

Shristi Special Academy Site visit  
by Meena Venkatachalam (from Asha SV)

Chakri, Venki, Venki's mother and me visited Shristi on Dec 8th 2010. Venki drove us to Shristi and we got lost a few times; We reached the Autism unit in Nagarbhavi at 10am. We met Suchi, other staff members including Karthik, cooks, special teachers and therapists. Suchi and Karthik gave us a quick tour of the Autism center. While making a conversation with one of the staff members, I asked how long she takes to get to Shristi from her home and her reply was 27 mins. I asked her if that is exactly how much she takes to get to work everyday and her answer was yes. I was very impressed and immediately wanted to introduce Venki to her and bring her perfect time sense to Venki's knowledge. As expected, when Venki was aware of this fact, he was very happy :). For folks who don't know about Venki, he is an Asha SV volunteer who is a perfectionist and likes such accuracy a lot. We then went to the terrace. Now Shristi has covered the terrace up so that they use this as another floor. A few kids were cutting vegetables. Suchi was telling us how these autistic kids do things perfectly - they were cutting vegetables to perfect and consistent sizes. Venki was impressed for the 2nd time :) A few other kids were in sessions with their teachers. The size of the autistics center has increased since last year. Last year there were 15 children and now there were upto 25 children being supported.

We met one of the parents at the autistic center. She seemed pretty young to have a 13 year old son and 8 yr old daughter. Her husband is a lorry (truck) driver and they are from Belgaum. Her son is mentally retarded and goes to the pre-vocational unit in Chennahalli center. Her daughter is autistic and comes to this center. So the mother also comes along. She has moved to Bangalore to make a home very close to Shristi. Her husband visits them once in few weeks since he does not have luxury of staying with his family. She was telling us how much Shristi has helped her children. She seemed to be very relieved to finally get help from Shristi after being put down by her surroundings for many years because both her children have some kind of disability. She has seen a lot of improvement in both her children. At Shristi, they expect parents to participate as much in the child's life and so they give a lot of advise and suggestions on how to work with the children at home. Suchi added that the mother has taken a lot of effort and has been very diligent in all her work with her children and that is why they have seen such an improvement.

After hearing from this parent, we decided to go to the Chennahalli center. I drove with Suchi. Venki drove the rest of them and followed us. We reached Chennahalli center. Anu, one of the staff members gave us a tour of the different units in this center. The tour started with the vocational unit and moved on to other units. We met various special teachers, therapists and other staff members most of whom I had met last year too. So it was good to see that they did retain their staff members. We ate lunch at the Shristi kitchen and visited the organic garden. The garden has all sorts of plants. We then went back to the vocational unit. We were talking to the Jyothsna, music therapist about her work and if she enjoyed working here. She did enjoy working at Shristi. We then worked on attaching strings to the bags along with rest of the people at vocational unit. Music therapy started in some time. So we joined in for that where the staff and children from vocational unit were singing folks songs following the lead of Jyothsna. It was time for us to leave but only after Chakri and Venki finished their shopping which took a while!

Not much had changed at Shristi since last year except that they had full fledged working Occupational therapy room setup in Chennahalli center. On the whole it was a very nice visit. One thing I would like to highlight is that project partners at Shristi give a very frank view of the project - all their nice work they do and also all the challenges they face. Also, they don't really change their routine work because some (esp a funding agency) is visiting them and at the same time they are welcoming. For all these reasons, it is very easy for anyone to do a Shristi site visit and also it gives a lot of credit for the organization