



Benares School Fund Foundation

THE NETHERLANDS

INTRODUCTION

Chairwoman Alet Meurs visited our projects in Varanasi last November. Due to circumstances, she was alone this year. Conny and Marien van Staalén were supposed to accompany her, but this was not possible due to their grandson's serious illness.

Alet wrote the following when she had just arrived:

'It is wonderful to be back in Varanasi. The temperature is pleasant, the streets are dusty but clean. The street scene is an unchanged mix of people, cyclists, carts loaded with fruit and vegetables, scooters, rickshaws and cars, with cows and dogs in between. Lots of honking, as always. In front of the hotel, the flute player continues to play his wooden flutes, dogs bark, and singing can be heard from Assi Ghat.

The Assi smells a little less, but the mountain of rubbish on the banks is huge. The huts along the banks have now been replaced by small stone houses.'

It was hard work for Alet, but she managed to visit everyone, talk to them at length, and still have time to relax: eating with others and catching up.

This newsletter is a reflection of her visit, supplemented with news about our projects throughout the year.

In order to make the foundation future-proof, the board had previously decided to spread knowledge, contacts and responsibilities across more board members. So this year we have redistributed the tasks within our board: Maurien Wetselaar has become the contact person for Asha Deep School, Marien van Staalén for the Sarnath project, and Moniek de Zwaan for Vatsalya School in Jaipur. They each contribute to this newsletter.

Ian ter Haar is our new treasurer. Unfortunately, Jantine Unger and Nienke de Graaf have had to step down due to their busy schedules. <

SCHOOL MEALS

Poverty means hunger. Many of our students only get one meal a day. That is why school lunches are so important. And what do we see? They also contribute to higher attendance, which is a nice bonus.



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JEEVAN SCHOOL

- > up to and including class 8
- > 200 students + 12 students further education
- > contribution BSF 50% of the budget of €30,000
- > manager: Sheelu Kujur
- > www.jeevansiksha.org

Jeevan is still our problem child: the school is largely dependent on our contribution. There is no prospect of change in this situation for the time being.

This makes it all the more remarkable how well the school is doing. There are 200 students (60% girls) and 15 teachers. The salaries of the new, young teachers (4,000/5,000 rupees per month / €45 - €55) are necessarily a lot lower than those of the older teachers (14,000/15,000 rupees / €155 - €170); there are even six teachers, sometimes students, who volunteer their help. Salaries account for 41% of the budget. Despite the adjustments, this is still a substantial percentage.



Manager Sheelu is unable to pay the teachers every month. This is a significant problem. Only four of the old teachers remained; the others left the school because of these irregular payments. It is remarkable that Sheelu is able to recruit enough new teachers.

With the help of board chair Smriti, who is a teacher herself, Sheelu has started teacher training (continuing education). The plan is to focus the teacher training courses primarily on learning methods (with practical exercises) and pedagogical issues (how to interact with pupils).



Teachertraining

A man from a wealthy family, with mental health issues, teaches mathematics for one hour a day. He is very good at explaining things and the students' maths results are skyrocketing.

For the first time, a syllabus is being used for the entire year. It appears that there are clear guidelines from the government about what material should be taught and when.

The average attendance is 75%, which is very good for India, and the average exam result is 80% (an 8), which is also remarkably high, given the background of the students.



The nursery school is housed elsewhere, half covered. Thirty-nine children learn the basics of reading and writing here, they are allowed to play to their hearts' content and are given food. Sheelu built a new roof himself.

The primary school classrooms look well cared for, some with tables, others with mats on the floor. There is a small computer room with eight computers and laptops. Colourful and cheerful posters hang on the walls in every classroom.

Three times a week, a music teacher comes to give free music lessons, and on Sundays there is karate. There is a strong focus on creative subjects. This is clearly evident in the many photos Sheelu sends us.



Sheelu communicates with us frequently. One of his WhatsApp messages was a pleasant surprise: students and teachers from BHU (Benares Hindu University) came to give information to the older girls and handed out free sanitary pads.

The school fees are 105-200 rupees per month, but they are not compulsory. This brings in 7000-8000 rupees per month for the school, €80 - €90. It is a small amount, but every little helps. It is noticeable that there is little money to spend; all the basics are there, but it looks sparse.

New this year, thanks to extra donations, is the school lunch: a hot meal on Mondays and Saturdays, snacks and fruit the rest of the week.

Jeevan offers education up to class 8. After that, the students continue elsewhere. Only a small number continue. This year there are twelve students.



Math market

The nursery school has about six children from the 'camp' (the nearby slum), the school's original target group. There are no longer any students from that neighbourhood in the primary school. They are cared for elsewhere.

Alet experienced the annual maths market: using play money, the children buy fruit and vegetables, school supplies, clothes and trinkets at stalls scattered around the school grounds. The aim is to test or improve their maths skills. Whether it helps is something we still need to ask ☺. In any case, the children have a lot of fun!

There are two hot topics: the registration of the school and the FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act); both still unresolved. Sheelu indicates that all steps in the registration process have been completed.

A major source of concern is the continuity of the lease on the school building. The landowner does not want to give Sheelu a long-term contract. A long-term contract is a prerequisite for getting the school registered. Incidentally, the rent is very high, €7,000 per year, which puts a heavy strain on the budget. Sheelu has also submitted the FCRA application, which consists of many steps. Without FCRA, you cannot receive money from abroad. There will now be a screening from the region, focused on the functioning of Sheelu, who submitted the application. According to Sheelu, this is the final step.

We are not very hopeful: a number of our schools are awaiting registration and the FCRA is difficult to obtain or maintain. The Indian government is not cooperating.

Registration and FCRA are often prerequisites for foreign sponsors to donate. Hence Jeevan's difficult financial position.

There is still a desire to start an English medium school with paying students on the piece of land once purchased in Sarnath, in order to partially cover Jeevan's costs. A distant dream...

In one of his reports, Sheelu writes: "I know that I am going into debt every month; some of my friends say that I have gone mad, but I know what I am doing."

What drives him?

Sheelu comes from a village, he was the only one who continued his education, and he received a lot of support from Father Frans Baartmans. Just as he had the opportunity to develop himself further and just as the support of someone like Frans proved indispensable in this, he also wants to support these children and give them opportunities to get ahead. <

INTERVIEW PRATHIBA TEACHER



Jolanda, Alet's friend, spoke to Prathiba (centre) at Jeevan

Prathiba: "I obtained my teaching degree in 2010 and have been teaching at Delhi Public School ever since. Teaching makes me happy!"

Why did you choose Jeevan?

Prathiba: "Jeevan is a school for the poorest children, from families who cannot afford education. I want to help them and prepare them for high school (years 9 and 10) and college (junior college is years 11 and 12). The school feels like a family, with lots of good contact between the children and teachers."

Do you have a special way of teaching?

Prathiba: "I like to transfer knowledge in a practical way, so I work with flashcards and practise English grammar with the children a lot. I speak to them in English during all lessons. This practical approach fits in well with Jeevan's educational philosophy."

Do you enjoy working at Jeevan?

Prathiba: "I really enjoy the work. The children can gain hope for their future, and I am happy to contribute to that."





VATSALYA SCHOOL

- > up to and including class 10
- > 103 students
- > contribution BSF 10% of the budget of €75,000
- > manager: Kartikey Gupta
- > www.vatsalya.org

The NGO Vatsalya occupies a special place within the projects of the Benares School Fund Foundation.

Not only because of its location in Jaipur, but also because it is a well-oiled organisation with various departments and partly its own income. The part that BSF subsidises is the school, which provides education to just over a hundred pupils up to class 10. Three quarters of the students live below the poverty line. School lunches are essential; all students also receive fruit and milk. Sixteen children also receive food supplements and extra study hours. This is an expensive part of the school.

Another important part of Vatsalya is Anoothi, a successful company that sells fabrics printed by poor village women (block printing) as sheets, bedspreads, pillowcases and clothing. It provides a large group of women with their own income.



Online maths lessons from Australia

Vatsalya is strongly focused on developing the children as broadly as possible. In addition to regular education, vocational training is part of the objective and mission, and there is a strong focus on personal growth.

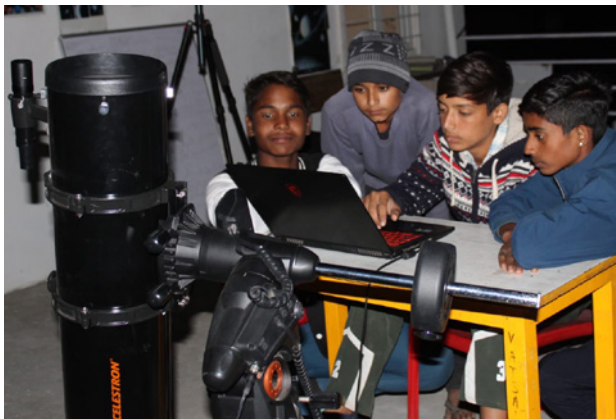
There is a lot of sport. There is a beautiful library and computer room. But the great pride of the current director Kartikey (son of the founders) is the Science Centre, where subjects such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) and astronomy are taught. A space centre with large telescopes has been set up on the roof.

A small selection of the extracurricular activities:

- Working in the bakery (baking pizzas!), organic farming, classical dance (kathak), block printing, sewing, computer education, cricket and fun STEM projects.
- Physical activities: Karate and basketball training programmes have been added to promote fitness and discipline.
- Involvement with Anoothi: The children are involved with Anoothi and learn various forms of textile art from well-trained artisans.
- Astronomy programme: The school has an independent astronomy project that benefits the school, neighbouring schools and the wider community. Every two months, people from the surrounding area come to look at the stars and learn about celestial bodies and astronomy. These sessions are very popular!



- Science Centre: The Science Centre is used almost daily for practical training that improves understanding of scientific concepts.
- Star System: A monthly star system rewards students for behaviour, attitude and honesty.



These students are working completely independently, using computers and special software to align and focus the telescope and connect the camera to it. They are children of day labourers from the surrounding area. They are so enthusiastic and motivated that they come to the campus themselves in the dark. Manager Kartikey: "My help wasn't needed at all! Some of them will soon be able to train others and have a great career."

Vatsalya continues to adapt and improve based on the changing needs of its students. Structured activities, additional learning resources and greater teacher and student involvement through feedback help to create a better learning environment. It is worth mentioning the online maths lessons from Australia. Vatsalya has a large international network and makes good use of it.

Pupils are monitored regularly. In addition to quarterly tests on learning outcomes, monthly feedback sessions are also held, focusing in particular on the personal well-being of the pupils. Average school results vary between 70% and 75%. <



ROHIT, TEACHER

On 15 October 2024, Rohit married Devyani. They have known each other almost their entire lives: they were among the first group of orphans and street children who grew up on the Udayan campus. For a long time, providing shelter was Vatsalya's main activity on the site.

Rohit arrived there - he remembers it clearly - on 27 December 2006, when he was 7 years old. He has always loved sports, earned his black belt thanks to Vatsalya's karate initiative, and won silver in the *National Kickboxing Championship*.

Rohit is now, like many former students, one of Vatsalya's staff members. For a long time, he was only a sports teacher, but since 2017 he has also been teaching English. And he still leads the karate training every Saturday.



This is what he himself says about his childhood and his work for Vatsalya: 'Everything I have learned at Vatsalya has shaped me into who I am today, and I take great pride in passing on this knowledge and experience to the children I teach.'





LITTLE STARS SCHOOL

3

- > up to and including class 12
- > 900 students
- > contribution BSF 33,3% of the budget of €90,000
- > director: Asha Pandey
- > www.littlestarsschool.org
- > Individually sponsored students: 21

Alet has visited Little Stars School several times, where she observed the classes in full swing and spoke with director Asha Pandey during delightful lunches at her dining table.

It remains a lively, well-organised school with almost 900 students and a hostel for 25 girls. The school is running well, there are enough reasonably paid teachers and there is a good new head teacher in the new building.

LSS only has a coaching registration for its upper school (grades 9-12): teaching is allowed, but exams take place at another school, with registration. Since last year, LSS has also been offering these classes the option of CBSE, a fully English-language education. This also had to be linked to another school, this time an English-speaking one, the Pioneer Convent School.

LSS pays the Pioneer Convent School 5,000 rupees per pupil (€55) and the students themselves pay a similar amount plus 1,500 rupees in examination fees. Despite this substantial personal contribution and the strict requirement of 75% attend-



ance, 52 students are taking advantage of this opportunity. This indicates that parents are more willing and able than in the past to invest in their children's education. Although their English language skills are limited, their teachers say that the pupils understand the material well. They are proud to be following this course and work hard.

In further studies, they benefit from their CBSE; most books are then in English. For this CBSE programme, we received a generous donation from Luzac through the NGO Globewise.

This year, five girls are taking a paramedical course. BSF is contributing to this. We have a special fund for this, from the large bequest we received years ago. The accompanying photo shows three proud girls!



Asha herself works hard to raise funds. As soon as she hears of an opportunity, she goes for it. For example, she has already received two hundred days of school meals from the NGO Smile. This also included a medical check-up and advice from a dietitian on healthy nutrition.





But funds also come to her. Feeding India, for example, has contacted her to offer school meals. School meals make a school attractive; many students come to school without breakfast and do not get lunch from home.

Sponsored students

83 of the poorest students receive school uniforms, books and materials from the school and do not pay school fees. Alet saw them this time; usually secretary Conny meets them and their parents. Asha refers to this group, for convenience but incorrectly, as 'Conny's sponsored children'.

The question of who is admitted to this programme is not up to us; we always leave that to the school itself, which knows the background of each child. BSF has been giving LSS a fixed amount for this group of students for years. Twenty-one of them have their own Dutch sponsor.

Throughout the year, Conny receives many photos of all kinds of celebrations. She is also in regular contact with Asha, including about personal matters. They shared the news of Asha's mother's death and Conny's grandson's serious illness.



Instruction to teachers on smartboards

Volunteer Pierre Satijn, Asha's indispensable helper, continues to take care of much-needed repairs and renovations. For example, the hostel girls got a new kitchen, the water tank was repaired, the computer room was refurbished and the new building has been freshly painted. The work never seems to stop.

Last January, Pierre turned 80; to mark the occasion, he donated three *smartboards* to the school. A wonderful gift! <

INTERVIEW MINU COORDINATOR

Minu: 'I have been working at this school as a coordinator since April 2024. I take care of the daily planning of the lessons, check what the teachers are doing, and work on improving the standard of teaching.'

I come from Little Flower School (a renowned English Medium school in the neighbourhood), and I bring my experiences from that time with me.

I studied economics. In addition to my coordinating tasks, I also teach *social science*, geography and history. Before I worked here, I had already heard good things about LSS.



LSS staff: Asha, Minu, Jyotima, Smita and Malti Ma'am

I knew that the children at LSS come from poor families. I felt that I could put my knowledge to good use at LSS, both for the teachers and the students. But I don't just want to transfer knowledge, I also want to teach the children to express themselves.

I encourage my students to practise their English and to speak English to each other. I start the lesson with a warm-up exercise in which I encourage them to speak aloud in class. In addition to teaching the class, I give the students small assignments to do together.

I am very happy that I made the switch to this school. I enjoy the work and learn a lot from the children myself, about the circumstances in which they live and what they need for their further development. Sometimes I notice that the children are ashamed of being poor. I talk to them about how they can be proud of what they do and what they can do!





ASHA DEEP SCHOOL



- > up to and including class 9
- > 114 students
 - 22 students further education class 10 - 12
- > contribution BSF 11,7% of the budget of €90,000
- > director: Connie Rao
- > www.asha-deep.com

Asha Deep School: a year full of adventure, challenges and successes. It was an exciting year for Asha Deep School and director Connie Rao: starting in a new building, in a village far away from the previous school.

The construction went smoothly, but when the children were already being taught in the new building, there was still a lot to be finished, such as installing solar panels on the roof, cleaning the bricks, installing the last windows and setting up Wi-Fi.

The registration of this school was also difficult. For the higher classes 9-12, Connie found the solution in coaching classes. The students are taught at Asha Deep, but they take their exams at other schools that are registered. This is a common practice in India.



There are now 180 students at Asha Deep School, including 62 new enrolments, mainly in the nursery classes. The latter come from the immediate vicinity of the school. The school is expected to grow to a maximum of 300 students. Connie Rao feels that her school has been well received by the village community. Some parents have had some education themselves, and she notices that these parents encourage their children to go to school.

The new school is beautiful, both inside and out, and feels like a friendly and pleasant place to learn. The classrooms are decorated with drawings and colourful posters, and a lot of hard work is being done to set up a *science lab*.

The children work on the floor with low benches as tables. The classes usually have 20-25 children per class, but during Alet's visit in November, the classes were less full because of the wedding season and the harvest season, when the children help out on the land.

Fashion show

The open indoor space is used for many purposes: for lunch, for exams, for dance and all kinds of activities. The fashion show was one of them. Asha Deep School teaches according to weekly themes: in November, the theme was the different Indian cultures. Every state in India has its own language, food, clothing and traditions.



HOPE FOR LIFE

Eight years ago, Akshay Kumar founded the NGO **Jeevan ki Asha** (Hope for Life). No one cared about the children who slept at the station and begged on the trains. He wanted to give them a better life and a good education. Now he cares for 70 to 80 children between the ages of 6 and 20. Fourteen of them live in his centre, 'Happy Home'.

He takes them to Asha Deep School every day. 'I had known Connie Rao for some time and had seen with my own eyes how she lovingly hugs every child. And the school does more than just provide education; other activities and culture are also given plenty of attention. That's why I sent my children here. He is grateful to Asha Deep for the attention it gives to every student.

BSF pays for these children's school fees and lunch.



The school wants its student to understand and appreciate the diversity of their country. Each class focused on a specific state.

The week ended with a fashion show where pupils showed off different regional clothing and music and said a few words in the different languages. The floor of the courtyard was decorated with dye to represent the Ganges: the buildings, the birds, the animals along the water. The catwalk ran between them. Saris hung down from the top floor as decoration. The show was a fantastic learning tool and a huge success.

There are plans for a new community building with a meeting hall and several smaller rooms for drawing, crafts and sewing lessons. <

INTERVIEW KAUSHAL KUMAR

FORMER STUDENT OF THE SCHOOL, NOW A TEACHER



Kaushal in front of the class

Kaushal : 'I teach class 5, all subjects except English. I also enjoy photography. I have a *Bachelor of Arts* degree and will be starting a *Bachelor of Education* this year.'

Why did you choose this school?

This school is completely different from other schools. Here, in addition to education, children are shown a new path, different behaviour; they learn how to interact with each other. I myself am the best example; this school has completely changed my life. I feel blessed to be a part of it.

How do you develop your profession?

I look for as many new things as possible on the internet and in books. And I experiment with new methods such as games, stories and videos.

How does your teaching fit in with the school's vision?

Just like Asha Deep, I want every poor child, wherever they come from, village or city, who never had a chance, to be able to study. I hope I can give them a good education, show them the right way, and tell them about their rights, so that no one can ever take advantage of the poor.

Do you consult with colleagues?

Yes, I get help from all my colleagues, and their years of experience inspire me. We consult in a friendly atmosphere; it feels like a family at Asha Deep.

Which subject do you like the least?

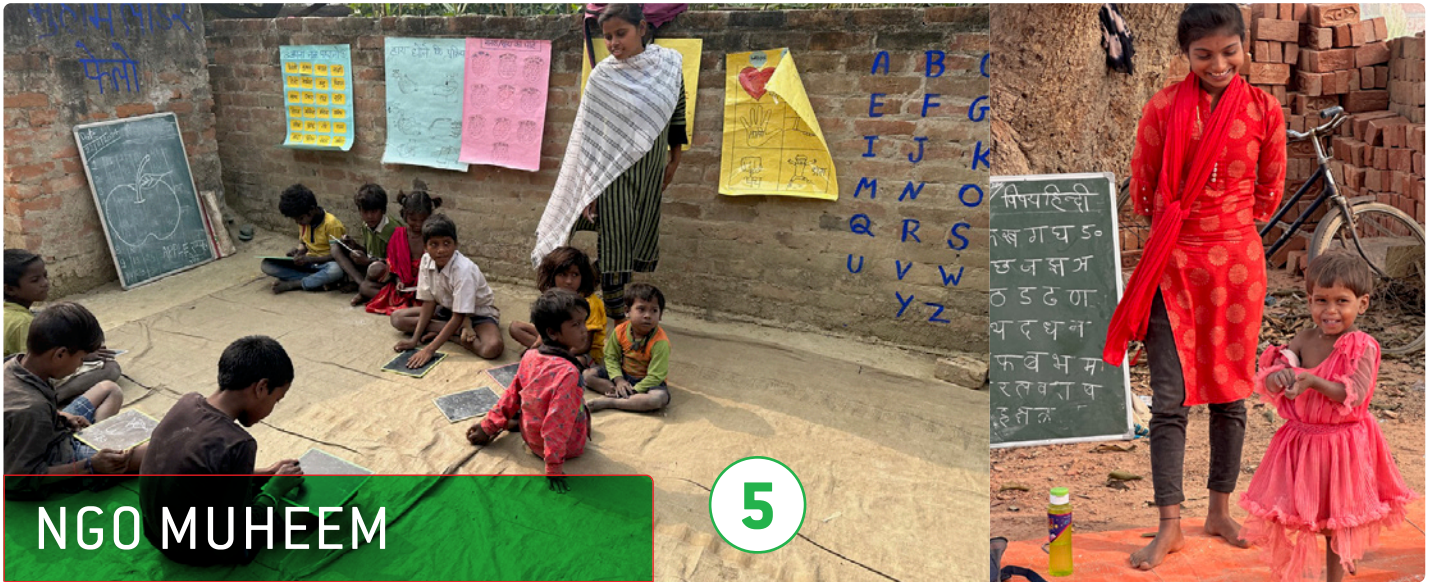
I like the holidays the least, because I get bored. I know everyone likes holidays, but I miss the children, the staff and the teachers. We are one big family and I enjoy spending time with them.

What makes you a teacher?

I am good at explaining things. I try to help every weak student to improve. As a teacher, you have to be able to show love and emotion, help and understand others, and always be positive. And of course, you have to be able to keep order!

PS Three former students teach at Asha Deep. Connie Rao writes: I love having these younger teachers at our school; they bring a lot of energy and new ideas. Because they grew up in poverty themselves, they understand their students' problems well; and they also understand our educational philosophy.





5

NGO MUHEEM

- > preparatory nursery classes
- > 150 students
- > contribution BSF 50% of the budget of €9,000
- > director: Swati Singh
- > www.muheem.org

Under the leadership of the highly motivated, combative and capable Swati Singh, the NGO Muheem, founded by her and her husband Ramji, is developing steadily.

The same goes for the five schools supported by BSF, the pathshalas. These represent much more than just education: they promote leadership development, strengthen the community and improve the disadvantaged position of the untouchables.

Swati does this by selecting young women from the community itself and, with the help of the non-profit organisation *Teach for India* (teachforindia.org), training them to become teachers for the schools or staff members of Muheem. Muheem has also been selected by *Teach for India* to help professionalise the organisation. A programme manager has been stationed at Muheem for a year.



In February 2024, we donated a laptop and printer. A young team member is now learning how to use them to coordinate projects and for teaching.

Muheem has also started a media training programme where young women are trained to become journalists in their own region. The trained women are deployed in their own communities, also to tackle social problems such as child labour and child marriages. The awareness campaigns that Muheem uses for



this purpose are aimed at keeping children in school longer. Swati thinks carefully about the best possible way to help these communities, these schools and the children. Nothing is 'top down', everything is 'bottom up'.

The five pathshala schools are located in Dalit villages that have themselves indicated that they want education. They are not being imposed on them.

The pathshalas are very basic: the first principles of arithmetic, reading and writing are taught in a playful manner, nothing more. This approach is intended to prepare the children for the nearby government school.

More play materials are needed for playful learning. Currently, there are only hula hoops, for reciting the alphabet or learning to count. Alet left some extra money behind.

In the village of Tendui, Muheem runs a library that benefits around 80 children. An Indian NGO provides staff training in 'community library practices'.

The annual 'Muskan Mela' at the end of the school year, a small educational festival where the children perform plays, among other things, is a great incentive for the children and an extra opportunity to reach the parents. Not unimportantly, this year teachers from the government school and village representatives were also present. Muheem is gaining ground!

The beautiful new school built last year by Swati's father for the wealthier people in the area - a revenue model for Muheem - is unfortunately not yet in use. However, after-school activities and extra coaching for the pathshala children are already taking place.

Last year, Swati Singh was nominated for the *Amazing India Award 2024* in the category 'Girl Child and Women's Rights Empowerment'. That says everything about her strength and determination. <





ASHRAY SCHOOL

- > up to and including class 7
- > 80 students
- > contribution BSF 39% of the schoolbudget of €27,000
- > manager: Rakesh Saraogi
- > www.ashray.org

At Ashray, Alet visited the school one morning when performances had been prepared. Dance, theatre, tabla, the usual stuff, but fun and sweet as always. It is moving to see how much the children enjoy it themselves.

There were about forty children, mostly younger ones. When asked about the older students, it turned out that twelve had completed class 8 last year and had gone on to further education. Because the new school building cannot be used due to construction work, all teaching takes place in the small building in Nagwa.

This is worrying: the school building looks bad inside, the walls are peeling and crumbling, the kitchenette is very simple and dirty. And only a limited number of students can fit in the building.



There are 95 children enrolled, but Alet counted only 60 on a normal school day during an unannounced visit. The older children, who stay until 2 p.m., receive a hot lunch prepared by one of the teachers. That is a real asset!

Alet has asked manager Rakesh Saraogi to better comply with the conditions that have been in our agreement for many years: clear insight into expenses, salaries, lunch. And *attendance*, which is an essential detail for us.

The site of the new school is still one big construction site with only pillars standing. Nothing remains of the garden that served as a playground. Three classrooms are now being added, as well as a canopy for lunch. According to Rakesh's schedule, this phase will be completed in April 2025, when the school can reopen for the older classes.

After that, he has the ambition to build another eight classrooms so that there will soon be a 12-classroom school. How realistic are these plans? We are not optimistic. But Rakesh is! He announced that he has several new donors, including *Art of Living*, a centre for meditation. We are pleased to hear this; he seems to be able to stand on his own two feet. And he will have to.



Rakesh at the construction site

Two years ago, we decided to end our support for Ashray as of April 2026. We were not happy with the very limited communication, the quality of education, and the developments surrounding the new school building on the Ganges. We believe Rakesh is capable of continuing the school on his own. BSF has given the school a solid foundation with its long-term support.

Rakesh accepted our decision and, given his new donors, responded well and appropriately. No hard feelings on his part.



We hope that Rakesh will realise his dreams and wish him every success. Rakesh assures us that we will continue to be welcome at Ashray after the 2025-2026 school year. <





DIVYA JYOTI

centre for disabled people

We have been receiving subsidies for this wonderful project from the 'Roman Catholic Orphanage' in Bergen op Zoom for many years. Leader Sheela and manager Nathan are still working tirelessly for this forgotten group. There are about fifteen young people involved, which is enough for our sponsor and more than worth supporting. And we are happy to pass on his money.



Every year, on International Day of Persons with Disabilities (3 December), Divya Jyoti puts on a beautiful performance, assisted by students from our Jeevan School. They were lucky this year: there was to be a wedding party in the evening at the green location, and the garden was already beautifully decorated. Divya Jyoti was allowed to use it. It was a wonderful party. <



SARNATH PROJECT



- > 22 girls, class 9 and 10, in hostel
- + 4 girls follow-up study in nursing
- > contribution BSF 100% of the budget of €15,000
- > project coordinator: sister Elsamma

2024 was the first year that BSF took charge of this project for Dalit girls in Sarnath. It was also a special year, with changes and adjustments that we are happy with.

The project is led by Indian sisters from the ICM congregation. At its heart is a hostel in the city of Sarnath, a sacred Buddhist site ten kilometres from Varanasi. The leadership rotates, and in April, Sister Tarcilla said goodbye. She was succeeded by Sister Elsamma, who had set up the project herself in 2011 and therefore knows it through and through.

The modern convent building with its beautiful garden is located directly opposite the largest Buddhist temple in Sarnath and is an oasis of peace in the midst of the hustle and bustle of modern India.



Elsamma has done social work in Bihar and in the state where Varanasi and Sarnath are located, Uttar Pradesh, the two most backward states in India. She has come to know the appalling living conditions of the Musahar community, casteless Dalits who are called 'mouse eaters' or 'rat catchers'.

Elsamma developed a project aimed at girls from this community. It was and is her firm belief that two things are needed to improve the fate of these children: education and economic independence.

In Elsamma's concept, 25 motivated girls attend classes 9 and 10 from a hostel, where they receive extra instruction and learn to study efficiently and with concentration. They take these skills with them when they finish secondary school outside the hostel and possibly follow vocational training afterwards. Together with the Dutch foundation Focus on Education, she was able to set up her project in Sarnath in 2011 - and the rest is history.

Upon her return, Elsamma adjusted the girls' daily schedule to align with the original objective and tightened it up somewhat. The day begins at five o'clock in the morning (!) with karate training. After breakfast, the girls go to school, where they attend classes 9 and 10. In the afternoon, they receive extra lessons in English and computer skills, followed by coaching and homework assistance in the evening.

In addition to school subjects, the girls are also offered other knowledge at the hostel. 'Social science' is comparable to our social studies subject. In 'life skills', the girls are taught to behave less like competitors, to work better together and to care for each other. The NGO Muheem, also supported by BSF, has a similar vision, teaching Musahar children that it is better to talk than to fight when there are differences of opinion. A characteristic of *underprivileged societies* is that children do not learn these skills at home.

Visit by Alet

Our chairperson Alet visited Sarnath in November and wrote: 'There was a parents' meeting on the day of my visit. The families come from villages in Uttar Pradesh, and some parents left at 4 o'clock in the morning to arrive on time. They are all very poor families, with the mothers mostly being housewives and taking care of the cows. I had a conversation with the girls. They enjoy going to school from this hostel. They have ambitions to continue their education after class 12. I hear that some want to become nurses or work for the defence forces.

When I talk to them alone, they ask me all sorts of questions about my family, home, animals and work. I show them photos, and they find it quite remarkable that my eldest daughter, who is 26, is not yet married...'

Alet asked Elsamma what the relationship is within the project between her, as a Christian nun, and the girls, who are almost all Hindu or Muslim, in Sarnath, one of the most important places in Buddhism. Elsamma replied that she wanted to offer this care based on her Christian values, but with respect for everyone's religious background.

Families

Elsamma is deeply involved with the girls' families. She visits them regularly, not only when planned, but also when suddenly needed. This year, Elsamma accompanied Chanda, one of the students, to the funeral of her only brother, and visited Manisha's father in hospital after he lost several fingers in an accident.

The death of an only son or the loss of a father as breadwinner is not only a personal tragedy for these families, but also an economic disaster. It is fantastic that Elsamma is committed to helping them; at the same time, she gets to know the families and their circumstances well. This in turn helps with the selection of new students for the project.



Chanda and her family

Alet was served a delicious meal, based on the remarkable idea that guests from the Netherlands only like Dutch food: fish with chips and boiled vegetables, and a homemade carrot cake for dessert. Enough curry on the other days in Varanasi to make up for that!

Child marriages

One of the objectives of the Sarnath project is to reduce child marriages. Motivated girls are therefore given the opportunity to follow vocational training after secondary school. There are four nurses in training, and we have an external sponsor who already supported the project during the Focus on Education period. It's great that they are continuing!

Elsamma is also looking into less expensive training programmes that offer job guarantees. Dance teacher and music teacher are two professions that are in high demand.



Ankita, third-year nursing student

When BSF took over the Sarnath project from Focus on Education last year, we committed ourselves to ensuring that it could continue for at least another seven years. Focus on Education gave us the money to do this. But the project is too good not to explore how we can ensure that it still has a future in seven years' time. <





ASTHA SCHOOL

Management: Soma Banerjee and Babulal Maurya

For two years now, we have been supporting the small Astha School outside the city, forty minutes by rickshaw, near the Asha Deep School. The explicit intention was to give the school a boost and then withdraw. However, the reality is that schools like this have no means of raising funds, so we remain practically the only sponsor.

The school only receives occasional support in kind (school supplies, meals) and sometimes money from local people and businesses. Babulal still contributes part of his own salary, which he earns at the Kiran organisation for disabled people, to the school.

Soma and Babulal do have the same wishes as other schools: registration, a good school building, an increase in the number of pupils, a hostel. That costs money, so we are asked to help them with that. Nevertheless, we are limiting our support, as we agreed with them in advance: three years, €2,500. Because of their drive and hard work, that could easily be five years.

A major problem for us with these kinds of small projects is that they do not have an FCRA, so they do not have an official bank account, we cannot remit money to them, but have to take it cash with us.



The school currently has 73 students, spread across a nursery class and classes 1 to 5. The school looks austere, but the basics are there: school desks, books and notebooks.



Everyone wears a school uniform, which the parents have to purchase themselves.

Soma runs the school. The seven teachers earn no more than 2,500 to 4,000 rupees per month (€30 to €45). Since last year, three of them have been able to teach English.



Soma is very proud of her project with and for women, most of whom are the students' mothers. She gives them sewing lessons and helps them find work by looking for clients.

The vision is broad: women are helped to earn money themselves; when they work at the school, they can see what their children are doing (the mothers are mostly illiterate); and they can pay the school fees.

Soma is extremely committed to this project, finding clients and motivating the women. She does this free of charge (from the heart, as she says).

Alet spoke to her about working for free; she could also ask the client for a small fee, money that she could use for the school. <

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW 2024

> in euro's

IN

Regular contributors/school sponsors	32,119,37
Other donations	10,490,00
Contributions funds/foundations	38,500,00
Contribution for project Sarnath*	8,455,37
Interest	1,734,55

91,299,29

Added to the earmarked reserve 1 -5,000,00

Added to the earmarked reserve 2 (Sarnath) -8,455,37

TOTAL INCOME 77,843,92

OUT

Little Stars School 30,000,00

General donation	21,500,00
For paramedical course 2 students	2,000,00
For batteries	2,000,00
For renovation / maintenance (earmarked)	3,000,00
For CBSE (earmarked donation)	1,500,00

Asha Deep School 9,800,00

General donation	9,500,00
For library	300,00

Vatsalya School 7,500,00

Ashray School 10,800,00

General donation	10,500,00
For picnic	300,00

Jeevan School 21,200,00

General donation	15,500,00
For school meals (earmarked donation)	2,500,00
For registration	3,000,00
Earmarked donation	200,00

Dalit project Sarnath* 15,000,00

NGO Muheem 5,801,75

General donation	4,500,00
For laptop and printer	856,75
For library	200,00
For play equipment	245,00

Divya Jyoti (earmarked donation) 5,500,00

Astha Foundation 2,500,00

For Sadhana (earmarked donation) 576,20

Expenses foundation 2,335,70

Bank costs	967,55
Newsletter incl. porto	564,63
Website	703,49
Chamber of Commerce	19,95
Representation costs	80,08

111,013,65

Taken from earmarked reserve 1 -10,000,00

Taken from earmarked reserve 2 (Sarnath project) -15,000,00

TOTAL OUT 86,013,65

Result Financial Year 2024 - 8,169,73

This amount has been taken from the general reserves.

Explanation of results

Of this amount, approximately €4,500 was unforeseen and therefore not budgeted for. Furthermore, there were slightly fewer incidental donations in 2023.

BUDGET 2025

> in euro's

IN

Regular contributors/schoolsponsors	32,500,00
Other donations	12,000,00
Contributions funds/foundations	35,000,00
From earmarked reserve 1	13,900,00
From earmarked reserve 2 (Sarnath project)	15,000,00
Interest	1,500,00

TOTAL INCOME 109,900,00

OUT

Little Stars School 30,000,00

General donation	12,000,00
Extra support poorest students (21 of whom individually sponsored)	9,500,00
For paramedical course 2 students	2,000,00
For extra costs CBSE (earmarked donation)	1,500,00
For maintenance (earmarked donations)	3,000,00
For solar panel batteries (earmarked donations)	2,000,00

Asha Deep School 11,000,00

General donation	7,500,00
For grade 9-12	2,000,00
For 13 students Jeevan ki Asha (fee and lunch)	1,000,00
From Merlet College Cuijk	500,00

Vatsalya School 7,500,00

Ashray School 10,500,00

Jeevan School 19,000,00

General donation	15,000,00
For grade 9-12	2,000,00
For school meals (earmarked donation)	1,500,00
From Merlet College Cuijk	500,00

NGO Muheem 4,500,00

Sarnathproject 15,000,00

Other costs 12,400,00

From library fund	400,00
Divya Jyoti disabled care (earmarked donation)	5,500,00
Astha Foundation	2,500,00
Unforeseen	1,500,00
Expenses foundation	2,500,00

TOTAL OUT 109,900,00

Balance per 31-12-2024

Current account: 29,250,56

Saving account 1: 124,715,58, 50,000 of which is fixed reserve and 67,886,49 is earmarked reserve. Saving account 2 (Sarnath project): 90,772,46

As of January 2025, €50,000.00 from both company savings accounts has been deposited in a Rabobank Time Lock Savings Account, which earns higher interest. This will e.g. help cover the sharply increased banking fees.

* Explanation Sarnath project

As of January 1, 2024, Benares School Fund Foundation (BSF) has taken over this project from Focus on Education Foundation (FoE), which ceased to exist. From the money we received from FoE, the project can be continued for about seven years. That money is held separately in a second company savings account.



HOW CAN YOU HELP OUR FOUNDATION?

As a school sponsor

For €23/month (or €275/year) you can provide education, books, a uniform, homework aid and tutoring for one child. If you like, you will receive a photo and progress report of the sponsored student every year. You can find more options for regular support on our website www.benaresschool.nl/en/donations.

As a (permanent) donor

All donations, whether one-off or a fixed amount per year, will benefit the children and their education; it will be spent on extra educational materials, salaries and yearly teacher training.

Tax-deductible donations

Benares Schoolfund Foundation has been classified by the Inland Revenue as an Institution Aiming for General Welfare (Algemeen Nut Beogende Instelling / ANBI). Donations are tax-deductible beyond a certain threshold. Donations by a written agreement with our foundation have no threshold and are fully deductible. See www.belastingdienst.nl under Periodieke giften. The secretariat can provide the necessary papers (license for donation).

New sponsors are kindly requested to give their address to our secretariat (secretary@benaresschool.nl), so we can enter them in our records.

Benares Schoolfund Foundation

Lenaertsstraat 6, 4724 AM Wouw, The Netherlands
T +31 (0)165 301422
secretary@benaresschool.nl

Chamber of Commerce: 20110334

RSIN-nummer: 811977936

Rabobank IBAN: **NL97 RABO 0194 3913 53** BIC RABONL2U

@ benaresschoolfund • www.benaresschool.nl

Benares Schoolfund Foundation is an ANBI foundation



EXPENSES BSF SPREAD OVER THE PROJECTS

Expenditures on fixed projects: 90%

■ Asha Deep School: 8,8%

■ NGO Muheem: 5,2%

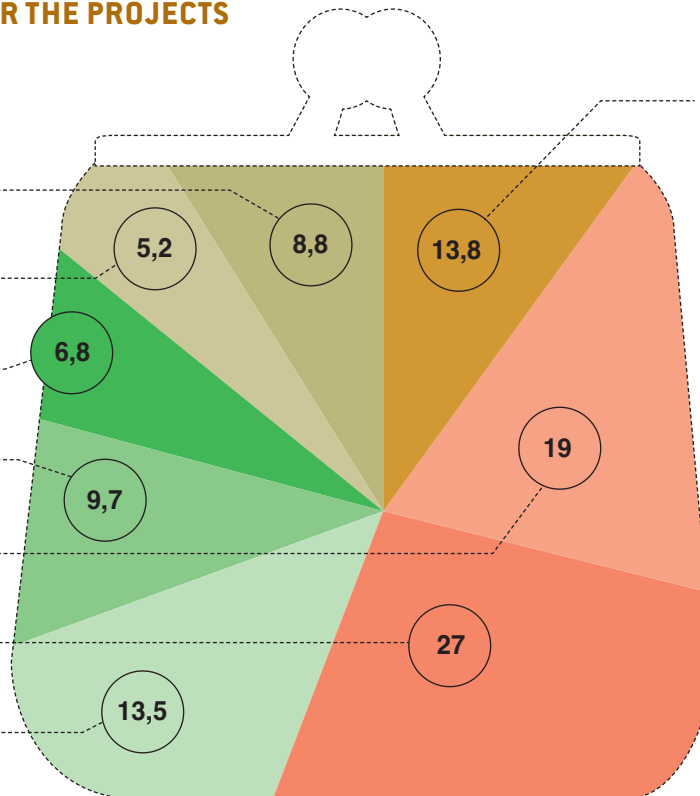
■ Vatsalya School: 6,8%

■ Ashray School: 9,7%

■ Jeevan School: 19%

■ Little Stars School: 27%

■ Sarnath project: 13,5%



Other expenses: 10%

Divya Jyoti: 5%

Astha Foundation: 2,3%

Sadhana: 0,6%

Expenses foundation: 2,1% (overhead)

FOR MANY YEARS, THE BENARES SCHOOL FUND FOUNDATION HAS BEEN ABLE TO COUNT ON A LOYAL GROUP OF REGULAR DONORS, AROUND 80 IN TOTAL. THEY FORM THE BASIS OF THE FOUNDATION'S STABILITY.

WE ARE VERY GRATEFUL TO THEM FOR THIS



Board: Alet Meurs (chairman), Conny van Staalen-van Leeuwen (secretary), Ian ter Haar (treasurer), Jacques Baartmans, Karin van Duijnhoven, Marien van Staalen, Maurien Wetselaar en Moniek de Zwaan

