

## A MODEL VILLAGE SCHOOL: THE SAI STORY

By Humera Ahmed

About 14 km from the town of Mangaon in Raigad district is the small village of Sai. When you Google Sai village Raigad, it does not appear on the internet. But it has a state of the art school built by Advocate Harun Solkar nearly 40 years ago. Before 1978 Sai only had a primary school with classes up to 4<sup>th</sup> standard and then for further schooling the children had to go to Morba, a small town nearly 8km away. Harun Solkar who was born and grew up in Sai did exactly that – walking both ways which way back in the early forties when there were no proper roads and bus services was no easy task, especially when one had to cross the Morba ghat. After completing his matriculation at Morba, he went to do his Intermediate at Mahad and then for his graduation and Law Degree at Mumbai (then Bombay). He could do so because his father was well off – the house in which he grew up is still there- a fine, sturdy, well maintained double storied house, nearly 120 years old.

Based on his experience and wanting to provide continued and uninterrupted education up to Junior College to the residents specially the girls of the village, he decided to build a school where children could complete their matriculation and didn't have to go through the ordeal he went through. This school is a fulfilment of his dream.



Sai is a picturesque village, situated just below the Morba ghat and when I visited it on 4<sup>th</sup> September, during the monsoons, the sight of the cluster of houses with Mangalore tiled roofs, the tall minars of the two mosque piercing the blue gray sky and the surrounding lush green paddy fields was breathtaking. Ninety percent of the population of 7000 souls is Muslim and 10% is Buddhist. Many male members of the Muslim families, specially the professionals such as doctors, engineers work in Mumbai and the Gulf countries, sending remittances home. Some of the residents are agriculturalists, growing rice. The village receives water from a nearby dam – the Sai dam which collects rain water flowing down the Morba ghat. The Gram panchayat of Sai which looks after a number of villages has a 17 member body. The State Transport Bus from Mumbai to Shrivardan has a halt here. There are also a few buses from Mangaon which connect the villages

The village has a branch of the Union bank, opened in 1992 provides banking services to nearly 22 villages in and around Sai. The single handed Sub Post office with 2 postmen and 3 branch post office offices was upgraded from a branch post office in 1994. The branch post office was opened in 1978. Before 1978, when Mr. Solkar started building the school. Sai had no bank or post office and also no medical store. Now it has one and also a small hotel though fruits, vegetables, groceries and other house hold items are still brought from Mangaon. But it's most prominent and unique feature is the Advocate Haroon Solkar school. The school has ground + 2 floors and a third floor is under construction where state of the art laboratories, a library, digital center and class rooms will be provided. The school is the focal center for schooling not only Sai but also from the surrounding villages – at least 20 in number from where children come through the State transport or through privately hired Omni Maruti.

It was nearly 3pm when I visited the school – the classes were in progress. The enthusiasm was palpable : on 5<sup>th</sup> was Teachers day and the good students from the senior classes ( 8 and 9 standard onwards ) were being assigned the primary classes(1to 4) for teaching in an attempt to inculcate the value and dignity of teaching .

The school follows the dual language system of education: the medium of instruction is in Urdu and English. The students are taught Science and Math in English, which as a language is taught from 1st standard onward. The other subjects are in Urdu. The result of the schools has been excellent and one of the students scored 95%.

A most encouraging sign in the school was the coeducation system: boys and girls (in hijab) sat in the same class – competing with each other. One of the girl's when asked, what she wanted to become said she wanted to be Doctor; another said she wanted to be a dentist. In a Junior class, two boys said they wanted to be Mechanical Engineers; another wanted to be a pilot. The two lady teachers who proudly escorted us around were two young and highly motivated sisters both class teachers - Zahida and Atika Solkar. They had completed their schooling at this school.

As the children went through the basic schooling which prepared them to fulfil their dreams, the school also ensured the children's religious and moral grounding was taken care of. There were classes in Deenyat – Islamic instruction and Ethics

The Maharashtra State Government is supporting the initiative and providing funds for the teachers' salaries-and other benefits from 5th standard onwards. Mid- day meals are also provided for the students and the teachers had no complaints about the quality of the food.

The school in Sai seemed a model school, demonstrating clearly what dedicated individuals committed to education and empowerment of the community can do. If there were more such initiatives, at least at Gram Panchayat level, India will I am sure be transformed .



*Figure 1 A senior class in progress at the school*