



Readers' Forum



Unmet Demand

With the growing work force of women, and working single parents also on the rise, there is a need for professionally managed child-care services. As we all know, careers of women suffer a break once they have a baby, and this break can be costly, in terms of career prospects. The parents-in-law and parents chip in their bit, but as one can imagine, this arrangement is not problem-free. After all, they too need a break. At present the gap in child care services is fulfilled to some extent by crèches, but more often than not, these are operated as a "side-business" by house-wives, with the help of maids who are untrained in child-care.

Pre-schools are another option, but the timings may not match the extra hours that today's professional is frequently required to put in, especially when deadlines have to be met at short notice.

Amidst all this, the mother/professional is pre-occupied with concerns over the child's safety: is the child being ill treated or neglected by the *ayah*, or worse - is the child being abused? These are only a few of the concerns.

Corporate houses can take advantage of this gap in services, by

offering child-care facilities, either in the same premises, where employees can visit them in the lunch hour or in a near-by location. These centres should be professionally managed: the premises should be child-friendly with no sharp instruments or open electrical switches. There should be trained help, an in-house doctor, a playpen, kids should be fed a nutritious diet, and, of course, given warmth and affection. The reason I say this will be to the advantage of corporate houses is that, their employee turnover will sharply decline once they offer such services. Most employees would forego a few thousands' increase in an alternative job offer in favour of such a service. Employees are also likely to feel grateful and the company can hence have a loyal employee base.

The difference between a product and a brand, as I perceive it, is the trust that the product enjoys. Now, this may not be the case with lifestyle consumption items, like colas, designer wear and so on, where the focus is on being "in". But it is a force to be reckoned with, in case of health services, insurance and banks. Considering this, there is immense potential for branding of child-care services. Once the relationship of trust is built, such that a parent will

actually leave his/her child in their care, this trust can be leveraged to other products and services too. Companies like Wipro, which have baby-care products among others in their product portfolio, can get into the market for child-care services, and leverage the trust they build in this field to other product segments as well.

After all, if a mother can leave her child in Wipro's hands and if the job is well done, there can be no better way to find a position not just in the minds of the consumers, but in their hearts as well.

At a different level, shopping malls, hotels, cinema houses and similar service providers can also offer child-care facilities during the time the customers are being serviced. In shopping malls, the kids' corner can be stuffed with toys and games which the child would want to take home and through this sales can also be enhanced. After all, it is not often that advertisers can grab a child's attention for more than a few seconds. Of course, these services need to be professionally managed, or else, it can have an adverse effect on their business. For instance, in Madras, there is a restaurant that offers childcare service and they actually have bows and arrows in the

playpen! The danger these arrows pose to children needs no elaboration.

Thus, the demand for child-care services far outweighs the inadequate and unsatisfactory supply. Corporate houses, companies which target kids, as well as service providers like cinema-houses, shopping malls and hotels can all build relationships with their clients by offering these services.

Vineeta Kommineni, Ahmedabad
by e-mail

A Name Says a Lot

Nobody has put down housewives more than our Tamil cable channels. In programmes like “ring for a song”, the mournful response, “I am only a housewife” to the question “*enna panreenga?*” (What do you do?) irks me to no end. Not just irk, it infuriates me. Immediately the questions turn to topics like, “What’s for dinner? How many kids do you have? What does your husband do? How long have you been married?” and so forth.

Are these women not expected to know about anything else in the world, including what appears in the newspapers?

To be economically independent is every woman’s prerogative and choice. If certain women choose to remain at home for various reasons, it does not mean they need to become diffident or reticent and “disappear”. Nor does it necessarily imply that they are not qualified or competent in terms of education, intellect and initiative.

Yet, there is no term more drab than “house-wife”. Everything about the word seems passive and stagnant. Actress Lakshmi whose performance in the progressive Tamil film, *Sirai* still remains my favourite, mentioned in an

interview: “Why can’t these non-working women at home call themselves “house-executives”? Yeah, why not? After all they coordinate and execute so many activities throughout the day. She further added impishly: “I ask these women who call themselves housewives if women who go to work are office-wives”? Good point indeed. Just like Eve is said to have come out of Adam’s rib, the wife is expected to be shorter, of lesser intellect and drive, and somehow inferior to the husband. Now and then she is addressed jocularly as the “better-half”; still only half and not whole. Okay, if not house-executive, why not say, “house-spouse”?

Jokes apart, I think this issue is as critical as the need to convert the term ‘prostitute’ into commercial sex worker (CSW), scavengers into cleaners and charity into assistance. The idea is to make the term more verb and less noun and make it a designation. Let wives be accorded the pride of a designation. That they have earned it already is common knowledge.

A house-executive’s day is filled with present continuous verbs: cooking, washing, cleaning...and what have you. But the image that looms is that of a rotund, staid woman with more inertia than initiative women, who have let their bodies and minds grow mouldy with constant TV watching and gossip. Again, to quote actress Lakshmi who responded to the question: “How are you so chic even after marriage?” by snapping at the journalist: “I look after my body for my own sake and not for my husband’s”

There is a phrase in Tamil, which produces an unmatched imagery of housewife (however false): *Idichcha*

Puli. Smashed tamarind, which is so inextricably stuck, so irrevocably entrenched that if anything has to be done with it, the tamarind has to be scraped out of the container.

I gave up my job when my child was six months old. Life was getting unmanageable with eight hours of hard work at office and another eight hours of babysitting at home — split between my spouse and myself. But nobody has ventured to ask me if I am a housewife. Is it because they can’t imagine housewives with bobbed hair and confidence?

It is all very well to ask, “What’s in a name?”. Maybe a rose would smell as sweet by any other name, but I can assure you that the name housewife can only stink. And how!

Jaya Madhavan, Chennai

Discovering my Indianness

I have not travelled much. I first lived outside Kashmir as a child in Bombay where my father was posted for some years. Later, I lived in Bangalore for five years when I went to study engineering. My sensibilities, for better or for worse, were shaped by downtown Srinagar, where I grew up and by the books I have read. The three major heroes I admire are Mahatma Gandhi, Einstein, and Russell.

I discovered the beauty of Gandhi when I was about seventeen years old and decided that a country that produced a man like him could not be anything except good. This opinion was not shared by too many people around me. Most of my fellow Muslim Kashmiris saw India as a Hindu country that was subjugating Muslim Kashmir. I should add here that before I read Gandhi I was an aid Pakistani with a host of illiterate prejudices against Hindus. I don’t think I was

too different in this respect from the other adolescents I knew. Most of us would have preferred if Kashmir were to be part of Pakistan.

Gandhi was the first influence that convinced me that true religion consists of loving one's fellow beings. A "religiosity" that required one to hate people who hold beliefs different from one's own is a perversion in the garb of the real meaning of religion. I began to fight in small ways against the rampant communalism all around me in Kashmir, overt and aggressive in the Muslims and covert and subtle in the Hindus. I earnestly came to believe it was all pointless and foolish.

It was naive of me to believe that since Gandhi was an Indian, all Indians shared his values and views. This was reinforced by the fact that most of my knowledge of India outside Kashmir, came from the media and the Indian media is more or less liberal. My first real experience of India came only when I went to study in Bangalore at the age of 20. I found the people on the street liberal. I even had a love relationship with a Hindu girl. However, Hindu communalism was very real. An incident will illustrate this. There was once a fight in our college (I studied in Islamiah Institute of Technology) between two groups of students from Kashmir. One of those involved used a knuckle-duster in the fight and for this he was taken away by the police to the nearby police station. He was beaten up severely and the sub-Inspector kept telling him: "Tell all this to your fellow Muslims when you go for prayers on Friday that this is what we will do to them". Or words to this effect. Incidents like this shook my faith in India and I began to believe that Kashmiris would be better off without being controlled either by India or Pakistan. I began to subscribe to the

JKLF ideology - a free, secular J&K.

Deep inside, however, I did identify with India. I found the idea of a pluralistic society where people of different religions and ethnicities lived in harmony and co-operation a beautiful one and wanted to work toward making the whole world exactly such a beautiful place. Indeed, this was Gandhi's dream.

Around this time, the movement for *aazadi* started in Kashmir and I found myself divided between my loyalty to Kashmir and my love for India. It seemed to me that the demand for a plebiscite was a fair one and the people of Kashmir had the right to decide what they wanted - India, Pakistan or freedom from both. However, I did not become actively involved in any sort of politics and went about my life with a more personal agenda.

Then came one of the most terrible experiences of my life. In June, 1994 (if I remember right), there was a *Newstrack* report about Kashmir. It was so crudely fascist that I was shocked beyond words. An unfortunate girl who was reportedly kidnapped by militants and had finally sought "refuge" in an Army camp was used for propaganda by the video magazine. The correspondent asked her: "How did the Army treat you?" The girl cringed for every-one to see and said: "They treated me well." I found the use of this girl for crude propaganda very upsetting. Those days I was in touch with an *India Today* correspondent and I conveyed my protest to her. A tragic mixture of the personal and the political took place and her reaction (she laughed, though not exactly in response to my protest) led me to attempt suicide. My rationale for doing so was that I decided that India was in fact a deeply fascist country and the Kashmiris

were a doomed lot. I felt that this extreme form of protest was required. By some miracle, I survived. And a month or so after the *Newstrack* report, there were cover stories in *India Today* and the *The Illustrated Weekly of India* about Kashmir. "Kashmir: Losing Control" is how *India Today* captioned its article. *Can We Hold on to Kashmir?* was the question asked by the *Weekly*. I don't know if my protest had anything to do with their stories, but it once again reassured me that with all its faults, there is hope in India

Not long after, I was once caught by the BSF unit stationed a couple of kilometers from our house and given a sound beating because they suspected me of being a militant. The only "reason" for this suspicion was that I did not have my identity card with me. I was threatened with a whole range of torture and was repeatedly asked to confess that I was a militant. This could be the story of any Kashmiri and speaks for itself. Yet I hold that India is a country of hope, and will one day love all her children equally. My Indianness consists of working towards this ideal. This determines my identity. I think many Indians - irrespective of their communities - have had experiences similar to mine, have faced discrimination and communalism. I think the way to purge India of this disease is to start with one's own self and make sure that one is religious according to Gandhi's and not Bal Thackeray's worldview. It seems to me that this is the way to make India a beautiful country. A country that can show the world that there is one underlying culture behind all the cultures of the world namely, humanism.

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