Sandnya Sanwardhan Sanstha has been supported by Asha for Education since 2006. Asha Athens has been the primary chapter that has maintained its relationship all along while there have been significant contributions from other Asha Chapters like Silicon Valley, Philadelphia, NYC/NJ and more recently the Portland chapter intermittently based on additional funding requirements or shortfall of funds from Asha Athens. This visit reminded me again of how well run the school is with the management and administration keeping a close eye on the needs of the school and doing their best despite their constraints.

Having visited the school almost every year since 2008, the last 10 years or so have given me the opportunity to see the changes and improvements that have taken place over the course of time. The school has been using a new big hall that accommodates all the students for its prayers during seasons when it’s hot or wet to conduct the morning prayer outside. Another reason to have the prayer indoors was that I happened to visit during the 10 day Ganesh festival that is popular in Maharashtra and the school celebrates it in a big manner. The Ganesh idol is place inside of this hall and a puja is done every day along with the morning prayer session of the school so the children get to participate actively in it.

The school’s physiotherapy unit has been relocated to a bigger room. Readers of my earlier reports may note that earlier space used as physiotherapy room was getting cramped as more equipment got added over the years. Asha had also funded the cost of replacement of some of the aging equipment few years ago.
This visit coincided with festival time and being just under two months away from Diwali, there’s frenzied activity in the vocational unit that makes diyas and lamps and decorative hangings which sell well during the season.
The handicapped school bus project
The school has been actively working on an interesting project that I got to learn about. Asha had funded one of the 3 school buses that the school actively uses. Its ageing and needs frequent repair but that’s a discussion for another day. For now, they have a usable bus. With the student count having gone up in the last few years, the school has also admitted a considerable number of mentally challenged students who also have physical disability. While such students have always been a part of the student population at the school, they’ve spoken at length about the challenges of getting these students on and off the current school buses where the staff on board the buses have to help lift the child (harder with adolescents and grown up students) into the bus, followed by the wheelchair and do the same exercise while getting off the bus. The process is repeated in the afternoon when the students are dropped of at their houses.

The school tried exploring the option of buying a special bus with the hydraulic lift that will allow for a wheelchair to be lifted in the bus – similar to the buses common in western countries – but such buses aren’t manufactured in India. Buying a bus from outside the country was proving to be super expensive so they got to convince a hydraulic lift manufacturer to supply the hydraulic lift which a bus manufacturer will have to fit on their bus. But no bus manufacturer in India was willing to make modifications to their production line for just one bus.

The problem is also compounded by the fact that ordinary wheelchairs common across India aren’t suitable for such buses. So new wheelchairs needed to be procured. IIT Bombay offered to design a wheelchair to their specifications and while the design was okay, the workmanship wasn’t. The school being in a distant location (Nagpur) from the designer (IIT Bombay), didn’t help either. The fact that the school couldn’t physically test out the designed wheelchair on their students while it was being designed was a major hurdle. Finally, the school found a local manufacturer willing to design and test wheelchairs on-site locally and a prototype is now ready with which the school is satisfied. The school needs about 20 such wheelchairs that can be accommodated on the bus.

As for the bus itself, a Scandinavian bus manufacturer agreed to supply the chassis for this special bus that will have few seats for regular passengers and more capacity to strap and hold wheelchairs in place. The chassis will be shipped to Chennai where an Indian bus manufacturer has agreed to supply the body for the bus.
Given all the constraints, follow ups & detailed level of involvement required in such a massive project, the school has done remarkably well to stay on top of its goal of making such a bus available for itself. Perhaps for us living in western countries, its not uncommon to see such a bus in action every now and then, its quite rare to see things being made accessible to physically and mentally challenged individuals in India.

Asha Athens has agreed to fund a major cost of this school bus project and funds have been delivered to the school but due to the delays and difficulties the school encountered in getting to the state where the project is right now, most the funds are unused and will come handy once wheelchairs go in production and the chassis gets delivered in Chennai.

I hope to see this bus in action the next time I visit.

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