

Sahyog, Mumbai

Site Visit Report 18th January 2005

by Barnali Ghosh with Anirvan Chatterjee

We arrived in Mumbai at 9:00 AM and were met at the airport by Farzana and Haseena. The last time I had visited Sahyog was a year ago, as part of a three day visit to Mumbai in January 2004. During my previous visit, I'd been able to visit both the Jari Mari Schools and Dindoshi schools, and had gotten a chance to meet up with Neha, a co-founder of the project, and Sriram, a former Asha volunteer who is now a Sahyog trustee. This year, Neha was in The Hague as part of a scholarship program and Sriram was in Chennai doing tsunami relief work. It was great having them around the last time, so I was disappointed to not see them this time.

I was also a little nervous about seeing the girls again. But just like the previous time the girls were all so friendly and smart and warm and talkative that it became very easy to communicate with them. I had met Farzana last year and we recognized each other immediately at the airport. I remember that on my last visit, Neha had described Farzana as a very strong woman and a very important driving force and leader at Sahyog. Farzana used to be a teacher at the project, but now she heads the community health-training program. From the airport, we took a taxi to the hostel where Neha had arranged for accommodation, and took an auto to Chehak Trust's office in the Jari Mari. The office was a new development since last year, and it was great to see that Sahyog had a stable administrative home. Space for the classrooms, let alone the office, has always been a big issue for the school in both the Jari Mari and Dindoshi sites. The new office is where Bharti, Farzana and Neha sit. Bharti is the Program Assistant at Sahyog and has overall management responsibilities; in Neha's absence, she showed my husband Anirvan and I around.

As we had only one day, we immediately started on our tour of the classrooms. We first went to the Sahyog Sanghursh classroom. The kids were all seated, but restless. There were both boys and girls of a wide age range. It was obvious that the children all needed care and attention. It seemed like most of the children there had mental disabilities of varying magnitudes. The four Sahyog students who work at the school were chosen because of their patience and interest, and were crucial to managing the class. The classroom itself was festive from having recently celebrated Christmas and Sankranti. There were also birthday charts on the wall. The teachers and students also showed me some of the things the children had made, such as wall hangings. The older children made medicine packets to sell to doctors' offices, but weren't doing it anymore, as it wasn't making them any profit. After that, we went to the higher-grade classes, and then the middle grade classes. In all of the classes the children were eagerly awaiting our visit. We always introduced ourselves and had the children tell us their names. Then the children would typically give us a demonstration of their talents. Girls would come up and read a story or teach a lesson to the rest of the class. In my previous visit one of the most fun activities was singing with the girls. They first sang songs of empowerment, about education, being a girl and women's rights. Then we'd sung old Bollywood songs together. Singing together always breaks the ice! We spent about 15-20 minutes at each class. It seemed as if the school had grown substantially, but some of the growth we perceived came from the new BMC-funded classes that Sahyog has started running. As we continued on through the classrooms, it was a pleasure to meet four of the girls I had met last year now engaged in teaching. The four girls had passed their

10th grade exams, and were in the process of studying to take their 12th standard exams. The classroom for each standard was in separate spaces but sometimes shared a partitioned room.

We had three more classes to visit when Padma came to see us. Padma works in CEHAT, and along with Neha, was one of the original founders of Sahyog. I had also seen her on my previous visit. Anirvan, who speaks only English and Bengali, was happy to meet Padma, as she was the first English speaker we'd met in a Hindi- and Urdu-speaking community. The girls and I spoke in Hindi. Some of them showed off their English by asking us questions. They were particularly excited that Barnali Didi had gotten married. Padma took us for a little walk, and showed us the effects of one of the major issues affecting Jari Mari—demolitions. We could see that the slum had been cleared in a buffer area close to the airport wall. Padma explained that some of the “cleared” residents were coming back to their original community, and setting up shacks again. A major demolition that took place after September 11 had affected some of the girls from Sahyog. Their families had been forcibly moved to Din Doshi, the relocation site provided by the government. We were not able to visit Din Doshi during this visit, due to the short length of our visit.

I did visit Din Doshi last year. It is a multi-storeyed apartment complex that sits atop a hill. There is no public transportation to it. There is a bus that cost Rs.10 each way—a prohibitive sum for most people living there. It is therefore a steep walk for most people. The only stairs to it pass through the houses at the foothills, and even that was recently blocked by the people at the foothill who resented the Din Doshi residents; the foothill residents contended that they were supposed to have been given the multi-storeyed apartments. The apartment blocks are at least five stories high and have no elevators. Units were allocated without any investigation, leading to older frail people being put on the top floor of the buildings. Shortage of water is also an ongoing issue.

The design of the buildings also had the effect of leaving girls feeling exposed. In Jari Mari, the girls could travel in groups to class through the galis knowing exactly which routes to avoid so they would be safe from eve teasers, but the apartment design made that very difficult. This issue interested me very much because of my background as an architect. In spite of all these challenges, the school was doing well when I visited it last year.

Another aspect of the project that I wanted to see this time was the new community health program. I was not able to see the clinic in progress, as the doctor was visiting the Din Doshi clinic that day, but I did see the space where the Jari Mari clinic operates. I also had a long chat with Haseena and Farzana about the work the clinic does. The clinic is open to all. Visits cost Rs.10, and treatment is free for students of Sahyog. The main focus of the clinic seemed to be pregnant women and children. We discussed the challenges of providing birth control to the women of the community. Some would not use it because it made them feel nauseous, others did not believe in birth control (believing that children are a gift from god), while others just forget to use it on a regular basis. Pregnant women who come to the clinic are encouraged to register at the government hospitals so that they can deliver there, and so that the children can get their birth certificates immediately. The first two deliveries are free at the government hospital. For every delivery after that, the parents are charged a Rs. 500 fine. If a man or women gets sterilized, the cost of this fine is given back, but the refund ends up being the fee for the operation. These

factors lead to many parents choosing to have homebirths, and children being born without birth certificates. A major activity of the community health program is wading through the muddy bureaucratic process and getting these children birth certificates. Haseena described the many trips she has to make to various agencies to make this happen. It seemed as if she had built up alliances with various constituencies, and had the process figured out.

By the time we finished visiting all the classrooms, we were all very tired and hungry, as we had not had time to have lunch. We went out to dinner with Bharti to the local South Indian restaurant—there are very few things that a good masala dosa can't fix. We had an opportunity to chat with her about her life and how she came to work at Sahyog. We found out that she and her husband were Buddhist and followers of Baba Ambedkar. Her husband worked at CEHAT, which is how she came to find out about the job. After dinner, we said our goodbyes and returned to the hostel for a much needed night's rest.