

Quality Day Care Services for the Young Child

Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi

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The Ghodiya Ghar:

Where the Child is the Centre

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The meeting with Prof. Anandalakshmy was truly a highlight. It was humbling and at once elevating to understand what personal motivation, a willingness to do more and a desire to make a difference in the lives of children and women, can achieve.

In short, this was an exciting and rewarding experience, and I hope you, the reader, will find it at least as insightful as was the process of learning for me.

Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan

‘Earlier I spent more time with the children’ – there is wistfulness, in Manju Ben’s (name changed) voice. An anganwadi worker (AWW) in Surendranagar district, Gujarat, she spent the first 11 years of her working life as a bal sevika in SEWA’s childcare initiative. In 2006, when the institutional partnership with the Gujarat government ended, the childcare centre, known as Ghodiya Ghar, became an ICDS kendra, and Manju Ben became an ICDS worker. The Ghodiya Ghar, which she ran earlier from 9 in the morning to 6 in the evening, now began to function as the anganwadi centre, but for shorter hours, from 9 a.m. to noon.

From the outside, it would seem that Manju Ben should have been thrilled. Being a part of the ICDS system meant that her salary went up and her working hours came down. And yet, Manju Ben is quite clear – ‘Earlier it was better’.

Manju Ben’s Ghodiya Ghar/anganwadi centre is a large single room, but with a lot of space. Even with one corner completely hidden by large gunny sacks of food piled one above the other, there is adequate space for children to run around and play. Though over 10 years old, the centre is obviously well constructed and well maintained. There is pride in the voices of the SEWA team as they recount the difficult task of rebuilding the centre following the massive earthquake of 2001. Surendranagar was among the badly affected districts. The earthquake had caused the earlier childcare centre functioning from rented premises to collapse. The new childcare centre constructed after the 2001 earthquake is inviting. With wide doors opening on opposite sides, it is airy, with natural light streaming in. As with many other post-earthquake constructions, the new centre has been constructed at a height, with lots of steps leading to the single room. And, in a break from the traditional, the room has a flat roof built with cement and concrete. The older sloping red-bricked roofs are few in the village now.

Just then, a young mother walks in with an infant clinging to her, and his lusty cries make conversation difficult. In the ensuing din, with other children crowding around, the mother’s voice can be heard: ‘He gave me such a hard time this morning, just would not take a bath.’ And then anxiously, ‘Can you keep him for about an hour longer at the Ghodiya Ghar today, I have to visit the PHC’.

Though it has been five years since the Ghodiya Ghar became the anganwadi centre, for the community and indeed for the principal teacher, the old name and mores hold. In conversation, Manju Ben often catches herself calling the ICDS centre Ghodiya Ghar, the name by which all the childcare centres run by SEWA are universally known. Correcting herself yet again, she looks sheepish and repeats, ‘I liked it more, earlier’.

Manju Ben finds it hard to explain what exactly is different from the earlier times. Earlier, she used to share the tasks that have been added to her workload – the number of registers that have to be maintained and reports that have to be prepared. There is a need to be prepared all the time to share data about the centre and the children to people who come there. And then there is all of the other work in the village, from group formation,

to supporting expectant mothers through their pregnancy. 'I don't know, I'm always doing something, even before the children come and after the children leave.'

The question, 'And earlier?' evokes a smile, and her entire body relaxes when she explains: 'Earlier, my focus was first the children, I did other work with the women, but it never felt overwhelming'.

She quickly adds,

It's not that everything was easy in those days. While all the women, especially those who were working, wanted, even needed childcare, convincing families to send their children to the centre was difficult. For many families, the Rs 10 that we initially charged was also difficult to find. Slowly, we managed to demonstrate that we did take good care of the children left with us.

Asked about malnourishment in the area, she points to one thin infant.

Her mother had a second child within a year or so after she was born. She got less attention. When she came here, she was in the yellow category; (borderline) we gave her milk, took special care while feeding, and also advised her mother to give her more attention; now look at her, she is healthy. When the programme ended we were charging Rs 50 per child, per month, but no one who sent their children minded paying. They were happy with the care their children were getting.

And with the children, it used to be fun. We had an annual picnic, and we used to plan that together, the mothers, and all of us in SEWA. We had a cultural programme at least once a year, all the children even the really young ones, would take part. And earlier, I travelled to Ahmedabad, even Delhi, met other women, we used to talk, share, it was nice.

I

The first item on my agenda was to organize the women for better wages for their head-loading work. The second item was child care for their children.

Ela Bhatt,
 Founder of SEWA,
 Recollection at Workshop for Bal Sevikas

As a trade union of women workers, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) has always put high priority on childcare. Today, with over 17 lakh members, spread over 10 states in India and having catalysed similar initiatives across Latin America, Africa, and South Asia, SEWA's priorities remain the same – organizing women workers and ensuring work and social security, including childcare for all members.

Table 1: Scale of the Operations

No	District	No. of Centres			No. of Children			Status
		1989	2006	2012	1989	2006	2012	
1.	Ahmedabad	35	131	27	875	4,585	25–30–35 per centre	During and after the communal violence in 2002, childcare centres were run in 5 relief camps, catering to almost 1,000 children.
2.	Kheda-Anand	10		21-22			30–35 per centre	During and after the communal violence in 2002, childcare centres were run in 4 relief camps, catering to over 550 children.
3.	Surendranagar			10			25–35 per centre	Centres conducted in the Rann for part of the year (December – May). The other centres, closed in 2006
4.	Patan			-			-	Closed in 2006
5	Kutch		20	-				Closed in 2006
	TOTAL		185			5,000		

At its peak, in 2006 (see Table 1 above), the SEWA childcare programme had a presence in five districts and had 5,000 children attending its crèche facilities, six days a week,

from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. in 185 Ghodiya Ghars. Building up to that scale was a slow process, which took over a decade of learning.

The first SEWA childcare centre was begun on the verandah of a worker's home in 1970. And the first crèche was started in 1975 for the children of vegetable vendors. It closed soon after, when the very middle-class landlord, on discovering that the women who were coming in to drop their children were vegetable vendors, stopped renting the room to SEWA. In 1980, almost a decade to the day when the first centre was started, a formal childcare programme for the children of unorganized workers was launched. About five years later, in 1984, that number had grown to 20 centres. The need for an organized structure for childcare activities began to be felt.

Given SEWA's own moorings within the community of women workers, there was much debate internally among the SEWA team on what should be the organizational structure of the childcare initiative. That it could not be a trade union was a given; nor was there comfort in the idea of keeping it as an adjunct to other initiatives, such as livelihoods or income support. After much debate, the cooperative society model was selected. This, it was felt, would allow for greater flexibility in operations and also provide the necessary space for family members, especially the mothers, to participate in decision making. The team's decision was warmly endorsed by the bal sevikas and parents who were consulted. Despite this internal endorsement, however, getting the regulatory authorities to even understand the idea took time. A cooperative society, as understood by the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, was formed to make and sell a 'product'. For the SEWA team, as also the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, childcare did not fit in this category. It would take two years of persistent efforts for the first childcare cooperative, Sangini, to be registered in Ahmedabad city in 1986.

During the time it took to register Sangini, the initial centres continued to function through a combination of external support and minimal contribution from families. This period of persistence to get a childcare cooperative registered was also one where the initial concerns of families, and especially the mothers, about sending children to the Ghodiya Ghar was replaced by strong community support for the initiative.

In 1986, SEWA also took the decision to partner with the ICDS, which was then just about to be launched in the Ahmedabad Municipal areas. The decision was based on a combination of exigency and a growing desire to influence the large and growing ICDS programme. External aid, which had been the main source of funding for the 20 centres, formally ended in 1986. With strong community support for the initiative, the idea of closing the centres was expected to be met with resistance. Partnership with the about-to-be launched ICDS in Ahmedabad would fill in the obvious gap.

Sangini: A Model of Democratic Governance of the Childcare Initiative

Since its inception, Sangini operates democratically, holding elections every three years to an executive committee which includes representation from all levels within the childcare structure: the bal sevikas, the supervisors, the Spearhead Team members and invitees from other teams of SEWA, representatives of the home-based workers, the vendors, the daily wage labourers working on farms and construction sites and the self-employed producers of products, such as salt, crafts, and handlooms. Together, the members elect a seven-member executive committee, who in turn elect a president and a vice-president.

1. To undertake childcare and child development activities for the children of self-employed women.
2. To undertake health-related activities for the self-employed women and their children.
3. To form childcare and development centres at the living areas of self employed women.
4. To undertake economic activities for the welfare of self-employed women and their children.
5. To undertake any activity which would advance the above objectives and to collect the required funds

Objectives of the Sangini Cooperative: From the By- Laws

In addition to this, there is the childcare team that includes, the bal sevikas and the full-time Supervisor (staff). Between six to nine centres are provided facilitative support through a supervisor and technical and capacity-building support through regular interactions with other teams of SEWA, as also external advisors and training.

What helped in working with the ICDS was the willingness of the local ICDS authorities to cooperate on SEWA's terms. They agreed that SEWA could operate in flexible ways and with the Sangini cooperatives' own value additions. Thus, the Ghodiya Ghars, the SEWA childcare centres, were open for the whole day, allowing women to leave their children in safe hands. The ICDS centres, in contrast, were open only for four hours a day. Through negotiation, two agreements were reached: first, that the SEWA centres would remain open all day as before; and two, that the parents who wanted to leave their children for the whole day would be charged the nominal fee as before. 'We wanted a partnership with the ICDS, but it was an "ICDS plus- plus" that we were keen to implement. It took some effort, but many in the department did understand, and so it was agreed' (Mirai Chatterjee). What continued, though, to be a source of concern was the difference in work culture and the differential emphasis that was placed on procedures and the quality of care offered.

SEWA had, early on, attempted to ensure that the bal sevika belonged to a similar economic category and social group as that of the parents with whom she would be engaging. This reduced the number of conflicts based on differential socio-economic status, which have affected work in other parts of the country, through both the formal government-run ICDS and those childcare projects run by other voluntary-sector organizations.

Often, this meant that even though SEWA at that point was operating in a municipal area of one of the more educationally forward cities in India, the bal sevikas employed to work in the Ghodiya Ghars had limited educational qualifications. Most of the bal sevikas had only completed primary schooling and had dropped out owing to family exigencies. Having been through the rigour of the SEWA training programme, they had the technical knowledge to take on the responsibilities of an ICDS worker. More importantly, they had an interest in the work and years of experience. This combination of knowledge, skills and attitude was not easy to find or indeed replicate. What they did lack, though, was the educational qualifications. At that point, the ICDS had mandated a minimum qualification of Class 10 pass, that is, 11 years of formal education for an appointment as anganwadi worker in the municipal limits of Ahmedabad. It took much effort to persuade the authorities to relax the rules, but with time and exposure to the quality of childcare provided in the Ghodiya Ghars by the bal sevikas, they were accepted by the system and placed on par with the other anganwadi workers.



A Ghodiya Ghar, where children of different ages, get care and developmental support appropriate for their age. Photo courtesy: SEWA Research Academy Publication

By 1986, after two years of struggle on multiple fronts, the programme in municipal Ahmedabad stabilized. Attention now shifted to rural Gujarat, particularly the district of Kheda.

III

Twenty years ago, the late Prof. Harshida Pandit had travelled through Kheda district, reviewing and documenting the efforts of SEWA in providing quality and affordable childcare facilities for women tobacco workers. Her report (Pandit 1995), part of the Surakhsha series, edited by Dr Mina Swaminathan, documented in detail the vital importance of the childcare initiative in improving the quality of lives of women tobacco workers.

About the same time, Jyoti Macwan, principal organizer of the childcare initiative in Kheda district along with Mirai Chatterjee, head of the Social Security team of SEWA and advisor of the Sangini cooperative, analysed what the Ghodiya Ghars had meant for SEWA's principal work of organizing women workers to fight for their rights, as guaranteed by law. In the report, 'Taking Care of our Children' (Chatterjee and Macwan 1992), they acknowledged that: 'The existence of the crèche programme has softened our

confrontationist union image. We are now viewed as managers of useful development programmes like crèches and health care. Many of the “khali” owners who refuse to even speak to SEWA’s union organisers, are quite amenable when it comes to discussing child care and health. Hence, these issues serve as useful channels for dialogue and negotiation, in an otherwise difficult atmosphere.’

While SEWA had begun organizing women workers in urban areas, in 1979, its work in rural areas took off, surprisingly in one of the most prosperous districts of Gujarat, Kheda. Even today, of its large rural membership, nearly a third comes from Kheda-Anand.¹ More than 80 per cent of the nation’s tobacco crop is grown in this one district, and SEWA entered here with the principal aim of organizing the women workers to ensure they get their rights as prescribed under the Factories Act. The principal fight was for minimum wages.

SEWA’s initial survey showed that against the then prescribed wage of Rs 30 per day, tobacco workers were receiving between Rs 9–12 for each day they worked. Other social security measures provided in law, including a crèche for their young children, were non-existent. Organizing women workers took time and effort, but within five years, 3,000 women from 30 villages were SEWA members. A majority were tobacco workers, who also worked as farm labourers during the times when the tobacco factories were shut.

Prof. Pandit records the struggles of the women (Pandit 1995). At that point, the government-run ICDS was not functional in the district. As Kheda had the highest per capita income in Gujarat and was among the five highest in the country, it had not been prioritized for ICDS projects. The Khali, factory owners, were reluctant to financially resource a crèche, and were outright unwilling to set up and operate childcare facilities. For the women, it meant a difficult choice. Either they opted out of the labour force, at least until the child was old enough to go to school, or they took their children to work, exposing the infants to a range of health hazards.

SEWA’s decision to set up crèches for children in the 0–3 age group was popular with both the members and the factory owners. Demanding minimum wages, better work conditions and unionizing workers were not appreciated by the Khali owners. However, the crèches were seen as benign, a useful entry point for negotiations that usually were difficult.

As Jyoti Macwan and Mirai Chatterjee had noted (Chatterjee and Macwan 1992), in Section 48 of the Factories Act, there existed the possibility of factory owners and union organizers finding common ground. The section provides strong support for employer-financed childcare facilities on factory sites.

¹ The original Kheda district has been bifurcated into Kheda and Anand for improving the quality of administration. The original Kheda district, has been known as the tobacco-growing capital of India.

Section 48 of the Factories Act, as amended in May 1982 states

1. In every factory wherein more than thirty women workers are ordinarily employed, there shall be provided and maintained a suitable room or rooms for the use of children under the age of six years of such women.
2. Such rooms shall provide adequate accommodation shall be adequately lighted and ventilated, shall be maintained in a clean and sanitary condition and shall be under the charge of women trained in the care of children and infants.
3. The State government may make rules:
 - a. prescribing the location and standards in respect of construction, accommodation, furniture and other equipment of rooms to be provided under this section;
 - b. requiring the provision in factories to which this section applies of additional facilities for the care of children belonging to women workers including suitable provision of facilities for washing and changing their clothing;
 - c. requiring the provision in any factory of free milk or refreshment or both for such children;
 - d. requiring that facilities shall be given in any factory for the mothers of such children to feed them at necessary intervals.

Between the union struggle and the supportive service of childcare, both the organizing work and the crèche programme of SEWA expanded rapidly. When Prof. Pandit visited, she found that 19 crèches were functioning, and these had been organized into a cooperative, Shaishav. The rationale for setting up the childcare cooperative were well-defined, confirming that the new organization would operate at the intersection of women's right to work, and the child's right to a safe and secure childhood. The objectives were:

1. To provide comprehensive childcare services through crèches for 0 to 3 year-old children, including health, nutrition and child development activities.
2. To enable workers to leave their infants and young children at the crèches so that they could work and earn in the fields and tobacco factories.
3. To support and assist workers in their struggles for full employment and justice in the workplace, including provision of minimum wages and welfare benefits like health, insurance and childcare.

The Shaishav cooperative functioned in a manner similar to Sangini. By the time Prof. Pandit left the villages, the Shaishav cooperative too had been registered, and as with Sangini, there was here, too, considerable difficulty with registration. Post-registration, the first elections were held, and office bearers were fielding requests from several villages for setting up Ghodiya Ghars. Clearly the childcare programme of SEWA union was in 1992–1993 at a point of take-off.

In the initial period, when there was no ICDS functioning in the district, the childcare initiative received support from multiple sources. The sarpanches of the 30 villages where SEWA had been working successfully helped to identify space for the Ghodiya Ghars. Often, they helped to negotiate either donations of the space or lease at nominal rents. This was hugely useful for the project, which found that, unlike in Ahmedabad, in rural areas, the needs were more extensive, and the costs of running a childcare facility higher.

Among the challenges that Prof. Pandit found facing the childcare programme was that of extending the crèche facilities to children who were slightly older, and, consequently, its having to deal with differential needs of children, particularly, the educational needs of the older child. Initially, the SEWA crèches had focused only on care for the children below the age of 3 years. Responding to the demands from its members, the crèches were extended to include children of the ages 3–6 years. Thus, by 1992, all children below school-going age were eligible to be enrolled in a Ghodiya Ghar.

In her report, Prof. Pandit leaves the reader with the impression that in rural Gujarat, in the early 1990s, the programme was at the stage of take-off. It had demonstrated its value to all stakeholders in the area – the Khali owners, the families, the women and the children. Other research conducted in the area provided evidence that the use of day-care centres is associated with notable increases in the working hours and earnings of mothers as well as reduction in their stress or anxiety about childcare.

At the end of her report, Prof. Pandit, leaves the reader with the impression that from then on, the SEWA childcare initiative would grow, evolve and spread much like the organizing work into more villages and factories. That assumption was to be proved both right and wrong.

IV

In 1994, for SEWA organizers, the struggle for minimum wages and better working conditions in tobacco factories received a fillip when one of the mothers who had come to drop her infant at the Rasnaul village Ghodiya Ghar publicly complained about working conditions in the Khali to the visiting labour commissioner. Already, before this, the women workers of Chikhodra village had filed a formal complaint of non-payment of minimum wages and illegal dismissal from the Khali. With the Chikhodra women winning their case, and the labour commissioner showing an interest in following up the complaint heard in Rasnaul, the Khali owners, who until then had been negotiating with SEWA organizers, individually changed tack. Now the Khali owners also began to organize themselves, forming an association to negotiate with the SEWA Union.

Through struggle, SEWA and the women workers soon began to demand and get the minimum wage of between Rs 100 to Rs 145 per day. Earlier they were getting Rs 25 per day and that was when they were able to find someone to leave their infants with. The positive impact on the lives of children and women of SEWA's interventions is best described by the woman workers themselves:

All we women know is work, work, work. Whatever has happened to us has happened. We can't change what we've been through. But we dream of better life for our children. That's why these crèches are so important for us. We leave our children at SEWA's crèches and go out to work with peace of mind, knowing they are safe. At the crèche, my children have learnt many new things: they have learnt about animals and flowers and also new games. My eldest child is beginning to read. And, they are given things to eat that we cannot afford. Because of the crèches we can earn more and buy dal and vegetables for the first time. We eat better. Until now we ate mostly rotlo and kadhi. And often just rotlo and chilies or onions. Without this crèche, how could I earn? How could I survive?

Another woman worker says:

Earlier we had 'rotlo' to eat only once a day. Now we can eat twice a day and have enough money to buy vegetables also. I pray that this crèche will remain – it has been such a support to me and my family

In 1994–1995, the expectation of progress in the childcare initiative envisioned in 1992 seemed to have come true. However, the take-off stage also became the turning point.

The mid-1990s saw a generational shift in tobacco production. Along with negotiating as a group with SEWA on wages and working conditions, individually, the owners were also exploring options of mechanization. Where for decades this had been manual, primarily site-based work, in the mid-1990s, the Khali owners invested significantly in mechanization. The year 1995 is recalled as a turning point. Where earlier, during the peak season of October to March, 150 workers would be employed in a Khali, that number was reduced to 15 by the late 1990s. Mechanization and the need for fewer workers, allowed employers to substitute the local, unionized women workers with a small number of families who had migrated from other districts or states.

While organizing women to struggle for minimum wages, the SEWA organizers had come to understand that one of the main requirements of women workers was the steadiness of their income. They wanted work all year round. In return for regular work, they were willing to compromise on the wage rate. In the early years, the SEWA team, though recognizing their own strength and therefore ability to negotiate a higher rate for the women workers, respected their desire for year-round employment.

Mechanization and the preference of employers to replace the unionized women with fewer people from among the migrants, affected the women's capacity to negotiate. .

By the end of 1990s, a tripartite committee, which included representatives of the association of Khali owners, SEWA on behalf of the women workers, and the labour commissioner, set the daily wages for khali workers, which were between half and two-thirds of the minimum wage for the state. Also, with the smaller numbers of women workers employed, employers were legally able to begin withdrawal of financial and material support for many of the welfare activities. Childcare had received the most attention from employers and was significantly hit.

About this time, the ICDS had also begun operations in the district. With a drop in incomes and the availability of a free, albeit inadequate childcare facility for children between the ages of 3–6 years, SEWA found that it was not enrolment of children that was affected, but that the children withdrew from the facility earlier. This affected the economics of the childcare initiative. As Table 2 below shows, in the six-year period, between 1989 and 1995, the cost of running one centre in Kheda had gone up by 50 per cent and in the next 12 years, the cost only went up one-third. Table 3 below suggests, that initially at least, the salary of the bal sevika and the sahayika, listed as teachers' salary, made up the bulk of the running costs of each centre. However, with time, the only costs that did not increase proportionately to the cost of living were, again, the teachers' salary. Other significant expenses of running a centre, such as rent and food, would have had to be managed. As the tables below bear evidence, the parents' contribution, in terms of fees (when the initiative began it was Rs 10 per child, which has since risen to Rs 50 per month in rural areas, and Rs 100 per month per child, in Ahmedabad city) tends to be nominal, and does not cover the costs even partially.

Table 2: Childcare Centre Running Costs

No.	District	1989	1995	2006–2007
	Kheda-Anand	10,000	15,000	20,000
	Surendranagar			8,000
	Patan			31,000
	Ahmedabad	3,315	7,800	10,000
	Kutch			

Table 3: Expenses per Month for Each Centre

No	Expenses	Amount Spent per Month	As a Proportion
1.	Teachers' salary	5,500	55%
2	Nutrition	3,500	35%
3	Room Rent	400	4%
4	Training	200	2%
5	Miscellaneous	400	4%
	TOTAL	10,000	

The struggles in Kheda in the second half of the 1990s were not really visible to the external world. The linkage between organizing work, livelihoods support and childcare had caught the imagination of the rest of the SEWA community. By the mid-1990s, many of the other districts, where SEWA had a presence, were also able demonstrate success in replicating the Kheda model. In Surendranagar, where SEWA had spent years trying to organize the salt pan workers to demand their rights, SEWA's offering childcare support made a significant difference to building trust with the community. During the salt production season, that is, six to eight months, the entire family moves into the Rann and lives in a small hut, which they construct out of local materials. Parents also being migrants living in temporary accommodation, and with the whole day being spent in salt production, small children were either left to the care of older siblings or left to cope with the harsh weather conditions, scorching heat and burning winds, all alone all day.

In Surendranagar, as harvesting salt from the Rann is not considered a factory-based activity, SEWA forged an alliance with the Salt Pan Development Board. With their support, along with some external assistance, they were able to provide childcare facilities in the Rann itself. In addition, for the families who lived more settled lives and earned their livelihoods from agriculture, day-care facilities were set up. While SEWA took on the design, management and implementation of the childcare programme, the principal funding support, about 75 per cent of the total cost, for the initial 21 centres came from the Gujarat State Rural Workers Welfare Association. The rest, 25 per cent, was contributed by SEWA through fees and external assistance. Similar stories of innovative funding mechanisms from the district levels to support childcare initiatives were reported from Banaskantha, where the DWCRA, a central government scheme at that time created to support traditional craft skills of women, was tapped for a livelihoods-generation programme along with a childcare initiative. Stories of

development and change were similarly reported from other districts, especially Kutch and Patan.

The decade of the 1990s was thus a decade of lateral expansion of the SEWA childcare initiative. All the networks forged, the team of talented, committed workers and managers that was created, and the confidence developed in the organization's ability to design and manage a childcare initiative to support women's right to work in any situation were to be tested in ways unimagined.

V

The date was February 20, 2001. On the long road journey, I asked the SEWA organizers about the experiences in the community soon after the earthquake. On January 27th, 2001, the teams from SEWA had left for Kutch and the adjoining district, fanning out to each individual household in the villages that had their members. Dealing with human pain and suffering on that scale was a tremendous strain on many of the workers, but they held on with fortitude, breaking down only when they reached the safe precincts of the SEWA office in Ahmedabad. They reported that mothers were just holding their children very close for fear that another earthquake may take them away. Children slept badly, they said, and would wake up crying. But the women were all keen on normalcy. They wanted very much to get back to work and to have a place where they could send the young ones.

Exactly four weeks later, I returned to Surendranagar again, with the SEWA Child Care Team. As we walked around the villages, we realized that a substantial part of the rubble had been sorted out. Quietly the people had started rebuilding their lives, saving what could be saved,... We saw no tears, confronted no self-pity.

Rebuilding Lives

By S. Anandalakshmy,

In *The Hindu Magazine*, 22 April 2001

A massive earthquake had hit Gujarat on 26 January 2001. It left the districts of Kutch, Surendranagar and Patan particularly badly affected as also Ahmedabad city, where poor quality of construction had led to significant loss of life and property.

In relief camps, which came up quickly to house all the displaced, SEWA took on the responsibility of organizing childcare along with myriad other responsibilities. For the children of their own Ghodiya Ghars, the sense of responsibility only increased. While in many areas, the bal sevika herself was a survivor of the earthquake, having lost property and family members, the concern for the children in their Ghodiya Ghars remained a

priority for them. Many of them recall cooking the mid-day meal and going house to house to ensure that the children, though still unable to come to the crèche, received their meal. That continuity of routine was especially important for the children who were finding it difficult to either understand or deal with their losses.

Even before the organization and the people could come to terms with the implications of the earthquake for their lives and their sense of security, one of the worst communal carnages was experienced in Gujarat in February 2002. Those parts of the SEWA childcare initiative, which had remained largely untouched by the earthquake, such as Kheda district, were badly affected by the riots. In Ahmedabad city, crèches were set up in five of the relief camps. In a few weeks, an additional 1,500-odd children became part of the childcare initiative of SEWA. As Tables 4 A and B below show, one of the immediately obvious differences between the crèches operated in the relief camps and the Ghodiya Ghars in other parts of the state was the sheer numbers that were now included. Also, the relief camp Ghodiya Ghars functioned as alternative schools for children who had no other place to study.

Table 4: Childcare Centres at the Relief Camps

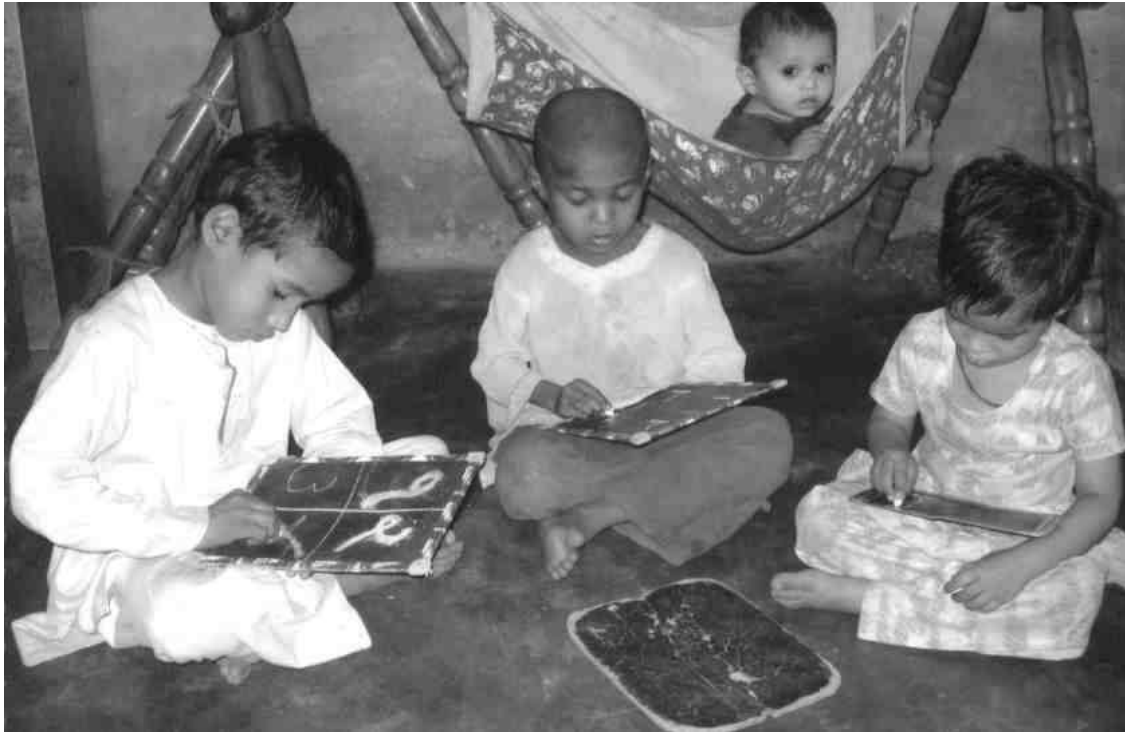
A: In Ahmedabad City:

Centres	No. of Children
Aman Chowk	400
Anand Flats	100
Bakarsha Roza	200
Bombay Housing	100
Dani Limda	100
Total	900

B: Kheda district

Centres	No. of Children
Inamnagar	125
Ismailnagar	200
Kohinoor	200
Nayavatan	30
Total	555

Afsari Bi was one of the many young people who along with her mother, grandmother and two siblings had to flee their homes and seek shelter in a relief camp. With little to do in the camp and as much to escape her thoughts, she gravitated to the crèche. She began to help and slowly became part of the team. Later, as the situation stabilized, she went through multiple rounds of training. Today, she is the 27-year-old bal sevika who efficiently runs the Ghodiya Ghar. Later in the afternoon, she runs a tea stall. The earnings from these are what run her home.



A Ghodiya Ghar, where children of different ages, get care and developmental support which is appropriate for their age. Photo courtesy: SEWA Research Academy Publication

The relationships forged during the years of peace among different communities became particularly important for the SEWA organizers, especially in the post-riot months when trust among people of different communities had largely broken down. In Kheda, where the riots had affected many of the SEWA villages, the entry of the SEWA organizers led to some tension. Then the children recognized the people from SEWA and ran towards their SEWA Bens. Trust from the children helped to begin a process of rebuilding trust among adults. Along with the nearly 1,500 additional children in its day-care programme, SEWA also began work to help women cope with the trauma and fear that the events had left them with. Work kept them busy as also giving them a much-needed independent source of income.

SEWA's ability to cope with the twin crises that affected all of Gujarat, and happening within a year of each other, was possible owing to many factors, of which the trust reposed by the children was certainly the most important. Along with this was the effort to introspect and learn, and based on those internal learnings, bring about changes in the way the childcare intervention was experienced by children.

VI

Table 5: Financial Inflow in 2002

No.	Expenses	SEWA members contribution	Parents contribution	Government Contribution	Employers Contribution	External Grants	Total
1	Teachers salary			791		4,709	5,500
2	Nutrition			2,125		1,375	3,500
3	Rent			120		280	400
4	Training			Kits		200	200
5	Miscellaneous			50		350	400
	TOTAL						10,000

The financial year 2001–2002 was a watershed for the SEWA childcare programme. Quiet confidence was evident as was the growing desire to expand and possibly take to scale what until then had been a small, though in terms of diversity, expansive, childcare initiative. Table 5 above shows that by this time, SEWA had diversified its financing portfolio, and given the range and nature of financiers for the initiative and the aspects they were supporting, scaling up, if the opportunity arose, would not be difficult.

To support its plans, SEWA also developed a desired financial inflow matrix. Table 6 below, shows that SEWA had clear ideas on what kind of resources they wanted to tap.

Table 6: Financial Inflow as hoped for (developed in 2002)

No.	Expenses	SEWA members contribution	Parents contribution	Government Contribution	Employers Contribution	External Grants	Other Contributions	Total
1	Teachers salary	100	500	791	500	2,000	109	4,000
2	Nutrition	200	400	2,125	600	1,500	300	5,125
3	Rent	50	30	120	50		30	300
4	Training	100	100	Kits				200
5	Miscellaneous	100	200	25		900	125	1,350
6	Bal SEWA Fund	500	100				2,500	3,100
	TOTAL	1,050	1,330	3,061	1,150	4,400	3,084	14,075

Interestingly, while SEWA was clearly expecting to expand the initiative, a comparison of Tables 5 and 6 show that the expectation was not for more government contribution. Indeed, they show that SEWA wanted to maintain the contribution at its existing level. Instead, it was contributions from other sources in India that were being sought to fund more activities, including a substantial growth in employer contributions.

In hindsight, this articulation of expectations on financial inflows was interesting, for it not only pointed to some troubles that were only emerging, but also masked others that teams, such as in Kheda, working on the ground were continuing to grapple with.

In 2002, it was not just the trust between communities and relationships among neighbours and fellow Gujaratis that were affected. Many organizations in the voluntary sector began to sense a divergence in approach by the Gujarat government. SEWA experienced difficulties particularly in its large earthquake relief and rehabilitation work in which it had been an early and long-standing partner of the Gujarat government. In 2004–2005, SEWA decided to withdraw from the partnership on rehabilitation and all other such partnerships with the Gujarat government.

In turn, the Gujarat government ended all project-based partnerships with SEWA. Particularly affected was the childcare initiative. All of the ICDS centres that SEWA was running by that time in five districts were taken over by the government. By the end of 2005–2006, the scale of operations shrank dramatically – ‘2006 was SEWA’s earthquake year.’ As Table 7 shows, from the peak in 2002 through the entire decade that followed to 2012, the sharp decline in the scale of operations has not recovered.

For SEWA, the other major concern was the decline of the tobacco industry. With the closure of many factories and mechanization, there had been a drop in the number of women employed by the industry. Consequently, there was a fall in employer interest and thus contributions to the child initiative. Thus, even in the Kheda district, childcare centres that had been running for more than 15 years had to be closed. In her report for the Suraksha series, Prof. Pandit had listed 19 centres that were then operational. Twenty years later, as Table 8 reveals, more than half of the original centres had to be shut down.

Table 7: Scale of the Operations

No	District	No. of Centres			No. of children			Status
		2002	2006	2012	2002	2006	2012	
1.	Ahmedabad	51	131	27	3,612	4,585	25–30-35 per centre	During and after the communal violence in 2002, childcare centres were run in 5 relief camps, catering to almost 1,000 children.
2.	Kheda-Anand	35		21–22	920		30–35 per centre	During and after the communal violence in 2002, childcare centres were run in 4 relief camps, catering to over 550 children.
3.	Surendranagar	20		10	830		25–35	Centres conducted

							per centre	in the Rann for part of the year (December – May)
4.	Patan	15		-	525		-	Closed in 2006
5	Kutch		20	-				Closed in 2006
	TOTAL		185			5,000		

As Table 7 shows, in winter 2012, the Ghodiya Ghars were operational all year round in only two districts, Ahmedabad and Kheda-Anand. In Surendranagar, they function for part of the year, when the salt pan workers move to the little Rann, as support for the migrant populations. And as Table 8 supplements, even in the now two districts of Kheda-Anand, few of the original centres are functional.

Table 8: Status of the Ghodiya Ghars

Village	Date of Starting Crèche	Status in October 2012
Rasnole	October 1989	Operational
Rahatlav	December 1989	Closed
Kunjrav	February 1990	Operational
Chikhodra	April 1990	Operational
Bharoda	June 1990	Closed
Ode	September 1990	Closed
Rakhial	November 1990	Closed
Bilpad	December 1990	Closed
Dedarda	March 1990	Closed
Navli	March 1991	Operational
Sarsa	March 1991	Operational
Vanoti	July 1991	Closed
Khambolaj	July 1991	Closed
Kavitha	September 1991	Closed
Vadod	December 1991	Closed
Verakhali	June 1992	Operational
Vehra	July 1992	Operational
Ajarpura	March 1992	Closed
Sinhol	June 1993	Operational

Update of the table provided by Prof. Harshida Pandit

VII

Preparations for the next stage of growth, which was started in the late 1990s and continued even through the crisis phase between 2001–2003, had begun by investing substantially in research-based, capacity building of its team on the ground and, most importantly, investing in the creation of a supportive middle management tier, with focus principally on skills and knowledge upgradation. The two principal instruments used for this was the setting up of district-level Spearhead Teams of three to five members. Each member is known as an *aagewan*, the vanguard. While the Spearhead Team has overall responsibility of promoting women's leadership in diverse areas of economic activity and assuring social security, the team leader has the specific responsibility of childcare.

Responsibilities of the Spearhead Team

The members visit the childcare centres and see that all activities – health, nutrition, child development and hygiene – are functioning as planned. If there are any problems, the Spearhead Team members help sort these out.

If new centres are to be started in the village, they find an appropriate space for the centre, elicit the sarpanch's cooperation and prepare lists of the children who need the services.

They are also involved in providing supplies to the centres: food grants, medicines and essential equipment.

If any child at the centres requires medical attention, the Spearhead Team helps the mothers to access the required services.

Members of the Spearhead Team participate in the monthly crèche teachers meetings and follow up on issues or problems raised when required.

The Spearhead Team meets with the local district coordinator and supervisors every week. The experiences of the week including the issues that have arisen are shared and the plans for the week ahead are made.

Supporting this local cadre is a technical team, which includes individuals involved in the childcare initiative at different levels, but who have a particular interest and knowledge in specific areas of child development. Based on the needs identified by the technical team over the years, subject experts in diverse areas such as nutrition, child development, and identifying and supporting children with special needs have been involved.

By the mid-1990s, mothers had begun to ask more questions about what the children were learning in the Ghodiya Ghars. This brought SEWA close to one of the more difficult and still unresolved questions in child development – teaching methods. There is no agreement, for example, on whether children should be taught alphabets first or words as part of language learning. Instead of a consciously thought through and applied method, it is the lack of knowledge and skills of the teacher that the children are exposed to. ‘The natural sequence of learning is listen, speak, read, write. Only, quite often, because the teacher does not know what to do in the classroom, she writes something, and children, just copy it’ (Prof Anandlaxmy).

There is also a school of thought that suggests that in the early years, it is the emotional intelligence and not the cognitive development of the child that should have the focus. SEWA has been an advocate of this method, which is gaining supporters, at least among the fraternity of educationists. Research has shown that even without formalized early childhood education, that is, even if a child enters Grade 1 without any schooling, by Grade III, there is an equalization.

For the SEWA childcare team, developing skills such as getting children to cooperate and to find their way around holds as much interest as developing the more formal skills, and they have attempted to emphasize these. For the bal sevikas, though, there has been a shift, because from the mid-1990s, there has been much interest from mothers and families about what their children are learning, and the focus of parents is entirely on cognitive skills, reading, writing, numbers and words. And this is also what is emphasized in primary schooling. Thus, an adjustment has been made; since it is not possible for the entire primary schooling system to be changed, the idea is to adjust to it. Thus, teachers continue the emphasis on emotional intelligence with cognitive development, but they, especially in the transition time to primary schooling, raise the pitch and attention on the three Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic).

This adjustment approach has influenced other aspects of the childcare capacity-building initiative. With physical space scarce, games had to be devised that allowed free movement of children, while also helping children grasp complex concepts such as small and large. Innovations such as the number game helped to meet the demands of child development within particular constraints.

Many of these innovations work, because of the constant emphasis on supportive training. These trainings, are as much about unlearning attitudes, ‘when they are naughty, give them one *thappad*’ (slap), to understanding, the play way method. Unlearning attitudes, though, has as much to do with the teacher’s accepting that slapping or being verbally violent with the child is to be actively discouraged.

Sangini Bal SEWA Cooperative's Activities

Nutrition: One hot, freshly cooked meal and nutritious snack, one in the morning and one at tea-time are given to the children in all these centres as per the local diet.

Health Care: The bal sevikas coordinate with the nearby urban health centres to organize monthly health check-ups and immunization for the children and for the pregnant mothers. A SEWA doctor visits the centres once a month to monitor growth and health of the children via growth charts. Regular growth monitoring helps identify malnourished and weak children who are then given special attention and diet. Counselling is provided to the parents in addition to providing referral services to both government and private hospitals for the children or mothers who need further treatment.

Meetings with parents: Regular monthly meetings with mothers are organized to brief them about the children's growth and progress. Counselling of mothers with health or personal problems is a significant aspect of these meetings.

Quarterly meetings with the fathers have been initiated since January 2012, as their participation, in general, was noticeably low. Separate meetings for mothers and fathers are organized to enable the participation of both parents.

Graduation Ceremony: A graduation ceremony is organized for the children. Each year nearly 50 per cent of the children are admitted in schools (Std I). The ceremony is organized with the support and contributions from the local community. Some of the children belong to migrants who do not have any identity proof or birth certificates to enable admissions in formal schools. However, the certificates given are accepted in many of the schools. Principals and teachers of neighbourhood schools are invited to grace these occasions which further enhances the possibility of the children getting admission in the schools.

It is the processing of information, the how of what is transmitted, which has been creatively thought through and implemented and is the defining factor in the success of the childcare initiative. Possibly, this has also been the reason for explaining why even during the ongoing years of adversity, which was discussed in the previous section, and will be taken up again in the next and concluding section, the emphasis on the child has not wavered.

The fulcrum of the capacity-building initiative was the daily diary of the bal sevikas, one of the four daily records they maintain. In this, they record observations about individual children. While this functions to monitor developmental changes, what is of particular interest to the capacity-building efforts are the diary notings of any changes in children's habits and behaviours that the bal sevikas notice and record.

Based on these observations, the bal sevikas were asked to develop a game / toy / puzzle, using just 10 rupees worth of materials. What emerged was a range of low-cost, easy to replicate teaching-learning materials. These when displayed during training sessions turned each bal sevika into a resource person for the others, creating an effective, peer mentoring process.

For children, exposure trips were organized. It was through the exposure trips that many children and some bal sevikas, too, saw animals, like elephants and tigers for the first time.

That the method is working came through when children, between the ages of 8–14 years, who were alumni of the Ghodiya Ghars, were brought together for a *bal mela* in both Ahmedabad and Kheda, the districts where the project had been functioning longest. The bal mela was a research methodology innovation to do tracer studies of children who had spent significant time in their early years in the Ghodiya Ghars. At the bal mela, alumni of the Ghodiya Ghars and their parents shared similar stories – they had good memories of that time and recalled their association with fondness.

For the Ghodiya Ghar teams, it was especially heartening to learn that nearly all the alumni were in formal schooling, that their parents appreciated not just the good cognitive base their children had received for a life of learning, but also, as particularly mentioned, the self-confidence with which the children faced the world. All of the children not only remembered the teachers, but also especially recalled the food, that it was warm, that it was different every day, and that it tasted so good.

Ongoing regular engagement with the bal sevikas for their capacity building, but in diverse settings, helped to bring to the fore issues that otherwise would have remained neglected. As part of its health and nutrition outreach, a small sample study on the food habits and nutrition levels of SEWA members and their children was conducted. As part of the study, the actual quantity consumed by different family members was measured. Along with insights into food preferences and habits, the study highlighted that though children with special needs, like the physically challenged, need special attention at meal

times, they were not getting this from family members. Within the technical team, it soon became clear that there was a need to identify the needs of children with differing needs. For example, early in the research process, it was found that bal sevikas were not clear about how to even identify physical disability. In many cases, severely malnourished children were being classified as ‘physically handicapped’.

Prior to receiving training on identification and care practices, the bal sevikas provided a combination of extra care, oil massages, additional food and attention, along with traditional practices to help these children. With all of this, the health and nutritional status of the malnourished child, of course, improved, leading to an improvement in his/her development indicators. Based on their own observations, as recorded in the daily diary, the bal sevikas began to conclude that with care, physical disability was reversible.

While the trainings helped bal sevikas learn more about children with special needs, what the entire experience of the past two decades and more has demonstrated, at least through anecdotal evidence, is that the children who went through the Ghodiya Ghars received advantages which were not only cognitive.

Involved in the childcare initiative from its inception and the principal and continuing influence on the capacity building of bal sevikas and the running of the Ghodiya Ghars, Prof. Anandalaxmy explains the undeniable difference between the SEWA childcare initiatives and that of many others, including the government-run ICDS. She suggests that to understand what is happening on the ground, you have to look at the wider environment within which childcare is being delivered.

What is happening in SEWA, they have caring environment, and the children have teachers who genuinely care. Within SEWA, they have an ongoing kind of relationship, for example, it is a cooperative which provides milk to all the SEWA crèches. A professor I met once told me that intelligence is not just a property of individuals; it is a property of environments. Also, as the mother are members, there is that whole confidence that they can reach out to someone for help when they need it, there is a community, where when they reach out, they will be supported. It has a kind of fellowship they know where to go, it has been a big help to them. They know where they can borrow money where they can borrow money without any security and these add together to a sense of community. In SEWA they have their membership, they have their aagewan, who is democratically elected ... there is this democratic functioning system; you can go to somebody for help, for assistance, for advice. I wouldn't idealize SEWA, it's not like a small group but the fact of functioning in this fashion, provides people at the field level, a feeling of belonging which is lost now ... in most of India, we don't have that feeling.

VII

Days after meeting with Manju Ben and visiting SEWA childcare centres, in urban and rural Gujarat, we are sitting in SEWA's social security office in Ahmedabad. The conversation veers to the many Manju Bens who were met in the course of the travels, all with similar stories. Being an AWW gives the women not just more money, but also a status within the society and, at least until now, for shorter working hours. All of this the

former bal sevikas acknowledge readily and with appreciation. And yet, they all shared stories of missing something special from their days with SEWA. Of feeling isolated, overwhelmed, disconnected within the vastness of the ICDS. It is a difference in the work culture, explains Mirai Chatterjee, head of the Social Security team within SEWA. There is a sense of community, a bond among the SEWA workers, a sisterhood, which is hard to explain, it has to be experienced.

That work culture, the sisterhood, has been carefully nurtured as part of the organization's overall organizational evolution in which the childcare initiative, though it is high maintenance and cost intensive (see Table 9), has been considered important. The childcare initiative was always small and now is even smaller; The table below shows that it is expensive to run the initiative (2012). The monthly costs of running 22 centres in Kheda works out to Rs 4.5 lakhs. In both Kheda and Ahmedabad, the cost of running a single centre is Rs 20,000, per month.

Table 9: Actual Expenses of Running a Crèche: 2012

No of Centres	Costs in 2012	Nutrition	Rent	Teacher's Salary	Monthly Cost of Running A centre	Parents Contribution
20-21-22	Kheda-Anand	10,000 p.m.(Rs 13/- per day per child)	Nil – Rs 500/-	Rs 3,050	Rs 20,000	Rs 50 per month per child
27	Ahmedabad	Rs 5–6 per day per child	Nil-Rs 900/- p.m.	Rs 4,150	Rs 20,000	Rs 100 per month per child
47	Total					

Years before the twin crisis which hit Gujarat in the early 2000s, SEWA had begun preparations for the next stage of growth of its childcare initiative. That preparation for growth has been the defining factor in the organization, retaining its influence in the childcare policy space, despite its now limited engagement.

Impact on the Framing of National Policies

2011: Presentation to and discussion with the National Advisory Council: Inputs into cabinet decision to extend centre-based ICDS services to all children below the age of 6 years.

2000–2010: Part of Planning Commission dialogues and engagement with practitioners and civil society on improving the efficacy of the ICDS.

2003: Central ICDS budget increased, with a substantial rise in the salary of the childcare workers nationwide. SEWA among others had been advocating for this increase for some time.

1998: National Crèche Fund started. Translation into policy of a Shram Shakti report recommendation.

1989: Government Resolution issued, enabling teachers with less education and more experience to apply for recruitment as ICDS workers.

1987: The commission for self-employed women workers in the informal sector included the question, 'What do you do with your children, when you go out to work?', in the list to be asked of every woman interviewed.

At a workshop, as part of the Effectiveness Initiative research project that was conducted in the early 2000s, the childcare teams along with their colleagues in other parts of SEWA had attempted to distil the key ingredients that are essential to make a childcare programme successful. In the workshop report, they are shared under the title, 'Lessons Learnt' in a text box in the report. While the team had listed them out, as they emerged from the brainstorming, they thus read as an unsegregated list.

In the same workshop, as part of her inaugural address, SEWA founder, Ela Bhatt, had also listed her own learnings and the programmatic priorities.

Below, these are presented as linking into the society and state system at multiple points where they could add value: the value they add at the level of the individual, that is, child and woman; the value they add at the level of the collective – the family, the organization; and finally the value they add at the level of the unknown – the future of the community and the nation.

At the level of the collective:

Childcare centres need to be at convenient locations, suit the mothers' working hours, be flexible and respond to the needs of the mothers.

Childcare is an effective way to organize members on union issues.

During crisis and disasters, childcare centres become the hub of activities.

Confining activities to nutrition, health and a few development activities is inadequate to provide quality childcare.

Changing social attitudes takes time. It requires a continuous process of training and exposure to new ideas.

At the level of the individual:

Alumni of the Ghodiya Ghars years later recall the warmth, care and affection received at the centre.

Children who attended childcare did better in schools.

Childcare for the 0–2 years age group was more difficult than for the children in the above 3 years age group.

The best crèche teachers were from the same area and background as the members.

Both financial and human resources are required for providing effective childcare.

At the level of the future:

Childcare must be the community's responsibility.

There can be no work security without childcare.

Delinked from employment, childcare remains limited.

Poverty alleviation and employment-generation programmes are incomplete without childcare.

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