



14th August 2023

Dear friends and supporters,

We hope this letter finds you well, as ever.

Post pandemic, children and staff have been continuing to settle back into the old routine of schooling. Enrolments had grown back to the level of 453 children and staffing was not proving too much of a problem. Joanna was in Edinburgh up through Christmas due to family commitments, and the autumn term from our last update letter in August 2022 ran fairly uneventfully.

In December 2022 students and staff started to prepare for our best school performance yet. The programme consisted of dramatic sections (scripts written by Gaurav and one of our senior teachers) interspersed with music and dance performances all reflecting the chosen theme. Dance and drama sections were brought together via a duo of narrators who explained the programme and brought out key messages. The narrators were one student in class 11, Richa (aged 16), and another student Mahi in class 8 (aged 13). These two girls did an amazing job, speaking confidently and clearly to an enormous audience – approximately 1,200 family and community members.

The theme of the programme was a 'social justice' taking a historical perspective. All of the dramatic sections showed how life and society worked in one rural village from pre-colonial times through to current times. The first dramatic section was set in our village called 'Sanskarpur' meaning roughly a place of values, showing how villages used to be run on communitarian bases. The second dramatic section was set in our village now named 'Angrezpur' or 'English village', set in Colonial times, showing how British administrators changed things through sucking the wealth out of communities and municipal services through taxing communities, leaving little to nothing to spend on services like health and education (that had been taken care of through municipal funds before the British came along). This undermining of the way things used to be run led to undermining of society. The third dramatic

section was 'Azadpur' or 'Free Village' in which independence was gained and celebrated, with dreams of a better India. The final dramatic part was set in 'Gulampur' or 'Slave village' which showed how the promise of independence was not capitalised on, for example through continuing with systems and societal norms that were foreign and not Indian, leading to the confusion in the culture and language that continues today. Between these dramatic sections were different dance performances showing historical scenes, scenes from the Bhagwat Gita, and other aspects of more modern times. There was also an amazing yoga demonstration and a Taekwondo demonstration which was truly impressive.

The performance, which took place on 29th January 2023, was the highlight of the year. The students practiced relentlessly, perfecting their performances. The backdrop and props were prepared by students and staff, and really set the performance off beautifully. The programme made a big impact in the area, blending a serious message, which did manage to end on a hopeful note, with great performances from the girls. Practicing for the performance brought girls together in teams led by a teacher (one teacher was responsible for helping the students prepare each section), working together in a way that they do not usually get to do. These 'teams' were composed of mixed age groups at times, and girls guided and helped each other, with older girls often coaching younger ones. The performance was a great achievement at the end of a hugely educational process of preparation. We are building up now to making our next major school event a science fair which might take place towards the end of 2024.

Otherwise, this school year (April 2023 – March 2024) has started well, and we now have 452 students (there have been a number of new schools started in the area so there has been some movement particularly for those who live closer to these schools). We have completed another project at the school: roofing/covering over of one courtyard space so that it can be used in the very hot half of the year. It entailed building a roof structure, raised up over the tops of the classroom blocks it rests on, to allow airflow, covering 250 square metres or 2,500 square feet. This will allow this area to be much better utilised for the entire school year, rather than just during the cooler half of the year.

Staffing is managed, as ever, by the efforts of Gaurav and his Principal who works with him, but it is never easy attracting good staff, particularly for the senior secondary school level. One of our very important teachers to leave after getting married and moving away from the area, is Preeti, our Taekwondo teacher. However, we have been lucky enough to get a teacher on staff who is possibly even better, and came with the added bonus of knowing how to handle snakes! In summer some rather long and dangerous snakes come out of hibernation and cause quite a bit of fear but our fearless new teacher knows how to trap them humanely, holding the head, so that they can be let loose in farmland away from people. I made a short video showing one of these incidents with a black cobra and our Taekwondo teacher, as practice for creating a video

from the school function, and it can be accessed by clicking this link: [\(1\) Black cobra in India - YouTube](#)

More generally, we struggle on with the usual staffing issues when teachers or admin staff have to leave, but exam results continue to be extremely encouraging (on the class 10 and class 12 Board Examinations). We always have some girls who really find the material difficult, especially with the highly demanding science curriculum of the senior level, but others have done spectacularly well, and when we go with them to the Board Examination Centres, the difference in demeanour and behaviour of our students is clear to all – and often commented on. All in all, the school and the community has passed another good year and we thank you sincerely for your continuing support! We have been slowly recovering from the blow dealt by the pandemic shutdowns and people's ways of coping with it.

I am currently working on editing together a video of the school performance that we plan to upload to Youtube with password protection so that only school supporters can view it. I will email again when I have managed to do this. We will also be working on updates to the site, www.freeschoolindia.net.

Best wishes to you all,

Joanna, Gaurav, Rosemary, and everyone at the school in Chakarsi.