We visited Samerth Talim Kendra in Ahmedabad on Nov 18th, 2019. The following is my site visit report. Note that almost all of the details are from memory, so please pardon any minor discrepancies in data.

We were introduced to and coordinated our visit with Rajul Bharti, the project coordinator. At the school, Rajul introduced us to Ms. Afroz who founded the school in 2003, and serves as the principal. The school serves mentally retarded children 3-years and older - all the way to late teenage years. It is located in a relatively poor and predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Ahmedabad, with the result that a large majority of the students are also Muslim and come from socio-economically backward families with limited education and knowledge about mental retardation.

Rajul and Afroz gave us a quick overview of the school and the students. The school building is a modest house converted into a school. Currently, the school serves about 84 kids, across varying levels of disability. There is also a program for pre-kindergarten kids who are part of the early intervention program. This is important, because often times the parents do not know how to deal with kids with mental disabilities. There have been reports that some of the kids have been chained so that they don’t run away or “cause trouble”. Other times, the mentally challenged kids are not “counted” as kids, and are not involved in any family activities etc. Therefore, by inducting these kids into the program early and involving and educating their parents, there is a greater chance of rehabilitation and ultimately getting the kids to be as independent as possible.

The school employs many teachers who are trained in special needs. Furthermore, the school also employs (or contracts with) speech therapists, physiotherapists, ophthalmologists (or equivalent.) These specialists visit the school several times a week and work individually with the kids.

We then toured the facility, visiting 3 different classrooms (see photos below.) Each classroom had about 15-20 kids. We were told that when the school was first founded, there was hardly any furniture for the kids, so they sat on the floor. With Asha’s funding (and subsequent funding from another charity) the school now has wonderful furniture - made of hard-plastic, designed specifically for kids. Most of the kids seemed to be super happy, with smiling faces and a quick namaste for us as we were introduced. In the first classroom with the younger kids, both Ishika and Anushka sat next to one of the kids for a few minutes. Anushka even shook hands with one of the girls.
There is also an indoor/outdoor area at the back of the school, which serves as the vocational training area. Here, kids are trained in simple tasks such as making paper plates using a hydraulic press, while others learn how to make beautiful ornaments (such as necklaces) with beads. These artifacts are then sold in wholesale or in collaboration with some other NGOs such as the Mahila Parishad and the Blind People’s Association.

There was a kitchen area which was kept closed for the kids’ safety. Some staff members were making some food for the kids when we visited. (This is a little bit of conjecture on my part; not sure about the details.)

Overall, the school was wonderful. It was clean, well organized and well run by highly passionate individuals. We discussed future needs. A key thrust for the school is more vocational education in an effort to make the older children as independent as possible. This is also an area where the school is putting together a proposal to garner additional funds.

Photos from several classrooms below:
Ornaments made by the kids