

Auroville, April 2021

Dear Friends and Donors,

It seems that uncertainty is a persistent challenge facing all of us and Deepam is no exception. We had hoped that the worst of COVID-19 was behind us, but in many parts of India we are experiencing a rapid surge in cases again. As infection numbers had been steadily declining until recently, most people have not been following COVID-19 guidelines, with large gatherings, marriages and election campaigns happening as usual. This delayed second wave may result in further restrictions and another enforced lockdown so at this point we do not know what lies ahead. We update our website regularly, please check there for the latest information: <https://www.deepam-auroville.in/>

The impact of the pandemic

We had expected that we would be running at full capacity by now, but our work and schedule has had to change regularly over the last year to adhere to local requirements and we are still not able to open fully. We continue to work hard to support our families in any way we can while navigating the complexities of the ever-changing situation. In March 2020 there was a very strict lockdown across India for a few months where very few services were operating. Factories, schools and public transport stopped and only essential food shops were open with reduced timings. As many people in India live from what they earn daily, many have had no income and are struggling. Society is dividing ever more between those more affluent who own a good quality house, a computer and a smartphone, and whose children benefit from online classes, and the big percentage of people who are struggling to make ends meet. Existing inequalities in health, education and wealth are worsening drastically due to the pandemic. Some people who were out of work have since been able to restart, but many have lost their jobs or the work that they have is not enough.

Rising food prices and changes to eating habits (away from traditional healthy millets and vegetables, towards processed foods) is resulting in many people having poor diets consisting mainly of white polished rice, oily snacks, sweets and sugary drinks. We have been providing essential items to some of our families, such as toothpaste, soap and nutritious foods including jaggery, fruit, dates, milk and lentils, however even with this support we have noticed a sharp drop in the health of our children, who have not had access to the healthy lunches and nutritious snacks at Deepam. We are sad to share the stories of three of our children who have had to receive blood transfusions due to life-threateningly low haemoglobin levels, below 4mg (anything less than 10mg is considered too low):

Sarvajith, 10 years old, has a complex diagnosis and was always undernourished, but we had managed to patiently motivate him to eat healthy food and his iron levels had gradually increased. Unfortunately, his parents simply do not support him to eat a nutritious diet, so after the break he was very skinny, in a poor condition and could hardly walk anymore. It is very difficult for us to provide effective therapy when his basic health needs are not being met at home.

Chandru, 13, has always been a picky eater and we struggled to get him to eat anything other than curd rice, however with daily encouragement before the lockdown his haemoglobin had increased to a healthy 13mg. Last month he collapsed at home and was taken to hospital as a medical emergency due to having haemoglobin levels of just 3.3mg. When we discussed this with his parents it became clear that they have a very poor diet at home. These unhealthy eating habits come partially from a lack of education around nutrition, and partially from a lack of income from the simple pottery items they produce. We are now supporting his family with food items as well.



Rajesh, 6, was born with multiple disabilities into a family with both his father and grandmother struggling with alcohol addiction. Rajesh first came to Deepam when he was just one year old, but unfortunately his family rarely brought him to Deepam for therapy. During the past year we provided milk, jaggery and a rich millet-mix powder for him, but it seems that while his mother was working at a construction site to earn money for the family, he was left with his grandmother who did not feed him at all. A few weeks ago, when his condition deteriorated, his mother brought him to us for help. He looked like a baby with an “old” face, curled up with stiff limbs, only skin and bones with his ribs sticking out, extremely weak and peering out of huge sad eyes which will be in our memories forever. We could see that he was starving and arranged for hospital admission immediately. Despite poor life prospects for Rajesh and the reality of the neglect he has faced, his mother has committed to taking better care of him and to bringing him to Deepam consistently. We continue to help them however we can. Just when he was starting to gain weight and look more alert, he was bitten by a rabid dog in their home. He suffered several deep bites on his face and severe bleeding and was hospitalised again for treatment and anti-rabies injections. It is heart breaking how much this little boy has had to face.

It is really difficult for our team to see our children who were doing so well under our continuous care, now deteriorating due to the lockdown and their detrimental home lives. Whenever the situation allows it, we provide essential therapy at Deepam for those babies and children who are most in need. Our vocational training centre is open for our older students and a few are also supported to volunteer on an Auroville farm. The progress and enthusiasm of these students on the farm is inspiring. Our young adults, who are typically disregarded in society, contribute so richly to the farm work and social environment. They also receive fruit and vegetables from the farm, which they proudly bring home for their families. We hope we can offer this valuable experience to more of our students in future.

Children becoming adults

A continuous concern for us is the increasing number of students who are becoming adults. Our team recently had a further visioning session where dreams and hopes were shared. These ambitious ideas included: a residential service; a Deepam farm community; a cafe/restaurant; income generating enterprises under Deepam that provides training and work for our adults with greater support needs; and enabling our more capable students to get paid employment outside of Deepam. Some of our students are able to achieve an independent life, such as Sarasu who is hearing impaired and came to Deepam at 18 months old and is now married, has her first child and is a tailor. In contrast, others will need constant care into their adulthood and require a more hands on approach. It is a big task to meet these differing needs, but we continue to strive towards realising our dreams.

Thank you!

We would like to wholeheartedly thank all our friends and donors for their support. Your kindness and generosity during this difficult year has touched and encouraged us. Your support has allowed us to continue to pay our hardworking and committed team members their full salaries, as well as supporting many local families. Once again, we realised how big our Deepam family is and how many people are carrying us.

May we all be healthy and navigate through this challenging time with an unbroken spirit.

With love and gratitude from our children and our team members,

Angelika Ehrle and Lawrence Selvi

