

Vidya Ratna scholarship programme

Visit on February 26, 2015

When we started working with SADRAG for the Vidya Ratna scholarship programme two years ago, we accepted to support a total of 16 children thanks to our donors. Some of the children were in the programme already, but did not have sponsors anymore. Others were newly enrolled in the Noida Public School (NPSchool). The NPSchool is one of the good, but fee charging schools. Dr Mala Bandhari, head of SADRAG, maintains a good contact with the head mistress of the NPSchool. It certainly was not an easy task to choose those children who would manage the leap into a good school. They all came from one of the learning



centres, run by our project partner SADRAG in India. In these learning centres, children who do not go to school are prepared for attending school. Most of them afterwards go to their local Government School.

On the right in the room: the children of the Nithari Learning Centres. On the left: the boys and girls of the Noida Public School supported by noon.ch in the framework of the Vidya Ratna programme.

On February 26, we arrived at the "Learning Centre Nithari" in Noida, where the students of the programme Vidya Ratna were waiting for us. Seeing them answer our questions in a well-educated and concentrated way was a real pleasure. They quickly overcame the initial barrier to speak English to us, so that they participated actively in the conversation.

These children come from migrant families who very often share one room with 5-7 family members. Many of the children are not in forms fitting their age. This is not surprising, as many of them used to look after their siblings before, or worked with their parents, or went to school in their old home and so could not keep pace with the school education in Delhi. In the UGTA Suraj programme, also supported by us, those children who do not go to school are prepared in the learning centres for attending school. An entrance test at the NPSchool ensures that the children are classified into an appropriate class. Consequently, a twelve-year-old child might be enrolled into form 2.



Boys and girls in form 2

The family income is between 5000 and 8000 IRs. They live with the family in a room with 2-4 siblings. The rent amounts to between 2,000 and 3,000 IRs per month, about the same again is needed for food. The rest of the income must cover the costs for clothing, transportation to work plus expenditures for illness. "In this situation, the costs for a good school for their children, about 1000 IRs per month (about 15 SFr), are the last thing that the parents would consider." (Quote: Dr Mala Bandhari)

Most of the children currently supported by the Ratna Vidya programme come from Bihar. Bihar is considered to be one of the poorest and most unstable federal states of India. For years, the situation in Bihar has been characterized by violent conflicts.

During our visit, Mala and the project coordinator for the programmes Ugta Suraj and Vidya Ratna showed us the children's school leaving reports of 31 March 2014 and the end of term reports of the autumn 2014. So far, all the children have been moved up into the next school year, many of them with remarkably good marks.



Dr Mala Bandhari and the project coordinator Sandhya

We tried to strengthen the children's group feeling by helping each other. This option was apparently strange to them. We do not know to what extent the children are involved in domestic duties or in helping the parents, and whether they can meet friends after school.

This year, three more children have lost their former sponsors, and we were asked by Mala, whether we could sponsor them. They, too, participated in Nithari, as well as another girl who still has a sponsor in SADRAG. Thus, you can see all of the 20 children of the Vidya Ratna programme in the photo.



Vidya Ratna group with Mala, head of SADRAG, the boys and girls of form 2-7 and Doris of noon.ch.

The colourful small parcels contain cases with compasses and rulers we brought along for the students. We asked the children what was difficult for them in school and if they had friends in the class. They all answered the second question in the affirmative. We conclude that they are integrated in their class. Some of them complained about their poor marks in

mathematics. The school reports showed that a group of the pupils enrolled in 2013 have massive deficits in Hindi and English. Although the official language in Bihar is also Hindi, there are various dialects that have little to do with Hindi. It was not always easy to formulate the questions in a way that the children liked to answer them. We were interested to know, for example, who actually helps them with their homework if there is something they do not understand. In response, they referred only to school friends or said that they had to master problems without any help. The question whether their parents had attended school was unpleasant to them, and we quickly changed the subject.

We were pleased to see how well the children are developing, although they were socially significantly disadvantaged from the start of their lives. Here are all 20 students arranged according to size.



Visit of Doris and Klaus in Delhi, Noida, Nithari Centre, February 26, 2015 Vidya Ratna