

## Site visit to Seva Chakkara Samajam 2-3 Dec 2012

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I reached Seva Chakkara Samajam (SCS) around 4 p.m. on Sunday. I focussed Sunday on taking care of administrative tasks requested by Asha-NYCNJ and understanding where SCS stands as an organization. This also led to various discussions I had with Lakshmi some of which I have documented here.

Though I have been in touch with Lakshmi and received updates from my mom (she volunteered at SCS for 5 yrs till she moved to Bangalore 2 yrs back) it had been many yrs

since I last visited SCS so Lakshmi showed me around the campus they have created for themselves in these two buildings.

The (smaller) office building has a computer centre a couple of staff quarters, the classrooms, some toilets. The computer centre is segregated into that used by the kids and two computers and a laptop used for office purposes. There is one computer used exclusively for account keeping and tally. There is small room used as staff quarters for the girls warden. On top are 5 classrooms, though they only have 4 grades now with 5<sup>th</sup> onwards going to local schools. There are also a few restrooms and space to take a bath. The first classroom is well lit, but the others keep going further into the building and the lighting and ventillation is not as good. RTE (Right to Education) requires that any school be registered, they had applied for the registration even though they have very few kids (around 30). One of the feedback from the govt is also to improve this in order to be approved. The other issue is also classroom size which is limited.

I met the teachers the next day there are two teachers and Sukanya also helps with the classes. One of the teachers had a death in the family and will not come till the customary time passes. There is also a yoga teacher who doubles as the warden for the boys. There is one vacancy in the number of teachers the required. I met the teachers on Mon. One teacher is responsible for grades 1 & 2 and the other for 3 & 4. Sukanya helps out for some time. Here is the first classroom... There are 112 children at SCS:

- Primary (V and younger) - 41
- Middle School (VI to VIII)- 26
- High School & Higher Secondary (IX-XII) - 35
- College - 4
- Differently able-ed – 6 (older kids)

There are around 30 kids who are in the inhouse school. These kids are very young and Lakshmi is still not comfortable with them having to travel for schooling for now.





SCS has acquired a small school bus this year. This may make transportation a little safer and easier. I think the bus can seat around 30 kids, so they must need to take turns to transport the 80 odd kids who need to attend school. Not all children go to the same school so the school timings being a little different may help.

Here is a picture of one of the inside classrooms. The pic also shows some of the artwork done by the kids with the art teacher.



This building also has a medical room where a doctor comes in daily. He gives preference and free medical consultation for those at SCS and charges a small fee (Rs.25) for outsiders. This way he gets to run a small clinic for a few hrs a day and it works out well for the organization too.

We next went to the larger building which is where all the children live. There are a couple of large halls one for the elder boys and one for the elder girls, a pooja room, and various smaller rooms where younger children live.

There are 8 odd restrooms and a dining area at the top of the building which is now also covered. It poured a good part of the time I was there and though the buildings are old there were only a couple of leaks that I could see. Due to the construction (the place was initially meant to be a godown [warehouse], hence, the thin and long rooms of the classroom and the large halls and limited minimal ventilation) there are gaps right in the middle of the buildings that is open to the elements, nonetheless, the place was amazingly clean considering over a 100 kids are running around.

The nice thing about the boys hall was that there was a raised platform at the end of the room to convert it into an auditorium when needed. They had also recently bought some chairs. I really liked



the fact that SCS keeps making incremental improvements which in time add up to something substantial.

There were special chairs for the really young kids and as Lakshmi explained meant to help them be more comfortable as they are the most fidgety during a presentation.

The puja room has every conceivable god and saint from most religions. Apparently, this is also a room for meditation though it's a small

room and I can't imagine it can accommodate many.

The girls room had been painted by Siemens as part of their CSR the last time I was here, though the paint had worn off now.

SCS is far more organized now than they were when I interacted with them earlier e.g. the names of children living in a room were listed outside.

Similarly, there is some sort of system or process in place for many things, even who among the senior students is responsible for cleaning, in what order do children take biscuit and fruits from donors, etc. But, with so many children it becomes necessary to have these processes in place.



The terrace is the brightest and the most open space during the day. The flooring here was also done when Siemens CSR was working with SCS a few yrs back.

Kamalkannan one of their former students who handles the kitchen now made us some hot dosas before we dug into the admin work at SCS. He cooks beautifully, though since I'm vegan and can't handle spice I got the food before it was 'spiced up'. The children like the food and he has been



keeping a tab on the nutritional needs of the children. At the same time having grown up at the SCS he has a good handle on what kind of food would be enjoyed/accepted by the children at SCS.

After having tiffin I went through all the documents and questions sent by NYCNJ.

There were some errors in the way data had been entered in the budget document Lakshmi had sent. I discussed this with her and corrected the document. It's available at: [http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/252/SCSBudget2012\\_2013.xls](http://www.ashanet.org/projects-new/documents/252/SCSBudget2012_2013.xls)

Next, I went through their audit report to understand their ability to raise funds other than that sent by Asha. Asha supports around 25% of their expenses and they were able to raise funds to meet the remaining amount. A consistent supporter for them has been the Shiradi Sai Trust in cash and in kind over the yrs. They also received a grant this year from Guru Krupa foundation for the school bus. They also have a donor who has been supporting the sports day expenses for a few yrs. The US donors (Guru Krupa and sports day) came across SCS through the website maintained by Asha-NYC NJ. There is a sizeable amount of donation that is in kind, people bring in rice bags for 10-20 kg or bring fruits, etc to give to the children. They also received support through individuals and Ashok Leyland.

One more of SCS former students Gangadharan is now working with Lakshmi at the office. He maintains the paperwork and the computers. I was happy with how streamlined the paperwork at SCS is now, both in terms of having paperwork in softcopy and even in gathering random vouchers I asked for. A similar audit had taken me 3 days 10 yrs back.

I had a discussion regarding the number of children at the orphanage. I pointed out that when we started working with Seva Chakkara almost all the children were under 7th grade. Now there are over 45 kids from IX onwards. This implies that children are staying in school longer and getting better jobs when they graduate and is a positive development, but it still feels like there are a lot of kids. Lakshmi mentioned that they have not grown in strength by a lot. Last year they took one family (one elder brother and two twins) and a couple of more children but only when 4 children graduated from SCS. There are some situations like street children who are brought in by the police also it is difficult to refuse.

We also talked about letting children be adopted. Having adopted a child earlier this year I realized that it is not easy to find children and organizations that allow legal adoption in India (the number of children adopted legally in India < 7000/year). Lakshmi said that they had applied for consideration as a legal adoption agency 5 yrs back. However, they have realized that it is not a good fit for SCS because

- 1) Primarily infants are adopted and even children at 3-4 yrs don't get adopted.

- 2) An adoption agency is required to maintain a separate block for infants with facilities and a high child to caretaker ratio. Even now there are two young kids and it is quite hard to have as many caretakers with them all the time.
- 3) Adoption requires the mother to relinquish her child and there are cases when the mother is too poor and not in a condition to take care of the child, but would like the child to grow up in a learning conducive environment but without losing the bond with the child. In such cases adoption is not an option.
- 4) There are cases where there are siblings and it is difficult to place these children.

For these reasons they have decided to let their application be and if they find abandoned infant forward him/her to an adoption agency rather than take up the child.

We spoke about exposure for the children beyond schooling. There are weekend classes for children from 7<sup>th</sup> onwards. Grades 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> have spoken English classes that volunteers take. Similarly, a group of volunteers take computer classes for grades 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. Children of grades 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> usually have extra classes in the school itself and don't take part in these activities. I showed her 'scratch' a program that can help children be creative and create their own games, animation, etc that can also be introduced to the kids.

We discussed initiating the SAC program at Asha-Blr and arrived at supporting the education of children from X-XII who require support to finish schooling as the best candidates for the program. We also decided to initiate the program in sync with the schooling year in May 2013. This would also offset the requirement from Asha-NYCNJ to raise the complete funds towards the education program.

## Day 2 - The fun day

With the admin stuff out of the way I thought I'll spend the next day in tracing what happens as the kids go to school and though I will miss most of the kids spend some time with the primary children at the inhouse school. I got up at 5:30 a.m. and found SCS was buzzing with activity. There was one child, K who was cleaning up the office building restrooms. He said that he slept in the computer room and it was his responsibility to keep this space clean. I walked around to the boys hall to find most of the kids were getting ready, getting water from the hand pump and getting younger children ready for school. There is a diary that children sign in once they are ready. Around 7:00 a.m. most children assembled and had a short prayer. I talked to the Yoga teacher/boys warden to understand what he does with the kids. He mentioned that he gives some asanas (though yoga is not asanas he told me) and does some meditation session over the weekend.

Anyway, just as everyone got ready to leave it turned out that due to heavy rains the classes were cancelled. Having seen the demo on scratch Lakshmi took the initiative and borrowed a projector for the morning for me to give a presentation of the same to the kids.

The auditorium kicked into action. The younger kids got their chairs and the older once just sat on the floor. I was glad that my stay at Sittlingi had improved my Tamil to be functional and not need the aid of an interpreter.

I had brought a bunch of puzzles with me. It helps me engage with the children and gives them something to do if they are not interested ☺. Also I use the puzzles as a way to gauge how

comfortable children are when encountered with new things. I was pleasantly surprised by how quickly the children took to the puzzles and tried to solve them without hesitation and fear of 'looking bad' if they were unable to solve it. Unfortunately, I have only worked with 10 kids of the same age group in the past and 100 kids of different age groups is a very different affair. The 8 puzzles I took were grossly inadequate and instead of easing the group only got them more excited. I used some of the games I had learnt at the L-net conference to calm the children so they were more patient and observant. By then the projector was set up and off we went.



The children seemed quite engaged and actively participated in the workshop/demo. There was a guessing game that the children had a ball with and another fish game that they changed the color of the fish, added voice over and we even used the laptop camera to add our pictures.

As all good things come to an end, Lakshmi informed me of a couple of hrs of load shedding that ended the session. The elder children were clearly comfortable with English. The younger children were not scared to try their hand out at stuff. Gauging at their comfort level of interacting with a new person these children have been receiving inputs from volunteers on a regular basis.

With the power gone we went to the roof and I decided to try out a full body learning exercise (again thanks to L-net, but of a different year). Once I had the children settled in with pick-pluck-eat routine we took some words they knew under a theme – transportation, vegetables, flowers and asked them to write down a bunch of words on the board. Different children wrote the words each time and it was nice to see there were no spelling mistakes. Then one of the children went through the words a few times so everyone is comfortable with them and then volunteer came up to the board to point out the words as they were announced by the audience. This involves the two people playing as well as the audience in picking out the words.



Since I was not in an alternative school I didn't need to worry about it turning into a competition and it turned into a boys vs girls affair. Though I kept playing with their heads and killing the game when they were tied, asking for two girls, two boys, different age groups, etc.



At one point my experimentation got a little too much for them and they started getting 'equal' children and had a contest up to 5 points. I let them make the game their own.



As my throat got sore and I was getting exhausted the children were getting more excited! The game got over and the children still wanted more! I gave them a theme of environment and asked them to do a play without words.

The power was back on and we went into the auditorium once more and after about ½ hr four groups of children put up their shows.



With the shows over we went for lunch and I headed out back to Bangalore.

I was quite happy having made the trip to Seva Chakkara after such a long time. There were many improvements and it was really nice to see so many children who are older and quite sharp and confident.