Site Visit Report
Sandnya Sanwardhan Sanstha

By Ashwini Nadjarni and Yash Warke

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In winter of 2005, my wife Ashwini Nadjarni and myself, Yash Warke did a site visit to the project that our chapter, Asha-Athens, has committed to. The name of the project is Sandnya Sanwardhan Sanstha, and is located in Nagpur, Maharashtra. We went to India on Dec 15th, and spent a few days in Mumbai where both our families are. We then visited Nagpur on Dec 23rd where we were also visiting my maternal uncle and his family. We had a couple of days stay over at his place, and the first of those two days we visited the SSS project.

The Secretary and co-founder of SSS, Mr. Naveen Deshpande had come to pick us up at my uncle’s house (which was about 30 mins from where the institute is located). I had been in touch with Mr. Naveen for a few months before we did this visit and so we had been planning the visit. On the way, we picked up Dr. Utturkar, the Chairman and co-founder of SSS as well as Mrs. Shailaja Deshpande (Mr. Naveen’s wife). When we reached the institute, we were welcomed by a gatekeeper who was also mentally challenged, but the very fact that he was at the gate helping out in the security process started the mind-boggling journey of SSS. We were in awe to see that someone who is himself disabled is providing services to the community rather than worry about his own disability. It was an impressive start!
Once we entered, we saw their motto in big bold letters – “They are not disabled, but differently-abled’. That said it all about their attitude! We were informed that the school was already in session and there was a board put up outside letting everyone know about our visit. We were taken to the Administrative office, where we had some water (it was almost 40°C in winter time!) and then Shailaja started giving us a tour of the institute. We first went to the group therapy room where there was a young boy of about 12-14 years of age who was severely retarded. Shailaja informed us that all children go through this exercise of group therapy where they learn collectively about basic concepts like shape, size, etc. as well as learning to hold things, identify things by color, etc. Although this exercise is preferred to be done in a group, it is frequently also done on individuals as required.

Next Shailaja took us to the class that was for autistic children. These children live in their own world, and have very little interaction with the outside world. The first goal of this class is to bring such children into the social world we live in. The next goal is to develop their daily skills. The main challenge these children pose is to control their hyperactivity. The energy generated though this hyperactivity needs to be channelized in the right place, otherwise it will become destructive. One of the teachers was teaching a student how to brush his teeth. We met two teachers and about 4 students there. The students were delighted to meet us, and each one of them smiled at us when we talked to them. One of the students did not know how to sit on a chair, and so his waist was tied to the back of the chair, so as to help him learn how to sit in a chair.

Next, Mr. Naveen and Shailaja took us to the music therapy class. There were about 6 children here, and the atmosphere was fully charged up due to the magic of music! There were two instructors, one was playing the harmonium and the other was overseeing the children. They were enjoying the popular song “Lakdi ki kaathi, kaathi pe ghoda” that the instructor was playing on the harmonium. The
children, even though they couldn’t understand the words of the song, were thoroughly enjoying the tune of the song and were moving their heads to the tune. Some of them were also jumping on the rhythm. All in all, it definitely appeared that music as a form of therapy was definitely working for this group. The room had a lot of charts and drawings that were created by the students, and they were proudly displayed on the walls.

We then visited the Care group that was located in the individual pagoda-like units. These children have relatively short attention span, and hence should ideally be there only for 2.5 hours maximum for academics. When they were in Nagpur earlier, they used to have these students in school only for that much time and then they used to go home. However, now that they have moved further away to Butibora town (suburb of Nagpur) and they run buses to pick up these children, they cannot afford to have these children go back in mid-day. Hence they are there for the entire day, but their day is planned such that the academics are completed in the first half of the day and they relax for the rest of the day. The Care group teaches children how to take care of themselves. For instance, one of the students was being taught how to tie a knot using two strings. This way he will be able to wear his own clothes soon without depending on others for that. There were other children doing more relaxing activities (since it was afternoon time) that needed eye-hand co-ordination. Some others were doing something on their own. Basically, children were relax during the afternoon time while at the same time learning something basic that allowed them to take care of themselves. One of the children there was so shy and conscious that he just couldn’t stop smiling, all the time looking down at the floor!

We then visited the next-door Primary class. This was the class that taught them basic things necessary for leading a daily life – like crafts, cutting, etc. There were about 10 children here. The most active student of this school was in this class – right from the time we went in, she started jumping and was just delighted. Many students in this class were suffering from multiple disabilities.
We asked each one of them their name, and some of them very gladly pronounced their names to the best of their abilities. Some of them got very excited and also started reciting names of the other children in the class and recognizing them. Two of the children very fondly did ‘Namaskar’ to us.

The Secondary class was right next to the Primary class. Here there were slightly elder children and they were immensely pleased as well to see us. It had now started to become a regular practice in all classes for the students to be delighted when they saw any visitors. The children in this class started tapping on the table and jumping in their chairs itself. All the children here did ‘Namaste’ to us on their own. The teachers were teaching the children craft, specifically how to draw and then stick colored paper in the drawing at the appropriate places. This was to enhance their abilities to identify color and deal with one problem at a time to solve the overall problem. The children very proudly were telling us that we did this piece of art, along with their name. One of the children, Aditya, started showing us his drawing book which had all his drawings. When we asked him whether all these drawings were done by Aditya, he nodded his head in great joy 5 times! As we started leaving, the children said ‘Bye’ in unison and with big smiles.

Next, we visited the Pre-Vocational class. There were about 5-6 children in this class, and were learning things that will train and help them when they lead their own lives in the outside world. Here the teacher, Mr. Shende, was teaching the class how to prepare a ‘Bead Tree’, wherein the children were using beads of various kinds and inserting them into long metal wires to finally create a decorative tree item. The children seemed to have learnt a good bit, and appeared to be experts as they were working fast on getting to the final goal. It must be noted that all the children in the class, although very proficient at what they were doing, started off at different levels of retardedness and had reached this stage through all the other levels. Here they are also taught regular behavior concepts that are needed when living in the outside world – how to figure out
time, how to behave with teachers, how to behave with people elder and younger to you, concept of money. Mr. Naveen informed us that in some cases, they have to deal with challenges where the parents of the children want to dictate what should be taught at this level, frequently due to personal issues like social status, etc. The management of the institute have to plan their activities keeping all that into account.

We then headed into the Vocational unit. This class was meant to teach children the tasks that can be used directly to earn livelihood. There were four children here, and they were extremely happy to see us there. Here, we met one of the most smiling students, Nitu, who started showing us how to insert beads into a needle. There was also a novel concept we got to see here – that of Ambar Charkha. They have put the charkha to a novel use – that of increasing the eye-hand co-ordination. Frequently in vocational training, students need to have a good focus and strong eye-hand co-ordination. Most students lack that when they enter this level. SSS staff has managed to transform these once-extremely-hyperactive children into focus-oriented students by means of the charkha. In the charkha, as the wheels rotate and the thread spins and gets released below. In order to use that thread as it comes down, the student has to have a focus in terms of looking at the thread. If the student loses focus and looks elsewhere, then the timing of the wheels spinning by hand and the thread being released below is lost. Over time, the students use the charkha to develop their focus and eye-hand co-ordination in this way. A very different use of the charkha as compared to what its inventor must have had in mind! Charkha is also used as a therapy here, in addition to making use of it in the usual sense – i.e. create cloth out of the thread in the charkha. Another student, Pankaj, also demonstrated inserting beads into a needle to us for creating a necklace. It was amazing to see their eye-hand co-ordination. Nitu insisted that she will insert another bead into the needle only if her photo was clicked. Mr. Naveen was telling us stories about Nitu that her hand never used to stay still earlier, but she is now one of the finest
vocational training students who have mastered the art of inserting beads into a needle.

We then went into one of three Rehabilitation Units. The first one was Sorting and Packing Unit. Some of the children here were in the Rakhi and Friendship Band making unit. There was board there that clearly listed the goals of the unit – monthly/yearly targets, completion dates, etc. These bands are then sold to the outside world, and income is generated. It was practically run as a project in the corporate world so that there is competitive spirit and not just taken for granted. Each of these rehabilitation units is trained thoroughly in making these products, until the time that they are deemed to be ready to be released into the outside world on their own. At such a time, these students “graduate” from the school, and the parents of all the children in the unit take up the rehabilitation unit collectively and the children start generating income.

Another such unit was the Dinshaw Ice Cream Sticks Packing unit. There were about 8 children who were in charge of packing N number of spoons into individual packets for a local Dinshaw ice-cream company. This activity utilizes the counting skills of the children. These children, although quite busy under deadlines, were very gracious to say Namaste to us.

The third rehabilitation until was the Screen Printing unit, where children are taught how to print characters and words on surfaces using specialized techniques. These students were a little shy but appeared to be quite professional in their work.

We then saw some of the other artwork that the rehabilitation units had prepared. Each one of them was a class apart and worth a lot of value in the market. One of the students also showed us their picture taken with the Indian Cricket Team that was visiting SSS a few years back.
We then proceeded off to the Dining Hall, where students have lunch. Mr. Naveen explained that lunch was also viewed as a form of therapy for the children. They teach children how to eat here. Many times the childrens’ mother are not patient enough to teach a 15-year old how to eat, and so lunch therapy at SSS works much better. Also, frequently collective activities help learning a lot more than individual activities, because children look and learn from each other. We met the caretaker of the kitchen. Most children bring their lunch, but they also have the facility to cook food for some children, if necessary. Mr. Naveen indicated that they have not yet set up a full-fledged program for the kitchen that is well-thought out (in terms of what kind of nutrient foods they need to bring in, etc.). Dr. Utturkar also supported Mr. Naveen by saying that any project they undertake is started with the point of view of sustaining it further, and hence a lot of thought goes into it before roll-out.

Next Shailaja took us to the diya-making unit, where the children were making beautiful diya and candles of varying shapes and sizes (there was one with the shape of an ice-cream glass). The children were diligently painting the bases and filling it with wax. One of the students was missing, because he supposedly needed to take care of his father's shop that day.

By this time, it was time for the children’s outdoor activities and games in the lawn. There were boys on one side, doing long-jump, wherein they were also leaning the art of recognizing where the white line lies, and jumping only after that point. Mr. Naveen showed a lot of care by taking pictures of these game activities. The children also demonstrated a lot of traits like encouraging their colleagues in their games, discussing strategies, etc. There was also a boy on the wheel chair who was enjoying all the activities although he himself could not participate in the activities. On the other side, the girls were playing running games like ‘pakda pakdi’. There was another group of children on another side doing ‘pasaydan’, i.e. reciting prayers.
It was almost time for the children to go home by now. We stood by the gate and all the students, as they were leaving with their bags, gladly wished us Bye as they went by. SSS has two buses, each of which takes the students home in different directions, all the way to their door step, and also pick them up the next morning. All the children were so humble in nature that none of them failed to wish us as they went by.

Then Mr. Naveen and Dr. Utturkar took us on the top floor of the new construction work that had just been started with the new builder who had graciously agreed to build another floor at his expense. They expressed the desire that if they can finish off the new building construction ASAP, then they can bring those children who are currently in the pagoda-like units into the building.

Now, we had come to and end of the visit and we went back to the Administrative office and wrote loving remarks in their visitor’s book. Mr. Naveen, Shailaja and Dr. Utturkar then dropped us home in their car. While going home, there was an interesting incident that happened. An accident had just happened a few moments ago in which a truck had smashed into a car coming from the opposite direction, and the passengers in the car were still bleeding. It was amazing to see that a huge crowd gathered around, but no one was doing much to help. Mr. Naveen and Dr. Utturkar immediately jumped out of their car and pulled out the bleeding passengers, and put them in one of the other cars to take them to a hospital. If all the day’s experiences were not enough, just that one incident proved that these founders of SSS were not living lives for their own sake, but were constantly cognizant of placing services to the world always above services to self.

All in all, it was a very memorable and eye-opening visit. It is always easy to sit here in the US and learn of things happening on the project in India, however, getting to live a day in the lives of these children and in the midst of them all
really brings out the nuances involved and the challenges faced in this effort. However, it is welcoming to see that neither the staff, nor the children, or even the founders have gotten bogged down. Any challenge that has come their way, they see it not as an impediment, but as another opportunity to find a way around it. Although the staff and teachers are not so well-paid, it is their sheer dedication and love for the cause that keeps them coming every morning to the institute. We went back from SSS thinking how much we tend to worry about paltry things and brooding over them, while taking some very basic things for granted. Having lived a day with the children of SSS, it re-iterated the truth of the age-old adage “Where there is a will, there is a way!”