



BENARES SCHOOL FUND FOUNDATION

THE NETHERLANDS



FOREWORD BY OUR CHAIR

Last November, I traveled once again to our projects in Varanasi, spending a few days there with our treasurer, Ian. This time, as well, we had ample opportunity to visit all the schools. We always receive a warm welcome, and there is plenty of time to see how the schools are doing. Throughout the year, we maintain regular contact with the school directors, and during a visit, we can delve deeper into the details. Again there is much to share about the schools. We are happy to do so in this newsletter.

There are a few experiences I would like to share with you, as they demonstrate how children and young people can grow through education. They realize that they can make a contribution and achieve something.

At Asha Deep School, I visited the art class; the teacher is a former student of the school. It was here that he had learned to express himself creatively, and he now incorporates that into his lessons. He asks the children to find a spot outside and draw what they

experience and see around them. One of them - according to the director, a withdrawn boy who struggles to keep up - had made a beautiful drawing. In this way, he was able to express what he felt and was proud of what he had created.

During a visit to our project in Sarnath, I spoke with the girls at the hostel. They go to school from there. The girls practice karate and experience the power of those movements. After a karate demonstration, all the girls bombarded me with questions and stories. One of them told me how much she wants to continue her education after her schooling so she can get a job. Because of her caste, she feels she has no power at all, but she knows that, with a good education, she can change that herself. Impressive!

At the NGO Muheem, I spoke with another group of young girls. I asked if they could recall a moment they were proud of. A multitude of answers came back. One of them said, "When



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I came in first in a sports competition, and my parents were standing on the sidelines." And another girl said, "When I earned my first money." She had earned it by selling a small bag she had made in sewing class.

Our foundation supports disadvantaged young people. A good education gives them self-confidence and helps them become independent. <

Alet Meurs



New **CBSE** rules require extra attention ___ **3&5**



Asha Deep School starts new construction work ___ **5**

No. 0100001212025
Government of India
Ministry of Home Affairs
Foreigners Division
(FCRA Wing)

Floor, Hall No. 1, Open Gallery Major Dhyana Char

Jeevan School has finally received her FCRA ___ **6**



This year, we are saying goodbye to **Ashray School** ___ **8**

1



LITTLE STARS SCHOOL

- > 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 notes that the school is as lively and bustling as ever, with nearly 900 students. Everything looks good; the school is running like clockwork. Director Asha Pandey has every reason to be satisfied.

The annual report showcases a wonderful blend of countless traditional Indian holidays and typical school matters. Academic results were strong; all of the students in grades 10 and 12 passed their exams! *Attendance* has improved and now stands at 80%. Health check-ups and eye exams were conducted, in addition to counseling and support for the students and training for the teachers. The annual *science exhibition* was a success.

Of course, there was also news about the never-ending construction work. In addition to the renovation of the computer lab, toilets, and kitchen, as well as the necessary painting, two additional classrooms are being built on the roof of the old building. This is desperately needed; the building is bursting at the seams.



The finances looked reasonable. The total expenses for the school and hostel (25 girls), including renovations and repairs, amounted to €105,500. That was covered by nearly €95,000 in donations. That is, of course, not enough. Also, with the passing of a major American sponsor, there are concerns about the future. "God will help," they say in India.

Unfortunately, this year's annual meetings with sponsored students and their parents took place without anyone from our

foundation in attendance. We were missed, wrote Rishi, the daughter of Asha Pandey, who is in charge of this group. And we received many greetings and best wishes.

Every year, Rishi sends the sponsored students' school reports to BSF, which secretary Conny then emails to the Dutch sponsors.



Students at LSS

Shilu's father cleans toilets; her mother died of cancer in 2023. The family lives in a small mud-brick house. Shilu has two sisters and a brother; one sister is married. Shilu passed 10th grade at LSS with a score of 62%, a commendable result for someone with her background. Her younger sister Rina (8th grade) is also a good student. Both want to continue their education, but their father wants them to stay home to help with the housework. After a heated argument, the girls ran away from home and went to the police. Now they live with their younger brother in a plastic shack and work after school. Asha Pandey supports them.

Nitu, Rambabu, Saumya, Vikas, Saloni, and her younger sister Rupali also live in appalling conditions in a slum. But they all go to school. Their mothers are the driving force behind this. The fathers often spend all their money on alcohol and contribute little to the family.

Many older students work after school. For example, Akash Rajbhar sells tea at Assi Ghat and Akash Gaud sells dumplings.

Swadha, Pinki, Mukta, and Netra, girls from the hostel who are now pursuing further education, earn a little pocket money by teaching for a few hours at the school.

Vidhi, also one of the boarding school girls and now a certified nursing assistant and midwife, celebrated her birthday with the elderly women from Nagwa. She had bought blankets for them with her pocket money; it was very cold in Varanasi in January.

Paramedical courses, post-12th-grade programs

In principle, BSF provides education up to and including 12th grade. This limitation is becoming increasingly problematic. Students, particularly girls, are often unable to chart their own future after that and end up sitting at home unemployed. The family remains just as poor; there is still no money for further studies, and there is a lack of assistance in exploring the available options. But not all courses and programs are expensive. The Indian government offers many affordable vocational training programs and higher education options. But you have to know where to find them.

Last November, chairwoman Alet and a small group of highly educated Dutch women exchanged knowledge and experiences



with young Indians who are participating in a leadership training program at the Muheem NGO. This led them to reflect on vocational training. And so, later on, they sat down with Asha Pandey and 25 girls from LSS to discuss with them the opportunities and challenges facing young people after they finish high school.

For several years now, LSS has been selecting three to four high school seniors for a two-year training program for paramedics. It has been a great success. Almost all of the young people find jobs immediately after completing the program.

The program is expensive - a thousand euros per student per year - which none of the families of our students can afford. BSF is sponsoring two students.

The Dutch women's group believes there are more affordable alternatives and would like to have this investigated, but has already set aside funds for a few training programs.

Asha has since investigated options for the highly sought-after beautician training program and has found an affordable course: the costs are limited to Rs 30,000 per student (approx. €300).



Thanks to the Dutch women, three girls - all from a slum - will be able to take this course this year. This ensures they will have a good job. <

CBSE (CENTRAL BOARD OF SECONDARY EDUCATION)

In India, the CBSE offers English-medium education at the highest level. That is what most students want. The UP Board, the standard for the state of Uttar Pradesh, also offers English-medium education. Many consider it just as good, but in the eyes of the students, it has much less prestige.

At LSS, 66 students took the final exam for 10th grade. 14 of them took it under the CBSE board, 52 under the UP board.

LSS is registered as a Hindi-medium school through 8th grade, and as a coaching school for grades 9 through 12. Starting in 9th grade, students are taught at their own LSS, but they take exams at a different, registered school. In principle, this works well - as long as the rules don't change!

However, that is exactly what is happening now: the CBSE rules have become stricter, as Asha noticed this year. She was only allowed to register twenty students and had to disappoint many more. If this means that students have to leave the school after 8th grade to continue their CBSE studies, it will cost a lot of money. Grades 11 and 12, in particular, are expensive: 700 to 750 euros per student per year. Asha, like Connie Rao of Asha Deep School, sees it as her moral duty to help her students financially so they can complete their schooling.

The Dutch Luzac College has donated a generous sum for these programs, but those funds will be quickly depleted with these costs!



THANK YOU, DEAR THEO

Our former board member and dear friend Theo van Pinxteren passed away on February 28, 2025. We wrote about him in the 2024 newsletter, on the occasion of his departure from the board. At the time, we assumed we would be able to benefit from his wise counsel for many years to come. It was not to be.

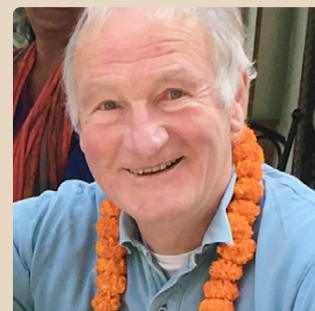
For many years, Theo held a special place on our board: he was deeply committed, yet also critical, speaking with great expertise and drawing on a wealth of experience.

He was an enthusiastic and passionate person, with a warm heart for "his" children in India. They and we miss him dearly.

Last October, he unexpectedly got in touch again! He had included our foundation in his will and left a wonderful bequest. We were overwhelmed, very surprised, deeply grateful, and moved by Theo's generous gesture.

We are considering the best way to use the money; it must be in line with Theo's wishes. He has always been a passionate advocate for more vocational training. That will likely be our approach.

Thank you, thank you, dear Theo; many young people will benefit from your wonderful gift.





ASHA DEEP SCHOOL

2



- > up to and including class 8: 220 students
- > class 9 and 10: 14 students
- > further education class 11 and 12: 17 students
- > contribution BSF 14% of the budget of €90,000
- > director: Connie Rao
- > www.asha-deep.com

Maurien Wetselaar

After just two years, the new school is already a huge success! An increasing number of students from the neighborhood are enrolling, and students from the city have now gotten used to commuting to school from Nagwa every day by bike or bus.

The students come from very poor families who live in simple homes, often with only one room for the entire family.

For most students, going to school is a joy. The school is not only a beautiful building that students are proud of, but also offers a stimulating learning environment. Here, lessons are combined with creative and musical activities.

Director Connie Rao had the ramp along the building specially constructed for the wheelchair of Siddharth sir, the vice principal, but it is also greatly appreciated by the students.



Since 2023, the number of students has doubled. In 2025, 77 new students have joined, mainly young children in kindergarten. Fifteen students also graduated; they left the school after their 10th-grade exams. This growth demands a great deal of effort from both the teachers and the support staff. The enrollment process takes time, as new students are tested and assessed to determine if they are a good fit for ADS's educational program. Parents receive clear information about school hours, uniforms, and school lunches. Communication with parents is excellent; Connie Rao regularly visits them at home.



A special atmosphere

The atmosphere at school is extraordinary. Lessons in the core subjects are interspersed with art and computer classes, and the music lessons add a cheerful touch. The beautiful library is used extensively by the children.

Connie has introduced something new: an extra snack during the first break. A cup of milk and a banana ensure that the students don't go into class hungry.

Arts Program

There is an arts program for students in grades 2 through 10. They can choose from music, tabla (Indian drum), art classes, or dance. The school team is very happy that Manish, a former student, is now the new arts teacher. He is very talented and regularly performs as a fire juggler together with his brother. He also writes and illustrates children's books. Manish is a wonderful asset to Asha Deep School, and he is grateful for the inspiring education he once received there.

One of the highlights of the past year was the visit by Suki Kwon, a Japanese art teacher. With her passion for teaching and her

expertise in the shibori dyeing technique, she taught the students over two days how to create beautiful indigo dye patterns on fabric using wringing, folding, squeezing and pressing.



Science Lab

The science lab has finally been set up, thanks to a generous donation from Germany. The essential materials have been purchased, and the room has been equipped with cabinets and furniture. One of the most exciting additions is a detailed model of a female skeleton, which they have named “Khokhli Rajkumari” (Hollow Princess).

Expansion of the School with a Community Center

In order to become a fully-fledged school with twelve classrooms in the future, Asha Deep needs to expand.

The new building will house five larger classrooms for older students up to and including 12th grade. The addition of a large multipurpose space will enable all kinds of creative and athletic activities. It will also provide a comfortable place for lunch, shielding students and teachers from the rain or the heat of the sun. Finally, the building will serve as a “Community Center,” a gathering place for the village community. Adults will be able to attend sewing classes and evening courses there.

The design has been approved, and construction is now in full swing. The center will be built in the same style as the school, with a playful look featuring red brick.

The BSF board has decided to contribute to the construction of this Community Center. Connie Rao is still working hard to raise the final €15,000. <

CBSE

Connie Rao also noticed that the CBSE’s rules had become stricter. The arrangement of teaching students herself and having them take exams elsewhere, at registered schools, is now only permitted on a very limited basis.

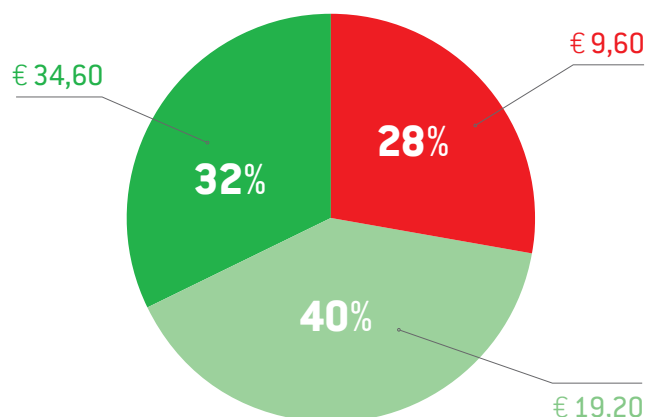
She currently still teaches grades 9 and 10 herself, but she has decided to send her students to other English-medium schools after grade 8 for the time being, just as she did in the past. In addition, following the move, there are still few students in her upper grades; the different subject combinations make it difficult and expensive to provide appropriate education with qualified teachers.

Connie in one of her emails: *‘The only thing that saddens me is that the requirements for large classrooms, first-class laboratories, and the like prevent poor children from receiving a decent education. There really should be a second tier of CBSE schools for them, without those high standards.’* An interesting thought.

With the construction of the Community Center, which will include several larger classrooms, and with a fully equipped science lab, registration up to and including 12th grade is getting closer. Once the school is registered and the upper grades are large enough within a few years, Connie will be able to teach her students up through 12th grade herself.



STUDENTS’ FAMILY WEEK-INCOME





- > up to and including class 8
- > 150 students + 19 students further education
- > contribution BSF 63% of the budget of €30,000
- > director: Sheelu Kujur
- > www.jeevansiksha.org

Alets' impression of the school was very positive. Our treasurer, Ian ter Haar, who spent a few days in Varanasi, was impressed with director Sheelu Kujur: "A fantastic man - wise, friendly, and incredibly passionate."

The school looks neat and tidy. All the children are wearing school uniforms. Sheelu considers that important. The library is well-stocked and organized, and the classrooms are tidy.



Sheelu presents reports and awards

Throughout the year, Sheelu sends us lots of photos of all kinds of activities and holidays. Everything looks equally fun. At last summer's summer games, he set up a small pool for the youngest children; he knows exactly what kids like.

The fact that there were fewer children at school this year was due to the requirement for an ID card, which not every child has yet. This is also because of the requirement for rickshaw drivers to have a driver's license. Many fathers are rickshaw drivers, and many have left for other places, taking their families with them.

From Alet's report: 'Outside, with all the children gathered together, one of the new students came up and asked how she could become a singer. She then sang a song for us in Hindi. She has a touchingly beautiful voice. One would wish for such a girl to be able to further develop her singing and, for example, become a singing teacher.'

Alet spoke with the English teacher. He believes it's important for the children to stand up for themselves and have the courage to speak their minds. He pays close attention to this in the classroom.

The school results were excellent this year; everyone passed their final exams, attendance has improved significantly (85%), and twelve students moved on to another school for further education after eighth grade. A total of nineteen students are pursuing further education elsewhere. For nine very poor students, Sheelu applied for and received government sponsorship; these students will receive Rs 4,000 per month (approximately €40) for their education until they turn eighteen.

The children are regularly given fruit and an egg; the funds allocated for this will run out in a year. Alet has pointed out to Sheelu the possibility of free meals, such as those provided to Asha Deep and Little Stars School.

Despite the construction of a massive building in the courtyard, there is still a little space left for a play area and spending time outdoors. But it's not ideal. Sheelu is looking for another building.



Sheelu is also a lawyer. His financial situation has improved since he started working at the juvenile court, where he handles cases involving missing or runaway children. He can handle the administrative work related to this job from the school. This allows him to provide adequately for his family.

Registration

School registration remains the top priority. Currently, students receive their 8th-grade certificate from another school that is registered.

The current Jeevan School has classrooms that are too small and the school cannot secure a 30-year lease commitment from the landlord - two requirements for school registration. This is another reason why a different building is needed. One option is to build a simple school on the plot of land in Sarnath owned by Jeevan and apply for registration for that facility. That is easier if the school building is owned by the school. Then the children from Varanasi can receive their certificates under the Sarnath registration. That, however, means an investment of at least €30,000, and it takes a lot of time.

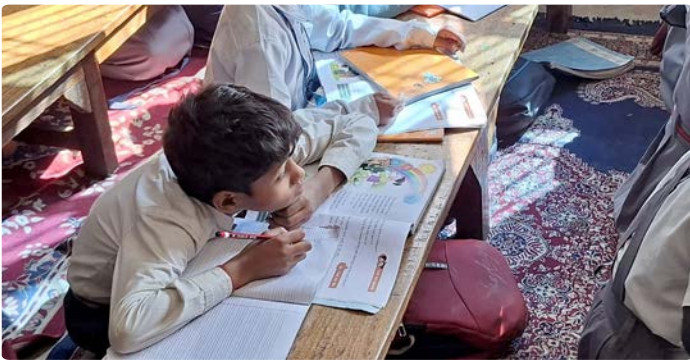


FCRA

The biggest news is that the school has finally obtained an FCRA, which is authorization to receive funds from abroad. Sheelu can hardly believe that he has actually received an FCRA. He is currently reaching out to foreign sponsors.

Additional sponsors are desperately needed, because the school is facing a significant funding shortfall. BSF covers 63% of the school's costs; ideally, that should be less than 50%. And to think that those costs have been minimized out of necessity: salaries and rent haven't been paid in full for years, and Sheelu doesn't pay himself a salary. That is very admirable, but not sustainable.

Treasurer Ian wondered if we shouldn't help Sheelu with a business plan and see what expertise he needs. Ian: *"Jeevan is a project that fits perfectly with BSF."*



We all admire Sheelu's perseverance and his talent for achieving so much with so little. He has our support, both financial and moral; in addition, we're trying to connect him with potential sponsors. Eventually, the FCRA should help him achieve a healthier financial situation. <



DIVYA JYOTI

center for disabled people

The annual highlight at DJ is the festive celebration of International Day of Persons with Disabilities on October 6. With the help of students from the Jeevan School, the students of Divya Jyoti put on a moving performance featuring song and dance.



Leader Sheela is the driving force: throughout the year, she practices endlessly and with great patience with her students. But that's not all: she enriches the daily lives of these young people, many of whom have severe physical and mental disabilities.

Together they sing, play games, and make handicrafts to sell. This allows the students to earn some money themselves, but it also helps the organization.

The support that Sheela and her volunteers provide to parents - for example, in applying for grants and benefits - is incredibly important. In fact, this year two clients received electric tricycles from the government!

We are happy to dedicate ourselves each year to raising sponsorship funds for this wonderful organization.





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ASHRAY SCHOOL

- > up to and including class 8
- > 95 students
- > contribution BSF 42% of the schoolbudget of €25,000
- > manager: Rakesh Saraogi
- > www.ashray.org

As we announced in our previous newsletter, after many years we are parting ways with the Ashray School.

We have long been dissatisfied with the lack of communication, the quality of education, and the developments surrounding the new school building on the Ganges. That was supposed to be ready in April 2025, at the start of the new school year. However, the students are still in the neglected old building in Nagwa.

After many years of support, Ashray is now moving forward on its own. Manager Rakesh Saraogi is highly motivated and determined to make the best of it.

Our chairwoman bid a fitting farewell, bringing treats for the children, a gift for the teachers, and sharing a lunch with Rakesh.

We will definitely visit the school again next year to see how things are going and to say hello to the familiar team of teachers.

Some donors are very familiar with this school: it was an initiative of Father Frans Baartmans, who managed to inspire many young people from the Netherlands to volunteer for his work in the Nagwa slum.

It was for this school that Nienke de Graaf and her boyfriend Bálint cycled from the Netherlands to Varanasi in 2017. With the sponsorship money they raised along the way, they set up a library for Ashray (read more in the 2018 newsletter at www.benaresschool.nl).

Those young people are now in their thirties, forties, and fifties and still form the core of our foundation and our donor base.

Saying goodbye to Ashray is therefore accompanied by a touch of sadness. <



STOP OR CONTINUE?

Marien van Staalén

In April 2026, a long period during which the Benares School Fund Foundation has supported the Ashray School in Nagwa will come to an end. That feels rather strange, because we have never before stopped supporting a school.

From the very beginning, we have been guided by the advice of our first major sponsor: focus on quality and continuity. We focus on quality, because disadvantaged, caste-less children deserve more than just any school. We focus on continuity, because good education must not be a flash in the pan.

The thinking about small-scale development aid is constantly evolving. Books such as *People Develop Themselves* by Betteke de Gaay Fortman give this a significant boost. In doing this, there are a few key principles: let the people themselves take ownership of the problems, facilitate without directing, and make yourself, as an aid worker, redundant as quickly as possible.

Those are sensible ideas. They help prevent aid from continuing simply because it's already there. A foundation like ours must constantly ask itself: aren't we doing something that the people themselves could do just as well or - even better? And also, very importantly: isn't our support actually making it easy for the Indian government to shirk its duty to provide a good education?

In line with the principles mentioned above, BSF has chosen from the very beginning to facilitate rather than dictate. We agree with our schools on *what* they do, not *how* they do it. We never interfere with teaching methods or textbooks. But regardless of these principles, the fact remains that the schools cannot survive without external sponsorship funds.

We can see whether our money is being well spent by looking at the results: how many students there are, how they perform, and whether they graduate. Above all: *whether* the students are not just on paper, but are actually there and attending school. That is, after all, what *matters* to us.



Our foundation supports Swati Singh's NGO, Muheem. Through her Pathshala schools, she demonstrates how aid works best: let the people themselves identify the problem. Don't tell them what they need; ask them first.

That's why Swati always starts with a simple question for a Musahar community - a caste-less group that is still contemptuously called "rat-eaters" in India - : *what do you need most?*

If the answer is "a pump," a pump is provided. Only if the answer is "education" does a Pathshala school get built. This is a small, informal school where toddlers and preschoolers learn how school works, so they don't immediately get overwhelmed at the *government school* later on.

If those children end up falling through the cracks because they're discriminated against due to their background, their parents don't sit idly by - especially the mothers, who make their voices heard. That's no coincidence: a key goal of Muheem is for young women to learn to stand up, speak out, and take the lead. Developing leadership skills among women is exceedingly important.

This approach embodies much of what De Gaay Fortman recommends: offering the help people want, while simultaneously working toward a future where that help is no longer needed. By empowering parents, the government is urged to finally take its educational responsibilities seriously.

In this concept, influencing the government is crucial. In Nepal, where the book *People Develop Themselves* is partly set, the local government sometimes takes over successful projects. In India, the situation is different. Most government schools (there are, fortunately, exceptions.) struggle with corruption and discrimination. The middle class sends its children en masse to so-called "public schools," which, confusingly enough, are not actually government schools. The poorest cannot afford that.

For them, schools are emerging that rely on sponsorship, often from abroad. That is precisely the playing field for a foundation like ours. Because when a government structurally neglects its duty to provide quality education, while cheerfully pointing to a constitutional article stating that education is free, you know: it's true on paper, but not in the classroom.

As much as we would like to make ourselves redundant, that is impossible for the time being. Our support is still indispensable to all of our projects - unless another sponsor steps forward.

As long as the Indian government clings to the myth that its government schools provide a good education for everyone, aid like that provided by BSF remains desperately needed. To change that, a political upheaval in India would be necessary. But before that happens, a lot of water will flow down the Ganges...

Our departure from Ashray, incidentally, has little to do with these big questions. BSF and Ashray's manager, Rakesh Saraogi, regularly disagreed on the direction. Rakesh had big dreams: more students, new buildings, moving to a different location. His plan was for paying students to finance education for underprivileged children. Sounds smart - and that's why we invested heavily in it. But unfortunately, those paying students never materialized. And that eroded our confidence.

We are stepping back, not because we are no longer needed, but because we disagree with the policy. Rakesh is moving forward; he remains optimistic. We wish him all the best. <



ASTHA SCHOOL

The head of this small school, Soma Banerjee, is a highly dedicated and energetic woman. Together with her husband, Babulal Maurya, she not only runs Astha School, but they have also established a new small school in Babulal's hometown of Sarnath. This one is for the poorest of the poor.



Babulal puts his salary into the school, and Soma works part-time as a teacher at Asha Deep School. They do everything they can to keep their initiatives running because they have no other sponsor besides BSF. However, as is common in India, they receive a lot of support in kind.

The seven teachers at Astha School have been well trained by Soma and are able to work independently. Soma doesn't need to be there all day, which allows her to balance all her activities effectively.

The school only goes up to fourth grade. Six students have been accepted into fifth grade at Asha Deep School. BSF covers their transportation, hot meals, and tuition.

Soma has a big heart: she regularly seeks attention and support for this disabled child or that lonely widow. She has also set up sewing classes for women and young girls and is looking for markets where they can sell their products. This allows the women to make a significant contribution to their family's income and pay for their children's school fees. It also boosts their self-confidence.

Soma regularly receives awards for her social work. She is - rightly so - very proud of this.





DUTCH MERLET COLLEGE

Every year in February, a group of Year 10 and 11 students from the Dutch Merlet College visits some of our schools.

Last year, this took place on 25 February; unfortunately, the schools in Varanasi were closed due to extreme cold. Connie Rao from Asha Deep School decided to take the group on a walk through the slum where some of her students live. It was an eye-opener for the students from the Netherlands: they could never have imagined that a family of five lives in a windowless room, no larger than 2x3 meters.

This year, the group arrived in Varanasi on 11 February; the school was open, and the weather was lovely.

The students and teachers from Merlet and Asha Deep enjoyed each other's company.

A day later, they also visited Jeevan School.

They asked Sheelu all sorts of questions: about schools in India and the caste system, how much school fees students have to pay, and even how much teachers earn.

And the students from Jeevan wanted to know what Dutch schools are like. Lots of freedom and few rules, they were told by the Merlet students, but in the Netherlands the standard of maths and science subjects is actually a lot lower!

Later, it turned out that the small playground was big enough after all for the wild Indian game of *kabbadi*.

Both schools will receive a generous donation via BSF from the Merlet students, who have raised the money themselves over the past few months through various fundraising activities. <

SEED FOR CHANGE A NEW PROJECT?

Chairperson Alet visited the Spanish NGO Seed for Change in Varanasi. This organization runs a unique educational project at two locations in one of Varanasi's poorest neighborhoods: the ragpickers' district.

With a dedicated team, 200 to 250 children receive supplementary education for half a day. The other half of the day, they attend a public school. The costs for this are covered by Seed for Change's sponsorship network.

The children receive a hot meal every day. A great deal of attention and care is also given to the families. Twice a week, they can visit a primary care clinic; hospital visits are partially reimbursed; and training sessions are provided on hygiene, family planning, and vaccinations. There is also prenatal care.



The NGO lacks funds for its own small schools.

Alet was impressed by the project. At our board meeting on January 18, we decided to support this initiative for one year, for the time being. <





SARNATH PROJECT

- > 20 girls, class 9 and 10, in hostel
- + 1 girl follow-up study in nursing
- > contribution BSF 50% of the budget of €13,000
- > project coördinator: sister Elsamma

Marien van Staalén

For the second year in a row, our trip to India was canceled at the very last minute.

As a result, secretary Conny and I have to postpone our meeting with Sister Elsamma - the new project leader in Sarnath - for a little while longer. Fortunately, the lively photo of our president Alet with Elsamma makes up for it and, above all, piques our curiosity!



Alet even visited the project for Dalit girls twice in November. The second time, she went with our treasurer Ian and his wife Elena. Ian immediately sensed the special atmosphere as soon as you leave the tourist hubbub behind and step through the gate. He describes it this way: *“From the bustling streets of Sarnath, in incredible India, you find yourself in a green oasis where you can feel a harmonious energy. The purity and simplicity are impressive. This is a wonderful place where the ICM sisters help twenty young, underprivileged girls take a step forward in life. They are given not only a safe place, extra coaching, English lessons,*

computer and sewing classes, but also life lessons: discipline, teamwork, cleaning and growing vegetables together, as well as cooking and doing laundry. There is also a focus on karate, self-defense, and cultural development.”

Elsamma's return

Elsamma is back at the project she once founded herself. She knows exactly what it stands for: guiding disadvantaged, untouchable girls toward an independent life - both personally and financially. Quality vocational training is an essential part of that.

In the Sarnath project, the girls live in a hostel attached to a small convent for two years. During that time, they attend grades 9 and 10 at a nearby school. Afterwards, they leave and complete grades 11 and 12 on their own elsewhere. Together with BSF, Elsamma has explored how support can be improved during that final phase.



The extra lessons at the hostel are of great value, but when contact then becomes less intensive, some of what they've learned is lost. Fewer girls also choose vocational training at that point. That's why vulnerable girls will now be able to complete grades 11 and 12 from the hostel as well.

The hostel can accommodate 25 girls; currently, 20 are living there. This means there is room for five girls who can take advantage of this new opportunity. They will be carefully selected. Contact with the families plays an important role in this process. Elsamma regularly visits the villages where the girls come from and invites the parents to parent meetings at the hostel. Alet attended one of these meetings.

Exception

In one respect, the project is a welcome exception: spending is lower than budgeted. Elsamma has managed to secure support from local sponsors, often in the form of in-kind contributions, which helps keep costs down. At the same time, there are concerns. The government actively opposes Christian institutions. Money transfers from abroad are restricted by the banks, and even domestic transfers from ICM India in Chennai to the convent in Sarnath are difficult to process.

Alet also visited the school where the girls are in grades 9 and 10: a *government school*, but fortunately one without corruption or discrimination. She was favorably impressed. The supplementary education at the hostel is essential, but it is important that the regular education outside the gates is also of good quality.

Reporting

Elsamma's reports to BSF are exemplary. Every month, we receive a summary of expenses and the remaining balance. And she regularly sends warm, heartfelt messages, such as this one: *“We had a harsh winter this year, but our girls held up well. I always reminded them to wear warm clothes and to use warm water for drinking and bathing.*

> read more on the next page



Schools were sometimes closed due to fog and cold winds, but here we simply continued with our lessons."

We must keep in mind, however, that in India, children come to school wearing thick hats even when it's 18 degrees...

In another email, Elsamma writes:

"I will not turn away a single girl who sincerely seeks admission for the coming year. Our capacity is currently 25 girls, and if necessary, we will make additional arrangements. That is not a problem. The budget is geared toward this, and we can find local support for a few more girls. Only when girls want to pursue vocational training after 12th grade do I need extra help with that."



Vocational Training

Vocational training is part of the project. In recent years, three or four girls have enrolled in the nursing program each year. Priya and Puja graduated in September 2025, immediately found work in a hospital, and are now financially independent. Elsamma hopes to make an agreement with the girls in the future that - if possible - they will repay half of the tuition costs to the project within five years. It remains to be seen how realistic such a revolving fund is.

BSF receives support from an external sponsor for the nursing program. There were no new applications this year. This is because there was not such a strong bond formed in recent years with the girls in 12th grade. Elsamma is keenly aware of this and will make an extra effort in the coming years to strengthen that bond. Currently, Muskan is the only one enrolled in the nursing program. Two other girls are enrolled in a two-year secretarial training program.

In addition to these courses, Elsamma also plans to offer training programs for teachers, tailors, beauticians, and dance instructors. There is a need for all these professions, and the job prospects are excellent.

Treasurer Ian concluded:

'Not only were we served a delicious lunch from their own garden, but there was also a performance featuring Indian dance, singing, and karate. The entire program was put together by the girls themselves. They were so open, cheerful, proud, and enthusiastic - it was a really cool experience!'

Two years ago, BSF took over the Sarnath Project from the Focus on Education Foundation. It remains a source of inspiration for us. <



VATSALYA SCHOOL

- > up to and including class 10
- > 93 students
- > contribution BSF 10% of the budget of €75,000
- > manager: Kartikey Gupta
- > www.vatsalya.org

Moniek de Zwaan

For more than two decades, the Benares School Fund Foundation has been supporting the NGO Vatsalya. Vatsalya is based in Jaipur - 800 kilometres from Varanasi, where our other schools are located.

Over the past ten years, Vatsalya has developed from a residential care programme for orphans into a day school for the local community, with a broad vision for children's development. The school is open to children from disadvantaged day labourer families. Three-quarters of the students live below the poverty line.

Mission

Vatsalya's mission is to offer the children the broadest possible development. Formal education is just one part of all the activities. Great emphasis is placed on developing all possible skills – sport, vocational training, science and astronomy - as well as personal growth. Fruit, snacks and a nutritious hot meal, all come from ingredients grown on Vatsalya's own land support the programme.

Vatsalya also aims to develop broadly as an organisation. It is a thriving NGO with various divisions, partly supported by the government and partly by businesses. The school and other educational activities rely largely on foreign sponsors. Its own income from the production and sale of printed fabrics (under the brand name Anoothi) covers only part of these costs.

For more information, see www.vatsalya.org

BSF's contribution is earmarked for mainstream education, which currently has 93 students, half of whom are girls. They regularly take part in various regional science competitions and even win prizes there.



At the start of the new school year, Vatsalya's focus was on strengthening STEM education: *science, technology, engineering and mathematics*. New teachers have been recruited, partnerships have been established with nearby schools, and more children from outside the local area have been given the opportunity to use Vatsalya's sports facilities, science center and exchange programs. The flagship of Vatsalya's work remains the astronomy programme, which has steadily expanded in both scope and impact.



New Building

To its great surprise, Vatsalya received a substantial bequest last year. The board decided to use this to build an 'Academy for Future Skills', with facilities for practical education and training. In addition to the beautiful library and computer room, and the adjacent Science Center, this new building offers the opportunity to host many schools for paid courses and workshops. This contributes to the organization's aim of becoming less financially dependent.



Some highlights from the past year:

- Five out of six Year 10 students sat for their exams at the highest level, achieving excellent results.
- More than ten children won medals in internal tournaments and two children won prizes in external sports competitions during the late monsoon season.
- Students also submitted two *citizen scientist* projects to NASA.
- One of the teachers was selected by the Indian Institute of Astrophysics from thousands of candidates to take part in a national programme in September in Hanle, India's only officially designated *dark-sky* location.
- Several educational excursions were organized. A particularly memorable experience for the children was attending a live cricket match in Jaipur.
- The *Saturday Activities* program is being continued - a day without formal lessons, devoted entirely to experiential learning, vocational skills such as baking, solar energy training, organic farming, karate, block printing and learning through an open library.



- Creativity and learning through play are key focuses within the school programme. A fifteen-day 'creative design' workshop was organized for the older students by a tutor from the *National Institute of Design* in Ahmedabad. <

A HEART-WARMING TEACHERS' DAY AT VATSALYA

On 4 September, the children at Vatsalya School celebrated the annual Teachers' Day. They had just one day to prepare, but they did a brilliant job.

Manager Kartikey Gupta reports:

'We handed the whole school over to them so that they could act as teachers and administrators. And they did a truly brilliant job: they taught lessons, kept an eye on things, organized a gathering and sports activities, and ran the campus with great enthusiasm and a strong sense of responsibility. Afterwards, they organized a one-hour party for the teachers entirely on their own. They beautifully decorated the hall of the Science Center with balloons, fairy lights and party decorations, and they had arranged a wonderful cake. Nobody had asked them to do this and no money had been given for it. These children, who mostly come from day-labourer families, contributed their own pocket money - asking for a few rupees here and there - to make this possible.

They imitated their teachers' styles - strict, caring - in a humorous sketch. It was hilarious and moving. It shows that education isn't just about academic achievement... If our children can grow up to be good people who value relationships, show gratitude and have fun together, then I believe we're on the right track.'





NGO MUHEEM

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



Alet Meurs

This year, I visited the NGO Muheem. Muheem was founded in 2020 by Swati Singh.

Swati is an inspiring woman who, through her organization, focuses on empowering vulnerable communities, particularly women, girls, and children in rural areas. With her vision, Muheem strives to improve their legal status, develop leadership, raise living standards, and provide education. The NGO has several projects for this purpose.

Musahar

BSF focuses on education. In 2020, we began working with Muheem to support small schools in two villages of the Musahar community. The Musahar live in the countryside of Uttar Pradesh in extreme poverty, isolated in remote villages of huts. They have little to no contact with the surrounding villages. They are viewed as the lowest group in the caste system and shunned by others. They sometimes work as day laborers in the fields or in the quarries. Musahar means “rat eaters,” because this group used to catch rats to survive.

Pathshala's

We now support four small street schools, known as pathshalas. These schools have been established with the consent



Training teachers

of the villagers. The young teachers are trained by Muheem and come from the Musahar community itself. They help the children learn basic skills. They also serve as role models by showing families and children that education is possible and valuable.

This year, I visited some of the schools with Swati. During the first visit, the entire village gathered around the children. Classes are held on a mat on the ground. The children sit in rows on it, with a chalkboard in front of them. The parents, with babies on their laps, watched curiously to see what we had come to do.

While the little schools in the villages were a novelty in 2020, it's now taken for granted that children attend them. At the start, there were also older children in the class; now we mostly see the younger ones, which is a good sign. The babies sitting on their mothers' laps will surely be going to school in a few years. The street school is seen as a *learning center*; here, the children learn to sit in a circle, they sing and count, learn the alphabet, and write their first letters.

Once they have acquired the basic skills needed for a regular school, they move on to a government school in the neighborhood. And here, this form of education achieves another goal: children who previously lived in isolation now come into contact with other children from different villages, sit in the same classroom, and play in the same playground. This breaks through their isolation.

At the end of my visit, we sang together. I was asked to sing a Dutch song. Surrounded by a circle of children, I sang “Head, shoulders, knees, and toes,” using the accompanying gestures. Singing brings people together: all the children joined in and sang “la-la-la” while mimicking the gestures. <

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW 2025

> in euro's

IN

Regular contributors/school sponsors	35,827,00
Other donations	3,386,00
Bequest	15,000,00
Contributions funds/foundations	43,500,00
Interest	3,882,00

101,595,00

Added to the earmarked reserve 1

(bequest + 5,000,00 for CBSE)

Added to the earmarked reserve 2

(Sarnath)

TOTAAL INCOME 76,975,00

OUT

Little Stars School 30,000,00

General donation 12,000,00

Extra support poorest students 9,500,00

(of whom 21 individually sponsored)

For paramedical course 2 students 2,000,00

For CBSE (earmarked donation) 1,500,00

For renovation / maintenance (earmarked) 5,000,00

Asha Deep School 12,600,00

General donation 7,500,00

For further education 2,000,00

For 13 students at Jeevan ki Asha

(fee and lunch)

For 6 students at Astha School 1,000,00

For study Kaushal 350,00

From Merlet College Cuijk 500,00

For library 250,00

For the construction of the Community Centre 10,000,00

Vatsalya School 7,500,00

Ashray School 10,500,00

Jeevan School 19,000,00

General donation 15,000,00

For further education 2,000,00

For school meals (earmarked donation) 1,500,00

From Merlet College Cuijk 500,00

Dalit project Sarnath 6,500,00

NGO Muheem 4,500,00

Divya Jyoti (earmarked donation) 5,500,00

Astha School 2,500,00

Expenses foundation (incl. bank costs) 1,582,00

110,182,00

Taken from earmarked reserves

(including 10,000 construction ADS + 6,500 for Sarnath)

TOTAL OUT 79,782,00

Result Financial Year 2025 - 2,807,00

This amount has been taken from the general reserves.

Balance per 31-12-2025

Current account: 12,469,39 Time-lock savings account: 100,000,00

Saving account 1: 86,802,38 (63,986,49 of which is earmarked reserve)

Saving account 2: 40,317,75 (Sarnath project)

Total: € 239,589,52

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.

BUDGET 2026

> in euro's

IN

Regular contributors/schoolsponsors	35.000,00
Other donations	7.300,00
Contributions funds/foundations	35.000,00
From earmarked reserve 1	12.600,00
From earmarked reserve 2 (Sarnath project)	10.000,00
Interest	3.500,00

TOTAL INCOME 103.400,00

OUT

Little Stars School 31.000,00

General donation 12.000,00

Extra support poorest students 9.500,00

(21 of whom individually sponsored)

For courses 12+ (5 students) 3.000,00

For extra costs CBSE (earmarked donation) 1.500,00

For maintenance (earmarked donation) 5.000,00

Asha Deep School 12.270,00

General donation 7.500,00

For further education 2.000,00

For 13 students Jeevan ki Asha (fee and lunch) 1.000,00

For 6 students Astha School 1.000,00

For B. Ed. study Kaushal 270,00

Expected donation from school 500,00

Vatsalya School 7.500,00

Support for **Ashray School** will end on April 1, 2026 (the amount pledged for the 2025–2026 school year was paid in full by 2025).

Jeevan School 19.000,00

General donation 15.000,00

For further education 2.000,00

For school meals (earmarked donation) 1.500,00

Expected donation from school 500,00

NGO Muheem 5.000,00

Sarnath project 10.000,00

Other costs 12.400,00

From library fund 400,00

Divya Jyoti disabled care (earmarked donation) 6.000,00

Astha Foundation 2.500,00

Seed for Change 5.000,00

Unforeseen 2.230,00

Expenses foundation 2.500,00

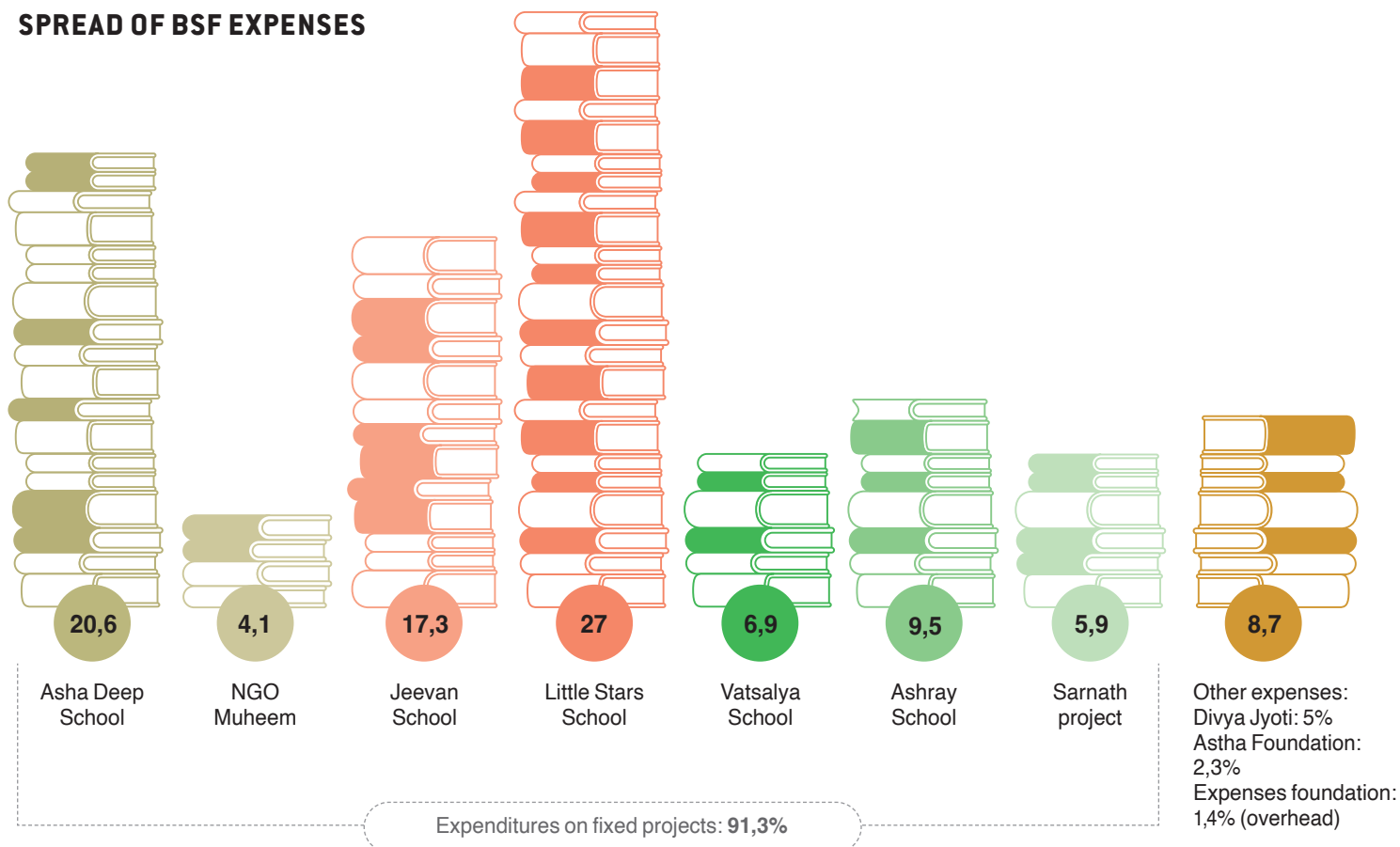
TOTAL OUT 103.400,00



Overhead costs 2025: 1,4%



SPREAD OF BSF EXPENSES



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).

Bequest

Would you like to ensure that underprivileged children in Varanasi, India, continue to receive a good education in the future? You might consider including a bequest in your will.

Benares Schoolfund Foundation

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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

