



Sahyog Site Visit Report

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Background Information: Sahyog began its work when Neha Madhiwalla and Padma Deosthali realized how many adolescent girls in Mumbai were dropping out of school or missing classes due to poverty related causes, social pressures, and a dearth of local schools. In response to these issues, the two women began the Chehak Trust, and through it, founded a school for the girls in the Jari Mari community. They opened their doors in June 2000 to twenty girls and one teacher, and were soon so successful that they expanded to open similar school in Goregaon East, as well as a special needs education program in Jari Mari in 2003. Over the next ten years, more than 800 girls attended the schools. Sahyog's approach towards the education of disadvantaged children is unique, in that, it focuses extensively on using education to bring about a social change in the communities it works in. The organization was awarded the EdelGive Social Innovation Honour for Education in 2010 as recognition of their creative and successful work within their schools. However, shortly following that achievement, Sahyog came to realize that its role as a school in the community needed to change, as most of the girls in its schools were moving on towards mainstream formal education classes. Therefore, Sahyog shifted its focus in 2011 to creating new programs and implementing new changes to existing programs that focus on career training, disability intervention, and life skills training for both their schools' graduates and other women in the communities.

Site Visit at Sahyog's Sangharsh Center: Beena Choksi, a part of the Chehak Trust and an Educational Consultant for Sahyog, arranged my visit to two of Sahyog's centers, Sangharsh being the first. Sangharsh is a non-formal school center for children with special needs that aims to help them become self-reliant individuals, who can integrate into formal education or employment environments. The center identifies and evaluates special needs individuals, adapts its teaching specifically to their needs, and helps them become active, valued community members. It was originally located in the Jari Mari community, but in 2011, the organization realized that its center was hard to access for the Kaju Pata community which was in need of its services, and moved to a new location in the Kurla-Ghatkopar. I met Beena on the outskirts of Ghatkopar and proceeded to take a series of long rickshaw rides through dirt roads and extensive hills towards the Sangharsh center. Eventually, our driver refused to go any further, and we walked the last ten minutes to the center. As an outsider, the center is almost impossible to find since it sits atop a steep dirt road inaccessible by car. For the bustling community of shops and homes around it, the location is central to their lives, and well placed in the hills. Sangharsh is located in an extremely small room, not much bigger than an average American bedroom, filled with seven special needs students, a lead teacher, and two teacher's aides. The room has chipped paint, one large barred window with two benches on either side, and a table with a laptop computer and supplies. There are also some storage units and alphabet posters on the walls, yet no desks, chairs, or bathroom facilities in the room. Despite the minimal necessities, I was

exceedingly impressed by the schools' staff as they interacted with the children. The children range in age from approximately three years old to fourteen years. About a third of the children I interacted with, are hearing impaired, while the rest have various forms of intellectual disabilities. Almost all of the children are somewhat non-verbal but learning to speak; they used a variety of hand motions and gestures to communicate with the staff and I. They are clearly very bright and seem to thrive in their environment with peers who experience similar difficulties. After playing and interacting with the children, it was time to begin speech therapy. I watched as one teacher, Laxmi, who has a BA and a diploma in Special Education with a focus on mental retardation, worked with her students. She patiently arranged groups of three children with herself and the other two aides, and began speech therapy with the children. Witnessing this was a wonderful experience. Laxmi would go around in a circle with the children, placing one of their hands on her voicebox, and their other hand on their own voice box, and slowly repeat simple words in Marathi to the children. Between feeling the vibrations of their teachers' voice boxes, and watching the movements of their lips, nearly each student would attempt to repeat what Laxmi had said despite their various impairments. Laxmi was particularly encouraging and affectionate to her students and patted their heads, smiling and commending them, when they succeeded in speaking. One little girl's face lit up by being able to say a word, which translated to "banana," and pointed to a picture of the object on the wall excitedly as she made the connection to the word and its meaning. This instance alone was one of many in which it became obvious that Sahyog's work was making a difference in the lives of the children; they were improving daily. Therapy continued until each child had been worked with in their small groups, then the children sat in a circle and did the hand motions to a short poem while trying to speak its words as well. Soon after this, we left for another Sahyog location. but before leaving were shown many of the arts and crafts the children had created.

Site Visit at Sahyog's Umang Center: After leaving Sangharsh, we traveled to the Umang Program in Dindoshi. This program was located in a mainly Muslim community (95% of the students are Muslim women) situated outside of the city. The communities' current situation is largely the product of a slum rehabilitation project, in which inhabitants were removed from their land, located within Mumbai's city limits, and given a 225 square foot apartment in exchange. Unfortunately, these apartments are isolated from the rest of civilization atop a huge hill with little or nothing nearby. Apparently, the area is much more developed now than it was a few years ago, but Beena explained that this isolation is still extremely difficult for the community. I couldn't help but imagine the extent to which this must affect them as the road literally drops off to nothing past the apartments on the hill. Sahyog's Umang program's English language class was located in a room in one of the 225 square foot apartments. The room is bare except for one window, in which a large white board is tied to the window bars by twine, and benches to accommodate the twenty young women who attend the English class. On the room's door, "Sahyog" is scribbled in permanent marker, and a goat wandered the halls of the apartment building as the class went on. Apparently this room is a new location, as they had recently been forced out of their old classroom and were unable to find another suitable location nearby in time. A new teacher, who is just twenty years old, stood in front of the class and instructed her students to introduce themselves in English, in which all happily did. She is a natural born teacher, very effective, as she is from the local community and teaches the class in a firm but thoughtful way. I was impressed with her manner and assertiveness. The students showed me

their textbooks, which Sahyog had purchased for them, and which were especially designed for English language learners living in low-income areas. We remained for about a half hour of this class, in which the teacher and her pupils spoke bits of English and wrote in their textbooks. We then said goodbye and began our trek home.

Observed Needs of Sahyog: The lack of tables and chairs in Sangharsh, Beena later explained in an email to me, is causing posture problems among children. Children are forced to write sitting on the ground and benches. The lack of a bathroom was a huge issue at the time. (Since then, Sahyog was forced to move to a new rental location a few months after my visit, which now has a bathroom.) Sangharsh also has no sign language teacher, and expressed to me their longing to have someone come in to teach their instructors and students sign language, due to the large percentage of their students who are hearing impaired. They also have no textbooks adapted to the needs of their children, which may be highly beneficial to the school if purchased and implemented in their curriculum. At the Umang class location, I did not observe funding to be as much of an issue but, again, the need for desks and more classroom materials as well was apparent. The resounding problem Sahyog faces is the need to purchase classrooms of their own, since renting rooms has become an issue as they are constantly forced to change locations.

Concluding Thoughts on Sahyog: I was amazed by the faculty at both Sahyog locations. They teach effectively and have obviously built meaningful relationships with their students, who may have little other support or encouragement outside of class. Sahyog's use of local community women as teachers clearly aligns with their belief in using education and skills training as a gateway to social change, as did everything else I observed in my visit. Their persistence in sticking with the communities in both locations despite being forced to move classrooms repeatedly, and adapting their programs to the needs of the area is commendable, as are their teachers, whose students show the result of their hard work. I would highly recommend Sahyog for Asha for Education funding, and have nothing but good things to say of their work as an organization.