

# A Continuing Experiment

## —The Story of Mobile Creches

THE story of Mobile Creches is an unfinished adventure still in progress. Its characteristic quality, from the very beginning, has been this experimental, pragmatic approach. The solution to each problem has generated fresh problems and launched the next chapter of exploration.

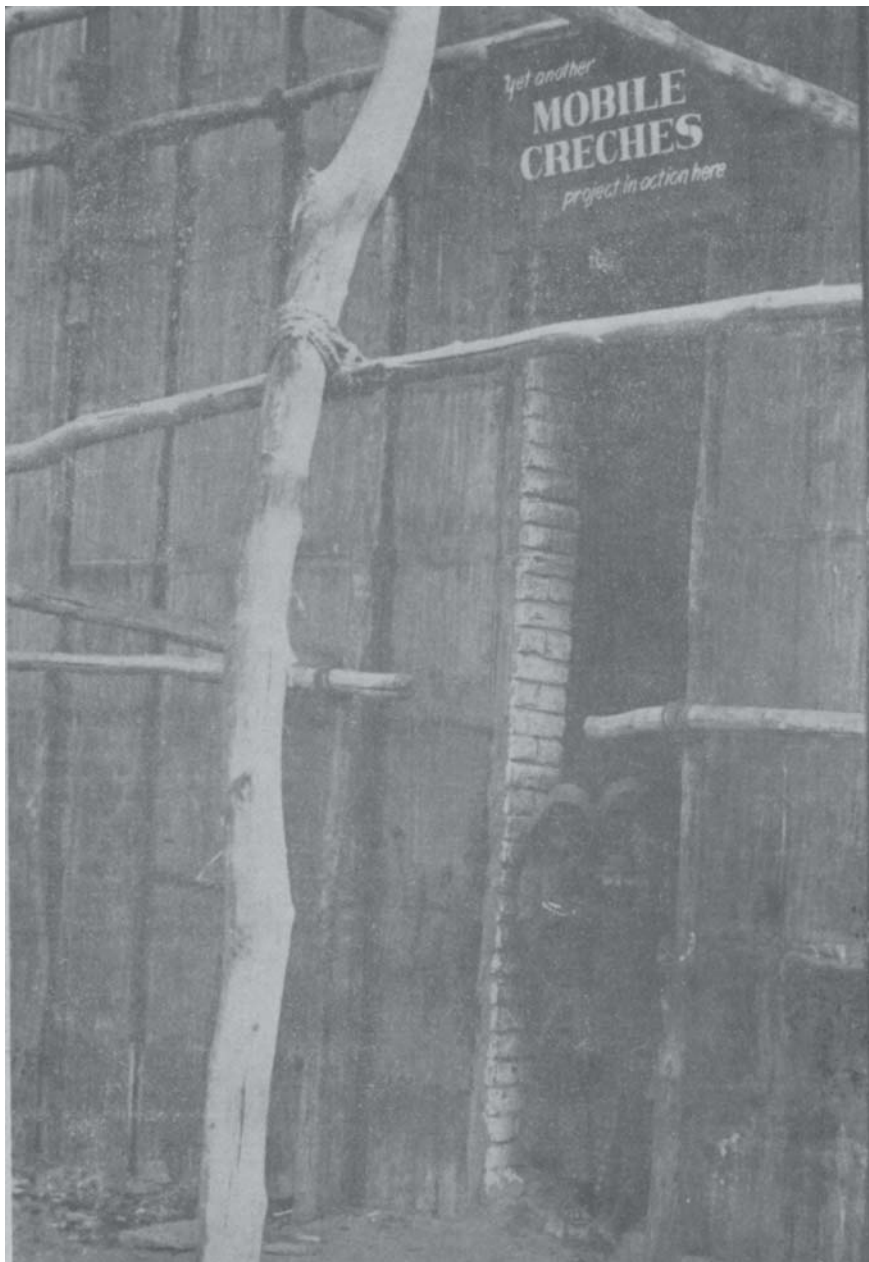
Mobile Creches was started by a woman and is run by women for women, yet it seems not to belong to the women's movement. Focusing on the whole family as it does, it is also different from most other child welfare agencies in its close concern for women. The effort to keep both objectives in mind has coloured its working style.

What is Mobile Creches? Today it is an organised programme of daycare for the children of poor working women, both on construction sites and in slums and resettlement colonies. But it was not always like this. How did it start? And why daycare? For whom? Is it necessary, or important?

Mobile Creches started from the response of one woman, Meera Mahadevan, to the plight of the children of the women who worked on the large construction sites of Delhi. Meera was torn by the sight of these neglected children, lying on burning pavements while their mothers toiled to erect skyscrapers.

### **Migrant Labourers**

Construction workers in the large cities of India are generally unskilled labourers who have migrated from surrounding rural areas in search of work. Usually landless or sometimes marginal farmers, they are almost always heavily in debt. Driven by unemployment or drought, often brought



**A typical mobile creche, housed in a building under construction**

in groups by labour contractors, they huddle together for mutual support. Their temporary homes, clusters of miserable huts or tents on the edge of large construction sites, are a familiar sight.

Only the able-bodied seek work in these tough circumstances. To make both ends meet, both man and wife must work on daily wages, and children and the elderly are often left behind. Ties to the village home are strong and many return to their homes once or twice a year when work is available there. Few migrants are totally cut off from their origins, though many have been living in this pattern for 20 years or more.

The nature of the construction industry is such that the duration for which labourers get employment on a worksite varies from a month to a year. The average duration is three months, but there is no guarantee of continuous employment. Rain, shortage of materials, technical and legal delays can interrupt construction work. Moreover the industry traditionally employs labour in gangs, each of which is geared to a specific stage of the work. When that specified stage is over, the gang moves on and another takes its place. This constant changeover of gangs of casual labour on daily wages is convenient and cheap for the employers but the nagging uncertainty about employment creates a nightmarish sense of insecurity in the labourers. Construction is said to be a risky business, and so it is, with most of the burden borne by the labourers at the bottom of the heap.

Migrant labourers are "migrant" in two senses : not only are they uprooted villagers shuttling uneasily between town and village, but within the city, they are transients constantly on the move. In spite of well meaning laws, employers have managed to get by without providing much by way of amenities. Minimal housing, made of rejected bricks and whatever waste materials the labourers can collect, and some access to water are often all that is provided.

Civic authorities traditionally feel no responsibility towards this population

and do not even give them ration cards. Political leaders, when elections are over, talk of sending them back to the villages so that they can stop polluting our dream cities. Even where schools, hospitals and other facilities exist within yards of the labour camp, the migrant workers cannot take advantage of them because of their illiteracy, lack of self confidence and constant mobility.

The women workers bear a triple burden. Labourers from 8 to 5, they must be homemakers before and after, as men hardly ever share domestic chores like gathering fuel and water, cooking and cleaning. Women's third task is to bear and rear children.

### **Scarred Childhood**

Young children are the worst sufferers in this scenario. The hazards of the construction site, exposure to the elements, contaminated water—all take their toll. There is a harsh process of elimination, and the survivors are often malnourished, with a variety of diseases. Lacking family elders, mothers are obliged to leave infants in the care of older siblings, often aged no more than six or seven themselves. Diets are not only inadequate in quantity but unsuitable in nature, because the mother

has no time to prepare special foods for young children,, nor can she afford a varied and balanced diet. Both physically and psychologically, the young child is under severe stress.

Older children who have survived are often tough, though they may lack the sturdiness of parents brought up in a rural situation. Yet they are deeply scarred by this process. Not only are they denied the chance of a normal childhood and a decent education, but the migrant way of life erodes the familiar features which give children emotional stability.

The nuclear family is often the refuge from the flux and stress of daily life. Emotional ties are strong and the family close knit, even possessive. Outside, there are few activities to stimulate and foster mental growth : conventional school too is denied. Companions change daily; new dialects are constantly heard ; lasting relationships and interests are difficult to form ; agricultural skills cannot be learnt. The migrant child, most vulnerable and most exposed, most denied and least equipped, is trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty, unskilled labour and daily wages.

### **The Challenge**

It was to this situation that the first

---

## **The Face Of Mobile Creches**

There are about 30 centres in operation in Delhi and about 24 in Bombay, each with anything from 50 to 250 children, totalling 3,000 children in Delhi and 2,500 in Bombay. On construction sites, the contractors provide simple accommodation. In resettlements, low cost structures using local materials have been put up.

The children are divided into groups according to age. A doctor visits each centre once a week. The centres work from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. After 7 p.m., the staff hold literacy classes for men and women for two hours five nights a week.

Children are given midday meals with special diets for the mal-nourished. They are kept busy with a variety of play activities, using simple, easily replaceable materials. The older ones get lessons in literacy and numeracy, using informal methods. Mothers are given informal advice on health, childcare and birth control.

A mobile educational drama troupe gives regular performances ; film shows, fairs and picnics are also arranged. Most of the money comes as grants and donations from the government, international voluntary agencies, individuals, institutions and trusts. Contributions from building contractors and nominal fees from parents also help. Funds are also raised through sale of greeting cards designed by the children, sale of spices, and film premieres

band of volunteers of Mobile Creches responded. They were not helped by the law, which blandly requires contractors in the construction industry, or failing them, the principal employers, to make provisions for certain labour amenities like drinking water, wash rooms, rest rooms, canteens, creches, first aid and medical assistance, without laying down either the means or the mechanisms for its enforcement. Lacking teeth, the law is easily evaded, and few dare tackle this situation.

In many ways, the voluntary agency is uniquely placed to meet the challenge. Flexible, capable of quick reaction, responsive to feedback, it can reach areas which government agencies cannot, and can devise imaginative solutions. Small, with few overheads, and able to call on devotion to a cause, it can operate at an incredibly low level of costs.

So Mobile Creches was born. Two formidable problems which had to be tackled at once were first, of reaching to the migrant families—and second, of providing services in an acceptable form. From the interaction of these two, the concept of daycare on the “worksite took visible shape.

What does reach imply? On the one hand, it meant gaining entry into worksites, overcoming the suspicion and mistrust of contractors and engineers. From their point of view, the so called social workers could well be the agents of trade unions or political parties, trouble makers bent on stirring up the labourers and creating problems for the employers. To break through, it needed not only understanding of the law and its provisions but also the reasons for its nonenforcement.

On the other hand, it meant gaining the confidence of the construction labourers themselves and being able to persuade mothers to leave their young infants in the creches, allaying their fears. A gut response was to identify as much as possible with the labourers, dressing simply, learning their dialects, being prepared to work long hours in their conditions without appurtenances like fans or drinking water.



**Creche workers feeding children**

But this alone was not enough. The only way, in the end, was visibly to demonstrate the possibility of caring for children, right under the noses of their mothers, in a way that would satisfy them. For how can a labouring woman be convinced of the possibility of a creche, something which she has never heard of, except by actually showing her that it works?

### **The Worksite Creche**

The creche had to be right there on the worksite and at the same time efficient, meaningful, harmonious. Bit by painful bit, the different elements of the programme were tried out, routines established and systems laid down. Fancy ideas fell by the wayside, as the possible became real. The search for lowcost solutions was not only because of the scarcity of resources. It was, even more, in order to find feasible and meaningful solutions in every aspect of work.

It had to be demonstrated that hygiene was possible in a mud hut, a tinroofed shed or an unfinished building, because those were the only premises available. And yet hygiene was essential in a programme of child care, and especially for the children of the poorest,

who suffer most from illnesses arising out of poor environmental hygiene.

The solution—plenty of soap, detergent, disinfectant, rags and waste, limited use of water (which is often hard to come by) and constant attention to gruelling routines. How to manage the constant soiling by young children?—elementary Indian style potties (two bricks over a sheet of paper) for toddlers; lots of sand and rags for cleaning; rough saris as uniforms so that the staff would not mind theirs being soiled; lowcost cradle cloths and getting the seniormost workers to wash soiled diapers.

What equipment to use in such a setting, with constant mobility, heavy wear and tear and the danger of pilferage? The answer— as little as possible, the sturdiest and most familiar furniture like *tat pattis* on the floor, hammocks and *chowkis*. For toys—waste materials, simple things easily found on construction sites like sticks, rods, sand and bricks; folk toys and play materials available on the market; household articles collected from urban middle class homes. How to introduce solids cleanly into the diet of young children? The answer was spoons.

How to attract, keep and teach the older kids who could easily be alienated by formal classroom disciplines and run away if the lessons were boring, while at the same time meeting the parents' demands to teach them somehow? The answer was a range of educational games and activities and attention to arts and crafts with familiar materials. With all these, a rich and stimulating educational environment for young children was built up over the years. The important element was the design of the system, an outcome of problem solving.

### **Success And Failure**

Soon, daycare was extended to another group of needy women— those living in slum resettlements i.e., scavengers, domestic servants, casual labourers, vendors and hawkers. Moved overnight to distant resettlements, many of these women and men had lost their jobs, and had now to commute long distances daily to find work, leaving their young children behind. Their situation was in many ways similar to that of the construction migrants, left as they were with barely more than the shelter over their heads as permanent residence.

Mobile Creches was able to adapt its basic programme of care and education for children ranging from birth to 12 years, to the needs of these families. Later, as amenities were built up in the resettlements, the older children began to attend regular school, and daycare concentrated on preschoolers.

In 10 years, there were some solid achievements, some needs met. The creation of a model, a daycare service offering a comprehensive and integrated programme for the children of the poorest, flexible enough to reach migrant labourers on the worksite, educationally rich and emotionally supportive. It was tailored to needs, reinforcing existing services, supporting older children through school, assisting migrants to make use of civic amenities, working with parents and adults at night, drawing on the support of employers, contractors, government, and public.

Mobile Creches was also successful in creating, to a limited extent, public

awareness of the problems of migrant children through its publications, seminars, volunteers, and exhibitions. Even more significantly, Mobile Creches persuaded the government to institute a scheme of financial assistance to agencies running daycare for the poor, so that more could be reached.

So much for the plus points. But the minus points? In terms of the vast numbers involved and the effort required, not even a dent has been made. There is still no change in the



implementation of laws applying to migrant workers. Though a new law, Interstate Migrant Workers Act was passed in 1980, there has been no change in government policy towards labour or its welfare, no move to create more stable guaranteed employment, no extension of civic amenities to camps; no organisation of migrant labour, no lobby or political pressure to voice their needs, and no growth of specialised educational or social services for them in spite of the financial provisions.

A few hundreds, perhaps thousands, are being reached by one agency, but the hoped for replication has not come about. To understand why, it is necessary to grasp the limitations of voluntary agencies and of their resource base. But before that, the pressures from yet another group of people have to be considered the staff.

### **Building The Staff**

Who runs the daycare services? Where do the staff come from and how were they found? Another story begins.

The work was demanding and the hours long, the same as those of construction labour. The environment was harsh, in dust, heat and rubble, with few physical comforts, no toilets and far from bus-stops. The children were dirty, lice ridden, in filthy rags, smelly, with runny noses, and suffered from diarrhoea. Who was willing to take care of them, to teach, medicate, chat with mothers, fondle, play, sew, sing, dance, sweep, cook, wash dishes and soiled clothes, make visual aids, conduct meetings, and keep records, endlessly and at hardly any pay?

The romantic notion that volunteers would do the job was soon discarded. Trained workers did not fill the bill; teachers, nurses, midwives and *balsevikas* were tried out and found either unwilling or unable to respond to the task. So it had to be people without preconceptions or demands; people who could be motivated to do it for the pittance that was all that could be found. So began the search for workers and for a system that would bring out the best in them.

This army of the untrained was recruited from the pool of women from the struggling edge of the lower middle class, wives and daughters of large families, for whom; the extra few rupees made a world of difference; neither well educated enough nor vocationally trained enough to aspire for specialised jobs; young high school graduates, or semi educated older women, housebound for many years and now seeking additional income; unemployed youth, marking time while looking for jobs, saving for marriages or studying through correspondence courses. All needed money, but most had no marketable skills. So it was possible to employ and train them and to coax, them to accept the arduous working conditions. For most, it was a "second income, even, at another level, for those who helped to direct, manage, and develop the programme.

The unskilled, however, knew nothing about day care nor about work methods and procedures. Who was to

train them and how and where ? No training courses existed in the country ; so it had to be on the job. Professionals were roped in from medicine, social work, education. Some came, saw and fled; others stayed on, stung by the taunts that they were ivory tower intellectuals. The turnover was high, but each made a contribution.

Slowly, a second rung emerged—the first group of workers, who had been broken in now knew what to do. They would train the newcomers, by demonstration, while the learners would learn by doing. At one stroke, two vitally important pedagogical principles were put to work.

For the senior workers, the rewards were recognition and promotion as well as raises in pay. Placed in positions of responsibility, they became both supervisors and trainers—they managed the centres, supervised the workers, maintained standards of work and guided and taught recruits. In the early years, staff turnover was enormous and the process seemed never ending. Later, training became systematised to what it is now, often described as an innovative internship model—experimental, pragmatic, and dialogic.

The system was arrived at by experiment, but it was no mere juggling with skills. Intrinsic rewards were built in, attempting to offer the deep satisfaction of creative involvement with work. The demand for high standards evoked a fierce pride in achievement against odds. The sense of identification and participation was woven of many strands—the involvement in day to day decision making, democratic procedures in problem solving, an informal homelike environment and affectionate concern for each other, a sense of family solidarity and sharing, the lack of distinction between high and low and the strict application of rules to all.

### **The Second Focus**

So evolved a cadre of daycare workers—dependable, competent, and committed. In their development, Mobile Creches came face to face with the pressing needs of yet another group of

women—different from the migrant labourers it had focused on earlier. Their problems were financial stress, eroded health and inadequate nutrition, social pressures, marital and domestic conflict, neglect of their own children to care for those of others, and underlying all, the economic problem of middle class poverty, the edge of the abyss. These needs could not be ignored ; not only were they important in themselves but on their satisfaction rested the psychic balance of a group of women and their effectiveness as workers.

Slowly, Mobile Creches struggled, to improve their salaries. For a voluntary agency, funded largely by donors who are eager to see that benefits reach the children directly, and ill prepared to pay for staff salaries or administrative costs, this is difficult. Nevertheless, a long struggle began, to provide job security, gradual advancement through annual increments, provident fund and exgratia payments as well as benefits like medical care, maternity leave, creche facilities, and interest free loans.

But financial constraints placed severe limits on how far this could go. A voluntary agency must always contend with uncertain funding, staff turnover and rising costs. All the more reason to

seek procedures that would maximise positive attitudes, and build up a sense of participation, creating not only competence but concern.

### **The Watershed**

Ten years on, Mobile Creches had reached a watershed. It seemed an established institution with a reputation for efficiency, running high quality daycare for the poor at low cost. Thirty centres ran at a time in Delhi, and a branch in Bombay, opened in 1972, had about 20 centres at a time. In 1980, work was extended to Pune too. A competent band of about 250 workers had been built up, with a handpicked cadre of trainer-supervisors handling ongoing training.

Close contacts with construction labour were maintained through adult education, an educational drama group, parents meetings, mutual savings societies, a library service, and weekend labour camps. But it was a precarious tightrope act—balancing the needs of the programme and of children, the first focus, on the one hand, with the needs of the staff, the emerging focus, on the other. Caught between the sea of unmet needs and the wall of an official policy that turned a blind eye to them, the agency groped for direction.

Seminars were held to ask— should



there be expansion ? Was it even possible ? Would that lead to dilution of quality ? Yet what was the meaning of running 50 centres in a country of 10 million construction labour ? If not expansion, then how to extend the movement ? How could a daycare movement be launched ? Tough choices lay ahead.

### **Blind Alleys**

Two directions—attempts to activate labour, and to activate public opinion opened up in earlier years, seemed to have yielded little. The first, it was hoped, would grow out of adult education, which aimed overtly at creating awareness in parents about a better quality of life for children's development. Inevitably, literacy classes were looked upon with suspicion by contractors, who felt that it was only the thin end of the wedge. Around them grew other related activities, but could not lead to the logical conclusion of organising or unionising construction labour. Any attempt to do so would have backfired on the services and affected the women and children negatively. The conclusion seemed clear, though unpalatable ; the same group cannot be involved in both social services and political activism. It has to be the one or the other.

Construction labourers are notoriously hard to organise, for obvious reasons like poverty, illiteracy, ethnic plurality and, most of all, mobility. With precarious employment and constant movement from place to place in search of work, a state of affairs which suits employers very well, formal unionisation is difficult. Most trade unions have kept away from this thankless task. Labour has its own bitter tale to tell of so called union people who appear to collect dues, make promises and are never seen again. The emergence of a strong union that could, among other things, press for implementation of labour legislation, is a faraway dream.

What about moving public opinion, through the media, and legislature, seminars, discussions, awareness creation among intellectuals and concerned people ? The attempts petered out in later years for lack of time,

funds and workers. Some options were already closed. Mobile Creches had learnt early that confrontation with employers did not help. The labour laws of this country provide for welfare services for labour but these are often not enforced. With an administration that is perennially short staffed, harassed at best, corrupt and in league with contractors at worst, and with rules which are unrealistic, implementation is obviously poor.

What, can be done ? There is the slow process of educating: officials at the lower levels, and getting the support of people at higher levels without alienating those; on the spot. Equally slow work is to change the law without risking what is already on the ground. But any attempt to take a legalistic stance and confront employers, meant certain defeat, not merely for the institution, which is a minor defeat ; it rebounded cruelly against the labour, laying off women labour and cutting them off from even the fragile amenities within their grasp.

But while working for changes in attitudes, legislation and administration, should the attempt to provide services continue ? Since the primary focus was the development of children, Mobile Creches had no hesitation in answering that question, knowing the consequences of that decision would be painful and humiliating. It meant having to take a pleading stance, begging for donations, "asking nicely" and swallowing insults whenever necessary.

Contractors may be obliged by law to maintain creches, but are under no obligation whatsoever to support a particular voluntary agency ; a tough attitude would have meant being politely shown the door while a token creche was run by the contractor. Aware of the implications and convinced of the long term value of the approach, Mobile Creches made its choice.

### **Core Problem—Finance**

The heart of the problem of a daycare movement is finance. Like other voluntary agencies, Mobile Creches operates on a slender and uncertain

resource base, largely dependent on donations. Tax laws preclude the possibility of engaging in income producing ventures ; little can be raised from parents by fees, though they do make nominal payments; employers' contributions, in the absence of a clear policy and firm implementation by government, are limited, and are also considered donations.

Government funding began in 1974, when the ministry of social welfare, at the instance of Mobile Creches, launched the scheme of assistance to voluntary agencies for creches for working or ailing mothers, which today supports about 1,500 agencies all over the country, running more than 7,500 creches. The grant given is low, and raises in the rates have not kept pace with inflation.

The pay of a creche worker was only Rs 100 per month, raised to Rs 135 as late as 1983 after an outcry from voluntary agencies. Two workers paid at this rate are expected to look after a unit of 25 children in the 0-5 age group, and there is no support for supervision, training, overheads and materials, though some funds, also inadequate, are provided for nutrition, medicines and health care and for initial equipment.

Agencies for whom this is the main source of funding are able to offer only a skeletal programme. For Mobile Creches, with its varied activities touching the life of the child and family at many points, and its high ratio of staff to children, the grant has never covered, even in the best of years, more than 25 percent of expenditure.

This leaves the agency heavily dependent on the donor—a term that includes private individuals, fund raising campaigns and international and national donor agencies, each with differing demands. Foreign donations, though forthcoming in plenty, have to be treated with caution, as few donors can resist the temptation to call the tune. Mobile Creches has consistently adhered to a policy of not allowing foreign contributions to exceed a certain percentage of its total expenditure. This,

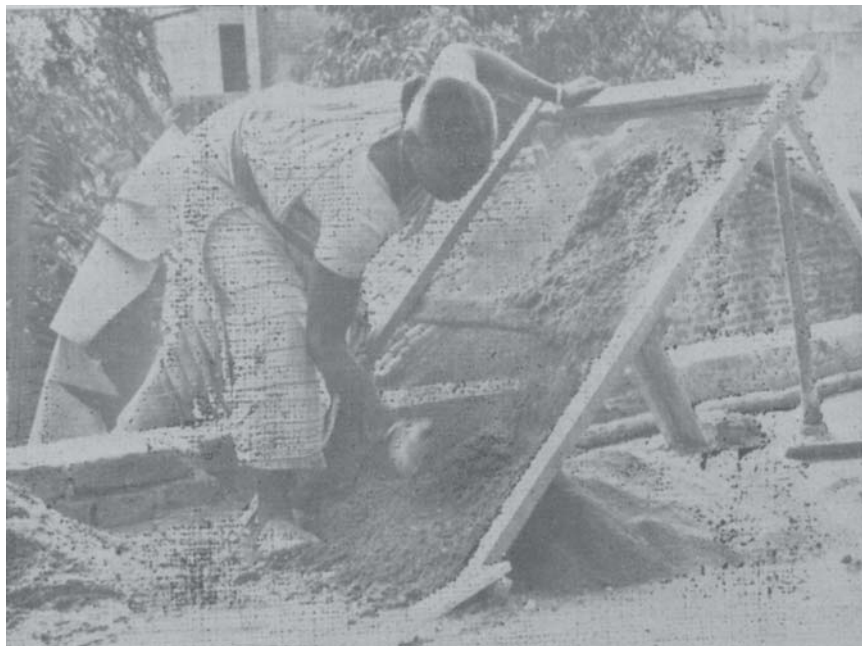
and the insistence on certain programme principles, has led to problems, but has enabled the agency to retain freedom to set its own goals and priorities and work by its own methods. But the uncertainty from year to year makes long term planning difficult.

On the other hand, expenditure is steadily rising because of the determination to improve salaries and provide fringe benefits, which few donors wish to fund. With these constraints, what is possible is a constant juggling of various elements to meet the challenge of low remuneration and an uncertain future. The wage differential in Mobile Creches, though not as wide as in commercial or governmental agencies, does exist; it is a direct outcome of a deliberate attempt to reward hardwork, length of service and ability. Over the years, those who have shown initiative and responsibility have not only received higher pay but have been promoted to positions of authority and acquired the status that goes with it.

Thus, there is a balancing at various levels : the demands of expansion and enrichment of the programme against the needs of the staff; equity and justice with the hierarchy necessary for orderly work ; job security and basic benefits for all with rewards to ability ; authority and accountability with a participatory and egalitarian style of functioning ; motivation through intrinsic rewards to counter the lack of financial rewards. Tremendous managerial inputs were needed to maintain this balance, and it was always a fragile one.

### **The Crisis**

In 1981, the tightrope cracked, shattering the dream and exposing the true nature of the situation. A small section of the staff, encouraged by a political activist, began to agitate and press for demands, including higher salaries, insistence on Minimum Wages and procedures according to the Industrial Disputes Act. The Minimum Wages demand was in a way irrelevant, since the minimum for daycare workers, or for any kind of social worker, has never



**Strenuous and monotonous work**

been laid down by law.

What it did, therefore, was to draw attention to the fact that, because of the wage differential, and in spite of the steady upward rise, there were still a few people at the bottom of the scale who earned less in cash terms than an unskilled construction labourer (ignoring of course job permanence, regular advancement and benefits). Equally significant was the implication that the participatory and informal procedures evolved over the years would now have to be replaced by the legalistic norms of industrial disputes and the confrontational instances of collective bargaining in the private sector.

For Mobile Creches as an institution, this crisis meant a tilt in the balance. The needs of the second group of women, the staff, now definitely came to centre stage, and attention to the primary focus was reduced. In the absence of any sudden enlargement of resources, the programme has been affected. Not merely is there no more talk of expansion or recruitment, but there has been an actual shrinkage in numbers ; quality wise, many of the diverse reinforcement activities have been pared, stripping the

programme down to the essentials of basic care education for infants and preschool children. This narrowing is an inevitable consequence of the change of balance.

### **The Issues**

The issues raised are much larger ones, which apply to all work for the underprivileged sections of society. Mobile Creches is but one institution and should be taken merely as an illustration dramatising the issues at stake. The real questions are : why daycare and for whom? what is daycare and what are its goals ? How much does it cost and can society pay the price ?

The children of poverty groups suffer from many disadvantages, too well known to enumerate. Those of migrant labourers, and of working mothers, have two more burdens—enforced neglect by their mothers in the most vulnerable period of childhood, and the consequences of the constant mobility of their parents. The answer to the question—for whom, is for all children who need it, with programmes adapted to suit each special group. Why? To create the possibility of normal healthy development and the right to a decent future.

## Bhopal—How Women Suffered

*Bhopal, the site of the world's worst industrial disaster, has still not recovered from the after effects. Sunila Singh, a volunteer from Manushi, visited Bhopal and conducted a survey of 100 women. This report by Shashi is based on the survey.*

In order to do that, and precisely because of the many negatives in the situation, daycare for the underprivileged has to be a comprehensive, rich, diverse and meaningful programme, with powerful reinforcements, strong human interactions, intimate individual attention. Anything less can only be dangerous. A minimal or halfhearted service, doling out food, or providing custodial care with token gestures of formal education, cannot meet the need.

A programme so conceived must rest on a combination of competence and concern beyond well meaning amateurism. It needs a cadre of professionalised workers. This is the real rationale for training which is not merely skill based but aims at enriching persons. This is also the reason for a high ratio of staff to children. Professionals who work in the voluntary sector cannot perhaps aspire to be financially rewarded at the same rates as those in the commercial sector, but the levels cannot be as far apart as they are now. For all these reasons, daycare cannot come cheap. The illusion of low cost daycare, so fondly nursed over the years, must finally be abandoned.

A few small agencies, like Mobile Creches, can perhaps go on walking the tightrope, struggling to make up for the lack of funds in other ways. But in the long run, this effort cannot go very far. Unless society accepts both the need for daycare for the underprivileged and its implications in costs, there can be no real expansion of meaningful services for those who need them. There has to be a powerful political commitment to children, based on a clear understanding of what must follow in terms of legislation, pressure on employers, implementation, funding and the role of voluntary agencies. These are the lessons of the first chapter of the unfinished story of Mobile Creches; whether they are learnt and applied will determine the content of the rest. □

I interviewed 100 women in the affected areas, and found that 95 of them suffered from burning in the eyes, chest and urinary tract, dimness of vision, weakness, pain in hands and feet, loss of appetite, indigestion, white discharge and fatigue. The menstrual cycle of 50 women had been affected.

Some complained of menstruation occurring once in several months, others of continuous menstruation for 20 days, almost amounting to haemorrhage.

Pain during sexual intercourse and dizziness are common complaints. Lactating mothers reported a sudden decrease in the quantity of milk. Pregnant women said that they are suffering much more discomfort than they did during earlier pregnancies. There are many cases of spontaneous abortion in the wake of the disaster. Pregnant women, who were not informed in time of possible damage to the foetus, are now worried lest a physically or mentally deformed child be born to them.

Of the women interviewed, 30 were once employed. They did needlework, *bidi* making, construction labour, domestic service, running of small shops and so on. The average income was Rs 8 to Rs 12 a day. Now, all of these women are unemployed.

Of the men, 40 percent in this area are unable to go to work. Thus, the domestic economy of many families is in shambles. Therefore, 90 percent of these families had been compelled to borrow money at an interest rate of 10 percent per month, pledging their jewellery or houses as security. The women did not have exact information on this aspect, since the men did the borrowing, but they say that silver and gold jewellery and houses have been pawned or even sold for a

song. Many families had lost their domestic animals such as goats, buffaloes and horses due to the gas. The government had promised to pay Rs 1,500 compensation to every affected family and Rs 10,000 for every death. Compensation for death of animals had also been promised. Of those surveyed, only 50 had gotten compensation. Many of these had been given only Rs 1,500 but had not received compensation for deaths in the family. In the chaos that followed the disaster, many children disappeared and are still missing.

### Wrecked Lives

Many of the women's lives have been wrecked by the loss of livelihood and of family members, or by the changed attitude of their relatives towards them.

Kantibai, whose husband lives, in Khandwa, happened to have come on a visit to her mother's house in Bhopal at the time of the gas leakage. Her husband and his sister now refuse to let her come back to her marital home because they say she will be sickly as a result of the gas and will not be able to work hard. Kanti is 20 years old, and she was married 12 years ago. Her in-laws condemn her because she has no child. Her parents are not willing to keep her either. Where can Kanti go ?

Omvati, aged 35, has three daughters. She is very unwell now. Her menstrual period lasts for a month at a time. She is also worried about her daughters because no one is willing to marry girls who are affected by the gas. For instance, Nanda's sister has been engaged three times, and each time the boy's side broke off the engagement, saying there was no guarantee she would not fall ill as a result of her exposure to the gas. The difficulty in



getting girls married is a major problem for many families.

Women whose reproductive ability is impaired also have to face hardship. Lakshmibai had two daughters and one son. The son died in the disaster. Lakshmibai had a loop inserted earlier but she has now taken it out. Her husband threatens to marry again to have another son.

### **Facing Destitution**

Another Lakshmibai, a widow, and a mother of five children, supports herself and them by stitching clothes. She does not get any of the free grain distributed by government because she has no ration card. Only those who have ration cards are given grain.

Munnibai, aged 35, lost her mother in the gas leakage. The Rs 10,000 compensation money was grabbed by her brothers who gave her only Rs 500. Her husband has remarried. Munnibai used to support herself by weaving straw mats and baskets. But now she is unable to work.

Qamrunisa, who suffered an abortion during the disaster, earns a living by making *bidis*. Earlier, she used to make enough *bidis* to earn Rs 6 a day ; now she can, earn Rs 3 with difficulty.

Gulabi's husband had married twice. The first wife died in the disaster. Now, Gulabi has to look after the first wife's two children in addition to her own two month old infant.

She is also suffering from menstrual disorders. Her period occurs three times a month and lasts eight days each time.

### **Pregnant Women**

Sukhiyabai is indignant that no doctor warned her of the potential risk to the foetus. Now, it is too late for an abortion so she has resigned herself to her fate.

Shahida, aged 32, has five children. She wants to have an abortion but it is now too late. She is very worried lest the child born be deformed.

Yashodabai is five months' pregnant. When she urinates, she feels as if the child is about to be born. Boils have developed around her vulva. She also suffers from



**Kshama—a missing child**

vaginal itching. She feels too embarrassed to tell the doctor about these symptoms so she suffers in silence. She also coughs blood and may be suffering from TB.

Shantibai has completed nine months of pregnancy but the foetus does not move at all. She feels constantly dizzy and experiences pain in her chest. Many women in Qazi Camp colony complained that they feel as if the uterus has been dislocated.

### **Relatives Untraced**

Harbobai, aged 40, is a widow. Her only son, aged 15, is missing. She used to work as a headloader on construction sites but is now unable to do so. She has no source of livelihood and has received no help from government. She is living on loans and has only one set of clothing.

Kamlabai, aged 40, has nine children. Her 15 year old daughter is missing. She is very unwell, and was not able to get up from bed until 25 days after the disaster. Her menstrual periods last for five days and restart after a gap of only two days.

Shriram, aged 20, was orphaned in the disaster. His 14 year old sister is missing. She had been taken to the hospital at 9 a.m. At 9. 15, he left her side for a couple of minutes. When he returned, she was not there. Announcements over radio and television and in newspapers have proved fruitless. He is very worried about her.

Rukmini told me that her 12 year old sister, Kshama, is missing. The three sisters were lying unconscious on one bed. Their father Gulab—also missing took them to hospital. Kshama disappeared from there. She was a pretty and healthy girl, who knew how to knit and ride a cycle and was also good at studies. Announcements about her have



**Gulab—also missing**

been broadcast but she has not returned.

Shahin and Kohin, aged around 17, belong to a family with 10 children. Their mother, who was seven months' pregnant, died during the gas leakage. Now the two girls have to do all the housework and feel very overburdened. Their father plans to remarry as soon as he has gotten them married.

The problems of each woman are different and yet there is a broad similarity in their situation. In this survey, information was gathered about a small number of women. There are thousands of others who have suffered in their health and in their social and economic condition.

Women even say : "If the gas leaks again, we will not run. We will die here. Those who died have escaped but those who survived are living a life worse than death." □

(translated from Hindi)