

November 2021

Dear Friends and Donors,

### What a year!

Our lives and our work is to a great extent still influenced by COVID-19. India made headlines around the world when, after a gap of a full year, the second wave hit, and the country was not at all prepared. Whole families, including some of our children and team members who live together in small spaces had fevers and other symptoms. Testing, however, was minimal in the local villages due to the stigma attached to being positive, so the real numbers of cases outnumbered the official figures by far. The hospitals in our area were full and intensive care beds were scarce.

In April 2021, we went back into strict lockdown for three months, and we had to close the activities we had just been able to restart at Deepam. This was particularly difficult as we saw how our children suffered without our care in the previous lockdown and they were just beginning to regain the health and development they had lost.



In May, the authorities even closed all food shops and only deliveries were allowed for three weeks. At Deepam we managed to order groceries in bulk as well as produce from Auroville's farms and have been delivering food and medication to the families of our children, which were much appreciated. Since June, we only had a few Corona cases and once restrictions loosened, we were able to gradually have most of our children back at Deepam and have been working hard to get them back to baseline health.

While schools were officially closed from March 2020 until November 2021 we were not allowed to use our 30-seater school bus. The smaller van was very helpful for the food deliveries, and transporting students to Deepam and to the farm, but logistics were challenging. We are happy that we are now allowed to use the big bus again.

Our team was outstanding and made use of the extra time when less students were present. We had weekly internal training sessions which also nurtured the team's togetherness, we completed a lot of



maintenance work, the vegetable garden was mulched and fenced against the neighbours' chickens and drip irrigation was installed. In one of the rooms we created a "cosy corner" for our kids who need protected quiet time. Our main focus during this time, however, was vocational work. While much of our therapy work was disrupted or stopped, we could focus our energy on our older students and their futures.



### **The farm project is thriving**

The farm project was one of these areas of focus. In August 2020, the first two students went to the farm, which marked the beginning of a beautiful and enriching collaboration between Deepam and Auro-Orchard which has been rewarding for everyone it has touched. Now, 15 students are going to the farm on a regular basis and they are thriving. Being around nature is in itself therapeutic, but the opportunities to learn new life and work skills, to expand their social networks and sense of possibilities, to build their self-esteem, responsibility and pride in their work has visibly helped them to blossom. The farm work is tailored to each one's individual goals and needs and the progress is evident.

Suresh, who had outgrown Deepam, but had nowhere else to move on to, now volunteers on the farm six mornings a week. He receives fruit and vegetables as a "thank you" for his work and is gradually integrating into the wider farm team. We are exploring whether this could be a long-term workplace for him.

### **Vocational skills**

Another area we have been focusing on is the Deepam vocational training centre. Currently we provide sessions in tailoring, handicrafts, woodwork, candle-making and cooking, again focusing on each individual students' vocational needs. Leela, who is an occupational therapist and also a tailor, has been offering tailoring classes 2-3 times a week. In her words:

*"The girls work on different projects simultaneously. They have their individual projects, like Dharani is making a dress for her niece and Hema is adapting and mending Punjabis, but they also have Deepam orders to fulfil, like stitching 40 cushion covers. In this case, Hema assisted me to cut the material and all of them were involved in the sewing. Taking exact measurements, choosing the right material, understanding how and where to place darts and pattern-making are challenging tasks, but nothing that can't be tackled. The girls have mastered handling the machines well now and sometimes grasp how it*



*works even better than me. For example, when the inbuilt mechanism stopped working, the girls discovered that by inserting a screwdriver through the bobbin hole and holding it against the turning wheel, it makes the bobbin fill up with thread. Over the past few years, my students have stitched stuffed animals, shopping bags, tops and dresses. Having done a tailoring apprenticeship myself, I am aware of how much attention to detail, fine motor coordination and perseverance is required to learn these skills. I am really proud of their progress!"*

### **Support given to build Nandini a safe home**

It is hard to believe that Nandini is already 18 years old. We first met her when she was a tiny 9-month-old baby. She did not have a good start to life as her mother attempted to end her life while pregnant with Nandini. Her mother was admitted to ICU with severe burn wounds and Nandini was kept in an incubator and diagnosed with microcephaly (too small head and brain). She takes regular epilepsy medication. Alongside Nandini's developmental delay, she also experienced a strained home life as her father had an alcohol addiction and was quite violent at home. It is unfortunate to say, but the family finally found some relief when the father committed suicide a few years ago and Nandini's mother could start regular work as a cleaner.



Deepam have tried to support Nandini and her family in various ways. For example, when she hit puberty we didn't feel comfortable with her defecating on the roadside (which is common here), so we supported her father, a mason, to build the family a bathroom. Unfortunately it collapsed in the first heavy monsoon rain and had to be rebuilt later. Last year, Nandini's mother asked for financial contribution towards a new home, as their old house was leaking badly. Deepam has partially contributed to this building and it is almost finished - although not quite in time for the monsoon due to the pandemic delaying the work.

Despite all the hardship which Nandini has had to face, she radiates happiness and is working hard to learn new skills. On the farm she is now able to manipulate a wheelbarrow, mulch a bed, use tools and has increased in her understanding, communication and confidence. She loves being at Deepam where she feels safe and in good company.

### **The monsoon rains let up for our festival of light**

The monsoon, which usually takes place between mid-October and the end of December, is important to refill the aquifers and carry us through the rest of the year and hot summers where we don't receive much rain. In recent years the monsoon has not been so good, but this year we have received an abundance of rainfall. While this is good news, it has also come with the challenging result of flooding, and many families were required to leave their houses for temporary shelters. If you haven't experienced a monsoon before, it is hard to imagine the extreme humidity and how the damp permeates everything: mould grows everywhere; clothes gain a distinctive monsoon 'scent'; wood becomes swollen so doors and windows struggle to open; electronic devices give up. In our area, even schools had to close due to the severe weather. The big school bus, which we had just started using again, found itself back in the garage.



A highlight of our year is our annual festival of light, called Karthigai Deepam, which always falls during the monsoon time. The rains mean that we often don't know until the last minute whether, or how, we will be able to celebrate. Traditionally for this festival, oil lamps are lit at every home for three nights. It originates from an ancient tradition and correlates with the full moon. Karthigai Deepam is only celebrated in Tamil Nadu, whereas Diwali or Deepawali (also a festival of light) is celebrated about a month earlier all over India. Deepam means light and we chose this symbolic name as we work to bring light into the lives of our special children and their families.



This year, we celebrated on the 19<sup>th</sup> November and as we woke up to heavy rain in the morning, we were prepared for it to be rained off. Luckily, as has often been the case over the years, the full moon brought with it clear skies. We were able to decorate, light 1700 oil lamps and celebrate with our dear friends accompanied by our children singing, before the rain started once more just as the festivities drew to a close. Due to the pandemic we could not invite as many people as before, but we hope that these oil lamps with their glowing warmth were able to carry their light and strength into the world.

Our children and team members would like to thank you for your continuous support and wish you deep happiness and health for Christmas and the coming new year.

*Angelika & Selvi*

