

August 2024

Dear Friends of Shared Blessings:

I was blessed with the opportunity to visit and spend time with our children in Dasmantpur, Odisha in July. It was seventeen years ago that I made my first trip to Odisha and Dasmantpur. Before my visit, I reread the journal I wrote at that time. So much has happened, so many changes and progress made – yet there is still so much to be done. That trip was incredible! I was visiting an area that was so distressed; progress made in other parts of India had not touched them. I learned about infant mortality, women dying at childbirth, children forced to become orphans despite having a living parent. The children had very little access to education. The social worker for IDS doubled as a tutor to our children who were spread out in several small hamlets. Over and over again, I heard pleas from the villagers about the need for a residential school where the children could live and study during the school year. We knew the need; had the desire. But had no way of figuring out how to get it done!

Given that, I was now looking at the completed school where fifty-four children (28 girls and 26 boys) are living and growing up with no worries about food, clothes, medical attention or access to education. There is a separate kitchen/dining building. We added solar panels which provide electricity to the school and the adjacent IDS building. Children have access to monthly medical checkups. They are provided healthy meals three times a day and a couple of snacks in between. Younger children attend school on premises; older ones go to local schools. All of the older children are provided with extra tutoring. The tutor, Saroj Kumar Tula, has been working with our children for the past four years. His help has resulted in our children doing excellently in their final examinations each year. We added a library last year which has been a great hit with our children. Our librarian, Alok Kumar Das, doubles as a teacher and also works with the children before and after school. Mr. Das engages with younger children in the library by exposing them to new books. The children have the opportunity to learn to use computers as the school now has four computers; an outside tutor comes in three times a week to teach them using computers. None of this would have been made possible without the generous supporters of Shared Blessings and AGPV.



Once again, all of the children who took part in the tenth-grade board examinations have been successful. We had four girls (Bati Jani, Debaki Gouda, Manju Muduli and Hema Gouda) and four boys (Dhanapati Budia, Radha Muduli, Bhima Gouda and Kesaba Gouda) who studied hard, participated in tutoring classes and did well in the finals. All of them are eager to move on with their lives and continue to learn and grow. One boy (Dhanapati) and one girl (Bati) decided to stay in Dasmantpur and attend local college while the rest want to go to the government trade school in Laxmipur. What is exciting this time is that all three girls decided to take a two-year course in electrical trade while the boys opted to take the course in fitter trade. This is the first year that the girls have chosen something other than sewing and designing to study. This will most certainly open up more opportunities for them. While the girls previously succeeded in their course, they (and their families) were reluctant to travel to other parts of India like the boys did in search of employment opportunities. There is only so much room in a small town for seamstresses!



Our graduates were provided with career counseling prior to their selection

As we have done in the past, Shared Blessings recognized the accomplishment of these children, and each child received a gift of \$50 that they can use to get whatever they want.

I was also very happy to hear from several girls who shared their aspirations... they want to be engineers, teachers, doctors! I hope each one of them makes their dream a reality!

Daily Life At The School

Behera reports that all children are practicing sanitary habits and wash their hands frequently and keep themselves clean. As it is now the rainy season, extra care is taken to ensure a healthy and hygienic environment. School premises is subjected to regular sanitizing. All children are regularly exercising and practicing yoga to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Each month a physician completes a checkup; any child needing any medical attention is immediately addressed. Fortunately, other than minor ailments, our children have all been very healthy.

The staff at AGPV ensure that all children are eating healthy and balanced meals three times a day. Their diet consists of rice, dal, green vegetables, milk and traditional food (ragi) on a regular basis; eggs and nonvegetarian food items are also provided to children four times a week.

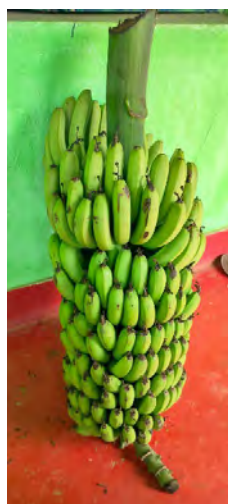
During summer break, older children participated in helping to prepare meals as time permitted. Now that they are back in school, they participate less than before.



Our children enthusiastically participate in the Children's Committee. They discuss various issues of interest, go over guidelines, any troubling issues and make recommendations to the staff. They take their role seriously and have lively discussions, I was told.



All of the children take part in tending to the garden. I got to eat some of the vegetables grown in the garden. Children take great pride in their efforts and enjoy eating the fruits of their labor. The jackfruit tree that was planted during one of my earlier visits is bearing fruit now. This healthy fruit is enjoyed by the children as a vegetable when raw and as a fruit when ripened. In addition to vegetables, they also enjoy planting and tending to various flower bearing plants and enjoy looking at the blooms.



Behera shared that the cost of eggs has greatly increased and is costing considerable share in the food budget. He and the staff would like to go back to establishing a chicken coop that would house about 100 hens. The cost for this is expected to be around \$2,500 - \$3,000. The plan is to build a sturdier coop that will last for some time to come as opposed to the makeshift coops they have had in the past that did not survive. They also need to ensure that the fowl is safe from overnight attacks by jackals and foxes. Initial funds for this were raised during my trip. We are hoping that the money can be raised quickly and the cost of providing nutritious meals for our children can be reduced.

Use Of Library By The Children

The children use the library almost every day. Mr. Alok Das, the teacher who resides on the campus, is in charge of the library; he is helping both the small and older children with utilizing books so that the children can get maximum benefits from the books. We had a very productive discussion about how to utilize the books, especially use of English books that cover the interests of children of all ages. Alok Das discussed how they have started lending the books to the children which has been very enthusiastically welcomed by the children. Looking at the records, I could see that the interests of the children varied from jokes to science to fiction. We want the younger children (1st and 2nd grades) to work with coloring books that teach them English words for a wide range of topics. Alok Das was also instructed to have a reading period just for the younger kids where he will read stories in English and encourage them to identify words. All in all, efforts are being made to make the library more systematic and functional, so that children will be able to make use of the library in its fullest extent.



One of the highlights of the trip was meeting Amanath. People who have been following our work in Odisha may remember him. Amanath Jani was one of the first children to be sponsored through Shared Blessings. He was a young, surly looking lad who needed support, guidance

and a chance to learn and grow. Once in the program, he thrived and quickly became a leader, excelling in just about everything. He set a good example for all the youngsters that came after him; he guided them responsibly with confidence and care. Amanath went on to become one of our first children to go to college. While he did not finish his education and earn a degree, Amanath has shown that all the support he received at AGPV ensured he would become successful in life. He returned to his village, started a business as a ginger merchant and has thrived. At 25, Amanath has established himself as a leader in his community, married (to one of our alumni, Mamata Jani,) and is proud father of a two-year-old girl. During the visit, Amanath spoke to the children at AGPV, recounted his days there and encouraged them to dream, work hard and obtain even more success than him. It was wonderful to see him and know that AGPV, Shared Blessings and his sponsors were instrumental in his life. Hope to meet more of the graduates in the future and see how they are doing.



It was hard to say goodbye to the children, but I know they continue to thrive thanks to the hard work of all of our AGPV staff, especially Mr. Behera. I am looking forward to the next trip already.



Respectfully Submitted By:
Shaila Rao
Odisha Program Manager

More Highlights

