

Case Study Two – An Akshara Balwadi in Pantharapalya

The Pantharapalya slum is embedded within a maze of twisting, stone-paved alleys, away from the wide, traffic-laden roads that lead out of Bangalore. The largely Tamil speaking population lives in small bare tenements, asbestos-roofed and cramped. They are daily wage labourers mostly. Some of them trade in vegetables which they push on hand carts or spread out on the pavements. Most of the women work too, to be able to propel the family forward.

Life is an eternal crisis, as Sagaya Mary, the volunteer who runs the Akshara balwadi here says. Poverty exerts a vice-like grip. The government provides no facilities. It is an occasion for the community when the tap at the end of the street yields water twice a week.

Assuring Parents

Sagaya Mary has 25 children in the balwadi she set up a month ago. It is open from 10 am to 3 pm. During her survey of the community, Sagaya Mary visited homes and assured parents that she would look after their children at no additional cost to them. Reassured, many parents now leave their wards in her care at 8 in the morning when they go to work. Sagaya Mary lives opposite, in a narrow, single room dwelling with her husband and she keeps an eye on them. Sometimes she personally picks up children from the neighbourhood. On the day the team visits, however, many of them have come on their own or their parents have dropped them.

Starting the Morning

Sagaya Mary begins the day with a prayer which the children and she sing together. “Oh my God, I love you, May we be good children, God is Mother, God is Father.” The children then wish her, “Good morning teacher.” The prayer is repeated when children disperse for the day as well. It has been a busy morning. All 25 children are present, many of them neatly turned out, the balwadi identity card pinned to shirts or frocks like a badge of honour. It has the child’s name, date of birth, address, card number and Sagaya Mary’s signature. Sagaya Mary encourages children to play as soon as they congregate in the morning. It breaks down their resistance to a school environment, she says. She starts teaching them only after they are comfortable with their surroundings.



Work and Play

Sagaya Mary teaches children the days of the week, the English alphabets, and the numbers 1-20. Then to enliven them she engages them in songs in English and Kannada. It is an enjoyable break for children. They are relaxed and happy.

Sagaya Mary studies them closely. Will they be amenable to another round of serious work? She seems to think so and, with her background with children, her intuitive insights are seldom wrong. She takes out the pre-test question papers that Sarla, the Akshara field coordinator, had dropped by a few days before and gets the children to do one part of it, the part that they can attempt with relative ease and without her active intervention. The questions deal with fine motor coordination skills, writing, drawing shapes and numbers.

Five year old Vinod's answer sheet looks hopeful. He has painted within the large circle, none of his riotous handiwork transgressing the boundaries. He has drawn squares, triangles and stars, his lines wavering, weaving in and out of the dotted contours on the question paper. The next question requires him to draw these shapes on his own and his efforts are commendable. He attempts somewhat shakily to write b-u-y. He is better with numbers, writing 1,2,4,6,8,9,3,5,7, looking at their representation in the question paper.

Three year old Lakshmipriya is the epitome of good grooming, hair combed and tied with a ribbon, a bright, well-scrubbed face, a neat, fancy frock, the identity card meticulously pinned on. It is only a few days since she has started writing. She can with some difficulty draw on the dotted lines, but is unable to embark on her own. Her drawing on the first page of the question paper is colourful. She has lavished paint in the circle with her fingers, the daubs staying within the outline.



Activity and Learning

Sagaya Mary keeps the post-lunch session as interesting and vivid as possible, with the right mix of activity and learning to stave off afternoon torpor. This is when she finds she has to rouse her children from occasional lethargy. The Akshara play material is brought out – the ball with its many versatile uses, the doctor’s set, the talent blocks, the puzzle pieces. When interest begins to wane, she involves the children in games, in dance, in something a bit more physically challenging like walking along a zigzag rope on the ground. When she has captured their attention fully and they are alive to the possibilities of the afternoon she introduces an element of writing, of teaching and learning.

Happy to be with Children

Thirty five year old Sagaya Mary has impeccable credentials, a rich background of work and experience, her gentle expertise with children widely acknowledged in the community. For many years she worked for a church, taking Sunday tuitions

and Bible classes for children. She was an anganwadi worker for three years and ran an Akshara balwadi for eight years, roles she performed with dedication. Then there came an unexpected three-year hiatus when she had nothing to do. “I have no children, so I enjoy being with them.” She was so used to having children around her that she told the programme team, “I can’t sit idle at home. Please open a centre for me.” For Sagaya Mary this balwadi is a wish fulfilled. She is happy she can be with children and work for them.

Sagaya Mary’s Challenges

What are Sagaya Mary’s challenges?

- I want to do more for the children of this slum. But I have no space for it. I had to turn down 10 children because of that. The balwadi functions in the open verandah of a community leader’s house. The owner asks for a rent of Rs. 500 a month, which Sagaya Mary cannot afford. The front and side doors of the house open out into the verandah and the family comes and goes during the day. Sagaya Mary has to ensure a smooth passage for them, not always possible with 25 children crowding together in a tight space. The owner’s dog has pride of place in a corner of the verandah, a benign presence. Sagaya Mary keeps the Akshara kit under her cot in her room every evening.
- “If children could get some food in the afternoon.....” Sagaya Mary leaves it trailing unsaid. She has bought a nutrition-rich, ready-to-eat powder for the children from an anganwadi nearby, which she offers generously to those who have brought no lunch.
- A literacy background is lacking, she says. Children are completely untutored and ignorant, says Sagaya Mary. There is no educational stimulation at home. Many of them did not know how to play with the toys in the balwadi, let alone hold a slate.

- Parents are unused to the idea of schooling or that education is empowerment. Before they joined her balwadi these children wasted their time; led a rough life on the streets, playing, lacking in hygiene, fighting. Or their parents took them to their workplace where the older sibling was put in charge of the younger child. Trapped as they are in that mood of misspent energy they find learning difficult.
- Teaching them is tougher still, Sagaya Mary says. The smaller children have no grasp at all. The older children do better, but only if she keeps repeating a lesson over and over. The children in her balwadi want to learn though, and that is the greatest plus factor, she says.
- Sagaya Mary warns parents that their children should not end up like them – as labourers. It is up to them to ensure a better future for their children.

Two Enlightened Mothers

The team meets two enlightened mothers of the community.

- Kalaiselvi is Lakshmipriya’s mother. “She needs to learn a lot more,” Kalaiselvi says, disappointed that her daughter cannot write well. She quickly avers, however, that Lakshmipriya comes home every day and repeats what is taught at the balwadi. Kalaiselvi does not work. Her husband, a painter, is able to support the family. Kalaiselvi has studied up to Std. X and she puts that knowledge to good use, teaching Lakshmipriya at home. She queries her daughter on what she has learnt in class that day and elaborates on that lesson. “I want my daughter to study well.”
- It is the first time five and a half year old Lakshmi has been exposed to a structured way of learning. Her mother, Nagamma, has no idea of what a school is all about; she never went to one. She is a housewife and her husband a construction worker. They have two daughters, Lakshmipriya

the older of the two. "I want my children to study. I myself never did. If they are educated they can do something with their lives. There is a government school here on the main road. I think I will send them there later. I have no gender bias against the girl child. I want my girls to do well. They should do better than we have been able to."