# Child Care Services in Tamil Nadu

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*While the network of child care services in Tamil Nadu is impressive, there are two shortcomings—the poor quality of care for young children and the near absence of facilities for the care of under-twos.*

THE fate of women, young children and girls are inextricably linked together in a complex interacting cycle. This becomes poignantly evident in the case of the poor, who in India constitute slightly more than a third of the population. The consequences of poverty for children are in themselves severe. In addition, young children in families where both parents have to work in order to make ends meet suffer the double disadvantage of poverty and parental absence, the impact of which can be seen in the high infant mortality rate, the high incidence of morbidity, malnutrition, deficiency disorders and disabilities among children and low literacy levels.

The pressures exerted by the forces of the changing economy have, in the last 40 years, significantly increased the triple burden on women as workers, home-makers and mothers. The sole responsibility for the care of children, in addition to the stresses of poverty, adversely affect the health and well-being of women and limit their chances of gainful employment and education. The third corner of this interactive triangle is formed by young girls, often deprived of their chances for education, training and even nutrition by their role as child caretakers. Yet this role and its consequences have been ignored almost to the point of invisibility.

It is only recently that the intersecting needs of women, girls and young children are beginning to be seen in a linked perspective, and there is a growing realisation that child care services are an important means of addressing these needs. An imaginative child care service can not only respond to the child's basic needs for loving care and protection in the critical years of life and for healthy all-round growth and development, but at the same time provide relief to women and girls in their caretaking role and enable them to make use of opportunities for education, training, employment and community responsibility.

Before describing the services, it would be appropriate to make some estimate of the size of the need. According to the 1981 Census, the total population of Tamil Nadu was 484 lakh, which, using 12 per cent projection, works out to about 540 lakh in 1989. The ratio of females to males for the state is 977 per 1,000 and urban population is 33 per cent of the total. Literacy rates are 58 per cent for men and 35 per cent for women.

'Working mothers', defined as working, ever-married women in the age-group 15-49 years number 55.6 lakh (1989). It is calculated that at least 26 per cent of them (14.2 lakh) would have children below the age of five and hence require child care support. Children below five number 60.4 lakh (1989) and it is estimated that at least 37 per cent (22.4 lakhs) would be children of working mothers and would hence need day care in some form.

Available information does not indicate the number of girls in the age-group 6-14 years whose child care responsibilities prevent or reduce their chances of schooling or training. The order of magnitude may be roughly estimated by using the poverty line ratio of 40 per cent of the population. By this method, any number up to 26 lakh girls in that age-group may stand to benefit from child care services.

A study conducted in 1978, on who takes care of young children while mothers are at work, reported that a majority of children, 40-65 per cent, were taken care of by mothers themselves. In rural areas, the second-most significant caretaker, described as 'other persons in the household' and probably referring mostly to female siblings, took care of about 20 per cent while grandparents were in charge of less than 10 per cent. For urban areas, these proportions were almost exactly reversed. An alarmingly high proportion, ranging from 2 per cent of infants to 25 per cent of five-year olds, were described as cared for by 'none' in rural areas. This is a kind of bench-mark, reflecting the position before the growth of institutionalised services to their present level.

Child care services in Tamil Nadu must be seen in the context of this need, and reviewed in the light of their history and development. Tamil Nadu has a long and well-established tradition of social services, both in the voluntary and governmental sectors. Pre-school education received a spurt in the 1940s with the visit of Madame Montessori during the war years and the subsequent growth of a Montessorian movement, which inspired a substantial flowering of pre-primary and nursery schools in the private sector. Following the establishment of the Central Social Welfare Board in 1953, a number of 'balwadis' and centres catering to the young child were opened in the rural areas. In the 1960s, a network of low-cost child care centres, open for the entire day and intended to help working women, were set up with financial support from CARE, laying down the pattern for later development. Services for young children continued to expand with the launching of ICDS and the creche scheme in 1975, both following the already established pattern of full-day working.

Meanwhile the school lunch programme, started in a modest way during the tenure of Congress chief minister Kamaraj, grew into a more extensive noon meals programme by 1977. With the expansion of the noon meals programme to universal dimensions in 1982 at the inititiative of the late chief minister M G Ramachandran, and its inclusion of day care for pre-schoolers, the present level of services was reached.

## THE SERVICES

The pattern of child care services in Tamil Nadu is unique in its scope and extent, both within India and elsewhere (table). Outstanding features are the extensive, almost total coverage, and the rich diversity of auspices, governmental and voluntary.

The two major governmental programmes, noon meals programme and ICDS, between them provide the vast bulk of services. This integrated grid of 29,000 centres caters to over 18 lakh children aged 2-5 years and claims to be accessible to every child in need. Creches in the voluntary sector cater to another 25,000 or about 1.5 per cent of the numbers in the state sector. It would seem, therefore, that, of the estimated 23 lakh children aged 0-4 years in need of day-care, a considerable proportion are already included. However, it should be noted that infants below two years are not formally included in these programmes, though occasionally found in voluntary sector creches.

Another significant feature of these services is that all centres are required to work for six hours, the timings usually being the same as those of elementary schools. While these timings may not always be adhered to in practice, the minimum requirements for a day-care service are recognised by such a rule. Since the programme is targeted to low-income groups, and since it can be assumed that most women in poverty groups are likely to be working, a kind of rough and ready infrastructure for day care has been laid down, though responses have not been locally matched to women's needs. Similarly, since the timings are the same as school timings, it is possible that many girls are thereby enabled to attend school, but information to support this inference is not available at present.

In addition to the basic network there is a tiny statutory sector on plantations, and creches and a variety of small-scale efforts are making thrusts in new directions. An important support service is provided by TINIP (Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Programme) through nutrition support for infants from birth to two years. TINIP, which does not offer day care, covered (in 1989) 1.36 lakh children in 10 districts, and is projected to cover the entire state in the next decade.

Undoubtedly the single most significant welfare measure introduced in independent India, the noon meals programme, is also

**the largest feeding programme in the world, providing a daily free lunch to one in six persons in the state with the following breakdown (1988-89):**

| Category (Enrolled) | No of Beneficiaries (Lakhs) |
|---|---|
| Pre-school children (2+ to 4+) | 20.24 |
| School children (Std I-V) | 42.21 |
| School children (Std VI-VIII) | 17.94 |
| School children (Std IX-X) | 4.66 |
| Old age pensioners/widows | 2.07 |
| Total | 87.12 |

In the 21,850 child welfare centres, each child gets a fresh-cooked rice-based meal at the cost of 0.44 paise per day for 365 days (for holidays the children get a take-home packet). This is expected to provide 412 calories, or 1/3 of the daily calorie requirement. Raw materials (rice, dal and oil) are centrally supplied, while 13 paise per child per day is provided to the local workers to buy vegetables (5p), spices (5p) and firewood (3p).

The child welfare centres are each staffed by three workers, a child welfare organiser, who is paid an honorarium of Rs 240 per month, and two assistants each of whom gets about Rs 90 per month. All three are local women, but the child welfare organiser is expected to be educated up to Class X. Preference in recruitment is expected to be given to certain categories of women such as destitutes, widows, SC/ST etc.

The child welfare centres are all housed in simple sheds specially constructed and equipped by the state government for the purpose. The CWOs are expected to keep the children for six hours and to offer a programme of pre-school education. Most of them were exposed to short training when the scheme was launched in 1982, but there has been little follow-up or training support since then. A kit of educational equipment and toys was also provided initially at a cost of Rs 750, but there is no regular provision for maintenance, replacements or extensions. A health care service, though planned, has not yet become a part of the programme.

The noon meals programme is impressive in its coverage and its regular supply of food to children. Though there are constant complaints of leakages, mismanagement and false attendance figures, there is no doubt that children are regularly fed and the service is widely accessible to the needy. Close monitoring by a politically conscious parent community ensures that this basic demand is met, though the implication of the criticism is that costs are much higher than they need be. (The scheme as a whole absorbs 6 per cent of the state budget.) The programme is also impressive in having laid the foundation for an infrastructure for a day-care service by providing the three basic elements—a building (however primitive and confining) personnel (however poorly paid, ill-trained and unsupervised) and a meal (however cost-ineffective). Thus a framework exists for future development of full-fledged day care.

In terms of day care, however, there is still a long way to go. To begin with, there is no arrangement to care for infants below two, and in practice, the centres are mostly used by children above three. There have been few examples of local adjustments to suit the timings or locations of working mothers. It is reported that children often come just before the meal is served and disperse immediately afterwards, though many children stay on for several hours. It is not possible to state to what extent the child care needs of working mothers and girls (potentially or actually schoolgoing) are met.

The nature of care offered is purely custodial. Attendance ranges from 20 to 80, and though there are three workers per centre, they are virtually untrained. Since the programme was conceived essentially as a feeding programme and not in the holistic perspective of child care, there has been little appreciation of the critical importance of a high ratio of adults to children or of the need for training, both essential to promote the close attention and interaction required for child development. Lack of adequate and suitable materials and equipment, lack of training and motivation on the part of the workers, and lack of informed supervision and guidance are equally important reasons for the failure to provide developmentally appropriate activity for children.

Table: Child Care Programmes in Tamil Nadu, 1989-90

| Auspices | No of Centres | No of Child Beneficiaries | Age Group of Beneficiaries | No of Workers | Total Cost (In Crores) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NMP | 21,810 | 15,24,000 | 2 + to 5 | CWO 21,810<br>CWA 43,620<br>Total 65,430 | Food 22.49<br>Staff 16.26<br>Other 2.71<br>Total 41.46 |
| ICDS | 7,051 | 1,31,529<br>1,93,760 | 0 to 2*<br>2 + to 6 | ANW 7,051<br>ANWH 14,102<br>Total 21,153 | Food 2.92<br>Staff 7.34<br>Other 0.27<br>Total 10.53 |
| Creches | 890 | 22,250 | 0 to 5** | about 2,500 | 1.05*** |
| Factories | 498 | 1,727 | 0 to 6 | NA | NA |
| Plantations | 140 | about 3,000 | 0 to 6 | NA | NA |
| Self Financed | 80 | 3,200 | 0 to 6 | about 400 | about 0.06 |
| TINP | 7,862 | 1,36,000 | 6 to 36 months | CNW 9,000 about | Food 1.01****<br>Staff 4.24<br>Other 1.73<br>Total 6.98 |

* Receive food supplement only. ** Usually only 2+ found. *** 10 per cent contribution from voluntary agencies. **** 1988-89 figures.

The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is a national scheme launched in 1975, intended to deliver a package of six services to children aged 0-6 and pregnant and lactating women belonging to the most vulnerable sections of society. The six services are supplementary nutrition, pre-school education, immunisation, referral, and health care for children and nutrition and health education for the community.

In Tamil Nadu, 81 projects, each covering, a population of about one lakh, are presently functioning through about 7,050 'anganwadi' centres. Each anganwadi is expected to cater to about 40 children aged 2-5, 30 infants below two and 30 pregnant or lactating women

Functioning as part of the state-wide child care grid, the pattern of ICDS services in Tamil Nadu differs in several respects from that found elsewhere in the country. The three significant differences are:

(a) Timings—the six-hour day is observed, in contrast to the three hours generally found in all other states except Kerala

(b) Staffing—the pattern of one anganwadi worker (aww) with two helpers is followed, as opposed to one aww and only one helper found in other states. The remuneration of the workers is about the same as that of the noon meals workers.

(c) Feeding—children aged 2-5 get the same lunch that is offered under noon-meals, while an 80 gm 'laddu' made from an energy-rich cereal-pulse mix and costing 80 paise is offered to children between 6 months and two years of age.

The anganwadi is usually housed in a community building provided by the panchayat municipal corporation, and sometimes in a rented building. In terms of day care, ICDS, like the noon meals programme, does not cater to children below two (in practice, three) and makes no special effort to meet the needs of specific groups of working women or girls by adjusting timings or location or otherwise. However, anganwadis are more likely to keep children for the mandatory six-hour day.

The programme at the anganwadi is richer and more diverse than at the child welfare centre, so that in a way the noon meals programme may be described as the poor relative of the ICDS. It includes health services like immunisation, growth monitoring, screening and referral for malnutrition and other disorders, distribution of vitamin and iron tablets, deworming and diarrhoea control as well as home visits and nutrition and health education of mothers and the community. The pre-school education component is also superior, since workers are better trained and the centres better equipped. Besides, the workers are under close supervision, though this tends to concentrate on financial aspects and maintenance of records.

Further, ICDS centres comprise 25 per cent of all centres, but cater to only 10-11 per cent of the total number of beneficiaries. The average number of children per noon

meal centre works out to 70, but for the anganwadi the figure is only 28. So the adult/child ratio is 2½ times more comfortable in ICDS than in the noon meals programme.

In spite of all these advantages, however, the quality of the programme is only marginally superior. Child care is still heavily custodial, and ironically, the 'non-formal pre-school education' tends to consist of formal activities. In terms of finances, most of the additional expenditure of ICDS can be attributed to the complex and heavy structure of supervision. So ICDS could be described as a slightly superior but more costly and less cost-effective service than noon-meals.

The scheme of creches for the children of low-income working/ailing women is also a national programme launched in 1975. Creches are run by voluntary agencies with financial assistance from the Central Social Welfare Board. They are expected to provide full day care, including food and health care, for children in the age-group 0-5, following a schematic budget. 90 per cent of the recurring expenses are met from the grant-in-aid.

Out of the 12,000 creche units (a unit caters to 25 children) in the country at present, nearly 900 (or 7.5 per cent) run by about 250 voluntary agencies, are found in Tamil Nadu alone. But it must be noted that the roughly 23,000 children cared for in these creches amount to only 1.3 per cent of the children catered to by the state network. Though the pattern for the creches is laid down in the national scheme, the manner of functioning of creches in Tamil Nadu has been heavily influenced by the dominant state model, and differs in significant respects from the way creches operate elsewhere.

As in the case of ICDS, the main differences lie in the areas of timing, staffing, and feeding. Creches in Tamil Nadu invariably function for the full day of six hours and often much more. Though this was the original intention of the scheme, it cannot be stated with assurance that this is the case in the rest of the country, where frequently creches function for only three or four hours. The schematic pattern of assistance offers (in 1989) Rs 500 as remuneration to be shared by two workers, usually one main worker and one helper. However, in Tamil Nadu, most creches employ three workers, either one worker and two helpers or two workers and one helper. This is usually done by sharing the available funds among three persons, though some agencies are able to raise additional resources to offer better remuneration.

The food children get in creches is in general nutritionally more varied and balanced than in the state sector; in terms of quantity it is about the same, though inadequate in some cases. However, some agencies are able not only to offer better food, but also to provide a second snack, which is essential if children are to be kept for long hours.

In two important respects, creches in the voluntary sector in Tamil Nadu (and also in the rest of the country) are similar to the state programme in the state. Though the creche scheme envisaged day-care of children from birth onwards and was supposed to meet the needs of women engaged in manual labour and other low-paid employment or self-employment, over time both these objectives have been gradually lost sight of. The near-impossibility of running full-fledged day-care, including infants, within the funds available from the grant must be cited as a leading cause for this drift.

As a result, the change in emphasis can be seen in both aspects. On the one hand, children below three are rarely seen, and the creche today has come to be looked upon as an educational activity, like a pre-primary school, with focus on children aged 2-5. On the other, little emphasis is given to the needs of working mothers or schoolgoing girls, and often the children of home-based housewives are also found here. Creches differ significantly from the state sector in being more flexible and efficient and in eliciting greater community support. Programmes range from excellent to poor, with examples of outstanding work. However, day-care still tends to be largely custodial. Creche workers, most of whom have no training, are paid no more than their state counterparts, yet are usually better motivated; supervision and direction is often provided by experienced and devoted social workers. Miniscule in size, the voluntary sector offers a fine example of what can be achieved even with limited funds.[2]

Child care for women workers in the organised sector has a history going back nearly 40 years. Industrial legislation of the early post-independence period provided (through the Factories Act, Plantations Act and Mines Act) for creches for children 0-6 where women were employed in certain minimum numbers, or in establishments of a certain size. Later, such services were also sought to be provided for women in the unorganised sector (through the Contract Labour Act, Inter-State Migrant Workers' Act etc). Unfortunately, most of these provisions have either remained on paper, or have been implemented more in letter than in spirit, partly because of weaknesses in the legislation itself. Except for a few outstanding and well-known examples of creches run by big business houses, industrial creches are a rarity or offer only a mockery of services. Tamil Nadu is no exception.

Out of the 8.11 lakh factory workers in Tamil Nadu, 1.2 lakh are women. In 1986, 12,886 factories were registered under the act, but only 498 of these were statutorily required to provide creches, and returns show only 1,727 children in these creches. Among reasons for this low utilisation are the unsuitability of the workplace as a location, and the nature of the legislation itself. Since there are no mines in Tamil Nadu employing women on a permanent basis, the provisions of the Mines Act do not apply.

Plantation creches in India existed even in pre-independence times. Plantation labour is highly feminised: of the 1.32 lakh labour employed on plantations in Tamil Nadu, 68,000 (or 51 per cent) is female. In tea, which employs two-thirds of the plantation labour, the proportion is still higher, 55 per cent.

Creches are to be provided where the number of women employed exceeds 50, or where the children 0-6 of women workers exceeds 20. Temporary/casual labour is not entitled to these facilities. Following this rule, about 150 of the 490 tea plantations covered by the act (employing 10,500 women and 8,250 men) are obliged to offer creche facilities. All the 68,000 women working on plantations may not have young children who require the services of a creche. Yet, since only 15 per cent of the female workforce on plantations is eligible, it is clear that many, employed by small growers or as temporary hands, are deprived of such services. Besides, the utilisation rate is low, many parents preferring to leave young children at home in the care of family members (probably older sisters) while some use the network of noon meals centres. As a result, the number of children found in these creches is highly variable, ranging from 5 to 50. On a rough estimate, about 3,000 children, or about two- thirds of the eligible children in the area may be using the creches.

The variable quality of care is in itself a cause for low utilisation. At one extreme, government plantations and some private estates interpret the statutes very narrowly, providing a barely tolerable setting for custodial care of young children. At the other extreme, some of the larger professionally managed companies take pride in maintaining a high quality of service, which they see as part of a labour welfare package related to productivity. These 'model' creches however are available to only a small fraction of the children covered.

Interestingly, plantation creches are exceptional in usually having a higher attendance of infants (0-2) than older children. Breast-feeding by mothers is permitted, though substitute milk is also provided. However, the law, which is archaic, makes no mention of responsibility for education or nutrition suitable for older children, and this may well be a reason why fewer older children are found.

It is hard to isolate the impact of creches on women and girls on plantations. It is reported that of the 18,000 members of the INTUC-affiliated union in the Nilgiris, over 10,000 are women. Yet few women participated actively in union affairs, due to the traditional 'double burden' and none are in leadership positions. The union leaders' interest in creches is mainly in relation to enforcement of the existing provisions, and no militant actions have been fought on the issue of the content or quality of creches. Female literacy levels are low and girls' education on plantations does not appear to be significantly better than elsewhere.

Workers in statutory creches, unlike those in the state or voluntary sectors, are required to be paid at the same level as other women

workers in the concerned industry. As a result of decent wages and physical infrastructure combined with low utilisation, plantation/industrial creches are today a high-cost/low benefit programme. The major reason is the assignment of administrative responsibility for the creche to the employers, whose priorities are usually far removed from child welfare. A fresh look at the entire legislation on creches in the context of developments over the last half century is needed in order to devise satisfactory child care services that would continue to involve some degree of employer responsibilty.

The many small-scale efforts in day-care are impressive in the variety of their efforts to fill the gaps. Small in size, they are high in human resource inputs. Their services though costly in comparison to the mass programme, are not only superior in quality but more sensitive to client needs. The small-scale programmes include:

(a) creches and balwadis for low-income families, run without governmental assistance, often by denominational groups

(b) experimental and innovative programmes, often involving self-help and community resource mobilisation.

(c) private creches, mostly catering to urban middle class and lower middle class mothers.

Besides day care, Tamil Nadu is rich in programmes and services which offer support to mothers and young children. Chief among these is TINIP (Tamil Nadu Integrated Nutrition Programme) a 10-year-old World Bank assisted nutrition intervention programme aimed at the most vulnerable age-group, 6-24 months (recently enlarged to 6-36 months). The programme which covered 1.36 lakh children in 10 districts in 1989 proceeds by monitoring the growth of young children and offering supplementary feeding to those showing growth retardation for only as long as is needed for nutritional recovery. This is supported by intensive nutrition education of mothers, supplementary feeding for pregnant and lactating women and health care services for both mothers and children. A community nutrition worker is the focal point through whom all these services are provided. The project has been continuously monitored and evaluated over the years, and the results of evaluation used to modify the programme from time to time. TINIP is gradually being merged with ICDS and Noon Meals and extended to cover the entire state in the next decade.

Tamil Nadu is also outstanding in the large number of institutions offering residential care to children in need of care—there are 22 state homes for destitute children and more than 400 in the voluntary sector. These cater not only to orphans but to children of single working mothers of the poor (divorced, widowed or separated women) who are unable to cope with the task of simultaneously earning a living and managing a home for themselves and their children. Though these residential facilities are mainly intended for children aged 5-18, there are many instances of younger children in these institutions, but the numbers cannot be accurately estimated now.

There are also instances of feeding programmes, maternal and child health programmes, and balwadis run by voluntary agencies and denominational groups without any assistance from the state. This range of options other than day care available to women and children in the lowest income groups, offers some support to those with special needs. They may offer only partial solutions, but nevertheless act as a 'safety net' for those who inevitably fall through the holes of any mass system.

## Conclusions and Implications

The 80s have been a decade of phenomenal change as far as child care services are concerned. In 1978, the study conducted by the National Sample Survey on who took care of children while their mothers were at work, indicated that the majority of children below six were cared for by their mothers, grandparents/siblings and other non-related persons, in that order. No mention was made of institutional care, and at that time it may not even have been included in the questionnaire. If the study were to be repeated today, there is no doubt that a large number of children in the age-group 2-5 would be found in some form of institutionalised day-care. It can definitely be stated that the network of child care services in Tamil Nadu, impressive in its extent and scope, and claiming to reach every child who needs the service, has today achieved a minimal level of provision for all.

The policy of universal coverage followed by the noon meals scheme has been described by some scholars as being a 'blunt instrument' from the point of view of achieving the objectives of helping the most needy. A 1983 study showed that 30 per cent of the beneficiaries did not qualify as 'needy', while a similar proportion of 'needy' were in fact unable to benefit. The situation prevailing today deserves to be studied from this point of view. But even taking coverage to be almost universal, it is not clear how far and how well the needs of working mothers and young children are being met.

Commendable as it is that an infrastructure for day care now exists, there are, from the point of view of the quality of services, two major shortcomings. The first is the almost uniformly poor quality of the day care that is offered to young children. In most cases, it is merely custodial, often in very poor conditions, sometimes worse than what the children would get otherwise. Little or no attention is paid to children's developmental needs, the children often being kept in forced inactivity for long periods. At its worst, the day-care situation is threatening to the well-being and development of children.

This is because the bulk of the services are provided by the noon meals centres (and ICDS) which were never intended to function as day care and are not equipped to do so. The poor ratio of adults to children, the lack of facilities and materials, and the virtual absence of training make it impossible for them to be effective as day-care centres. In many cases, perhaps as a result of these conditions, the children stay in the centres for only a short time, but it is not possible to quantify the extent to which this is happening.

The second obvious shortcoming is the virtual absence of any arrangement for the care of infants below the age of two. Since the centres at present are incapable of attending to infants, this may be considered a blessing in disguise. But from the point of view of the working mother, or of the older sister whose caretaking responsibilities stand in the way of her education, this is the most critical age-group, whose care constitutes a major share of women's 'double burden'. Any attempt at day care must eventually confront this challenge.

The lack of fine tuning of response to need is revealed also in the deadening uniformity of programmes, characteristic of large-scale governmental schemes. Flexibility, reflected in adaptation to local needs and situations, is missing, (with a few honourable exceptions in the voluntary sector.) But in general, the services reflect an insensitivity to the needs of the working mother, which often seem not even to have been perceived. Timings and days of work are rarely adjusted to the mother's work needs; the needs of special groups like seasonal, migrant or itinerant workers do not seem to be recognised; linkages with primary schools, enabling girls freed from the burden of child care to get an education, are not well-established. In the organisation of programmes, the women themselves are rarely consulted, leave alone involved.

Not surprisingly, the voluntary sector is far superior to the government sector in terms of quality. Its greater efficiency and capacity to develop and draw upon motivation helps to stretch funds further and gives it an edge in terms of cost-benefit ratio. But it is still regrettably small in size; and with costs inevitably a little higher than in the state sector, it is being gradually squeezed out of child care.

The overwhelming presence of the government programme has created a climate of dependency, with a negative impact on community participation. Even in the voluntary sector, an institutionalised approach is more commonly found than support for self-help. Experiments and innovations in decentralised management and parent participation are rare. One of the few examples of self-help was the self-financed and managed creches run by women office workers in Madras and other urban centres. But this was the response of the educated urban middle class, who found themselves left out by both the statutory and the government sectors.

Family day-care, a popular solution in many countries where there is little or no state involvement, is conspicuous by its absence, except in the affluent metropolitan

sector. Encouragement is required not only for a massive increase in the size and scope of the voluntary sector, but even more, for efforts to promote flexible, diverse and innovative responses to varying situations.

The record of the organised sector, in which 10 per cent of the female work force is found, is pitiful. The Factories Act is practically a non-starter, providing creches only in name and amply justifying the view that the workplace is not the best solution for child care except in cases where workplace and residence are closely connected, as in campuses and plantations.

Plantation creches however, offer little more in terms of availability or quality, mainly because the laws have been framed, interpreted and implemented so as to leave out the majority of those who need the services. There is a strong case for a complete overhaul of labour legislation with regard to child care, replacing the present provisions under the various acts with comprehensive legislation built around the concept of a central fund for child care services for all working women.

Child care is a significant generator of employment for women. An unexpected outcome of the development of child care services on such a massive scale has been the growth of a huge female workforce in child care. In the short space of 10 years, a new class of paraprofessionals—child care workers—has emerged, numbering almost to a lakh women in Tamil Nadu alone. (The 89,000 child-care workers in Tamil Nadu constitute 35 per cent of all child-care workers in India, who are mostly ICDS anganwadi workers. If all the women employed by the noon meals programme are taken into account, the total number would be of the magnitude of two lakhs.)

But official and social recognition of this new female occupation, measured by indicators like remuneration and social status, is still to come. All that has happened is that yet another class of underpaid, over-worked and exploited women has been created. Though policy directives clearly lay down that widows, destitute women and SC/ST should get preference in employment for child care, low wages are still frequently justified by such arguments as that they are part-time workers, merely supplementing family income, or that they are volunteers inspired by a self-sacrificing zeal for community service, the rationale commonly advanced by government officials regarding anganwadi workers. This kind of reasoning merely serves to obscure the links between adequate wages, decent working conditions, status and job satisfaction on the one hand and better motivation of workers and improvement in the quality of services on the other.

Workers in statutory creches, who are paid wages comparable to those earned by the mothers whose children they care for, form a tiny exception that is significant only because it suggests a possible base for future policy on wages.

Equally responsible for the shortcomings in day-care services are the gaps in training Tamil Nadu has a handful of institutions offering training in different aspects of early childhood care and education, such as creche, nursery, kindergarten, and child welfare. Most graduates of these courses find employment in the private and voluntary sectors, hardly any entering the ill-paid mainstream of child care. But since the private sector is unregulated, little is known about their wages, working conditions or subsequent advancement.

For the vast majority of child care workers, who are employed by the noon meals scheme, training is virtually absent. As the scheme started out merely as a feeding programme and later evolved into a form of day care, the approach to training is *ad hoc* and superficial in nature. Most workers have received at best a single short orientation, which is hardly enough to equip them with the requisite skills and there is no effective follow-up through professional guidance or supervision on the job.

ICDS offers a common pattern of training to its workers throughout India. In Tamil Nadu, the ICDS training has recently been decentralised, and is now conducted by mobile training teams at the field level. The information available suggests that the new approach is more practical and field-oriented. But it is not clear whether the earlier emphasis on record-keeping and other administrative requirements continues or whether the focus has shifted to meeting children's needs and developing the skills needed for day care.

Of late, creche workers in the voluntary sector are also being exposed to orientation through one-month courses, largely of a theoretical type. There is a large backlog of creche workers who have yet to receive even this exposure. Thus it appears that most of the child care workers have little exposure to knowledge about children's needs and how to respond to them, or chances to acquire the skills of working with children. The dismal state of affairs with regard to training reflects the lack of seriousness about the tasks involved in child care, probably growing out of a belief that child care is something which any woman should be able to do. The entire area of training, remuneration and working conditions of child care workers needs serious attention if child care services are to improve in quality and effectively meet their goals.

Saddest of all, yet profoundly significant, is the lack of involvement of the working mother herself in child care, in all the three sectors—government, voluntary and statutory. On every issue, be it decentralised management or trade union activity, parent participation or quality improvement, timings or location, infant care, legislative reform or skills training for child care workers—the voice of the working mother is conspicuous by its absence.

Women's movements and organisations have yet to become aware of this deafening silence and seek to understand the underlying contradictions. For where the starting point has been the working mother, as in the case of the statutory sector, the children's needs are often not well met. And where the starting point has been the child, even among some of the best programmes in the voluntary sector, the prevailing attitude to the mother places less emphasis on her needs and more on 'educating' her to be a parent. This is a whole new challenge to the women's movement. For it is only by the active involvement of women, especially working mothers, and women's organisations, that the intersecting needs of women, girls and children can be appreciated and addressed, with justice to all.

[The author is deeply grateful to G Pankajam, principal, Lakshmi College of Education, Gandhigram and Uma Viswakumar for their collaboration and support in carrying out the study.

This study of child care services in Tamil Nadu was undertaken in 1989-90 by the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi (in collaboration with Lakshmi College of Education, Gandhigram) with financial support from UNICEF, as part of a collaborative effort in seven states to document the state of child care services as an essential input in women's development. In addition to the profile of child care services in the state, six intensive case-studies dealing with (i) ICDS in an urban slum, (ii) rural creches by a Gandhian institution, (iii) institutional abundance: creches in Kanyakumari district, (iv) filling the gaps: some small-scale innovative programmes, (v) office workers in the public sector, and (vi) creches on plantations were carried out.]

**INDENTURED INDIAN EMIGRANTS TO NATAL, 1860-1902**

A Study Based on Ship's Lists

*by*

**Surendra Bhana**

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