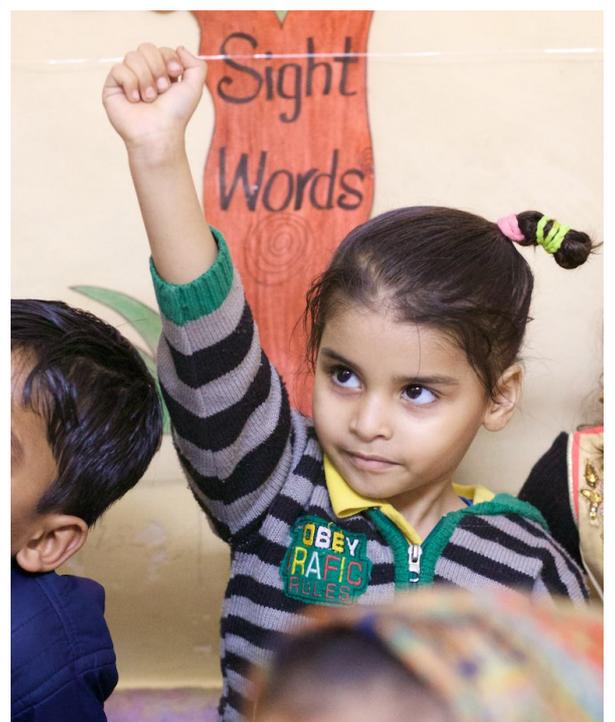


Despite the success of older children who are completing their education and finding better work and better marriages, some parents in Nasirpur slum are still reluctant to prioritise education, and are rarely prepared to let their daughters study beyond 18. Anxiety about unmarried daughters having freedom to move around and meet boys leads to parents marrying their daughters at 18, preventing them from taking further study.



These young siblings come to Saakshar 2 after school, and are keen to learn with the help of teacher Jyoti, in the slum resettlement colony in Maglapuri.

In the slum resettlement colonies served by Saakshar 2, 3, and 4 there is a more positive attitude to learning, and we have waiting lists. Parents say that the government nurseries are poor, and private ones do not teach the values their children love to learn at Saakshar. A number of parents even want Saakshar to become a formal school where their children can learn full time! They speak about how much they appreciate the depth of learning and how happy their children are. In the morning pre-school sessions children learn through play, crafts, movement, singing, educational games, experiments and activities. They learn about caring for one another, for themselves and for the planet. Teachers give each child the attention and support they need, however old or young.





Two children look up, inspired by their teacher Karishma. Saakshar teaches the spiritual and social values 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.

Learning in Depth

In recent years we have expected more and more of our teachers, and have increased their modest salaries in line with rising ability and responsibility. We have extended the working day to provide longer afternoon sessions for secondary age children, and our schoolrooms are now open until 5pm each day. Our dedicated teachers are from humble backgrounds and are trusted by our families, but we have also been able to recruit young women who have degree level qualifications, which enables them to tutor older students and to persuade parents that girls can do well in education. Every month our team comes together for a training day, to ensure consistent good practice and to extend the curriculum with new approaches. Training teachers like this is really valuable in itself as it gives skills and qualifications to local young women, who can use





Above - What will the future hold for these girls at Saakshar 1? Will they be able to complete their schooling? Will their parents let them study in the evenings, or fill their time with paid work and household chores?

Below - The children at Saakshar 1 are the most needy, and many have chaotic home lives without routine. While children at the three other Saakshar's bring tiny packed lunches, at Saakshar 1 we provide a healthy meal for all the children. On one day when I visited it was special food - samosas and daal, and this boy is helping his little brother. Two older girls would not eat them, but wanted to take them home to share with their families. Samosas cost Rs10 (about 11 pence).





Above - Saakshar teachers:
Sonia, Chanchal, Bhavna, Rachna, Ghazala,
Preeti Jha (Saakshar Coordinator),
Sandhya, Jyoti, Karishma and Babita



Left - children queue up at Saakshar 3, taking turns to wash their hands before eating lunch.

this experience throughout their lives. Each year one or two will leave, taking better paid jobs, or to get married, but they take with them a deep commitment to education and to the valuing of girls.

This year we will say goodbye to Ghazala, who is to be married in the summer and will move to her husband's family home outside Delhi. We wish her every happiness in her marriage and her future life and are enormously grateful for her devoted work over the last five years.



Children enjoying lunch. The morning I visited there were over 50 preschool children learning at Saakshar 3 in Matiyala.

Fundraising

Once again, a very big **“Thank You”** to all of you who have supported the children of Saakshar during the last year. Through your generosity we have raised all the money which Saakshar needed to operate in 2018, and we have also received a generous gift which enabled us to buy a piece of land next to Nasirpur slum, on which to build our own Saakshar school building. We are in the process of selecting builders and hope to start the construction of a small building (100 square yards) but with four floors, in coming months. This will also require funding - much of it from Indian donors too - so I will appeal about this when we are more sure of the budget we require.

We are so grateful to all who have responded to the effectiveness of this dedicated charity by raising money for us and donating generously. Thank you for all your donations, 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 2019 if you can.



The Saakshar School Appeal website has been updated with a new giving page, where regular and one-off donations can easily be made with gift aid reclaimed,

through the Charities Aid Foundation. In addition, there is the chance to give when you shop online through **Give as you Live** and a number of us now make donations this way.

Here in the UK Ralph has continued to promote the work of Saakshar, especially through school assemblies and visits. We have especially appreciated the support of St Peter's Primary School, who have fundraised for Saakshar, and made a special film to show to Saakshar's older children last spring, complete with Hindi voiceover. This year, Saakshar children and teachers are working on their own film to showcase their work for children to watch here, which is nearly ready.



Exercise and movement is vital for healthy bodies and minds at Saakshar 2 in Manglapuri.

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 Delhi in 2002 by Asha Kumar and her daughter Lipika in memory of her husband. It is run with dedication and absolute transparency, for the benefit of the children it serves.

Saakshar helps poor children in Delhi to attend and complete school. It serves families in Nasirpur slum near Palam in SW Delhi (Saakshar 1), and three slum resettlement colonies nearby in Manglapuri (Saakshar 2 and 4) and Matiyala (Saakshar 3).



Nidha and Neeha (behind her) moved to Nasirpur slum from a village in Utter Pradesh last year and had no school place for five months. Saakshar has enabled them to keep on learning and will help them return to school in Y4/Y5 in April.



On the morning of my visit there was no electricity at Saakshar 4, in Manglapuri, and the teachers had to find innovative activities which did not require much light.

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 small, 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 pay for my own visit to Saakshar each year, to meet and interview children, teachers and families, and to provide encouragement to Saakshar's dedicated team.

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. It brings me great joy to see children now completing their education at 18, and taking up better jobs in offices, or shops, as drivers and as valued employees. Those who marry are able to demand more of a prospective spouse and are no longer forced to accept someone without education and income.

Girls face many challenges

Girls suffer many adverse consequences due to a lack of literacy, numeracy and formal qualifications in India. 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. Often, a girl at secondary school in our Nasirpur community will be expected to rise early and do the household chores before school, and again afterwards, to go cleaning in



Girls in Nasirpur slum are responsible for cleaning, washing clothes, washing up and food preparation.



A family living on the edge of Nasirpur slum.

the evening with her mother, then make dinner for the family and clear up. She may have no opportunity to study until 10pm. While moving about she will also be subject to the sexual intimidation and abuse called 'Eve teasing' in India, which creates anxiety and stress. When drunken violence breaks out in the community, women and girls lock themselves indoors. Girls also struggle with poor sanitation, have little freedom or privacy, and their health, education and happiness are often the lowest priority in the use of the family's finances. Saakshar teachers provide support for these girls. They try to persuade parents to let them come to study in the afternoons at the safe space Saakshar provides, and to value them for their learning.

Yet these young women are highly able, resilient, and resourceful. While some men in the community 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. If a girl is illiterate she will be married early to an uneducated boy, and her in-laws may treat her harshly for her ignorance. Unable to read and without confidence with numbers, life can be a misery of dependence and humiliation. 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. Today most of our students aim to complete their studies at 18, and can hope for marriage to a more educated boy, and for some, the possibility of studying more, usually by correspondence. Today most families in the communities we serve treat their daughters well, although they fear for their safety and expect them to be modest and obedient. Many still see boys as a priority.



Older children enjoy extra lessons to enrich and strengthen their learning at Saakshar 3 in Matiyala.



Vinita is a hard working student at Saakshar 1 - thankfully she has a family who value the education of their daughters, and she has the good example of her older cousin Rupa to follow.

Girls are caught between the pressures and dreams 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. They learn through stories, play, crafts, science experiments, songs and movement, with clear teaching about values, hygiene and nutrition. Trips to broaden the children's experience, to 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, and this has been helped by a generous grant from Nicholas and Mary Gray for IT equipment in each schoolroom.



Divanshi, age 16, has a disabled and epileptic brother, who she helps care for. Her father sells cheap jewellery at the roadside, but her mother is literate and is able to give tuition classes for other children. Divanshi studies hard at school and at Saakshar 3 in Matiyala, and hopes one day to be a teacher herself.

At the end of their pre-school year children are signed up by Saakshar teachers for local mainstream schools. Once at school they can come to study at Saakshar each afternoon, enabling them to catch up and keep up, to talk about the difficulties they face with understanding teachers. Saakshar also provides creche facilities for younger siblings, health checks, primary health care and nutrition support, and sometimes literacy classes for mothers too. Having built a close relationship and deep trust with families in these struggling communities, we try to respond flexibly to the changing needs of the children we serve.

As children reach the end of '12th class' (age 18) school studies, Saakshar provides vocational guidance. Seeing their children complete their education and find training and work afterwards is a powerful catalyst for change in these poor communities.

Ten Years Later

These pictures and stories show how life is being changed for the children we serve.



Rupa in 2009



Rupa in 2019



Aarti in 2009



Aarti at home in 2019, with her brother and cousin.



Sonia in 2009



Sonia in 2019 with her baby daughter Avanshika.



Anita in 2009



Anita in 2019

Each of these young women grew up in or next to Nasirpur slum and completed their '12th class' education at 18 with consistent help from Saakshar. I have got to know each of them and their families, and have interviewed and photographed them every year for a decade.

Rupa was sponsored to train as a nursery teacher and passed her two year course with high marks. She has found it hard to get a teaching job, but is happily working in an office, where she was quickly promoted to the reception desk due to her English skills and intelligence, and is well paid. **Aarti** will complete a BA by correspondence in April. As her father works little she has the responsibility of working as a cleaner with her mother, but also learns design and Photoshop in a local office when she can, and they really want to train and employ her. A marriage proposed for her has been rejected because she is so well qualified, and the search is on for an educated partner. Moving out of her home, a room in the slum, will be a big change in lifestyle. **Sonia** always had to work as a cleaner throughout her secondary schooling, and was married at 18, but to a capable man who drives for Uber. After losing her first pregnancy, she recently gave birth to a beautiful daughter. She no longer lives in a slum. **Anita**, age 22, also always struggled to be allowed time to study, and had to carry a lot of domestic responsibility, but she is studying for a degree by correspondence and this year she is to be married to a boy with a good driving job. She will move to his family's flat in nearby Dwarka. We are very proud of all that they and many others have achieved.

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

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 Chanchal story telling with children and a fantastic bird costume at Saakshar 1

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

Ralph Williamson, March 2019

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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