



# इसलबेहली

# Trust

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## SHEERNI EDUCATIONAL PROJECT

### Report 2012-2013





The **Sheerni Educational Project** was born as a way of providing an opportunity to the village children in the rural areas of Setrawa by enabling them to receive a good education. By bringing them to Jodhpur, providing them with board and accommodation in a family-run home and education in a good school, we wanted to give 15 girls the chance to develop their potential.

### Early Beginnings

The project began on 1 July 2012 with 15 girls from the Dalit caste. Two girls are from Solankiyatala, one girl from Balesar, three girls from Sherghar and the rest are from Setrawa village. All are from the rural areas 100 km west of Jodhpur. At the beginning, there were a few girls who didn't want to stay, but after a month, things settled down. When they first arrived they were wearing tatty clothes, village clothes, then Sambhali provided them with two sets of new clothes. We got their hair cut and gave them a good shampoo. The volunteers helped them to get into a daily routine, getting up in the morning, getting washed, dressed, brushing their teeth and introduced new hygiene techniques. When the girls arrived they were only speaking in Marwari and Rajasthani, they never used the Hindi language.

Ten days after joining the programme, the 15 girls walked hand in hand towards their first day at school. This was the culmination of hard work and careful preparation by Virendra Chouhan and his wife Nirmala, Housemother of the Boarding Home where the girls are now living. Fortunately we had 6 volunteers from Germany, Canada and Australia at the time who were able to support Nirmala in starting a routine and in preparing the girls' clothes, books, backpacks and tiffin boxes for school and nurtured a welcoming homely environment. Some volunteers even took it upon themselves to also sleep at the boarding home to help establish a morning and evening routine.







## Daily routine

The girls wake up at 5.00am and get washed and dressed ready for school. They have breakfast at 6.30am and by 6.45am they need to be ready to go to school which starts at 7.00am. In the morning the girls have 1 cup of milk, small biscuits and toast for breakfast and take their tiffin boxes (with paratha and poya inside) to school for the 10:30 break. By 1 o'clock, school is finished and they go home to the boarding house, change their clothes and have lunch. Then they rest for a half an hour and the volunteers come from 3.00-6.00pm for tuition, practising English, games and Arts and Crafts. Nirmala would help them with homework between 6.00-7.00pm. Dinner is at 7:30 to 8:30pm, and then the girls brush their teeth and go sleep at 9:30 or 10:00pm.

Every Sunday the girls' parents telephone the girls; the whole Sunday girls are busy talking on the phone. Every month the parents come to visit their daughters at the hostel. They have developed a rota system where each girl takes it in turns to clean the lunchboxes, clean the toilet, sweep the room and do the washing or fold the school uniforms.







## Going to School

They attend Galaxy Secondary school, (which is a private school close to their home) for 5 hours a day. Every morning Nirmala and her mother-in-law walk to school with the girls and collect them. Seven girls are in 2<sup>nd</sup> class, two girls are in 3<sup>rd</sup> class, two girls are in 4<sup>th</sup> class, two girls are in 5<sup>th</sup> class and two girls are in 6<sup>th</sup> class. At school they learn Hindi, Maths, Social Science, Environmental and Computer Studies as well as English, yoga and karate. The girls were so proud of their school uniforms and settled into a routine, whereby the homework was mostly finished by the time the volunteers came for their daily 2 hour sessions, except for the two youngest ones who needed more encouragement to focus on their studies. Some of the older ones asked the volunteers to help them with their English reading, or learning nouns, spelling, pronunciation, reading and understanding the text. As the weeks and months progressed, the timing of the homework became an issue, but eventually it was decided that Nirmala would help them with their homework between 6-7pm before dinner.

The first results from school were in September in their trimester tests. Seven of them were in the top 10 in their class and all girls were at least in the middle level of their class. As the girls are in several different classes at school, and have different levels of ability in English, Maths and Hindi, sometimes the more able ones naturally dominate group activities in the boarding home with the volunteers. Therefore, one-on-one sessions with a volunteer, even if it is just 15 minutes a day, seemed to be an effective way of helping each girl with their studies and identifying where they need further help. The girls had exams throughout December in English, Hindi, Maths, Science and Computer Studies and spent a lot of time revising with volunteers. They have all done very well and continue to improve in all subjects.

By May 2013, with their end of year exams, their overall grades were very encouraging ranging from 64%-82%. The three top students were Pooja, Asu and Vimla (*photos below*).





## Medical Health

Firstly all the girls were weighed and measured by Nirmala and the volunteers to keep a record of their height and weight. These were taken in July, in September, December and then again in April 2013. (*See Appendix 1*).

All the girls had a problem with lice in their hair which couldn't be treated with an ordinary lice shampoo, and so they visited a dermatologist who prescribed them a specific lice and worm treatment. They also received medication for various skin rashes. Two girls were suspected of having nightblindness because of Vitamin A deficiency and were prescribed medicine and all girls were given a course of multivitamins and iron supplements.

The girls visited the Shared Vision Foundation in Jodhpur which gave eye-tests for all the girls and provided five girls with glasses.

At the ENT specialist the girls were diagnosed with congestions in their ears - a mixture of ear wax and sand which just needed irrigation. More serious is that also 2 girls had holes in the eardrums. A series of check-ups took place with the hope that the holes would close on their own. Rehka told the doctor that she already had this problem for 2 years and finally had an eardrum operation in May 2013 with the help of Shri Swami Madhavananda Austria Hospital (*photo, below left*). Thanks to Sadhvi Shanti and the same hospital, the girls also had a series of vaccinations for hepatitis and chicken pox as well as testing to identify their blood-groups.

The girls then had a thorough dental check-up and were found to have 3-9 cavities in their teeth. Nearly all of them had brown colourations and 8 have some fluorosis – shown by the teeth structure and darkening of the gum. Fluorosis is the consequence of too high a fluoride level in the drinking water in the villages. The girls were shown how to brush their teeth, were given new toothbrushes and toothpaste and they were shown a video on how caries affects their teeth. Pooja has a scoliosis of the spine and so went to see a physiotherapist as she is limping and has some difficulties with her hands. She was recommended to do some exercises to strengthen the muscles on one side of her back and then stretching them on the opposite side. She was also seen by an orthopaedic surgeon who said that her limping was due to the difference in length of both legs by nearly an inch.







## Volunteers

Over the course of the last few months, we have had many different volunteers who have helped to establish the daily routine with the girls for washing and dressing and getting ready for school. They have also provided help with their homework and go and spend 2-3 hours with the girls, 5 days a week to provide sessions in Art, Sport, English, Craft and Maths.

They have played games, like Ludo and Snakes and Ladders, have done some Arts & Crafts like drawing and sketching, jewellery-making, braiding, crocheting, making pompons, painting, finger-printing. They enjoy henna-painting and origami paper folding. Maths exercises have taken the form of games or competitions. They love the "Memory Game". The girls are in several different classes at school and so have different learning abilities in English, Maths and Hindi, so one-on-one sessions with a volunteer even for 15mins a day, was an effective way of helping each girl with her studies and identifying where they need further help and to encourage them where they are doing well. Volunteers have helped with revision for exams, embroidering their names on bags and drawing new signage for their bedroom. The girls have practised English by playing a "Shopping Game" which is part English, part Maths and part dressing-up. They have enjoyed a lot of skipping and have gone to the local park with the girls and done a three-legged skipping race and played some football.

A Progress Chart was formed for various activities, so that they could be awarded stars and after much discussion it was felt a better arrangement if Nirmala helped the girls with their actual homework between 6.00-7.00pm before dinner-time.

Besides these activities in the Boarding Home, the volunteers have accompanied them on the many medical visits and also on outings to the Temple and local park.





## Outings

On August 15<sup>th</sup>, Independence Day, Nirmala had arranged for the European volunteers to join a ceremony in the school, where there were several speeches given by the teachers, the national anthem and presentations of the school boys and girls. The highlight for the Boarding Home girls were two songs that they sung in front of the headmaster, teachers and 700 boys and girls. The girls were very focussed, with clear voices and presenting perfectly the melody and the lyrics and came on/off stage on cue. They behaved like real professionals and the staff and volunteers were very proud that the Sambhali girls had so much courage, singing skill and self-esteem to perform in only 7 weeks since they arrived in Jodhpur from a small village in the desert.

The girls also visited the Temple Garden where they could play outside, there's a lot of space with trees for shade. They could run, play Hide and Seek, do hula-hoop, play Frisbee or ball games. They also did competitive games like the sack race, egg-and-spoon race and relay races.

As Nirmala and the volunteers got to know most of the girls' birthdays (still 2 girls are unknown), then birthdays were celebrated in the Boarding Home, providing a great opportunity to dress up, dance and have some birthday cake.

## Summary

Nirmala, the Housemother has seen various changes in behaviour of the girls throughout the last few months, in response to the various volunteers as well as a changing dynamic within the group. Some of the girls had become more dominant and leaders of the other girls, whilst others have been encouraged to be monitors. Various methods were tried to encourage good behaviour between all the children in this evolving community and the progress chart has had a dramatic effect. There is now a daily structure of the subjects the volunteers teach and Nirmala has got into a routine of helping the girls with homework at a better time in the evening. Nirmala sees the girls gradually becoming more and more like one family, helping each other, supporting each other and being very helpful to staff and to volunteers. The results of their exams in April have proved so far that above all the girls are learning a lot at school and live in an environment which is conducive to learning. They have learnt so many different skills as well as developing their individual personalities apart from receiving full medical and dental checks. They are all putting on weight through having a better diet, vitamin and iron supplements and are at present having a 3-month course of spirulina candies (protein enriched).

Presently we have just had one more girl joining the Boarding Home to make 16 in total and we are looking to take 3 more girls in the next 3 months to make a total of 19 by August, all from the same district.