
FIELD REPORT: SAMERTH TALIM KENDRA

JUHAPURA, AHMEDABAD

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Samerth Trust is an NGO that works on social inclusion of marginalized communities in Gujarat and Chhattisgarh states. In Gujarat, their primary area of work is in Ahmedabad and Rapar. I got introduced to Samerth and its work with special needs children in Ahmedabad through Rajul ji. Samerth Talim Kendra, is a day care for special needs children in Juhapura Sarkhej cluster, a relatively impoverished, Muslim majority locality in south-west Ahmedabad. This day care center caters to about 40 special needs children, and serves as a center for community awareness and resource development activities of Samerth. This document provides a brief of the visit as well as some subjective assessment of the work.

I arrived at the Samerth Talim Kendra at Juhapura on an auto-rickshaw with Rajul at around 1:30pm from South Bopal, Ahmedabad. Juhapura is a densely packed housing cluster, dominated by random construction of small houses intermixed with slums at variety of places. The locality is habituated predominantly by Muslim families. The locality has rather high instances of children with developmental (mental and/or physical) challenges, which lead to Samerth opening the day care for such children in the first place. There's isn't a clear information on the causes of high instances of developmental disability in the community, although there is unverified hypothesis that I would keep out of this document.

Samerth Talim Kendra runs in a rented facility off the main road and houses over 40 children from the community. The facility has been operation since 2006 and provides day care, as well as creates awareness amongst the community regarding disability. The facility, at inspection seems a bit ill-kept but quite large. Interestingly the owner has not allowed the use of ground floor forcing the day care operations to the first floor only. The ground floor is used by the owner as a storage facility and has not permitted any modifications, barring some renovation, to the structure either. The toilets are situated on the ground floor, forcing children and staff to shuttle between floors to use the toilets. The main day care situated on the first floor has three large rooms, and a big hall. The two rooms serve as activity rooms/classroom for children, while the third room is used as spillover for group activities, community discussions and meetings. The hall houses the physiotherapy equipment, toys, books and acts as a general activity area for children.

At the time of my arrival, children ere in their activity rooms with their instructors. I was greeted by Afroz Beig who's the project coordinator of Samerth Talim Kendra. Afroz has been with the Samerth for a long

time and has been with Talim Kendra since its inception. Afroz gave a brief about the center, its current challenges, and about the community it serves. The children attending the center have moderate to severe developmental disabilities, and are divided into groups depending on their challenges, progress, and abilities to negotiate tasks. Naznin Chawda and Sayra Pathan are the teachers from the community that Afroz has trained over the years and have been working with the children for a while now. We proceeded to meet the children and sit through the classes. Sayra ji was with a group of slightly advanced children in drawing/coloring activity. The children were seated in a circle with sitting desks, and were either drawing or coloring pages from a coloring workbook. It was heartwarming when all the children gave us a cheerful welcome and were rather excited to share their, admittedly very inspiring, artwork. Children seemed engaged, happy, and aware. Despite of their disability, most has impaired motor abilities and/or and palsy, children seemed aware and quite alert. They paid attention to Sayra and Afroz when they introduced me and all of them wanted to show their drawings when asked. Some children visibly were more challenged than the others but nonetheless, showed a level of alertness that I counted as developmental progress despite of their unique condition. This was a group of children who were progressing better on development scale, and these sessions help them improve their fine motor abilities while helping them sit and work in a group.

Afroz and Rajul subsequently took me to meet with the second group of children. Naznin ji was working with the group of about 11 children, most of whom were boys. This was a group of children with rather severe disabilities and despite having made tremendous progress were still relatively poor on development scale. Most children acknowledged us and some greeted us either with Namaste or a Hello. Rajul and Afroz told me about the severity of disability some children face and improvement that some children have shown over the years. Despite of the humble setting, and dearth of equipment, this place seems to have made a definite change in lives of these children.

After meeting the children, we sat down in the hall for a discussion. Afroz gave me a brief history of the Talim Kendra and her journey since the inception of this day care. She has been instrumental in the success of this day care, and over years has received trainings, often at her own expense, to learn methods and interventions to engage with children who need special care. She is also the primary instructor & mentor for Naznin and Sayra who have been trained by her over the years. Sayra herself is a mother of a special needs child and her involvement in part is a personal journey as well. Besides the day care, Afroz plays an active role in the community, and along with the teachers works to sensitize the community about developmental disabilities and treatment of such children in society at large. A significant part of their work is to counsel the parents, who often suffer from economic and social hardship, women more than men. There is also a deep communal divide that plagues the region exacerbating the situation further. I came to know that the state government, as well as the center, has been either non-committal or non-cooperative in supporting the day care despite of their proven track record and strong community support. I witnessed evidence of multiple applications to secure support from various child welfare schemes that have failed to bear fruit after prolonged perusal by Samerth. Despite the failures, they continue to engage the state machinery to get any help that can come by.

As I was about to conclude my visit, that lasted a little over an hour and a half, I parent came to pick his child from the day care. After fetching his son from Naznin's classroom, he [name withheld] stopped by and introduced himself to me. And said [quote, translated from Gujarati] "this day care has changed our life, what they have done for my child is nothing short of a miracle. Please help this day care if you can in any way." I do not know how he assessed my presence with ability to help the day care center, but, he seemed full of gratitude. He further mentioned that "... its only because of Samerth that our children are becoming capable of handling themselves, we don't know how we would take care of them otherwise ...".

The day care is a bit understaffed, but, teachers are complemented by part-time and visiting specialists (physiotherapist, audiologist, arts & crafts instructor), that make the engagement holistic. Lack of on premise, continuous availability of professional therapist stems primarily from limited financial support. The project seemed like a reasonably good fit for Asha for Education to consider, and we agreed to make a proposal to Asha for Education SF.

During our discussion in the hall, a child Imran, came and sat near us to eat his lunch. Imran has moderate mental retardation and has been at the center for a few years now. Afroz encouraged him to sit and eat, and ask for any help. I understood that eating lunch, being able to wash his hands after eating, and showing a clean tiffin box to us might not sound much, but, for Imran was a tremendous achievement. This entire episode also highlighted the problem that the current facility poses to children like Imran, he had to walk down to wash his hands while Afroz quietly excused herself from our discussion to check on him. Imran doesn't like asking for help anymore, but, somebody from the staff is always watching.

Our discussion soon gravitated towards the immediate needs of the day care center, and admittedly a lot can be improved. Better equipment, a full-time therapist, better training for instructors, there ample possibilities. As we ended our discussion, Rajul invited me to briefly meet with the community meeting that was taking place in the adjoining room. About 12 community women leaders were in a meeting with Samerth social worker. I spent some time meeting and getting introduced to them and got a first hand feel of their work and the kinds of issues they deal with. This gave a perspective into community interventions of Samerth and how this connects back to the success to Talim Kendra – most community members have had their children attend the Talim Kendra or have been working with Samerth on community sanitization or other interventions. The community work broadly is divided into (a) helping women deal with domestic abuse/violence, (b) women and girl security in society at large, and (c) sensitization of community in general about women rights and above issues. These interventions beyond sensitization work they conduct for special needs children in the community. Additionally, they help women with securing Government subsidies and benefits by providing assistance in filling paperwork and filling forms to various government agencies. I spent about 15 min. meeting the community members before taking a leave from the Talim Kendra.

Overall, I was impressed by the quality of intervention and dedication of Afroz, Naznin, Sayra, and others at the Talim Kendra that has made such a visible change in the lives of many children. Overall, this is an inspiring intervention and certainly worthy prospect for Asha for Education to consider.