



Piali Ashar Alo

Piali Ashar Alo School January - April 2024



This year we are celebrating our 16th anniversary. On the 3rd of February, in 2008, was our first day of our first school. These were really modest and small rented rooms covered with asbestos sheets without furniture. We bought some chairs for our only teacher (who is still with us) and the guests, a few students sat on the mat on the floor. There was no kitchen, so we prepared our first meals on the veranda. Later we were able to build a small kitchen out of bamboo in the school yard. We had one "toilet", a room without a real WC. We pumped water with a hand pump or brought it from the pond. The first students were already older children whose parents did not enroll them in school. I remember that they laughed at me because I didn't understand their language; it was the first time that they heard English in addition to Bengali. Some of them quickly dropped out of school, but even they achieved basic literacy. The girls got married after the seventh or eighth grades. The daughter of one of them is now with us, in the second grade. One of the boys finished 10th grade and two boys and one girl finished high school graduation. The boys, now married and fathers, they are working but Shefali is preparing for the entrance exam at the dance academy. Perhaps these are not the success stories that we like to read about. To be honest, my own expectations were also different. I did not know that the road would be so difficult, but our children taught me that success stories can be different. Above all, we write them together.

Now our educational center is beautiful, those readers who have already visited us, I believe would agree with me. Sometimes I look back with nostalgia to those years of our beginnings, which were difficult, but we were more connected, worked enthusiastically and wholeheartedly, without fear. Project is now bigger, so is the team, there is more to worry about with administration, the expenditures are higher. I am grateful that in recent years the economic situation of the majority of our children's families have improved. This enables the parents to invest in their children's education. However, it will take more time for the bigger shifts in thinking and changing stereotypes about the (un)importance of education, especially secondary and higher. Unfortunately, there are still many girls who get married too young.

This year was the first time that we celebrated the founding day with a cake, balloons and Piali Ashar Alo song. It was a really special moment.



We had a wonderful cultural program on March 6, when we were also visited by the ambassador, Mrs. Mateja Vodeb Ghosh, with the first secretary, Mrs. Irma Sinkovec, and the honorary consul, Mr. Bagaria. The theme of the program was "Together" as we believe that together we are wiser, stronger and can achieve lasting changes. There was one more reason for choosing this theme: we wanted to include teachers and parents in the performances themselves. Mothers of our students and teachers participated in a short drama and musical and dance performances. We failed to engage fathers this time; however one of them shared some of his impressions and feelings about what it meant to him that his daughter, who has just finished 12th grade, was able to study with our support and guidance.



In January, young students/graduates Tinkara, Monika, Lucija and Lana from Slovenia surprised us with a one-week visit. Tinkara has been the coordinator of POTA volunteers for many years, but this time was the first time she was able to visit us. Volunteers are an extremely important building block of our project, as they enrich our work, we learn a lot from each other and together we develop informal ways of learning. This time, the girls presented traditional Slovenian carnival “Pust” and taught our girls choreography to some Slovenian children's tunes: Zajcek Dolgousek, Marko skace...



School excursions are a fun way of learning and necessary for the holistic development of students. For us, the organization of excursions is logistically very demanding. The road to us is not wide enough for a bus to arrive, which means that the departure point must be somewhere else. If we decide to take the train, it is also a big challenge, because the trains are crowded, so the children have to enter different carriages, which is risky from the point of view of safety and personal responsibility. Despite all these, we do not give up and this year we visited a museum, a planetarium and a film festival together. We also went to Shantiniketan, where the great Bengali humanist, literate, cosmopolitan Rabindranath Tagore worked and founded internationally renowned Vishwa Bharati University.



I would also like to mention two major changes that we have introduced. For the first time since last year, we have a smaller group of children who are taught only in English. Namely, in West Bengal, children can study in their mother tongue, which is offered by state schools, but more and more parents decide to enroll their children in English schools, which are mostly

private. Some of our parents also expressed this wish, so we introduced this model on a trial basis. Some children were very successful after the first year, and some less so, which is understandable, since learning in a foreign language is very demanding, especially if no one in the family speaks/understands English.



Another big change is that we also started enrolling boys. If you took a good look at the photo with our first children, you noticed that at first there were also boys among them. We felt that the time was ripe for girls and boys to study together in the rural areas, as this reflects the true dynamics of the world in which we live. We want to create a safe environment in which boys and girls will learn in the same environment and develop mutual respect and understanding. There will undoubtedly be challenges, but we believe that with plenty of patience and wisdom, we will be able to overcome them on the way.

Thank you for your continuous help and support.

Yours Piali Ashar Alo family