

Auroville, March 2024

Dear friends,

We hope the year has started well for you all and that this letter finds you in good health.

Here at Deepam, we have been very busy over the past few months. The cooler weather following the monsoon season is always full of guests, and this year was no exception. We are happy to receive visitors from all over the world and are touched by the connection so many people have with Deepam. The cooler weather is also a great time for us to visit other places and projects, and we have had a number of day trips, including to a temple, puppet show and a crocodile park.



In February we also organised a medical camp at Deepam and in our outreach centre in Nadukuppam. A local hospital supported us with a team of doctors and did health checks for all our children, including children from neighbouring schools, free of charge. These checks included height, weight, vision, ears, nose and throat examinations and an assessment by paediatricians. They were all given deworming medication, and, if necessary, vitamins and iron supplements to take home. Any students who required further follow up received extra assessments and treatment in the hospital itself, also free of charge. We are now processing all the reports and supporting the families of our children to continue with medical checks and treatment as needed.

Continuous medical care is needed for many of our students who have complex diagnoses, and our team is constantly ensuring that the children have their individual needs met.



Home grown food

Our vegetable garden, started three years ago during the Coronavirus lockdowns, is now a fixed part of our students' education and training. This time of year, following the monsoon rains, is the ideal time for cultivating the garden, and our children are busy planting, weeding and harvesting. Our students are proudly growing large quantities of eggplants, okra, bottle gourds, pumpkins, bananas and chilli, which are prepared and cooked together and eaten as part of our communal lunches.



Parents show support

Up until now, everything Deepam provides has been free for our children, including full day care, therapies, food and the school bus. For years we have discussed asking families for financial contributions but have then rejected it again due to the financial pressures most of our families are under. However, when we raised the issue of rising costs and dependence on donations from abroad at the last Parents Day, some of the parents offered to make a contribution, and they agreed on a minimum monthly amount of 1000 rupees (approx. £10 / \$12). Our team was delighted that this suggestion and offer came from the parents themselves. Our monthly expenses of approx. £8000 / \$10,000 are, of course, far from being covered, but we also see the support of our families as an appreciation of, and commitment to, our work.



A new addition

Nilofar is a 6-year-old girl who joined us last July. She has complete bilateral hearing loss, due to her inner ear not being fully developed, and therefore cannot be helped by hearing aids or implants. Due to this she has never been to school and has been staying at home having everything done for her. She wasn't able to use the toilet or eat independently until a few months ago. When she first started eating at Deepam she would cry because she wasn't used to eating vegetables, salads and wholegrain rice, but now she eats it all happily.

Nilofar is curious but was also quite anxious and shy when she first started coming to Deepam for individual sessions. Now she is attending Deepam full time, is much more relaxed and has made a good friend in Rakshaya, who is also hearing impaired, with a cochlear implant. The two girls have become inseparable and both love to dance.

We are experienced with hearing impairments and our approach over the years has been to provide good quality hearing aids and speech therapy, but as this won't be possible for Nilofar, we thought she will only be with us temporarily and then go to a school where sign language is used. However, there was no good school in the area and her parents, who have seen visible progress since she joined Deepam, have asked us to keep her here. Fortunately, a French teacher who teaches hearing impaired kids visited us at the beginning of the year and introduced sign language to Raji and Gopal from our team. With the help of the internet and our new digital classroom, Nilofar has already eagerly learned the colours, numbers, fruit and vegetables and many other terms. As she has naturally communicated with facial expressions and gestures up until now, sign language comes easily to her. She is now also learning the Tamil alphabet and participates in all the activities at Deepam. A special moment was when she jumped up and down with pride and joy being Santa Claus at our Christmas party.

We hope this gives an indication of the rewarding work we do with our beautiful special children. Thank you for your loyal support from afar.

With best wishes from all of us,
Angelika Ehrle & Laurence Selvi

