**From the Crèches of Vietnam**

My dear Editor,

Greetings to you and all our readers from Vietnam. A word that brings to mind images of a gallant little country that dared to defy the armed might of the greatest power on earth – a word that spells courage, sacrifice, self-reliance and an indomitable spirit.

Like most of us, I knew little more about Vietnam when I went there in August of this year. I was in for many a surprise. The Vietnam of today, nearly ten years after its reunification, is a desperately poor and struggling country, isolated, surrounded by hostile neighbours and cut off from most foreign countries outside of the Communist bloc. It lacks consumer goods; its buildings and equipment are shabby and dilapidated, its technology outdated, backward and constantly falling behind; and its citizens ill-clothed and poorly housed. Thirty years of almost continuous war have taken their toll.

Yet the spirit remains. Poverty there is, but the hardship is equally shared by all. One does not see the glaring contrast between rich and poor so obvious in India. Shortages there are, and malnutrition, but there is little inequality; everyone travels on bicycles, old and young. There is a tremendous effort to build, together. Nowhere is this spirit more obvious than in their wonderful determination to do the best they can for their children.

The world first learned about child care in Vietnam soon after the end of the war. During the 60s and 70s, a large-scale system of crèches had been built up, to release women to work in the fields and support the war effort. Later, the system continued to grow, because it is a basic plank of Socialist philosophy that women must be librated to participate in increasing production. And in a war-damaged country, the release of woman power was even more important to rebuild the shattered economy.

So today there are 43,000 creches in the country, catering to 1.2 million children aged 4 months to 3 years, or about 25% of the child population of that age. Vietnamese kinder gardens are run separately by the Ministry of Education, and cater to about 35% of the child population aged 3-6, but that is a story for another time. It is awesome to think that so many of the under-threes are being brought up in crèches. And this is indeed a women’s movement, run by women for women.

About one-third of the children in crèches are those of women working in the public sector. These crèches are run by the respective Government departments, central and provincial. The children of 70% of all women employed by the State are taken care of. Women working in factories and shops in towns have a choice between crèches run by the establishment themselves or “street” crèches intended for all children in the locality. These are run by the municipal authority. In the rural areas, the crèches are operated by the district or commune authorities and located in each village or hamlet. About one-third of the crèches are in the State sector and two-thirds in the cooperative sector, the latter mostly rural.

Funding comes from a variety of sources – the State, the cooperatives, the local authorities, the parents (who pay only a very modest fee), and mass organizations such as the Women’s Union and Youth Clubs. All crèches receive technical guidance and support from the Committee for the Protection of Mother and Child.

Crèches vary in provision and style. Some of the larger ones may accommodate up to 300-400 children in palatial former mansions, with huge gardens and ample space for everyone. In the villages, crèches are housed in converted warehouses, private homes, or common halls (the equivalent of Panchayat ghars). Some of these are quite old and broken down, but space everywhere is adequate.

Equipment too is variable. There is very little play equipment or material and little for the kids to do. I fear they spend most of their time doing nothing. There seems as yet vary little awareness of the vital significance of play in the physical, mental, emotional and social development of young children. This is also true of the nursery schools and balwadis in our own country, so there is little need to elaborate.

Food is adequate everywhere, but the better crèches offer a greater variety and more balanced meals. Water supply, sanitation, toilets and healthcare vary a good deal, with most problems in poorer districts and rural areas. There is a determined effort everywhere to provide the best possible now, gradually improving standards.

A peep into the crèches offers unforgettable sights and sounds – the mass of parent’s bicycles at arrival and departure time, the long lines of toddlers snaking out for a period of outdoor play in the garden, the little faces peering through the slatted movable screens at every door, the solemn tots seated on their little potties at toileting time, the mosquito nets over the low traditional wooden beds in the darkened afternoon hush, the huge kitchens with their cheerful aproned workers, the quiet contented buzz at mealtime when incongruous white masks suddenly appear on the faces of the girls who each spoons food to five or six infants, the lively action songs and dances which the poised young performers demonstrate for visitors, the surprisingly formal language lessons in the midst of a sea of inactivity – these and many more.

Most remarkable is the child care worker in the crèches. She is called a “monitrice” in French, and in Vietnamese, “Cu uoi”. Mostly young girls between 17 and 25, with a middle or high school education, they now number more than 150,000. Only half (or less) have received any form of training so far. An extensive three-tier system of training has been built up. A three-year course supplies the supervisors, administrators, crèche directors and instructors. The graduates of nine-month training courses are mostly found in the large “model” crèches; and there are crash courses lasting from six weeks to three months. Most of the so-called “trained” workers have only been exposed to these short courses. The work is hard, the hours long, and the pay low, even by Vietnamese standards. Yet the girls seem cheerful, interested, warm and affectionate to the children.

The worker/ child ratio is most impressive. The national average is one worker to seven children, ranging from 1:5 in the most favourable situations to 1:8 in the least. Every worker can relate intimately to a small group of children, and be a mother-substitute. The same worker stays with the same group of children all the time. She even continues with them as they move up the age-graded group ladder, so enduring relationships can be formed, and a great deal can be done for the children’s development.

The children are very strictly divided into narrow age-groups. In the smaller rural crèches, it is not so rigid, and the children may be divided into two or three age-grade groups at most, - below 18 months, 8-12 months, 13-18 months, 19-24 months and 2-3 years. The grouping is based on the kinds of food they eat (soup/milk, gruel, porridge, soft rice and rice) and also on the hours of sleep they need. No doubt this is practical in some ways. But if children spend all their time with such a narrow age-range of companions, and never interact with other ages, what kind of adults will they become? This is a far cry from the belief that a crèche should try to imitate a good home, where the younger ones learn by imitating and following the older ones and the older children learn to lead, protect, guide and teach.

Vietnamese parents, however seem to have found their own answers, since there are always fewer children to be found in the lower age-groups and more in the higher. Parents prefer to keep the youngest infants at home with the help of relatives, grandparents, or other children. The crèche authorities seem to have little confidence in parents ability to rear children, and are constantly lecturing them on how to bring up their own children, in a rather superior manner.

The daily programme is very formal, even rigid, with a strongly centralized curriculum. There is a second grand purpose to the crèches, as important as the first and that is the building of Socialism. Socialist theory asserts that human beings are moulded by their environment, and that greed, selfishness, and other bad qualities are the result of being brought up in an exploitative capitalist society. Socialists believe that a world in which harmony, cooperation, goodwill, love and service prevail, can only exist when these evils are eradicated and the New or Socialist Man, or Woman, created. That is why the crèches are so important, (followed of course by the kinder gardens and the schools) because they form the “magic” laboratory in which the “New Man” will come to life. Ho Chi Minh himself said “If we cannot have Socialism for ourselves, let us see that we have Socialism for our children”.

The curriculum therefore emphasizes all that is considered necessary to achieve this goal. From infancy, children are lovingly disciplined to wait for their turn, to share, to take part in the group, to be concerned for their groupmates, to love each other, to put the interest of the group first, to obey the teacher, to follow instructions and so forth. However, they are also being taught at the same time to sit still, be quiet, patient, docile, submissive, unquestioning and conformist. Must the two go together? The parents made revolution, but the children are not permitted to make noise.

Only structured activities are allowed and children have little opportunity to exercise their faculties freely. It is unreasonable to expect the “new” adult to be full of initiative, dynamism and creativity if the now child is never permitted these characteristics. Our own schools, balwadis and nurseries reflect the same disturbing trends.

There is no doubt that Vietnam has made a great new beginning for its children. There are still many problems, and the way ahead is difficult; but the Vietnamese are very aware of the defects, the shortcomings and the challenges of the system. They are open to discussion, eager to learn and anxious to overcome problems. And the crèches make an unmistakable statement, far louder than words, about their intentions and their determination.

In India, our leaders talk on ceremonial occasions of children being the “nation’s treasure”, “our future” or “our richest resource”. But when will India make an equally clear and unequivocal statement about our intentions for our children, in actions that turn dreams into reality?

Sincerely yours,

Mina Swaminathan