

## **Site Visit Report**

Snehalaya English Medium School, Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, India

Date: 19<sup>th</sup> Jun, 2015

Visit by: Pallavi Kulkarni, Boston USA. Volunteer and Project Steward for Asha for Education, Toledo Chapter.

Asha Toledo Chapter started working with Snehalaya Foundation since Feb 2015. Snehalaya Foundation was identified as a prominent NGO in Ahmednagar District in Maharashtra working towards bringing a social change in the community through tireless efforts to eradicate injustice and discrimination towards women. Currently Snehalaya has over 9 different projects in this area all aiming towards the rehabilitation of women and children subjected to sexual abuse and its prevention. They started an English Medium School in 2010 for which they requested funding to Asha Toledo in Feb 2015. Asha Toledo team after reviewing entire proposal and funding request decided to support the school by providing funds towards the purchase of school uniforms (2 per kid) and all necessary books and study supplies for the academic year which began in June. The transfer of funds was completed in the 1<sup>st</sup> week of June and I (project steward) was informed by Snehalaya project partner that uniforms had been purchased and the books order was also placed.

I happened to visit India in Jun 2015, and got an opportunity to visit Snehalaya on Jun 19. I arrived on Ahmednagar bus stand at 10 am in the morning and the Founder of Snehalaya Dr. Girish Kulkarni was present there to receive me. He then took me to visit their Orphanage, Snehankur which is one of their big projects. There I met with the staff, they also arranged for some tea and breakfast for me. I had an hour long discussion with Mr. Girish Kulkarni and Mr. Ambadas Chauhan regarding Snehalaya. Coincidentally, on the same day they had an adoption ceremony for one of their orphan infant, and a young couple from Bangalore was blessed with

this child. They requested me to be the "Chief Guest" for the ceremony and do the honour of handing the small bundle of Joy to this young couple who was so happy and full of praises for Snehankur, in how the entire Snehalaya team helped them navigate the difficult process of adoption. It was truly a very emotional experience which will always remain with me as a good memory!

Mr. Ambadas then took me to the second floor where more orphan infants were been taken care of. The age of the children ranged from newborn to 1 yr. They were all in one room, and each infant had a nice decent size crib in which they were sleeping/playing. The area was kept very clean and each child was been taken care by a dedicated staff member. In the adjoining room next to this there was a special room with 3 incubators. Two of them had pre-mature babies who were been continuously monitored and given all the necessary medical attention. Just as I was exiting the room, I met the Doctor who comes and visits the orphanage every morning to look after the preemies and any other child that needs medical attention. Just as I was walking out I saw a 7 yr old boy who has been in Snehankur since birth. He is mentally challenged and has some other medical needs which has made it very difficult for him to be adopted by a loving family who would commit to take care of him. Mr. Ambadas told me that they would care for this boy for as long as he needs. There was another 8 yr old girl there who had severe burns on more than 70% of her body. There was a big gas explosion in her house that killed all her family members, she survived, but with severe burns. She is also been looked after by Snehankur since her release from the hospital since she has no family left.

Seeing all this made me feel very proud of Snehelaya Foundation and very humbled as a human being.

Mr. Ambadas then took me to MIDC area where Snehalaya has a big set-up which encompasses many buildings including housing for women and children, special housing for young girls and boys infected with HIV,

English Medium School, a huge dining hall and a playground. First, we visited the dining hall & had a cup of tea. Mr. Ambadas informed me that the Dining hall and the building above it was built with the donations received after Snehalaya was featured on Amir Khan's Satyamev Jayate Program. Snehalaya received close to 1.2 Cr in donations after the program was aired on TV. Ambadasji then took me to see vocational center in the same building on the third floor. There, I saw beautiful art pieces made by the children and women. There were several Lord Ganesha idols which were being specially made for the festival and they were going to be shipped to London for sale. There were many other decorative articles and beautiful art pieces which were creation of imagination of the children. Women learned to make natural dyes from plant sources and used these natural dyes to color all the Ganesh idols. The entire set-up was very impressive and full of creativity.

Ambadasji then took me to various buildings which housed rescued women, children both healthy and some infected by AIDS. All the HIV infected women and girls were housed in a separate building where they were given rooms according to age group. Similar building was dedicated for boys infected with AIDS. They were given necessary medication every day, and ensured that they go for their monthly check-up to a good hospital in the city. I met with a 3 such girls, 10-13 yr old. They had just come from their medical check-up and so had not gone to school. All other girls were at school. They showed me the strip of medicines that they had just received from the hospital, they told me their names and were shy and laughing. Their spirits were high since they knew they were not alone in this struggle and that even if they didn't have their own family they had an even bigger Snehalaya family which took care of them and supported them as their own. Ambadasji told me that the mortality rate has gone down to zero, where ~5 years ago they used to bury at least 2 bodies a week.

The living conditions for all the women, children, girls and boys was basic but clean. They each had a bed in a room shared by others, bedding

and all basic necessities with shared toilets which they themselves had to keep clean. Seeing all this made me realize that things which I take for granted are actual luxuries for some and gave me more motivation and energy to work towards bridging this gap.

My final stop was at the Snehalaya English Medium School. Just outside the school, I saw 2 yellow color buses waiting to take the kids back to their homes at the end of the school. The school is up to 6<sup>th</sup> grade and the kids coming are not only from within the various projects of Snehalaya, but also from the surrounding slums and villages. Ambadasji took me to Ms. Pratibha Khengre, Principal's office. Ms. Pratibha was extremely happy to meet me and thanked me for Asha's donation. She informed me that the school uniforms had been purchased and distributed to the kids, and that the study material and books were ordered and scheduled to be delivered in the following week. She then took me around the school. We went to each and every class room in the school. As soon as we entered the class room, students would stand up and greet us by saying "Good Morning Teacher". Pratibha ji then would introduce me to the kids and also tell them that my organization had bought the school uniforms that they were wearing. There were broad smiles on their faces and seemed like they were happy to be in school and enjoyed learning. Also, each class room had drawings and paintings on the wall made by students themselves. A Mathematics class room had small posters of math equations and funny cartoons to keep it interesting. Kindergarten class room walls were covered with bright & happy paintings of smiling Sun, bright flowers & colorful rainbows. I saw the library, teacher's staff room where the staff meets each morning, music room and also the bathrooms. The school building is very well maintained. I was delighted to see the energy and happiness within each child and Thanked Snehalaya for stepping up and providing this opportunity to these children.

Ambadasji then took me back to the dining hall where we had lunch. The dining hall was huge with neat and clean kitchen. The food was very

good and nutritious. I saw the kids come in, wash their hands, then form a neat line to get their food, eat without making too much noise and then clean up after themselves by rinsing their own plates and putting it for wash. They surely seemed much more disciplined than I was at their age!

Finally, around 3 pm, Ambadasji drove me back to the bus stand so that I could take the bus back to my home in Pune. On the drive back, we talked about many other social issues that still exist in Ahmednagar and other surrounding villages and how Snehalaya plans to keep expanding and spreading and sowing the seeds of change.

I unfortunately forgot to take a camera with me, but all the things that I could not capture through the lens have been imprinted in my memory. I will never forget the feeling I had as I was saying Goodbye to Ambadasji. I was so fortunate to witness all this with my own eyes, all the women and children I met, their smiling faces teaching me that Life is a Struggle but face it with a SMILE!