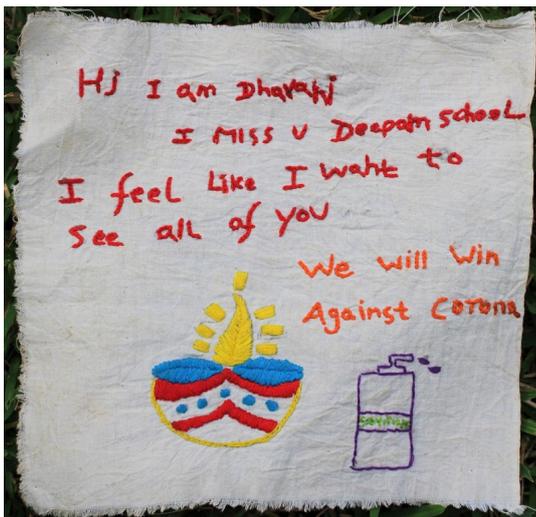


Auroville, October 2020

Dear Friends and Donors,

### Corona Blues

With a heavy heart we had to close Deepam in March for an indefinite period of time and say goodbye to our children without knowing what state they will return in. We have never been closed longer than ten days in our 28 years. Our Dharani expresses her feelings in her embroidery work which she did at home during the lockdown.



*"I am Dharani. I miss Deepam School. I feel like I want to see all of you. We will win against corona!"*

Dharani is now 23 years old and came to Deepam for the first time when she was just two. She was born with a neurological disorder with severe epilepsy and other complications. Both her parents died of HIV and she has gone through a lot of hardship and trauma in her life. Luckily, she has an older sister who takes good care of her and we are also supporting her family financially. Over the years, Dharani has received physiotherapy, education, medical and social interventions at Deepam and attends our vocational training and day care programme. She loves handicrafts and we are so proud of her incredible progress in this and other areas.

India had a complete lockdown for almost two months and public life paused to avoid community spread of the virus. Schools & universities, factories & offices were closed and public transport, including flights, were stopped. Only essential services and food shops operated, with restricted timings. Everyone was instructed to stay at home wherever possible, face masks became mandatory at all times outside of the home and social distancing was introduced. As millions of people in India live from what they earn daily, many had no income. The government provides a small amount of rice, pulses, oil and sugar to the poorest households, but no fruit or vegetables, and food prices are steadily rising. Meanwhile, the lockdown has gradually relaxed and many have restarted work, but the unemployment rate has spiraled without social security in place. The impact of this economic crunch will last for years to come and more people might starve or die due to the effects of lockdown than of this virus itself. Fortunately, Indian people are generally positive and resilient, and we hope that they will find ways to overcome this challenging time.

Our region was almost untouched for approximately four months, but, paradoxically, when cases were rising alarmingly, the economy was gearing up with workplaces, shops and restaurants opening up again. Schools, sports centres and hands-on therapies remain closed. As public transport and domestic flights have restarted, COVID-19 has now spread to Auroville and we have had one positive case in our team. As a precaution, all our team members self-isolated at home as recommended and luckily, she recovered well and nobody else developed symptoms.



Our team is very committed and is in touch with all our children and their families. Where needed we help with groceries, essential items and medication, in some cases even cash, as well as providing homework for a few children where possible. We are also using this time for internal trainings, meetings and maintenance work. From September, we were allowed to open the vocational training centre for the older students, following the safety measures. Schools throughout most of India are still closed and we do not know when we will be able to have our small children back for therapy. Unfortunately, our hope is constantly facing setbacks. We have to regularly adapt to changing circumstances while this prolonged condition and its development in India remains uncertain.

### **A new wastewater treatment system**

Auroville has no centralised water and wastewater systems. Deepam shares a deep well with several users. We have our own underground tank with a capacity of 15,000 litres for storage, from where the water gets automatically pumped into two overhead tanks which are mounted on the roof. The wastewater treatment plant which we shared with our neighbours for 25 years stopped functioning, so we decided to build a new system. After months of inquiries, the large hole excavation finally started at the beginning of March, with the first ready-made concrete parts unloaded just before the unexpected total lockdown began. Therefore, the construction, which was supposed to only last two months, was a lot more challenging and took a lot longer than expected. However, the new system is now in place and working effectively, and the recycled water is being used in our garden.

### **A project of joy**



During lockdown our team member Leo initiated a wonderful opportunity for a few of our older students to volunteer on an organic Auroville farm. Five mornings a week they do planting, weeding, pruning, mulching and composting work and share a delicious breakfast with the other volunteers. Akash, one of the students who is autistic with minimal communication skills and would not be able to find work outside of Deepam, has blossomed on the farm. Since his father committed suicide a few years ago he has considered himself the man of the house, which (following the example of his father) has often meant beating his mother and sister. Since he has been coming to the farm, he has been fulfilling his role by going to work and bringing fruit and vegetables back for his

family, and the aggression at home has decreased substantially. Akash has also developed a love for spinach and is eating and sleeping better. When he first came to the farm at the beginning of August, he had no idea how to use tools or a wheelbarrow, now he is independently filling a wheelbarrow with a fork and wheeling it to the intended location, all with a big smile on his face.

### **Three especially lovely ladies from different countries**

In the past year three wonderful women who are joining Auroville and who are experienced professionals have become part of our team and offer their highly professional skills voluntarily and add great value to our work with the children:



*“My name is **Leo**, I have moved to Auroville and hope to be here long term. After many years of often unsatisfying health and social care experience as **an occupational therapist in the UK** it is refreshing to be working in this beautiful fusion of Indian and Western practice. I truly feel Deepam is a special place and I'm very grateful to be a part of it. It is an honour to work with these students and see them blossom even in the short time I've been here. I am thoroughly enjoying the energy, creativity and challenges these students bring.”*

*“I am **Patricia from France**. Very quickly I felt at home at Deepam which feels like a warm and lively cocoon, where fundamental values such as listening, respect and the spirit of mutual help and sharing is practised. Here I am able to offer **Shiatsu** which is a discipline close to my heart. By applying pressure with the fingers to the acupuncture points along the meridians pain gets relieved, emotions are soothed and deep inner peace can be found. Most touching for me is the depth of the eyes of these children, their sincerity and their constant wonder. Their influence keeps enlightening me on my path into Auroville. Deepam means light and I am glad that my journey into living here started under this light.”*

*“I am **Swati, a physiotherapist from Mumbai**, trained in and working with children who have motor delays in their physical milestones. I work with children with the intention to help improve their movement possibilities. It is a gentle approach and largely guided by each child's unique needs. I am happy to have found the opportunity to be associated with Deepam, where I find an environment that is beautifully geared to truly help our children in every way and in every aspect of their lives.”*

Our eleven employed team members would like to express their gratitude to our loyal donors who made it possible for them to receive their full salaries during lockdown. We appreciate it is a challenging time for everyone, so we are especially grateful for the support we receive.

We hope you are all healthy and safe.

Best wishes from Deepam,

*Angelika Ehrle & Lawrence Selvi*

