

## COVID-19 April and May Report LEARN FOR LIFE EMPOWERMENT PROJECT

It has been over one year since the global pandemic began, and the Learn for Life Empowerment Project (LFL) India continues her work to guarantee health and social protection for both her workers and her beneficiaries, as well as to bring substantial help to the public at large.

In April, India was struck by the dreaded Second Wave of Covid. While the lockdown itself was less rigorous than the first one in April 2020, the toll on human life and well-being was immeasurably worse. Hospitals ran out of oxygen and medicines, and some even shut, with 80% or more of the medical staff themselves reporting Covid-positive tests. It is impossible to know what the final death tolls were, in Varanasi, in New Delhi, or in India overall: lacking the means to give medical care or a proper cremation or burial, thousands of victims died unreported, and bodies hastily and unofficially burnt, buried or immersed into a river. Any numbers one might give would surely be inaccurate and meaningless, as many local officials spent more energy in adjusting their statistics rather than maintaining care.

Compounding the problem, across North India thousands more succumbed to infections from exposure to Black Mold. While a common problem in India, the situation was greatly worsened due to lockdown, as many people were forced to remain in close proximity to the black mold for extended periods of time. Afflicted individuals with weakened immune systems were estimated to have a 50% mortality rate in many areas.

Given this situation, it is not surprising to hear that almost every family associated with the LFL work has had a Covid-positive case among them, with many succumbing to the illness or to an associated disease.

In April, a government mandate forced the Badi Asha online classes to temporarily cease; no reasons were given, and the logic behind this ruling is unclear, but government orders in the time of health crises must be obeyed of course. However, we were able to maintain the online Yoga classes for the teachers themselves; this was critical to maintain the morale of the staff in these difficult times.

At the beginning of May, we were forced to also suspend the stitching classes, by government order. However, after the 6<sup>th</sup> of May we were able to resume the course in the small open-air kindergarden park across the street from our main building.

Despite these limitations, we maintained giving as much assistance to our staff and their families as we could. We helped them in getting their vaccinations, and we provided regular constant Covid tests for them throughout this period.

In terms of relief work, food production and distribution from our bakeries is ongoing in both Delhi and Varanasi, and LFL has actively reached out with concrete help and logistical support to as many people in need as possible, as per previous reports. In brief:

LFL has concentrated her efforts on providing assistance to daily labourers, whose situation is beyond critical now after a year without work.

LFL continues to distribute food and medicines to families in Varanasi and some surrounding villages.

As part of the sustainable COVID-19 Relief Program, LFL continues to source food, medicine, hygienic products and cotton masks (which are produced in our Tailoring Project atelier), and distributed the same to:

- 740 students of our Badi Asha School and their families in Varanasi collect their daily rations of food, medicine and hygienic products from the premises of our school.
- 550 malnourished women and children in urban and rural areas in Varanasi (additionally, we provide sanitary pads and condoms in order to improve their reproductive health).
- 500 poor families: (approx. 2500 people) in rural areas surrounding Varanasi.
- 100 slum kids and their families in Varanasi.
- 300 individuals in 60 families, via a collaboration with Bindass (details below).

The biggest challenge continues to be the fact that much of our management staff has been working remotely all these months; our staff has risen to the occasion admirably. Our Head Baker, Mr. Naresh, returned to Darjeeling for a brief visit to help his family – but with the worsening situation he found himself unable to return to Delhi. Now, he manages all the kitchen production online from his family home, with incredible results.

The situation has also given rise to new opportunities for some workers. One of our former Badi Asha students from Varanasi had relocated to Delhi; this person is now in charge of all our Quality Control for food. We are proud of their achievements.

In any event, the staff keeps getting their salary even during an isolation period. Moreover, regular weekly video meetings about hygiene and safety measures continue to be held between the Project Managers and Coordinators. We believe this help us work with a higher level of safety for everyone.

Also, our collaboration with the Delhi-based Bindaas NGO has been quite fruitful. Their in-charge Ms. Meeta reports that they have distributed dry food packages and cloth masks to over 60 families, over 300 individuals total. All are daily wage labourers who have lost their jobs due to the lockdown; among them are house maids, ice cream vendors, chaiwallahs (tea sellers), auto and rickshaw drivers, guards, plumbers and electricians. Many of these families have also lost members from Covid, and all are in need of assistance.

Finally, we have included several new products onto the LFL online shop, and we are therefore following this with the appropriate the media promotion in this regard, with the continued overall goals of spreading the breadth of our project, as well as to maintain our donation and fund intake.