The Preschool Years
A Balwadi Programme Report

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THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS
The most important period of human life, when the foundations of health, cognitive development, language, personality and capacity are laid is undoubtedly the preschool age. A period of utmost vulnerability and rapid development, it is now more than ever that the young child needs health care, nutrition and psycho-social stimulation in a caring and secure environment in order to ensure holistic development.

In a country like ours where the Infant Mortality Rate* in 2003 stood at 60 per thousand live births, the under five Mortality Rate* during the period 1998-2002 was 98.1 per thousand and child malnutrition contributes to 50%** of child mortality, it is but understandable that our national priority remains the survival of children and improving their health and nutritional status.

Of secondary importance is the formal education of children. Our dismal public school statistics** reveal that out of every 100 children, 19 continue to be out of school; of those who enroll, 53 drop out before they complete Std. VIII and that the drop out rate reaches 70 by the time they reach secondary level.

The National Policy for Children 1984, the National Policy on Education 1986 and the National Plan of Action for Children 2005 have rightly endorsed the need for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) for all children. While the Eighty Sixth Amendment of the Constitution does not make early childhood education compulsory, government is well aware that unless investment is made here, children of marginalized communities will continue to remain out of school and a large percentage of our most invaluable resource, the human resource, will neither be able to participate in the growth of the nation nor improve their own socioeconomic status.

The 2001 Census puts the number of children in the age group 0-6 years at 157.86 million, constituting 15.42% of India's population. The number of children in the 3 to 5 age group as per a UNESCO report is 77.3 million. It indicates that only 29% of children of this age group are enrolled in a preschool programme.

The Government of India's response to the needs of this colossal number of children below six years is the Integrated Child Development Scheme and the Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme. Besides the government, local urban bodies, community based organisations, self-help groups (SHGs) and local and national level non-governmental organisations also run crèches/preschools, but the standard of many of them leaves much to be desired. There are also a large number of privately funded preschools, catering mostly to children of the middle and upper classes in urban areas.

Importance

The philosophy of early childhood education is that it needs to be largely child-centred, with a curriculum based on children's interest. It is expected to aid physical development and contribute to sensory, language, emotional and language development.

Learning through play is a fun way of acquiring skills and is strongly advocated, as it helps build self-confidence and encourages independent learning and the formation of concepts. Playing with natural things like sand, mud, clay and water provides children with the opportunity to actively explore, manipulate and interact with the environment.

The importance of early childhood education cannot in any way be negated as childhood is the time when neuron connections in the brain are formed and the lack of adequate stimulation during this period can stunt a child's all-round development and have long-lasting repercussions on his or her success in primary school and beyond.

*Millennium Development Goals, India Country Report, 2005
**HAQ-Centre for Child Rights, 2006 Report-What does the Union Budget 2006-07 have for Children?
**Government and Non-governmental Initiatives**

The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS)

Launched in 1975, the Integrated Child Development Scheme, ICDS today represents one of the world's largest programmes for early childhood development managed by a State. Today, the 6277* ICDS projects and reach out to millions of children below six years, especially those from vulnerable and remote areas and gives them a head-start by providing an integrated package of services under supplementary nutrition, non-formal preschool education, immunisation, health check-ups and referral services.

The Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme (RGNCS)

This scheme benefits over 0.77 million children at 30902* crèches and is implemented wholly by the voluntary sector through the Central Social Welfare Board and two national level voluntary organizations, namely, the Indian Council for Child Welfare and Bharatiya Adim Jati Seva Sangh. As with the ICDS, the component of preschool education is given importance and children are expected to be enrolled in primary school when they reach the age of six.

Non-governmental Initiatives

Committed NGOs across the country are espousing the cause of Early Childhood Care and Education. Among them, FORCES is a strong network of non-governmental organizations which have a vision that every child has the right to Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) and that it is the State's responsibility to ensure such services for all children, especially for children of women working in the unorganized and informal sector.

In Karnataka, the Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare (KSCCW), the Karnataka State Social Welfare Advisory Board, Akshara Foundation and the Movement for Alternatives and Youth Awareness (MAYA) are among the larger NGOs who have pioneered innovative approaches for providing preschool education and have over the years built their own networks to spread ECCD among the children of marginalized people.

**Moving Forward**

If access to preschool education for every child is to become a national priority, it needs to be revisited in the light of recent developments like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, the proposal to enact a Creche Act and the Supreme Court directives to “universalise” the flagship ICDS, first in 2001, then reiterated in 2004 and in its more recent mandate that this should happen by December 2008.

Considering the fact that the ICDS coverage is only around 22%* of children in the 0-6 years age group and the reach of the RGNCS is minuscule, government and civil society have a stupendous task before them.

Suggestions coming in from field activists, deliberated upon time and again, include:

- Larger investment in the ICDS as it has the infrastructure and can reach every nook and corner of the country. The Government of India could consider the viability of clubbing ECCD with primary education under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan in an attempt to extend its reach to 3 to 6 year old children.

- ICDS needs to look at local, innovative, cost-effective approaches. The need of the hour is to come up with models of day care and preschool education on a public-private partnership basis, as it holds promise.

*2006-07 Annual Report, Ministry of Women and Child Development, GOI.
Self Help Groups (SHGs) hold great promise in decentralising the ICDS, enhancing service delivery, lessening the load on the over-burdened anganwadi worker and in meeting its goals. This can be done by empowering SHG members. Given the opportunity, SHGs would most willingly accept the responsibility.

Home care within the community for small groups of children is a model worth replicating. Such a model is in practice in the western world with government sanction. Nearer home, Akshara Foundation’s model is worth replicating, as it also provides self-employment to women. Training in day care and preschool education for the service provider is a must for the success of this model.

Attaching anganwadis to government-run/government-aided primary schools is being practised in some centres and could be extended, as it would ensure the easy transition of six year old children into the formal school system.

Mobilising community support and involving local philanthropic associations and civil society groups in the running of anganwadis and community based ECCD programmes could be more actively pursued. Corporate houses are also constantly looking out for programmes to support through their Corporate Social Responsibility wings and ECCD programmes would appeal to them as they reach children and also offer employment opportunities to women.

Anganwadis could charge a small user fee (Rs. 20 to Rs. 60 per month, as permitted under RGNCS) and this could enhance the honorarium of the anganwadi worker and helper and strengthen the preschool education component. It would also make the anganwadi worker more accountable as parents who pay fees can demand service from her.

The immediate need is to set up ECCD Boards with civic society representation in States and Union Territories to ensure quality, accountability and transparency. Such Boards could take on a large-scale capacity building exercise of ECCD providers to empower them with not only knowledge on food and nutrition, community development and preschool education, but also entrepreneurship skills.

For ECCD to make a positive impact on the all-round development of children in the 3-6 year age group, equal importance should be given to the pre-natal care of children, to maternity entitlements and to the health and nutritional needs of children up to the age of 3 years. This will enhance the child’s receptivity to preschool education.

Universalisation of ECCD cannot continue to remain on India’s wish list. It is about time our States and Union Territories took on this task on a war footing to ensure that children everywhere have access to preschool education.

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**Nina P. Nayak**

*President, Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare*

*Vice President, Indian Council for Child Welfare*

*Member, Sub-Committee on Children for the Eleventh Plan, National Planning Commission*
The Importance of the Early Years

It is an undeniable fact that the first six years have a direct, decisive bearing on children’s lives. That is when minds develop and skills are acquired. The importance of early stimulation cannot be underestimated. “Recent advances in neuroscience establish that the first few years represent a rapid phase of brain growth, unparalleled in the rest of a human being’s life. Appropriate stimulation in this period is key to later success – both academic and otherwise – in life.”

While the importance of care for the young child is well understood, the reality is that the needs of millions of children in these crucial years are not met. The child under six is a largely deprived being in India. “The average Indian child gets a rather poor start in life.” They lack access to proper care in the home, they suffer from malnutrition, ill health, poor physical and mental development and many other problems that stem from poverty and illiteracy and inevitably feed into it. “Most of them are left to their own devices until the age of six years, when they are finally herded into school.” Their ability to learn and their overall development are already compromised by the time they enter formal school.

As the largest provider of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services in the country, how does the government define ECCE? The National Policy on Education (NPE) (1986) describes ECCE as “an integrated and holistic concept of care and education of children between 0-6 years from socially disadvantaged groups." It is also viewed as a support service for girls and working mothers.

ECCE is visualized by the government as an integrated concept for children, promoting early care in the areas of health, nutrition, education and psychological development. It is defined as a concept of early stimulation for children under three years and a more organised preschool education programme for children between three and six years. The NPE emphasises the joyful nature of ECCE and stresses the need to discourage any formal instruction of the three Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic at this early stage of education.

The aim of ECCE is to see that every child has access to the fulfilment of all basic needs. It involves the development of children in every aspect, including the physical, cognitive, psychomotor, language, emotional, social and moral.

Crucial Recognition

The Government of India acknowledges the role and significance of ECCE. There is marked endorsement of its vital developmental need in a country as diverse and heavily populated as India, with 157.86 million children in the 0-6 age group. ECCE is seen as the vehicle that will provide this segment of the population universal access to quality care and education.

The Working Group on Development of Children for the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012), A Report, Ministry of Women and Child Development, focuses on education and states, “Early Childhood Education requires that young children be provided opportunities and experiences that lead to their all-round development – physical, mental, social, emotional and school readiness. Along with health and nutrition, learning is also equally important.”

The Policy Framework

The Indian Constitution has provisions either as a Fundamental Right or as a Directive Principle of State Policy to promote ECCE services and thereby safeguard and enhance children's development and welfare.

• Article 15 (3): “As a Fundamental Right, Article 15 (3) empowers the State to practice positive discrimination favouring economically and educationally weaker groups. This allows for special provision for girls and children of disadvantaged social groups and children in difficult situations." Article 15 (3) asserts, “Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making special provisions for women and children." This was seen as a boost to the education of girls who could be relieved from the burden of sibling care and sent to school with equal opportunity.
• **Article 45**: Initially, Article 45 (Directive Principles of State Policy) of the Constitution directed the State to provide “free and compulsory education for children up to fourteen years of age.” Children of the 0-6 age group were not excluded. Therefore, ECCE was considered a part of the constitutional provision and preschool education was seen as an important aspect of the provision.

• **The Eighty Sixth Amendment**: This Amendment of the Constitution Act 2001 divided children in the 0-14 age group into two clearly separate categories to serve their interests better under separate articles in the Constitution. Article 21 A has been introduced as a Fundamental Right which states, “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years in such manner as the State may, by law, determine.”

The Eighty Sixth Amendment has altered Article 45 of the Directive Principles of State Policy to say, “The State shall endeavour to provide early childhood care and education for all children until they complete the age of six years.”

The Eighty Sixth Amendment was seen as a raw deal for children under six. It has thrown open distressed debate over the perceived de-recognition of the young child’s rights and interests. There were protests from civil society and professional organizations. Advocates of ECCE are disappointed and let down. ECCE has been included as “a constitutional provision, but not a justiciable right of every child.” It allows the government to withdraw from any statutory obligation to provide education and care to the child under six.

### Policies that Strengthen ECCE

- Education for all was high on the list of government priorities and concrete action plans emerged. The National Policy on Education was launched in 1986 and revised in 1992. “The policy recommended the strengthening of ECCE programmes not only as an essential component of human development but also as a support to universalisation of elementary education and a programme of women’s development.”

- India’s ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1992, has confirmed India’s commitment to its children in that it would take measures to ensure the survival, protection, participation and development of its children and “develop appropriate monitoring procedures to assess progress in implementing the Convention…… and seek public inputs for frank and transparent reporting.”

- The National Common Minimum Programme of the Union government in 2004 specifically states that, “The UPA government will protect the rights of the children…… ensure facilities for schooling and extend special care to the girl child.”

- The total overall responsibility of ECCE has shifted recently from the Department of Education within the Ministry of Human Resources Development to the newly created Ministry of Women and Child Development.

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What the Five Year Plans provide for the Young Child

Despite the large number of policies and statutory provisions, the young child in India had been sidelined in the planning process and ECCE reduced to a welfare concept, till recently. For example, the Third Five Year Plan left the young child’s care and education to the voluntary and private sectors. It was drawn into the government’s ambit only in 1968 on the recommendation of the Ganga Saran Sinha Committee. However, the Fourth Five Year Plan continued to deal with ECCE in the welfare mode, under a scheme of Family and Child Welfare for rural areas. The objective was sound, but not enough – to provide welfare services to preschool children for their multifaceted development.

The Fifth Five Year Plan signalled “a clear shift in approach from child welfare to child development. This shift culminated in the declaration of the National Policy for Children in 1974 and a conceptual move to integrate early services for children. Since then every successive Five Year Plan reaffirmed its priority to the development of early childhood services as an investment in human resource development and stressed the importance of involving women’s groups in ECCE.” The Eighth Five Year Plan accelerated the momentum of preschool education in the government sector and the Ninth Five Year Plan underscored ECCE’s importance in human resource development.

The language of development underwent a change in the Tenth Five Year Plan, which adopted a rights-based approach for children under six. The plan saw more comprehensive support for the young child, with synergistic national programmes that concomitantly addressed health, nutrition and education.

The approach paper to the Eleventh Five Year Plan places unequivocal emphasis on the early childhood stage and commends the value of education for unlocking children’s potential. “Learning at the early stage must be directed by children’s interests and priorities and should be contextualized by her experiences rather than being structured formally. An enabling environment for children would be one that is rich, allows children to explore, experiment and freely express themselves and one that is embedded in social relations that give a sense of worth, security and trust,” says the Working Group on Development of Children for the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2007-2012), A Report, Ministry of Women and Child Development.

“Mankind owes to the child the best it can give….” (Extract from the Declaration of the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1959).

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13 Ibid
The Status of the Young Child in India Today

At the National Level
- Children in the 0-6 age group are 157.86 million
- Highest number of malnourished children in the world
- 60 million children live in poverty
- Only 25% children (3-5 age group) attend ICDS’s preschool centres

In Karnataka
- Children in the 0-6 age group are 6.82 million
- More children in rural areas (4.7 million) than urban areas (2.1 million)
- Only 20% of children in urban areas and 4% of children in rural areas attend preschools

“The percentage of children attending preschools is extremely low in Karnataka. The absence of preschool education from the government’s mandate for providing education for all could be responsible for this scenario. The small section of children attending preschools would most likely come from urban, middle and upper class families sending children to privately run preschools. The disparity between sexes in education is seen to begin at this early stage. But the rural-urban differences in preschool attendance are more stark than the sex differentials at all ages.”

Public Sector

ICDS
The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme was conceived in 1975 with an integrated delivery package of early childhood services so that their combined effect can be taken full advantage of. It represents the largest state initiative to address the needs of children under six and is one of the largest government programmes anywhere in the world that addresses the early development of children in that age group.

ICDS symbolises the country’s commitment to its children. ICDS promotes child survival and development through an integrated approach for converging basic services for improved child care, early stimulation and learning, improved enrolment and retention, health and nutrition and water and environmental sanitation.

“The Supreme Court issued a landmark judgment on the 13th of December, 2006, directing the government to universalise the ICDS by December 2008. The universalisation of the ICDS involves extending all ICDS services (supplementary nutrition, growth monitoring, nutrition and health education, immunisation, referral and preschool education) to every child under the age of six, all pregnant women and lactating mothers and all adolescent girls.”

“To comply with the directions of the Supreme Court and to implement the National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) of the Government, the scheme has been expanded to cover 466 additional Projects and 1,88,168 additional Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) during the FY 2005-06. As on 31st March, 2005, 5653 Projects and 745,943 AWCs have become operational.

Existing Preschool Offerings in Karnataka

15 Census of India 2001
18 Right to Food Campaign, “ICDS: Key Directions in Supreme Court Orders,” ICDS Articles.
The total number of beneficiaries as on 31st March, 2006 was about 56.84 million comprising of about 47.45 million children (0-6 years) and about 9.38 million pregnant and lactating mothers through a network of about 0.748 million Anganwadi Centres.

**ICDS in Karnataka**

- ICDS was initiated in Karnataka in 1975.
- Each of the 185 Blocks in the state has an ICDS project, of which 166 are in rural areas, 10 in urban areas and 9 in tribal areas.
- On 30th June 2007, 51,352 anganwadis were operational in Karnataka.

Though the absolute number of anganwadis is high, there are many communities without an anganwadi centre. Remote rural and tribal areas and poor urban communities are in all probability left out, which means children of socially and economically marginalised people have little or no access to ICDS's services.

**The Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme**

The Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme was envisaged for the children of working mothers. With the joint family system increasingly under threat and nuclear families becoming the norm, working women need the support of quality, substitute care for their young children while they are away at work. “There has, however, been very slow growth of crèche/day care facilities under this scheme, resulting in a failure to meet the needs of working mothers in terms of extent, content and quality of services. Crèche and day care services are not only required by working mothers but also by women belonging to poor families, who require support and relief from childcare as they struggle to cope with their burden of activities, within and outside the home. Effective day care for young children is essential and a cost-effective investment as it provides support to both the mothers and young children. It is also a protection measure as it addresses issues such as child labour, school drop outs, child prostitution, .... female literacy etc.” The Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme is the government’s response to the urgent need for quality-conscious and far-reaching child day care services for working women of all socioeconomic groups, both in the organized and unorganized sectors.

The government has stipulated that “a crèche centre must have a minimum space of 6-8 sq. ft. per child to ensure that they can play, rest and learn without any hindrance. The centre should be clean, well lit with adequate ventilation.” All basic infrastructure should be provided, like clean toilets, sleeping facilities for children and a cooking area. “Essential play material and teaching and learning material must be available to meet the needs of preschool children.”

Community support, including support from Panchayati Raj institutions, is also envisaged in the scheme to ensure their participation and to supplement the grant of the government. Lateral linkages with the local primary health centre and a tie-up with

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22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.
anganwadis for inputs like immunisation, polio drops, and basic health monitoring needs are recommended. “Each crèche unit would provide these services for 25 babies for eight hours, i.e. from 9 am to 5 pm.”

Creche workers are community-based women. A ten-day creche workers’ training is included in the scheme to orient them on childcare and early childhood education, health care, first aid, emergency, hygiene and nutrition, all of which will provide better services and build a child-friendly environment in the crèches. Preschool education is given importance and children are expected to get enrolled in primary school when they reach the age of six.

The scheme was launched on the 1st January, 2006 by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. The Ministry has allocated a sum of Rs. 42,384 per crèche per annum. 30,902 creches were sanctioned up to 31st January, 2007. Beneficiaries are 0.77 million in number.

NGO Sector

**MAYA**

MAYA (Movement for Alternatives and Youth Awareness) is a Karnataka-based development organization working to create an empowered and equitable society that systematically addresses livelihood and education. In the field of Early Childhood Care and Education, MAYA focuses on quality education by facilitating the formation of community owned preschools in seven districts in Karnataka. They are managed by local community institutions and incorporate local knowledge and traditions for the education of children under six. They are networked for institutional support. MAYA’s educational interventions address the right of every child to quality education, preparing them for success as they approach school age.

**Sutradhar**

Sutradhar is an educational resource centre involved in the design and dissemination of learning resources for early development of children. One of their innovations is an “Early Learning Kit” developed to promote the all-round development of children between three and six years. It includes sturdy, three-dimensional, pedagogically rich material for young children to use, complementing what is locally available.

**The Promise Foundation**

The Promise Foundation was set up in 1987 to provide services in mental health, education and potential realization. Recognizing the need for early childhood intervention for cognitive development, The Promise Foundation has a two-level Stimulation Intervention Programme (SIP) for cognitive development of children in the three to six year age group. Promise Shishukendra is a preschool and demonstration centre in a slum in Koramangala which lays...
strong foundations for later formal learning with emphasis on literacy acquisition skills and balances children’s all-round stimulation with individualized school-readiness stimulation. The Promise Foundation also conducts training programmes for anganwadi staff and ECCE workers in NGOs and community based organizations.

**Akshayam**

Akshayam has a Cognitively Oriented Programme for Preschool Children (COPPC) based on the play house and nursery school experience. It also draws from the experiences of children in rural areas and children with special needs. It has been used in anganwadis. Initiated in 1985, COPPC training was given to 140 child workers like nursery teachers, Bal Sevikas, anganwadi workers and trainers. The benefits of this training have since extended to 60,000 anganwadi and balwadi workers and to over a lakh preschool children.

**Paraspara Trust**

Paraspara Trust is in the field of Early Childhood Education to prepare children for primary school and to prevent them from slipping into child labour. The organization runs balwadis for children between three and six years. An attempt is also being made to have communities run balwadis. Paraspara’s programme focuses on preschool education. Classes are conducted in teachers’ homes, community halls or in other spaces identified by the community.

**Private Sector**

Early Childhood Education centres in the private sector have grown by leaps and bounds in the last two decades. They go by various names: play schools, play homes, nurseries or pre-nurseries. They began as centres for children of upper income groups, but today, they exist in poor urban communities and rural areas as well. It is widely believed that they have contributed to the falling enrolment in government facilities, which have a poor standing in popular perception. The focus on English as a global language of progress and the preparation of children for English-medium primary schools seem to be the reason behind their appeal. Data is hard to come by as private preschools are not registered.

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28Ibid.
In early 2000, Akshara Foundation set up its preschool (balwadi) programme in Bangalore. At the time, Akshara was following the model received from Pratham (www.pratham.org) in Mumbai, which had ignited a quiet revolution in the slums of India’s fastest growing city, inviting people who had been left out of the mainstream to become instruments of change.

Its mission was lofty, again inspired by Pratham – Every Child in School and Learning Well. The focus was clearly on children from underprivileged, under-served communities, with the goal of universal access to primary school.

Akshara believed that to achieve this, they needed to start with children who were not yet of school age. These were the children who, unlike children from better off families, would possibly not have a chance to access intensive parental engagement or safe tactile material and written text. They would have less exposure to expansive vocabulary and due to their poverty situation may not receive the general all-round stimulation to properly develop their cognitive and other skills.
Akshara wanted to fill some of these gaps and wanted to help children get to school at the right age. Many of them were the first generation in their families to go to a school. Akshara started by speaking to their parents to understand what their aspirations for their children were.

As in Mumbai, they found that they had touched a raw nerve in the slums of Bangalore. A small team of three went around surveying the ground reality and wherever they went, they evoked a positive response. Many young girls with some education came forward to take on the simple challenge that Akshara posed – Would you like to work for your community? Can you engage very young children in your neighbourhood for a couple of hours in your own home, so that they can learn something and also enjoy their learning process? Akshara offered training, teaching learning material and a modest honorarium of Rs 200 (over the years, it moved up marginally to Rs. 375 and now it is Rs. 500).

The balwadi idea took off like wildfire. Within a year, there were hundreds of centres in more than one hundred slums in the city. The balwadi experience included handholding the child and the parent until school admission was procured. Some children went to government schools, others to private ones.

Those were early days. Akshara was a young organization and could not seriously monitor what was happening. It was a catch-as-catch-can, low-cost, trust based model which worked wonders at the time for testing proof of concept. As time went by, the model evolved and quality and efficiency norms were defined. Accurate data on children was collected – their age, their time in the balwadis, the schools they got admitted to, their ‘learning achievements’ etc. Along with this, there was work being done in parallel with the community to socialize the idea of education by creating an initial non-threatening atmosphere for learning, within easy reach of home.

While Akshara balwadis were often not the ideal preschool experience because of the lack of space and resources, children were happy to be there and they were engaged in joyful learning. Not only were the children opening up and blossoming, often the teacher herself was finding the space to come into her own. There are numerous stories of young women who found meaning of a sort when they became teachers; when they took on the responsibility of education and found that reciprocated in large part by the community. “Everyone respects me now, I can walk with pride” was an oft echoed sentiment. This was one of the happiest of side-effects of the balwadi programme. Another happy outcome was that many community leaders and School Development and Monitoring Committee (SDMC) members came forward to organize public spaces to run the balwadis. There were cases where balwadi centres were being run inside mosques and community halls, inside government schools and rented properties, with local citizens supporting part of the costs. It was seen as a social good.

The balwadi curriculum was designed to be an easy, flexible yet formal programme for teachers to use in their ‘classroom.’ Along with the training, simple measurement techniques were created for balwadi teachers to track children. This was the beginning of a process that borrows from best practices to make the balwadi spaces for children to receive the best possible care and exposure, under the circumstances.

Then a time came in Akshara where we began to examine the future course of the programme. How would the programme become self-sustaining? How long would Akshara continue to support it?
It became apparent that for universal access to become a reality, new models would have to be explored and new partnerships forged. Working with the government’s ICDS system was an opportunity to scale up the programme. Akshara studied the anganwadi system and found that early learning, or school readiness, was happening infrequently in the anganwadi centres.

So Akshara moved in to fill the gaps where it could. A preschool package was developed to be deployed in the anganwadis which would focus on 4 and 5 year old children. A volunteer would go to the centre for 90 minutes every day and engage meaningfully with the children.

This effort had a slow start. The Akshara volunteer was seen as a threat by anganwadi workers but slowly a relationship of trust developed and she became an ally. Today, there is a large improvement in the government’s commitment to the child under six and such partnerships have played a key role in catalyzing the change.

Another strategic development was involving the community to support the balwadis in their area. The idea was to encourage independent balwadis that would be seeded by Akshara, trained by them and made self-sufficient through parental fee support. This idea was quickly tested in the field and proved successful. Today, Akshara has managed to create successful education entrepreneurs in preschool.

As the independent balwadi model gained momentum, the Akshara supported balwadis were encouraged to follow that path and become self-sustaining. It was an unusual scenario where a subsidy was withdrawn. Common wisdom suggested failure was imminent, but this was not so. Over 90% of them have flourished and this clearly underscores the value of preschool education.

Most of Akshara’s balwadis across the state are now run by education entrepreneurs, backed by enterprise development training, supported with curriculum and material and the power of a network. Young entrepreneurs have established themselves as nurturers of young minds and have seen their own economic and social standing improve. Because of them, young children have become self-confident and are fulfilling their parents’ ambitions of admission to the right schools.

A criticism of this strategy is that this is a commercialisation of education. Akshara does not think so. The State has failed to create a universal, high quality preschool environment, in spite of the long-standing ICDS programme. On a nationwide basis, over 100 million children do not have access to preschool. These sorts of interventions, however imperfect, are filling a critical gap. These balwadis are flexible and responsive to community needs and are continuously trying to better their services. There are enough forces at play to prevent any misuse or abuse. There are many case studies of how hard these proud entrepreneurs are working and how well they are succeeding. In a market where jobs in the service sector are increasingly attractive to our typical entrepreneur profile, this is a reflection of their community mindedness.
It is true however that it is hard to determine the real impact of one system over another. Perhaps there can never be any perfect evaluations of the value of different approaches to Early Childhood Care and Learning. Most studies have shown that after an early edge, the advantage from exposure to a preschool learning environment dissipates over time. But there are other immeasurable values that are being created and there are many, many happy children to show for it.

Akshara is committed to doing its best and investing time and other resources to reach every child in need. It is this motivation that has enabled it to reach more than 100,000 children in the preschool age group over seven years.

**Coverage of Children under Akshara’s Preschool Programmes (2000-2007)**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Number of Children in Independent balwadis and Rural child centres</th>
<th>Number of Children in Anganwadis</th>
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The physical structure of a balwadi remains more or less the same, whatever its type. Most balwadis function out of volunteers’ homes, while a few are located in rented premises or government schools. A cheerful environment is created in what are sometimes small and cramped spaces, and lit up with multicoloured charts and vibrant paintings by little children. Teachers, who are called volunteers in Akshara’s balwadi programme, create a safe, nurturing, inclusive environment for their children.

Anganwadis are mostly in government schools, but they also function from rented community spaces in urban locations. The government has sole responsibility over their functioning. Akshara offers them the educational support of its volunteers and some teaching learning material.

There are usually 20 children per balwadi, though there is no rigidity about this number. If a volunteer can handle a larger group without compromising on quality, she is at complete liberty to do so. The balwadi admits children who are 4 to 6 years old and they operate for two hours a day throughout the year.

Balwadi volunteers usually have a minimum educational qualification of having passed Std. X. This is not, however, always mandatory. Sometimes outstanding personal qualities supplement a lower educational qualification.
The preschool curriculum for children under six is described as “experiences and activities that provide and meet children's needs and stimulate learning in all developmental areas: creative, physical, social, emotional and intellectual.”

Akshara Foundation’s balwadi curriculum promotes the holistic development of children and prepares them for primary schooling. It has been designed as a child-friendly, participatory, supportive and developmentally appropriate curriculum.

The focus is on activity and play-based learning, with action songs, group games, dance and movement, creative work, talk and interaction, themes and educational material and reading and writing readiness.

**Features of the Balwadi Curriculum**

1. The teaching method is a mix of the Montessori and thematic approaches.
2. Activities are designed to address all five developmental skills.
3. Specially designed teaching learning material (TLM) is provided.
4. Regular assessments and evaluations are done.

**1. Teaching Methodology**

*The Montessori Method* is based on intelligent play. The learn-while-you-play process creates an easy, stimulating environment for children.

The Montessori method was developed in the late 19th and early 20th century by the Italian educator, Dr. Maria Montessori. In the Montessori method children learn through a hands-on approach. The method encourages and develops their observation skills through activity of different kinds. Activity that focuses on the use of the five senses, kinetic movement, spatial refinement, motor skill coordination, and concrete knowledge. Physical activity as a means to absorb academic concepts and practical skills forms the cornerstone of Dr. Montessori’s philosophy. Materials that instigate children to think and reason and understand form the central core of the approach.

The emphasis is on self-directed activity by the child, while the teacher observes and gently guides. The role of the teacher is to introduce children to materials and then remain a "silent presence" in the classroom. The method advocates adapting the child's learning environment to his/her developmental level. The Montessori method is scientific, practical and time-tested.

*The thematic approach* uses a series of themes to expand the knowledge base of a child. It is a journey of gradual progression, from what children see in their surroundings to an awareness and appreciation of the world around. It begins by teachers first assessing what their children know. The accent is on selected themes through the year, usually a week devoted to a particular theme, with activities grouped around it. The theme is something children already know, but have not comprehended fully or grappled with. The journey takes them from what is known to what is not, from the simple to the slightly more complex. Theme-based learning expands the child's knowledge over a defined time period. The themes explored are parts of the body, facts about the child's home or environment, neighbourhood or town. Other themes include vegetables, vehicles, money, coins, festivals, flowers and fruits, music and musical instruments, animals and insects, trees and plants, rain and water.

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2. The five developmental skills taught at a balwadi are:

1. Creative/Aesthetic Development
2. Cognitive/Intellectual Development
3. Physical Development
4. Language Development
5. Social and Emotional Development

Creative/Aesthetic Development. Children learn to express themselves through creative activities. They open their eyes to the world of art through a crayon set or a box of paints, the act of drawing and colouring kindling their imagination. Children paint on a vegetable or on a leaf and print them on paper. Waste matter becomes the stuff of creative inspiration – some discarded thread, chocolate paper, or dry leaves, which they cut with their hands and paste into a design framework. Their teacher guides them as they turn curls of pencil sharpener waste into flowers and stick them on a vase. Children learn to respond to beauty through these explorations into art. They also learn to enjoy music and dance to its rhythm, perform role plays and discover their creative abilities.

Cognitive/Intellectual Development enhances the skills of thinking, reasoning, questioning, experimenting, problem solving and communicating. In the balwadi, children learn concepts like big and small, colours and shapes. They do this through drawing and colouring, sorting, arranging and stacking.

They are introduced to books and reading. Simple worksheets develop their powers of observation and encourage the use of words to narrate and communicate. It stimulates curiosity and promotes orderly, scientific thought patterns and sequential thinking.

Besides, children are exposed to early arithmetic, they learn to identify parts of their body and familiarize themselves with the functions of each. They are also taught healthy habits and a self-care routine.

Physical Development is aimed at total physical well-being and developing fine and gross motor coordination. Teachers draw a curved line on the floor and ask children to walk along it for balance and coordination. Children fold paper and tear it along the fold without scissors or they cut the outline of an object they have drawn. This activity teaches them hand-and-eye coordination, besides developing their concentration. Colouring of predetermined shapes or writing uniformly between lines develop their fine motor coordination.

Children learn gross motor coordination in a balwadi through uninhibited play or activity, in the space available. The balwadi curriculum has action songs for the synchronized or spontaneous movement of hands and body. They play with a ball, bouncing, throwing or catching it. They have frog races, simple obstacle races. They run, jump, leap over, climb up and down and learn a range of movements.

Language Development is fostered in the balwadi through reading, story telling, action songs, picture talk and conversation. Children identify by name the common objects they see around them or on charts. They learn to express more difficult concepts like feelings and ideas through words. The idea is to help build communication skills and expand their vocabulary.
Social and Emotional Development is when the child learns to behave in socially appropriate ways with a view to wider acceptance. The balwadi curriculum has the celebration of festivals, national holidays, a monthly balwadi day and children's birthdays as central activities to provide opportunities to children to socialize and bond with people, imbibe the community spirit and a sense of belonging. Children learn to make choices, function independently, investigate their surroundings and take their learning curve higher.

Teachers hand out to children a kitchen set or a doctor's set and ask them to perform role plays. They embark on self-discovery, finding confidence within themselves when confronted with new situations. Balwadis have also now introduced a snack time so that children can learn etiquette and the habit of eating appropriately. The snack time was also devised to teach children how to share.

Akshara Foundation provides the basic TLM to all its balwadis. Since the curriculum is activity based, there is the need for a lot of creative learning material for children. All the material provided is low-cost, developmentally appropriate and safe for children. Akshara supplies blackboards, charts, slates, chalk, the Shishuvachan series of readers, crayons, paint boxes, activity books and workbooks for writing practice. Volunteers of all balwadis are also trained to prepare their own teaching learning material.

Shishuvachan is a set of phonic readers developed by Akshara and used in the balwadis and anganwadis. These simple story books in Kannada and Urdu develop children's ability to understand the spoken word. The stories are written in large font and have attractive illustrations accompanying the text. Every page has two or three sentences that rhyme together and form a meaningful paragraph on anything that could capture children's imagination - an animal, a playground, or a festival. Watching and listening to the teacher tell the story encourages children to re-tell the story and start reading. The idea is to provide a rich literacy environment for children, where reading and books play an important part.

Periodic assessments track the progress of the child. When a child enters the balwadi there is a baseline evaluation on the following parameters.

- How does the child arrive at the balwadi? What is his/her grooming like? Is there hesitation and fear of a new place?
- Has there been any pre-balwadi exposure?
- Does the child identify a few alphabets and numbers?
- Can he/she answer simple questions?
- Can he/she identify a few animals, vegetables or common objects?
- Can he/she colour within an outline?
- What is his/her health and hygiene status?
- Is the child rebellion-prone?
- Is the child given to unstoppable crying?
- What kind of temperament or personality does the child have?

These are important parameters, and once the assessment is over, parents are counselled, especially the mother, on preparing her child to attend the balwadi and invited to be a part of the process and the progress.

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As the child progresses through the balwadi there is a mid-term and final assessment every year. The mid-term assessment evaluates the child’s progress after three months. He or she is assessed on learning and non-learning parameters.

- Does the child come to the balwadi with neatly combed hair?
- Does the child wear footwear?
- Are his/her clothes washed, clean and tidy?

What has the child learned?

- The child must be familiar with the first three lessons of Shishuvachan.
- He/she must be able to identify letters and read a simple sentence.
- The child must be able to identify primary colours.
- Say the days of the week.
- Identify alphabets and numbers from 1 to 5.

The final assessment follows the same pattern of evaluation, except that here, the whole year’s portions are covered.

- The child must be familiar with the first seven lessons of Shishuvachan.
- The child must be able to read simple sentences.
- Say the months of the year.
- Know the basic alphabets in English and Kannada/Urdu.
- Know numbers from 1 to 20 in English and Kannada/Urdu.

A report card is given to every child at the end of the year which represents the progress he/she has made.

Akshara Foundation has a timetable of development attainments for children that volunteers need to cover in a year. It tracks children’s progress even after they have moved on from the balwadi. Akshara sees education as a continuum - preschool education a link to primary education. It facilitates the process of admission into formal schools, whether private or government.

Akshara tracks a sample of the children who move from the balwadis into formal schools. A comparison is drawn to see if children with preschool experience in Akshara balwadis fare better than children without balwadi exposure when admitted to Std. 1. Our research results have shown that children not only perform better in Std.I, they also have the lowest drop out rates.
Akshara’s Trainer Monitors, Team Leaders, District Coordinators and Master Trainers have a regular schedule to visit balwadis. The visits are made to assess the way the balwadi functions and to keep the programme on track. Monitoring ensures that quality and standards are maintained. Apart from this, it also gives the monitoring team an opportunity to offer friendly support and reassurance, advice and guidance to volunteers.

Akshara’s staff acts as observers, noting the following points:

- Does the preschool centre open on time?
- What is the attendance like? How many absentees?
- Is the volunteer present when children come in?
- What is the state of children’s hygiene when they arrive?

The balwadi/anganwadi environment.
- Is learning material displayed effectively?

A qualitative assessment of how the volunteer runs her preschool is done.
- Does she follow the timetable?
- Is there full utilisation of the TLM?
- What are the activities in the balwadi/anganwadi?
- Do children participate actively in the activities?
- Does the volunteer create her own teaching learning material?
- Does she collect fees from parents?
- Are parents’ meetings held regularly?
- Does the volunteer attend every meeting and training programme?
- What kind of a relationship does she have with children and their parents?
- How effective is she in mobilising children and parents?
- Does she maintain good communication structures with children, parents, the community and Akshara? If she is an anganwadi volunteer an additional factor is her interaction with anganwadi staff.
- Does she celebrate the balwadi/anganwadi day every month?
- Does she celebrate children’s birthdays, days of national importance and festivals?
- What is the feedback from parents?

Another method of monitoring is involving parents in the activities of a balwadi/anganwadi. A monthly parents’ meeting is conducted at every balwadi and it is usually accompanied by a children’s competition. It is called the balwadi day. Anganwadis also have a similar forum and celebration. Anganwadi teachers are also involved in the meetings, giving them a greater sense of participation and accountability. Competitions are a tried and tested method of monitoring children’s progress. There are contests in art and craft, story telling, rhymes and in reciting Shishuvachan.

Akshara has taken steps to revitalise the Bal Vikas Samitis in anganwadis and assign to them a more prominent role. The Samitis are groups of women, mostly, offering moral support to anganwadi workers. They have local community leaders and panchayat members in their midst and comprise largely of mothers. Trainer Monitors hold periodic meetings with Bal Vikas Samitis where discussions centre on how they can be drawn into the anganwadis to improve their efficiency and management, improve learning and help with enrolment and regularity in attendance.
Akshara also conducts a monthly meeting for all its volunteers at the block level. They become meeting grounds for discussion and sharing of new ideas, new techniques and methods. These meetings provide a boost to volunteers because they get a chance to share and learn from being part of a larger network.

Akshara has set up two Balwadi Resource Centres in Bangalore which act as nodal centres for the programme and are engaged in a variety of activities to improve and enrich the quality of the programme and to create stronger processes for monitoring and evaluation. The Akshara balwadis in Hubli-Dharwad serve as model balwadis or resource centres for preschool work.

The Balwadi Resource Centres are equipped with all kinds of preschool learning material and the resource team actively engages in developing new TLM using low-cost, locally available material.

There is also a large library for volunteers to borrow books from, both for themselves and for the children in their centres. This allows for rotation of resources between centres and feedback is provided to the resource team of children’s responses to the books.

The Resource Centres also serve as training centres for volunteers and as data centres for the programme. They are equipped with computers and data operators feed in comprehensive information about the balwadi programme in their areas. Every child in every balwadi or anganwadi is accounted for, with his or her personal history and record of achievement. There is data on volunteers, on assessments, on balwadi or anganwadi functioning, evaluated, analysed and updated every month.
The Balwadi Models

Akshara Foundation has four balwadi models

The balwadi programme began as a basic, no-frills, subsidy based model. After a modest start in a few slums in Bangalore, it slowly took root across the State. The model itself evolved based on market needs and the needs of children and today Akshara has four different models of balwadis.

- Akshara supported balwadis
- Independent balwadis
- Rural child centres
- Volunteer-supported government anganwadis
A Subsidised Model

Akshara-supported balwadis are a subsidised model that started in Bangalore and Hubli-Dharwad. This was the first model introduced by Akshara and at its peak, there were almost 1200 centres in Bangalore alone. As of March 2008, there were 56 Akshara balwadis in Bangalore and Hubli-Dharwad, a number that will reduce as more centres get converted into independent, self-sustaining units.

The Survey - The First Step of the Balwadi Programme

When Akshara started its balwadi programme, preschool opportunities in the slums of Bangalore were limited. Akshara’s survey team assessed the situation and put together a demographic profile of each community’s children, with particular reference to education. They compiled a comprehensive database that covered children in thousands of households. The survey focused on the following:

- What was the status of preschool children?
- Did they go to school?
- If not, what did they do during the long, idle hours of the day?
- What were their hygiene standards?
- Were there easily accessible preschools or anganwadis in the area?
- What did parents think about the situation?
- Were they aware of the need for preschool education?
- What was their economic status?

The survey clearly established that the value of preschool education was understood. It had penetrated the remotest urban slum, but there were inadequate facilities. The survey classified areas as ‘red,’ ‘amber’ and ‘green.’ ‘Red’ signified very poor, high density, low access communities with poor preschool facilities. ‘Amber’ was the middle ground. There was some provision for education, but not all that much. Parents could not pay too much as fees. ‘Green’ was categorised as upper income communities with access and affordability. Akshara focused more on ‘red’ and ‘amber’ areas.

Trainer Monitors mapped communities into groups of 250 households and opened balwadis there. The intention was to ensure that every child in the communities that Akshara worked in would go to some form of preschool, government or private.

Choosing and Training Volunteers

Volunteers are identified from the community they belong to. They are women who have completed Std. X, though some exceptions are made when candidates possess other strong attributes. In Hubli-Dharwad, the emphasis is on women who are already active in the field of education through their involvement in the government’s literacy programme or by taking home tuitions.

Akshara conducts a simple test to assess their aptitude and communication skills. The ability to read and write Kannada is a must as is some general knowledge. Their homes are also assessed to see if they have the space to run a balwadi.

But more than anything else, Akshara looks for a spirit of commitment in volunteers and a passion for children. This is the key driver, since the small honorarium they receive from Akshara cannot be the motivator.
In 2008, Akshara paid each volunteer Rs. 500. The honorarium used to be Rs. 250 in the early stages of the programme. Volunteers are free to collect a fee from parents as well.

Akshara trains the selected volunteers. The focus is on the skills they need to run a balwadi. The training includes:

- The five developmental skills of children and how to foster them
- How to organise activities and group games for children
- Cultivating children’s interest in learning
- How to involve children in fun-filled activities like story telling, art and craft and creative explorations
- How to use the TLM and employ their ingenuity to make innovative material of their own for children
- Encouraging children to come to the balwadi with a sense of hygiene
- How to conduct parents’ meetings.

In Hubli-Dharwad, Akshara Foundation has a ten-day non-residential programme for volunteers of Akshara balwadis. The training modules are on the same lines as in Bangalore, but there is a special Entrepreneurship Development Programme (EDP) for four days by the resource institution, Initiatives for Development Foundation (IDF), with which Akshara entered into collaboration in 2006. The training is in entrepreneurship, keeping in mind the fact that women here fight shy of the public domain and are sometimes lacking in confidence. The training mainly focuses on:

- How to work independently
- How to deal with people

Volunteers are supported by the Akshara team on a continuous basis. They are regularly assessed and go through a refresher training course every quarter.
Independent Balwadis

**Showing a way**
The Akshara balwadi helped redefine thirty year old Shakeela’s life. Her husband had died in an accident and she was left alone and unprovided for, with four children. She wanted to stand on her own feet but she was a Std. VIII drop-out and had never worked before. When Akshara’s Trainer Monitor came to Faiyazabad, Bangalore, Shakeela poured out her woes. She was unemployed, she repeated continuously. Was there not something – anything - she could do? That was three years ago.

She took her first tentative step and set up a balwadi in her home. Shakeela was inhibited, but not without determination. The community supported her and her confidence grew. Within days Shakeela realized she could teach and hold the attention of a class of young children. She wanted to make them eligible, help them move on to school. Her self-esteem rose as they did well in her balwadi. Today, she is regarded as a fine teacher by her community. She has shown a way.

There is an underlying reason too that simmers in her. It is necessary for women to be doing something, Shakeela said. They have to forge ahead, be doers. They led suppressed lives before, they never knew how the world went on. Shakeela herself never knew what to do, how to get on with life. She said that sitting at home was such an unaware kind of existence. “I am happy I started an Akshara balwadi.”

**A Balwadi brings awareness of education**
Volunteer Vijayalakshmi Morab has her Akshara balwadi with 26 children in the Odaradoni slum in Hosur, Hubli. This is a particularly crowded area where tenements jostle close to each other and the surrounding neighbourhood is steeped in dirt.

Vijayalakshmi’s balwadi is neat and colourful. There are charts on the walls along with pictures of gods and goddesses and personal mementoes. It had been difficult to get children to attend the balwadi when Vijayalakshmi started three years ago. Children would run away, roam aimlessly, distract others in class, fight and scream.

Parents were grateful that a balwadi had opened in their area. It created an awareness of education. It seemed unbelievable that the elderly Vijayalakshmi managed to win what seemed like a lopsided tug-of-war with obstreperous children. Now they sit in groups, order restored, playing with a ball, in raggedly neat clothes, happiness all around that discipline has been firmly established. That is her balwadi’s strength.

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**How the Idea Evolved**
As the balwadi model expanded, Akshara evolved a strategy to make the programme self-sustaining. The plan included training volunteers to set up balwadis, providing them with teaching learning material and making them sustainable through parental fee support.

The new model had a slow start with the first batch of 49 entrepreneurs but now the majority of balwadis in Akshara are self-sustaining.

As of March 2008, there were 547 independent balwadis in the urban centres of Bangalore, Hubli and Dharwad.

**The Structure**
Parents pay a monthly fee for the services of an independent balwadi. The fee varies across locations and is dependent on parents’ ability to pay. The balwadi usually runs for two hours a day but some have altered their offering to include day care or lower kindergarten (LKG) and upper kindergarten (UKG) sections, for which the fee increases.

The interaction with parents is also much higher in this model. Parents ask for quality more freely and the volunteer realizes that when she accepts money for the job she does, she has to teach well.
Most of the volunteers used to manage Akshara-supported balwadis earlier and have transitioned to become entrepreneurs. The majority of them are earning much more than they did when they were receiving an honorarium from Akshara. There are successes where entrepreneurs have started earning as much as Rs. 7,000 to Rs. 10,000 per month, but on an average they earn about Rs. 2,000 per month in urban areas and Rs. 1,000 per month in rural areas.

**Choosing and Training Volunteers**

Volunteers go through preschool training as well as entrepreneurship training. The preschool training lays emphasis on:

- How to interact with children, how to engage with them
- How to handle small children
- How to enlist the cooperation and support of parents
- How to organise the balwadi into a joyful centre of learning
- How to make changes in the environment and make the atmosphere conducive.

The additional component here is the Entrepreneurship Development Programme designed by Initiatives for Development Foundation (IDF), aimed at developing entrepreneurship skills. It focuses on:

- Helping volunteers understand the concepts of marketing and entrepreneurship
- Developing market acumen and leadership qualities
- Empowering them to be independent economic entities
- Developing persuasive communication skills
- Helping them with strategies for survival and success
- Teaching them how to be independent
- Honing personality and self-development
- A child psychology component
- Convincing reluctant parents to pay fees
- The modifications they can bring to their institutions of learning in terms of content and set-up to make them more competitive in the marketplace.

The training is designed over six days, twice a year, with new groups of volunteers.

Akshara continues to support independent balwadi volunteers even after the training and teaches them to be self-responsible and self-reliant. A six-month period of “handholding” is there and in some cases, a monthly honorarium of Rs. 175 is given to keep them going. In six months, though, volunteers have to get adequate support from parents and manage their enterprise independently.
**Enhanced Teaching Learning Material (TLM)**

Akshara provides every independent balwadi with a starter TLM kit. This includes all the basics that the entrepreneur would need to set up her centre. The TLM for independent balwadis is a slightly enhanced version of what is provided for the subsidized model. This is to ensure that the entrepreneur is equipped with everything to help her market her balwadi better. Apart from a blackboard, charts, slates, chalk, the Shishuvachan series, crayons, paint boxes, activity books and workbooks, it also includes plastic fruits and vegetables, building blocks, stacking toys, a miniature kitchen set and doctor’s set and a rocking horse.

### Coverage of Children in Independent Balwadis (2003 - 2008)

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of independent balwadis</th>
<th>Average number of children</th>
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<td>40</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>1,720</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>2,201</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>533</td>
<td>10,709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>11,524</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The balwadi gave her a life**

Not all independent balwadis were successful from the start. Volunteers remember the uphill struggle of fixing and receiving a fee. Prema, who started the first independent balwadi in the Anandpura slum of Jeevan Bhima Nagar, Bangalore, reminisced about the initial year when she had to go to every parent and request them to send their children to her preschool. Initially only five children came. She had to slowly build her credibility with the community.

Today, Prema earns more than Rs. 3,000 a month. “The independent balwadi has given some people like me a life,” she said, supremely cheerful and confident.
**Live and let live**

Volunteers of independent balwadis often become trailblazers in their communities. When she started her independent balwadi in the slum of Belamkargalli in Old Hubli, thirty one year old Pooja Raikar had wanted to do something for children.

The conservative criticism that came was expected. Men of the community said, “Look at her, going around picking up children. What is the need for her to do all this? Why should she teach children?” Or, stingingly, “What kind of a teacher will she make?” Pooja's neighbours complained of the noise her children made and asked her and her family to vacate. To make things worse, women started rival balwadis and charged a lower fee – Rs. 10 per child, where Pooja charged Rs. 20.

A soft-spoken person, Pooja went about her work with quiet dignity. Akshara’s support and direction and her family's unflinching encouragement led her on. She found a submerged steeliness in her as she adopted the path of least resistance, the principle of live and let live. It gradually dawned on an unsuspecting community that Pooja was putting in tremendous work, a fact that came up for appreciation at parents' meetings.

For her balwadi’s cultural activities, she specially invited people opposed to her and Pooja had the thrill of seeing a converted community taking up for her. Her landlord withdrew his eviction notice. Parents stood by her. Pooja had grown in stature. Today, her balwadi flourishes, with crowds of little children swarming into her tiny front room to learn from her.

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**Comparisons between an Akshara-supported balwadi and an independent balwadi**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Akshara Balwadi</th>
<th>Independent Balwadi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. Volunteers trained to be preschool teachers.</td>
<td>Volunteers trained to be preschool entrepreneurs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Volunteers paid by Akshara Foundation. They can also collect nominal fees from parents.</td>
<td>Parents financially support the balwadi with the fees they pay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fixed timings.</td>
<td>Flexible timings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Predetermined age group of children.</td>
<td>Children of all age groups, as long as they are under six, are accommodated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Solely a preschool.</td>
<td>Based on parents’ demand, designed to accommodate varying needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. TLM provided by Akshara.</td>
<td>Basic TLM provided by Akshara but the entrepreneur often supplements it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lower involvement of parents since they pay no/low fees.</td>
<td>A high degree of interaction with parents and community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Fees in the range of Rs. 20-30 per child.</td>
<td>Fees usually start at Rs. 100 per child and can go up to Rs. 500, depending on the services rendered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Parents often complain about the fees they have to pay and are irregular about payment.</td>
<td>Parents regular with fees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Irregular attendance in some cases</td>
<td>Parents particular about regular attendance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Mostly located in poorer slums where volunteers have resisted the conversion to independent balwadis since parents are too poor to pay regular fees.</td>
<td>Independent balwadis thrive in slums and areas that are upwardly mobile and where parents are willing to pay for quality education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Another Dimension in Villages

Akshara Foundation has balwadis in the villages of North Karnataka which are slightly different in character. Balwadis are called rural child centres here. In 2008, there were 686 such centres in the eight districts of the region, run along the same pattern as independent balwadis. The key difference here is that all rural child centres have libraries attached to them, providing school going children of all age groups with an opportunity for books and reading. For volunteers, they are an additional source of income. Volunteers are also encouraged to take private tuitions after preschool hours. Hence the nomenclature, child centre, as it offers a wide range of educational services for children.

As of March 2008, there were 686 rural child centres in North Karnataka.

The Partner Model

Rural child centres are not set up by Akshara Foundation directly. Akshara partners with NGOs, religious associations, corporate houses, educational institutions and self-help groups and train them to handle educational programmes. These organisations are already working in villages on non-educational programmes or with Akshara’s in-school and out-of-school programmes and have strong ties with the community. Akshara expands their capacity and scope and adds preschool education to their existing sphere of work.

Akshara selects them on the basis of their links with village communities and looks at their reach, capacity and quality. There is a mix of small organisations and large ones. The strongest partners in rural child centres are NGOs, corporate houses and educational institutions. Self-help groups also have a vivid presence in the village scene.

Since partner organisations have operating bases in villages, they can reach out directly and more effectively. Their roles include:

- Selecting volunteers
- Overseeing the functioning of rural child centres
- Monitoring the progress made by child centres
- Building community support.

The partner model of rural child centres works well and in 2008, Akshara had 80 partners in North Karnataka.

Daunting Issues

Rural child centres are a welcome feature in villages where there is limited access to preschools. Akshara starts by taking a look at the village profile and determines the need for preschool education. The crucial question is, “Can the initiative be sustained?” The pace picks up gradually and demand is created, particularly in bigger villages. There are many villages with four or five centres each.

The most challenging issue faced by rural child centres is the resistance of parents to paying fees. One of the anomalies is that villagers pay for their children’s use of the libraries, but do not want to pay for preschool education. It is an issue that has its roots in poverty, and despite the awareness and its rise in status in people’s perceptions, education still does not command the respect it deserves.

Many volunteers have devised methods to circumvent the ongoing crisis. They get their children to participate in village functions where their talents are displayed before community gatherings, bringing to public view the progress children make in rural child centres. Parents begin to come around, they appreciate the learning that takes place and as a result start paying fees.
Another thorny issue is the opposition from some anganwadi workers to the functioning of rural child centres. In urban areas this is less of a problem but in villages anganwadi workers feel that they have sole monopoly over children and consider rural child centres an incursion into their territory.

Volunteers, Akshara and partner organisations have jointly come up with compromises to cope and to overcome. In villages where the problem is rife, volunteers run their rural child centres after anganwadis close at 1.30 pm.

**Choosing and Training Volunteers**

Partner organisations select volunteers from village communities. It is difficult to find women who have passed their Std. X here, so Akshara builds their capacities with a seven-day residential training programme that focuses on their overall development. The initial training focuses on personality development and is followed by functional training.

Akshara's first task is to:
- Motivate them
- Encourage them
- Deal with issues and shape personality.
- The team inspires them by recounting the experiences of successful volunteers in the field.
- The team tells them they have it in them to function independently, that they can work and do a commendable job of it.
- The functional, seven-day training concentrates on the five developmental skills of children and how to inculcate them. Included in it is a two-day entrepreneurship training by IDF.

An important aspect of the course dwells on creating awareness in parents.

Spread through the seven days are special activities like yoga, chanting of *slokas* and taking volunteers to public spaces like parks where they launch a cleanliness drive, a lesson in keeping their environment at rural child centres clean.

There is a high attrition rate of volunteers in rural child centres. Volunteers with a sense of commitment are harder to come by. They migrate outwards from their villages, get married or secure better-paying jobs with other NGOs or the government. As a result, the programme’s impetus often suffers.

**Coverage of Children in Rural Child Centres (2006-2008)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rural child centres</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>539</td>
<td>10,267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>686</td>
<td>15,625</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Graph showing coverage of children in rural child centres (2006-2008)](image)
**Personal choices**

Despite popular belief, villages can be surprisingly progressive places. Prejudices melt away, sometimes faster than in urban centres. Rural child centres are beginning to engender a healthy respect for the personal choices women make.

Sujatha is frail but indomitable. Her husband expired two years ago when she was twenty three. She had a deep-rooted compulsion to work with children and saw no opening for it till Akshara came to her sleepy little village of Dummavada with hope. The rural child centre training gave her self-assurance, and with her parents’ encouragement she decided to start a child centre. Her mother, the secretary of the income-generation programme in the village self-help group, got her a loan and with public cooperation, Sujatha opened her rural child centre in a community hall.

There are three government anganwadis around Dummavada where Sujatha works, but parents send their children to her rural child centre at a fee of Rs. 30 each, because she follows the syllabus, she teaches methodically and painstakingly. Fun and laughter are not ignored either, nor are games, songs, stories and Sujatha’s personal interest in her children. She also offers lunch to the 22 children at her centre.

**Uniforms in a rural child centre**

In the village of Dastikoppa, parents are so keen on their children’s education they get uniforms stitched for them at their expense. Uniforms of blue checked shirts and blue shorts that make children look spruced up when they go to study at the village’s preferred preschool, the Chaitanya Shishu Mandiram, a rural child centre. Some little girls sport snazzy ties as well. Parents explain that uniforms ensure equality, rendering caste and gender issues unimportant.

Prema Koppad and Shivaleela Savanur are the young volunteers of the rural child centre with the ambition to do something radical like this in a village. Their preschool has spurred their ambitions and Prema would like to open a school if the community supports her. They represent the emerging new face of the village.

In their centre, they have exemplars like Vani and Raghu. Vani is a vivacious five year old, who says her rhymes and multiplication tables with unselfconscious aplomb, little realizing why the other children applaud her. Four year old Raghu has a deformed right hand, which does not stop him from taking part in all the activities in the balwadi as enthusiastically as anyone else.
An Inter-Sectoral Programme

The anganwadis are the Integrated Child Development Scheme’s (ICDS) delivery points across the country. The ICDS was launched on the 2nd October, 1975. “It is an inter-sectoral programme which seeks to directly reach out to children below six years, especially from vulnerable and remote areas and give them a head-start by providing an integrated programme of early childhood education, health and nutrition.”

The Stated Objectives of ICDS

- Lay the foundation for the proper psychological development of the child
- Improve the nutritional and health status of children in the age group of 0-6 years
- Reduce the incidence of mortality, morbidity, malnutrition and dropping out of school
- To achieve effective coordination of policy and implementation amongst the various departments to promote child development
- Enhance the capability of the mother and family to look after the health, nutritional and developmental needs of the child.

A package of six services is provided under the ICDS Scheme

- Supplementary nutrition
- Non-formal preschool education
- Immunisation
- Health check-up
- Referral services
- Nutrition and health education

ICDS – Education Service Delivery through Anganwadis

ICDS services are delivered through community-based workers and helpers at centres called anganwadis, which are child care centres. The anganwadi literally means a courtyard play centre and is managed by the anganwadi workers and helpers who are ‘honorary workers’ from the local community and who come forward to render their services, on a part-time basis, in the area of child care and development.

The Challenges

“ICDS is a relatively well-designed programme, but its reach is limited and the quality of services is also well below potential…. Financial allocations for ICDS are meagre: barely one tenth of 1% of India’s GDP, for an age group that accounts for 15% of the population.” ICDS covers only 22% of children in the 0-6 age group in the country. The real challenge for ICDS is to improve its services and offer universalisation with quality. “This is where anganwadi workers have a crucial role to play. Indeed, the success of an anganwadi depends first on the skill and motivation of its workers, and on the support they get from the administration and the community.”

When all the services of the ICDS are to be administered at the anganwadi by a team of an anganwadi worker and a helper, their work is huge. “The workload and burden of responsibility seem well outside the scope of any two human beings, however committed and well trained.” The anganwadi is laden with good intention, but as a mass harbinger of change it has not yet lived up to the expectation and hope that founded it. An energised community of anganwadi workers can go a long way in rectifying the situation.

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36 Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) Scheme website
38 Ibid
A Learning Component in Anganwadis

The ICDS’s package of six services converges at the anganwadi. The anganwadi worker performs multiple roles, feeling overworked and unable to give equal emphasis to each. It is the education component that suffers the most, for want of time and energy.

The anganwadi worker is hard-pressed to engage her children in a structured way and often no real learning is imparted to the children there. Akshara believed that a beneficial partnership could be forged with the anganwadi system by providing volunteers who would go to the anganwadis and impart preschool education to the 3 to 6 year old children there. Akshara collaborated with the government and introduced a learning component in selected anganwadis in Bangalore and North Karnataka. As of March 2008, Akshara supported 436 anganwadis across Karnataka. The content and curriculum followed at the anganwadis is the same as in other balwadi models.

Akshara’s Objectives

- To strengthen the preschool component of the anganwadi with a structured curriculum
- To build the anganwadi worker’s capacity in the preschool area
- To provide teaching learning material and enhance the quality of the environment in anganwadis
- To make a significant impact on children’s learning levels in a shorter timeframe
- To improve the attendance of children in anganwadis.

What do Akshara Volunteers do?

- Akshara focuses on the education component and provides a volunteer who teaches children for 90 minutes every day.
- A volunteer visits two anganwadis every day to conduct preschool sessions.
- Volunteers cover the content and curriculum in an interesting manner through activities, rhymes, interesting monthly competitions etc.
- Akshara takes on the responsibility of enrolling children in formal schools at the appropriate age.
- Akshara conducts assessments to track improvements in children.

Choosing and Training Volunteers

The Akshara volunteer is trained to work in anganwadis alongside anganwadi workers, without breaking down any of the existing structures. The challenge for Akshara lies in identifying the right volunteer, with the right inner resources.

- She has to be willing to work outside the safe territory of her home and go to far-flung anganwadis.
- She has to be able to work collaboratively.
- She has to give wide berth to personality clashes with anganwadi workers who, more often than not, have been at their posts for ten or fifteen years.

Besides the five developmental skills for children, Akshara’s training for anganwadi volunteers focuses on:

- Giving them inputs on how to interact with local leaders and government officials like supervisors and project officers
- Giving them inputs on how to build a bond with anganwadi workers and helpers
- Tackling the inevitable stress of this new workplace, especially when they first go there
- Dealing with hostile situations and knowing how to combat them
- Knowing when and how to introduce Akshara’s teaching component without the slightest hint of superiority, without giving offence
- Being a friend to children who are not often motivated or inspired.

Working in anganwadis is often a tough call and there is sometimes the difficulty of retaining volunteers at their stipend of Rs. 300 per month. Each volunteer works in two anganwadis, for which she receives a remuneration of Rs. 600 per month.
**Akshara’s anganwadi programme in Sirsi**

Sirsi is a small town in North Karnataka where Akshara has an anganwadi programme implemented by the Malenadu Education and Rural Development Society (MEARDS). It is a programme with a difference. Started in 2006, it works with the fundamental conviction that change can be enduring if the anganwadi worker changes. In 2006-07 the programme covered 15 anganwadis in Sirsi. This figure rose to 113 anganwadis in 2007-08, all located in remote villages around Sirsi.

The objectives of the programme are:

- Capacity building of anganwadi workers
- Sensitising parents of anganwadi children about important issues relating to early childhood health and education
- Early identification and treatment of developmental problems.

The programme is implemented by a team of:

- Anganwadi workers
- Supervisors
- Akshara’s trainers
- A paediatrician
- A clinical psychologist.

**Capacity building of Anganwadi workers – The key aspect**

Training or capacity building of anganwadi workers is a key aspect. Deputing an Akshara volunteer from outside can only be a short-term solution here. Anganwadi workers are a part of the community and their capacity building will sustain the programme of change in anganwadis, besides building a relationship through them - with the community.

Akshara’s and MEARDS’ trainers met anganwadi workers once a fortnight for two hour sessions each. An hour was spent on giving them an understanding of theory and the second hour was spent on practical demonstration and the preparation of teaching aids. The aim was to equip them to facilitate learning in children that is joyful, meaningful, relevant and practical.

Trainers monitored the effectiveness of their training and provided support. They visited the same anganwadis twice a month without prior intimation. They spent an hour, recording their observations and giving helpful suggestions. A system of self-monitoring and evaluation was put in place in which anganwadi workers assessed themselves in timing, cleanliness, prior preparation, interaction, activity based teaching and ‘other’ work done during the week.

Parents’ groups were formed and meetings and interactions were encouraged. Issues like lack of space or the need for construction were taken up with the community and resolved. Parents were informed about health issues in each centre by a paediatrician and about education by a clinical psychologist.

Akshara Sirsi’s anganwadi programme wants to impact all stakeholders. It wants to reach out to mothers to inform them about their children’s health and nutrition, about education, to involve them more systematically in the running of the anganwadi. It wants an empowered community of anganwadi workers and parents to work together to realise the potential of their children.
**Children, her inspiration**

For children now, the excitement never wears at the anganwadi in the Government Kannada Higher Primary School at Hegganahalli in Bangalore. Every session is anticipated with delight. There is so much more to learn and do. M. Srinivas, a diminutive child in a shirt and pants, pointed to a chart with Kannada alphabets and the words they formed. He had a long cane in his hand with which he picked them out with controlled triumph. He spoke them loud and the class, packed with children, repeated them. He raced through words cramming a blackboard without any prompting.

For Lakshmi, the Akshara volunteer who has been working here for three years, these were cherished moments of pride, her children doing so well. Her inspiration is children, she said, and when they learnt what she taught them, it never failed to motivate her. Lakshmi’s greatest achievement is that children’s learning levels had improved vastly. They could all read the Shishuvachan till lesson number 15. Her children came in neat and maintained a sense of calm order.

Susheelamma, who has been the anganwadi worker here for eleven years, said she had no trouble cooperating with Lakshmi. After all, it was in the interests of the children in her anganwadi. They were acquiring learning skills and that would pave a smooth way to the next stage in their education.

Lakshmi is an Akshara award winner in 2007 for her excellent interaction with children, her rapport with anganwadi workers and helpers, for her skills in time management and her commitment to work.

Parents were satisfied with the anganwadi and preferred it to the private schools around because of its better quality of instruction. They were in general aware of Lakshmi’s competence in their children’s class and appreciated it.

**Harmony at work**

The anganwadi in the progressive slum community of Thorvihakkal in Hubli is a good example of harmony at work. It is a large, airy, cheerful room festooned with colourful buntings and a profusion of charts on the walls. Prema Miraskar, the anganwadi worker, and Savitha Kalal, Akshara’s volunteer, work together with complete trust and understanding, working rhythmically. Prema is often caught up in other work, like census operations or writing reports about the ICDS’s services and she relies a lot on Savitha to teach the children in her anganwadi.

The subject for the week is water. Prema had provided the theoretical reinforcement in the morning, while Savitha handles the practical component in the afternoon through song, dance, drama and story. Savitha simulates a peacock’s dance through graceful movements and introduces its yearning wait for the rains. Then, she goes on to make her point that rains bring water.
Outcomes and Impact

The balwadi programme is Akshara Foundation’s flagship programme. Every year, thousands of little children pass out of Akshara’s balwadis, a report card in hand and go on to enter primary schools. Their transition is always smooth and these children tend to fare well academically in Std.I. But it is not children alone who benefit from Akshara Foundation’s balwadi programme. There is a cascading effect on the community. It comes through in parents’ positive attitude to their children’s education and in the confidence levels demonstrated by volunteers who have come into their own as capable educational entrepreneurs. Capacity building has been done for dozens of local organisations in small, educationally backward villages in North Karnataka. Corporate houses have come forward to meet the admission fees for of indigent children and the learning component has been enhanced in government’s anganwadi system.

The benefits of the balwadi programme have been all-round and have surpassed expectations.
Outcomes of the Programme

School Admissions

Since the balwadi programme’s inception in 2000, over 100,000 children have benefited from it. Almost all of them went on to enter formal schools and our tracking shows that 95% of them are still in school.

% children from Akshara balwadis admitted in government schools and private schools in Bangalore in 2007

In recent years, the majority of children from balwadis in Bangalore have preferred to join private schools while in rural areas, most of them go into government schools.
Akshara’s balwadi programme has had significant impact on children, parents, communities and the government.

It has:

1. Provided an opportunity for early education to thousands of children
2. Empowered thousands of young women
3. Embedded the idea of education in communities
4. Made parents partners in education
5. Impacted partner organizations
6. Garnered corporate support for children
7. Impacted the anganwadi

1 An Opportunity for Early Education

Akshara Foundation recognized the huge gap that existed for preschool education in slums and poor communities when it set up its balwadi programme. Thousands of children under six would otherwise have remained deprived of an opportunity to learn joyfully. It would also have impacted their ability to learn after they joined formal school.

Scientific research has established beyond doubt the criticality of the early years, as years that decide the future and dictate development. Akshara’s balwadis have accelerated children’s progress in an environment where they can grow and develop. For children, they have been a rite of passage to a better life.

The activity based, child-centred curriculum has fostered the holistic growth and development of children and has also prepared them for formal schooling. Akshara’s balwadis have gone beyond basic skills-acquisition to the broader compass of learning where minds are sharpened and intelligence developed, all in a responsive, interactive, non-intimidating atmosphere, without the burden of performance.

That children under six have rights is a new idea, often difficult to grasp in India. Balwadis are places where a child’s right to human development is safeguarded and encouraged. Every child, Akshara believes, has a right to develop her potential.

But Akshara is aware that more can be done. There is a dire shortage of space in balwadis. Akshara balwadis, in particular, function from cramped, crowded places. Children should ideally have more room for a more comprehensive experience. Akshara balwadis operate on shoestring budgets but that is the ground reality when the model is a low-cost, scalable and replicable one.

All children from Akshara’s balwadi programme take admission into formal schools whether government or private.
An Agent of Empowerment

The empowerment of volunteers is a by-product of Akshara’s balwadi programme. It has been an unplanned, but welcome development. All the balwadi volunteers are women, most of whom have never worked before. While they have the ability, they lack capacity and this is what Akshara focuses on in its training.

For volunteers, the balwadi is an honourable effort with children and even with its limited income, it gives them an entry into the wider world of work and fulfilment. For the hundreds of women volunteers who run them, balwadis are agents of change and empowerment. The balwadi programme provides them with an opportunity, gives them an identity as a teacher, creates economic space for them, and makes them independent. Along the way, they earn self-respect and growth and also discover personal assets of courage and confidence. It has opened the doors for many of them to successfully pursue careers beyond Akshara’s balwadis.

Embedding the Worth of Education

The balwadi programme has succeeded in creating a value for education in the communities it works in. There is a ripple effect wherever there is a balwadi. The community appreciates the balwadi and what it aspires to do. There is enhanced awareness about education and a demand for better quality education. Once children come into a balwadi parents know there is a guarantee that their children will go to school.

Ringing endorsement

Community leader and septuagenarian M.P. Viswaram is a member of the District Congress Committee and the President of the Nehru Harijana Sangha in the Anandpura slum in Jeevan Bhima Nagar, Bangalore. He expresses happiness about Akshara’s balwadis in his locality. Children used to be unruly, they got into fights, the street used to be their home, he reminisces bitterly. This was before independent balwadis came up in Anandpura. Now children have been channelised in the right direction and taught the basic rules of behaviour and good conduct. The community, he says, is proud of the volunteers among them, especially those who spearhead the independent balwadis. “Develop your balwadi. Build on it. Don’t give it up,” he tells them.

Bibi Jaan is a senior member of the Fatima Sangha, a self-help group in the Faiyazabad slum of Bangalore. Akshara balwadis have started a slow breeze of change here, she says. Illiterate mothers take a leaf out of their children’s workbooks and learn how to write their initials and peruse documents like bank papers. Volunteers, she says, are towers of inspiration in her community. The balwadi teaches them to be beacons, it helps them stand on their own. Children’s lives have improved and only education can do that. “We never studied; but then, those days, times were different.” Now, the balwadi gives children academic opportunity. “Make use of it,” Bibi Jaan tells parents.
Parents – Partners in Education

Mothers understand their children’s development needs better when their children start going to balwadis. They become aware of the importance of education and they start taking an interest in their children’s learning.

Today, even the poorest parent places a value on education and realises that a balwadi can constructively harness their children’s misspent energies and direct them productively towards learning, deportment and social conduct. Parents are happy that their children learn discipline, manners and hygiene along with basic knowledge. They have hope that their children will now gain admission in regular schools, their balwadi background, the learning and grooming they have inculcated, standing them in good stead. The balwadi is the beginning of a future, as Ratna Bandivadar of Odaradoni, Hubli, says. She is the mother of five year old Jyothi who goes to an Akshara balwadi there. Parents believe that education leads to opportunity. There will be jobs and a better life for their children, something they never had access to.

Mothers take decisions

Not all mothers work. Their husbands do not let them, or they are school drop-outs and therefore, not qualified enough. Most of them are poor. Shahnaz of Ilyas Nagar, Bangalore, ekes out a meagre, fluctuating life with her husband, a vegetable seller, and their four children. But of one thing there is unerring certainty. Their children would go to school and learn. As parents, they had had no education, they did not study. Their children should. Sultan, her son, is in an Akshara balwadi and Shahnaz hopes that he will lead a life beyond Ilyas Nagar.

Balwadis often have more girls than boys. Mothers resolve to do as much for their daughters as for their sons. Girls would be educated and would not get married early, mothers say. Times have changed for women, as Parveen Taj of Ilyas Nagar, says. Her three year old daughter is in an Akshara balwadi and she believes her daughter should have more choices than she had.

Impact on Partner Organisations

There are partner organisations in North Karnataka who have entered the arena of education for the first time and are inspired to go beyond balwadis. They look for new ways to universalize quality education in the geographies where they work. They would like to start private schools, partner with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan to work with out-of-school children, open wide the portals of quality education in villages, for too long denied the opportunity. Akshara Foundation in North Karnataka works through a strong network of partner organizations.

Garnering Corporate Support

Akshara’s balwadi programme is in part supported by corporate organisations, which has led to the participation of its employees in the programme. They recognize some of the issues faced by children and their parents and provide support. Parents, recognising the modern significance of English, would like their children who have passed out creditably from balwadis, to enter private, English medium schools. Corporate houses step in to pay part of the admission fee which parents find steep and unaffordable.
A helping hand

Corporate houses like Texas Instruments have come forward to help promising children with financial support and ease the parental burden. Vighnesh had been in Arunachalam Play Home, volunteer Meenakshi’s independent balwadi in Anandpura slum in Jeevan Bhima Nagar, Bangalore, for three years. His father, an alcoholic, left his family in the lurch and disappeared. Texas Instruments came to the rescue, bearing Rs. 4,500 of Vighnesh’s admission fees of Rs. 6,500. His mother paid the rest.

Surya was a top scorer at the same balwadi. His father died suddenly of a heart attack. Surya could never have made it to school on his mother’s paltry earnings from domestic work. Texas Instruments supported him to the tune of Rs. 1,540 for his admission. Harihahan, another bright young spark of the balwadi, was similarly helped with admission fees of Rs. 1,900. His mother ironed clothes for their living and, much as she aspired for it, could hardly support her son’s entry into a private school.

Impacting the Anganwadi System

The balwadi programme attempts to significantly impact the government-run anganwadi system. Akshara’s partnership model with anganwadis has shown that the preschool component can be reenergized. The focus on development-oriented teaching and activity has arrested the anganwadi’s slide into merely unsupervised play areas.

In North Karnataka, anganwadis have started improving in areas where there are balwadis. Anganwadi workers come on time, show more interest in children. It is a process of osmosis, a positive signal that change can be wrought through healthy competition.

Collaboration guides this partnership with anganwadi workers, who are often burdened by the sheer quantum of work expected of them. They benefit from Akshara’s engagement with them and do their jobs better.

There is growing acknowledgment in government circles about the weaknesses in anganwadis and the need for reform. Shalini Rajneesh, the Secretary, Department of Women and Child Welfare, Karnataka, has asked her department to work with NGOs to strengthen anganwadis. Akshara Foundation will be involved in the training of anganwadi workers in preschool education, so that the centres become hubs of learning. NGOs will also play a role in training the Department’s Child Development Project Officers (CDPOs) and Supervisors. Partnering more closely with the government will pave the way for imminent, large scale improvement in anganwadis.

Finally, it is children who gain the most from the balwadi programme’s initiatives, their mental, physical, social, emotional, cognitive, intellectual and aesthetic capabilities enhanced. They get a background in education. They learn manners, good behaviour and the unwritten rules of social interaction. Every child gets a basic foundation. They improve their skills. They are on the whole better prepared for formal schooling. They adjust better and stand far greater chances of success.