

Site Visit Report for Seva Chakkara Samaj (SCS)

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Background:

Seva Chakkara Samaj (SCS) is a residential home/orphanage and school for 110 children and 5 staff in Chennai. This project partner has been supported by the NYC/NJ chapter since 2001. Some of the children are orphans, but 80-90% of children are of single parents or otherwise parents that are not able to provide a home for them (day laborers, reside as domestic staff, etc.). The orphanage consists of two buildings which serve as a school (KG – 5th standard), residence for the boys and girls and the administration office. There are a number of staff/wardens who reside with the children. Lakshmi Ravichandran is the General Secretary who oversees all the administration and has been the main point of contact for Asha NYC/NJ for many years. Starting with supporting the full budget for administration, food, and education expenses, the expenses grew rapidly as the number of children supported grew over the years. Currently Asha supports a large portion of the educational budget.

Visit:

I planned the visit to be a one-day event like my previous visit in March 2008, and scheduled it for Saturday when the children will be home at SCS. To assist me in the travel, my cousins Madhura Chaitra and Karthik, also came with me. We traveled by bus, arranged by LakshmiAkka and Mahesh, on Friday night from Bangalore and reached Chennai ~5am on Saturday morning. We were met by Mahesh and staff from SCS and were taken to a hotel nearby to freshen-up and then walked to the SCS location which was around the corner. We had a very sweet and traditional greeting by the youngest of the children, all bright and smiling, standing in line and presented us one-by-one with flowers. Afterwards, we went upstairs to the main hall for breakfast with all the children. To facilitate the visit, and communicate with the children (I don't speak any Tamil) and help us throughout the day, we had a young woman, R. Mahalakshmi assist us. She was a young 8th grader when I visited last; she is now a very confident, articulate, young woman, studying for the IAS exam while also pursuing a Masters in Commerce. It was great to see and speak with her again after so many years and we appreciated all her help accompanying us through the day while we visited us.

Administration/Review:

After breakfast, we toured the building and the changes that had taken place since my last visit in March 2008 (7 years!). Large improvements have been made with the dining hall area, which now had a roof, floors had been redone, and most importantly, significant amounts of technology and security enhancements. Due to general building code requirements, there were large number of CCTV cameras throughout the two buildings with the feed being displayed on a large flat-screen TV in the administrative office. Additionally, visits/certification plaque was displayed for basic safety/occupancy requirements checks. Per regulation, there has to be now segregation of the older boys and older girls – they now “reside” in the two separate buildings. The maximum occupancy capacity per regulation is about 140 + 75 for the two buildings. As mentioned above, there are currently 110 children (57 boys and 53 girls) residing at SCS. Over the past year, about 16 new children (12 girls and 4 boys) have been admitted to SCS; over the same period 12 children have left. But, there were at least a 100 requests to join – showing still a demand for the orphanage.

Over the years, most of the children have been admitted into English medium private schools. Though they are “orphans”/lower economic standing, and should get some discount on the fees, there is still discrimination by the schools when there are open enrollment spots in the schools. Only when LakshmiAkka indicates that she will pay the full tuition expenses, do the schools miraculously announce that a spot to join is open! Details of the children, their standards of study and fees are available in the budget proposal.

Activities/Children:

My cousins engaged and spent time interacting, talking and playing with the children for most of the day while I was in discussions with LakshmiAkka. After lunch, we showed a Planet Earth video that I had bought along to donate to the orphanage. They bought a projector owned by LakshmiAkka's husband and were able to project the video on a large screen and have all the children watch. The children had a great time viewing the amazing videography and imagery; afterwards, we had a question & answer session hosted by R. Mahalakshmi. The children had great fun and I hope they continue to watch the rest of the episodes and other videos going forward.

After the video, I took them to the bookstore to buy some books - we went to one of the oldest bookstores in Chennai, Higginbotham's. We took a couple of the children to select some books - both in English and Tamil that would make good additions to the library. We chose both fiction and non-fiction books. On the drive to the store, there was large amount of construction visible in the underground metro that is currently underway.

In the evening as we wrapped out the work, we took some video diaries of a couple of the children - describing their name, age, standard, what they want to be and small tidbits to share. The goal is to potentially use to share the stories with donors and potential Asha events. With photography a very popular hobby and the ease now in making videos, it could be another learning opportunity maybe have children create and share videos of life at the orphanage.

After dinner with the children, we bade farewell to the children and caught a taxi-ride to the bus-station for the overnight ride home. Again, a very short, but successful visit to see the great work done by SCS and ensure continued support and funding by Asha NYC/NJ.

Notes/Recommendations:

Though I didn't go into too many details with LakshmiAkka, the project is well run by the staff and the children enjoy staying at the orphanage, providing a caring and nurturing environment. This sentiment was echoed multiple times by the children themselves to me.

With the large amount of infrastructure improvements, the housing and residence facilities has greatly improved, but I was unable to ascertain with the amount of children, is the space adequate? However, given the limited resources/space availability, this would be hard to improve upon in the current circumstances. I was not able to ascertain how the children are supported in their studies – though there is study time with the teachers overseeing their study periods in the evenings, it would be great to see if there are any opportunities to increase their interest in studies and learning in general (outside memorization and focus on school studies only). Questions are always asked in the chapter meetings about what happens with children who – either leave the orphanage or graduate and pursue employment opportunities. It would be great to follow the young adults and see how they are doing, which in-turn can provide success stories for the younger children as well as for stories to share with Asha donors.

Pictures:

Some snapshots of the orphanage as we interacted with the children through the day.



A panoramic view of the dining area when we all sat down for lunch.



Discussing, sharing stories and playing games with the girls. R. Mahalakshmi is the young woman standing on the left.



Question & Answer session after watching the Planet Earth video.



Young boys studying in the evening in the "Boys Hostel" rooms.



A view of the young girls outside the SCS building. Lakshmi Akka, the general secretary, is the woman on the far left.