

Quality Day Care Services for the Young Child

Institute of Social Studies Trust, New Delhi

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Caring for Children, Transforming Lives: Urmul's Experience, A Generation Later

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Vijayalakshmi Balakrishnan

'If I don't add the sugar, not one of the children will eat.' It is time for nashta, the morning snack, at the anganwadi centre, and children have just started on their daily cooked meal of khichdi. The teaspoonful of sugar sprinkled on top, stood out. As per the norms, the children are to get sweetened khichdi every alternate day. The other three days in the week, they are to get unsweetened khichdi. For Mamta Devi, (name changed), the anganwadi worker, the norm doesn't work. 'The children, they won't touch it, unsweetened.' So how does she cope? Sometimes, the local women's self-help group provides the sugar and, sometimes, she stretches the allocation across the week, instead of using it over three days. There are about 20 children in the anganwadi eating, four of them are physically smaller and are eating from the same plate as the slightly bigger child they are sitting next to; their knees touching, sometimes the fingers, as they reach for the small portion in the plate before them. 'They are not registered', Mamta Devi explains. Under threes get the dry rations, which the mothers collect once a month. The cooked meal is exclusively for the registered children, between 3–6 years of age only. At the anganwadi centre, the food allocation is precise, measured for each child, registered and in attendance. Unlike sugar, it is not possible to stretch the food. Watching two children trying to make a meal from one plate with one small portion of khichdi, (there's discomfort all around), the AWW, the helper, the ASHA worker, all speak – 'Sometimes the next allocation is delayed', 'There could be an inspection' 'If a child gets less, a mother complains to the panchayat ...' their discomfort only accentuated by their helplessness.

The CDPO intervenes. 'September–October is the peak agricultural season. Both women and men, leave for the dhanis early, at about 8.00 a.m.; they spend the whole day in the fields and return about 6.00 p.m. With no one at home, the younger child follows the older one to the centre. We've explained to the authorities. During the agricultural season, some parents take their children to the dhanis and stay there for a month. As you can see, there are only 16 of the 30 children, registered. Then there are others, who go up and down daily, but have nowhere to leave the younger child, so send them also to the centre. We've explained, many times, and some of them do understand. But, the norms...', there's a pause, and the exasperation with the unchanging situation, which is evident in Ram Prasad Harsh's voice ... 'they remain the same'.

The children have finished their meal, they get up, carry their plates and leave the small room. Some take a flying leap and land on the soft sand; quickly hauling themselves up, they run with their plates and stand in queue, facing a small water camper kept on the edge of the verandah, a little distance away. Others, who are physically smaller, sit on the verandah floor and stretch to reach the big stone kept near – one step on that and a little jump and they too are off towards the tap. The four little ones move forward too, uncertain. Just then a grandmother arrives, escorting her grandson. He had been away and just returned and she wanted him to get his share of food. She helped him step on the stone and scramble onto the verandah. Seeing the others waiting, she helped one reach the stone, and he makes his way down, and then she lifted the others and gently lets them down on the sand. Quickly, they ran around, and stood in the queue, squeezing up, next to their older siblings. The tallest child was at least a few inches shorter than the raised

verandah. Not one of the children, standing on the ground could stretch and open the water camper's tap on their own

Anticipating the question, Mamta Devi explains, 'Earlier the centre was operating from rented space. That we selected, it was on the ground, easily accessible to even the smallest child. About five years, ago this centre was built'. 'It cost Rs 4.5 lakhs', explains the team, 'and while the construction was done by the district authorities, the design was sent from Jaipur. It's the same design everywhere'. Mamta Devi admits that mothers complain about the height, the lack of steps and then asks, 'But what can we do?'

The government-constructed anganwadi centre stands out. It is square, the same size on all four sides, at a height of about 4 feet from the ground, with no steps to reach the rooms. Adults and children who clamber up reach a handkerchief-sized verandah, where next to a pillar stands a water camper with a steel glass next to it. There is a cooking area at one end, where a dish still sits on the earthen stove. There is also a toilet, but there's no water facility, and there is a fear of pilferage, it has been kept locked, open only for inspections. The verandah links the two main rooms. A small store, dark and dingy with white gunny sacks of grain piled high. Next to the gunny sacks was a blue wide boat-shaped plastic object and on the other side a pale green low wedge-like object. As eyes get used to the darkness, it was possible to see two seats on either end of the green wedge; it was a smaller version of a playground's see-saw. 'It is a toy for the children', explained the sahayika. The sanstha (Urmul) distributed it to us last year. In the main room, where children had been sitting a few minutes ago eating their khichdi, the walls are festooned with gay, brightly coloured alphabets and numbers. On one wall were birds and animals, and on the table, wrapped in plastic, were flash cards with words and numbers. Next to it was a bright blue plastic stump with a ladder attached. The sahayika entered the room, bringing with her the red boat-like object. A few seconds of struggle to fit them, and soon the red and blue portions, had been converted into a slide. The smallest of the under threes had been standing on the side, clinging to his brother. Now, he came forward and as we turned towards the kitchen, he began to cautiously climb. The sahayika helped him onto the slide and whoosh!... for the first time in an hour, a child's laughter filled the room.



I

Social Services here and there do not really solve the big problems. Governments and the people must together solve them.

Setting Priorities for Child Welfare
Jawaharlal Nehru
Speech given in 1956

It is no longer possible to think of development as a process merely of increasing the available supplies of material goods; it is necessary to ensure that simultaneously a steady advance is made towards the realisation of wider objectives such as full employment and the removal of economic inequalities.

The central objective of planning in India at the present stage is to initiate a process of development which will raise living standards and open out to the people new opportunities for a richer and more varied life.

The Nehruvian Vision of Modern Development As articulated in the First Five Year Plan (1951-1956)

Taking its cue from the goal set out in 1950, newly independent India embarked upon various schemes to provide irrigation to those areas previously not covered by the British. Much of the early attention was paid to the northern states, in what is known as the Indus Water Basin region. One of the biggest landmarks in Indus Basin irrigation achievements is the Indira Gandhi Nahar Pariyojana (IGNP, the Canal Project). Conceived as early as 1940, it was previously known as the Rajasthan Canal Project. When completed, the Indira Gandhi Canal provided irrigation to about 12.58 lakh hectares of land in the seven districts of the Thar desert of Rajasthan – Barmer, Churu, Jodhpur, Hanumangarh, Sri Ganganagar, Bikaner and Jaisalmer.. It is the largest irrigation project in the world, greening the semi-arid and arid areas of Rajasthan and, along with this, transforming the economy of the region and the lives of the people in the area.

Various studies of the ecological, economic and agricultural impact of the canal in Rajasthan have found that in myriad ways, people's lives have been transformed. Yields obtained from *kharif* and *rabi* crops have increased substantially. A shift from subsistence crops to commercial crops has also been seen, bringing prosperity and alternative employment opportunities to the region. In the areas falling under canal irrigation, villagers have become prosperous. Studies have found that the incidence of sandstorms, which brought with them a range of negative health hazards, has come down. Having the canal meant that potable drinking water was available to all villagers. Canal water has meant that crops can be grown every year and, sometimes, it is possible to grow more than one crop, including commercial crops, which was not possible earlier. While the area continues to be sparsely populated, there has been significant in-migration and growth of secondary and tertiary economic activities. From being migrants, in search of

work as farm labourers, to small farmers, they are now in a position to employ farm labour for at least part of the year. With the rise in household income, there has been a change in the expenditure profiles. Vegetables and even seasonal fruits, not grown in the district, have become part of villagers' diet. Fish, entirely unknown, is now harvested from the canal, and, in some homes has slowly entered the diet. There has been a change in aspirations too. As was earlier noticed in the Green Revolution belt of Punjab and Haryana, the demand for education, especially English language education, has grown phenomenally. Slowly, too, the caste rigidities are diffusing. During the construction of the canal and in the early years, when new farm techniques were being learnt, there was greater inter-community interaction. The new modes of interaction have continued, income growth has brought with it mobility and all of this has ensured that a regress to the norms of earlier times did not happen.

II

The normative narrative case study, whilst useful for details and insights, more often than not fails to provide the basis for a comparison across time and space. Nor does the format of the case study usually allow for a systematic analysis of intentions of the actor(s), on the one hand, and eventual outcome(s), on the other. Hence, here, for the intergenerational review, the argument begins with a theory of agency which takes both the actor's references into account and the strategic context. For this, the analysis borrows from new institutionalism, in particular, the insight that sequence and timing in the decision-making process matters and that rationality is context dependent.

In other writings by the author, it has been posited that the decade of the 1950s was a crucial one that profoundly shaped India's subsequent policies towards children and defined the child-State relationship (Balakrishnan 2011).

To qualify such a proposition, the report draws upon the insights of *path dependency*,¹ which holds that choices made in the past can set into motion a self-reproducing dynamic through which a set of preferences are accepted as state policy.

Going beyond the causes of action, to explore the consequences, the argument is made that at 'critical junctures', key policy decisions can alter a country's path of institutional development. Path dependency, as an instrument of analysis, traces divergent trajectories

¹ Path dependency is now a complete branch of scholarship within both political economy and political sociology. While the literature on path dependency is vast and growing, at its simplest, it can be explained through the phrase, history matters. In the case of the Thar region and the ambitious Rajasthan canal project, path dependency can be understood as Nehruvian socialistic ideas converted into historical decisions in public policy matter. For a wonderful, prescient view of similar arguments in relation to big infrastructure projects and their possible impact on people and their livelihoods, please see Harold Laski body of work, particularly, H. Laski, *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1943). More recent literature on path dependency provides us with interesting cases over time and continents – for instance on the evolution of the Qwerty keyboard from the typewriter to the mobile phone. See especially the chapter in P. Krugman, *Peddling Prosperity* (New York: W.W.Norton, 1994).

back to systematic differences either in antecedent conditions or in the timing, sequencing, and interaction of specific political economic processes. It suggests that not all options are equally viable at any given point in time. It is suggested here that the early 1950s represented such a 'critical juncture' in the life of independent India and the IGNP is one manifestation of that juncture.

For Urmul, the decision to accept the ICDS project and take on the responsibility for Kolayat block was just such a moment.

III

The small village of Bajju in north-western Rajasthan's Bikaner district is a little-known testimonial of the impact of Nehru's vision of state-led modern development. Twenty-odd years ago, visitors to the area would be struck by the expanse of desert, dotted with round mud huts, each a homestead, most often including two round huts in close proximity, one small, one big, surrounded by a small patch of courtyard, the boundaries marked by a small mud fence. These homesteads included, often, three generations living together in close proximity and who kept livestock, primarily goats. These were the classical food-for-work, villages, where almost every household had land, but which was unable to provide adequate income to keep a family. Visitors to a home would share the family meal of *roti* and raw onion peeled, broken into four and liberally sprinkled with red chilli powder. Water, though prized, was freely shared with visitors, who uniformly found it acrid. Conversation, in those days would meander, but also inevitably would coalesce on the ongoing barrage work for the much looked forward to water from the then under-construction, Indira Gandhi canal.

Twenty odd years ago, when travelling from one village to another, visitors would be shown the small concrete one-room houses, all in pink, which dotted the desert. These were the temporary homes for the supervisory staff who were working on the canal in the field. Now 20 years later, the same pink houses, abandoned, stand out for a different reason. Earlier, they stood out as a testimony to an aspirational life, of concrete brick and mortar homes, a rarity in the area. Now they stand out for being small when compared with the expanse of large, single and two-floor houses that are the norm in the village. While everyone points to the water and the rise in farm incomes as the principal reason for the change, there have been other developments that have helped. The area, has also benefited from the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojana (the rural roads construction programme) in the early 2000s.

Now, with good roads, villages that were almost 4 to 6 hours of a difficult drive away, distant from the district capital, are now a smooth hour-long ride. Better quality roads have added another layer of prosperity to the area. Along with agriculture and livestock, small shops selling cloth, cosmetics, and footwear have now appeared even in remote villages. Availability of accessible roads has seen many private educational institutions in Bikaner opening up branches, all offering for a substantial fee English-medium education for children as young as 3 years, and going all the way to high school.

For the Urmul Seemant Samiti's 20-odd member management team, almost all of whom have grown up in Bikaner, the transformation in the lives of the people of the area holds special significance. Having begun community development work in the Kolayat block of Bikaner in the late 1980s, Urmul's transformation of Bikaner has paralleled the changes within the organization itself. Urmul's core team, though all professionally trained in the Nehruvian model of development, were in their philosophically moorings closer to Gandhian ideals.

In the late 1980s, Urmul had begun work among the villagers, focusing initially on health care. The poor health situation of children was inevitably a high priority for the villagers, and thus for the Urmul team as well. In the late 1980s, the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) was started in the district and in 1990, Urmul was asked if they would be interested in managing an entire ICDS project; the block suggested was Kolayat. This would mean taking on responsibility for all aspects of implementation of the ICDS project.

It would take one year of intense debate within the core team, with positions being polarized and discussions continuing through the day and often through the night, for the team to come to a decision. The team did not doubt their own ability to manage the project, yet there were concerns at multiple levels: at an operational level, the concerns were about assuring the quality of the processes of childcare, while also ensuring that Urmul's value-based development model could be continued. At a more philosophical level, there were genuine concerns about what the change in the relationship with the administration would mean for the organization. As a Gandhian group, the effort had always been to remain accountable to the community being served, and while supporting social development efforts led by the state, maintaining a certain distance from state agencies posed a challenge. Taking on something as large as an entire ICDS project would inevitably mean greater engagement with the administration. What tipped the balance was the sense that this would be an opportunity to demonstrate that another form of development was possible even within the framework set by the state system.

More than 20 years later, that year of *chintan*, internal brainstorming, and challenging each other is remembered for its intensity as much as the final decision to take on the project.

For those who remain from that initial Urmul core team, the phase leading up to the decision to implement the ICDS project in Kolayat block of Bikaner district and its immediate aftermath is recalled as a period of intense negotiation during which the modalities for institutional partnership were worked out. Then in the first years, the partnerships were experienced in ways the team was possibly quite unprepared for.

IV

Early in the partnership with the ICDS, Urmul faced a difficult moment that potentially could have ended the relationship. Of greater concern, this had the potential to damage

the reputation for credible quality work and commitment to the people that Urmul had built up. In an independent report to the ICDS directorate in Jaipur, it was mentioned that many of the anganwadi centres being run in Kolayat block were found closed when the ICDS team had visited, and in those that were found open, there were far fewer children present than registered. Urmul was asked to explain this. Unsaid, though real, was the possibility of the project being withdrawn.

Kashyap Mankodi, author of the initial case study of the Urmul-ICDS partnership, as part of the Suraksha series, had highlighted in his review that the relationship had not been easy for Urmul to experience and manage (Mankodi 1995). Used to working closely with the community at a pace determined by the situation on the ground and thus emphasizing accountability to the people they served, Urmul found that the almost factory-like regimentation and the emphasis on reports to the near exclusion of all else that came along with the ICDS project were difficult to get used to.

In the review meeting that was held in Jaipur, the Urmul team, when asked, pointed out that the independent report had only echoed their own regular reports to the ICDS directorate. All of these had clearly shown that there had been a seasonal dip in numbers of children and that they had risen a few weeks later. For the directorate, a project holder self-reporting that some centres were kept closed and that at others, there were fewer children attending than registered was unusual to say the least.

The Urmul team recalled their clarification, ‘We explained that due to the good rains that year, entire villages had moved to the *dhanis*, to work in the fields. Families, quite naturally took their children along. As a corollary, it was therefore inevitable, that when the independent team visited, they found fewer children, than registered in some centres, or that some other centres, were found to be closed.’

The Urmul team did not end their report there. They helpfully added that if the officials went themselves, they would find 99 per cent of the other anganwadi centres also shut, and if they sent out other independent teams, they would get similar reports from all the Thar districts – Churu, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer and, of course, the rest of Bikaner.

Even 18 years later, the immediate reactions of the officials in the directorate are recalled with clarity and some relish. ‘When we finished, one of them was so startled that he blurted, “But we’ve got reports of regular attendance from all of those districts, from everywhere”; another official asked, “So why has this seasonal variation never ever been mentioned before?” We treated it as a rhetorical question. Though we did suggest that if they had involved us, earlier, they would have known.

For the directorate, the Urmul claim, plausible and easy to verify, now called into question all of the other reports they had been receiving, which suggested that even in the peak agricultural season, with all parents in the fields, it was business as usual at the anganwadi centres. Along with establishing Urmul’s credentials for quality work and a high level of integrity, for the directorate, the episode provided a glimpse of other unexpected benefits of a partnership with the voluntary sector.

Though that independent report was not mentioned again, it did have a salutary effect on the nature of the partnership between the ICDS and Urmul. For Urmul, that episode established a different equation with the ICDS directorate in Jaipur. Urmul's voice began to be heard differently.

V

One of the immediate benefits of the changed equation with Jaipur was the easing of difficulties in recruitments. Initially, the Urmul team had found it difficult to employ the candidates they had selected, as the candidates did not have 8th Class pass educational qualification as required. After the episode with the independent team evaluation, Urmul found that requests for waiver of the educational qualification norm were quickly approved. As Table 1 below shows, a significant proportion of the women working as anganwadi workers have minimal educational qualifications. A majority of them have only just completed secondary education or less. Moreover, even today, about 16 per cent of the anganwadi workers are just literate.

Table 1: Educational Profile of AWWs in the Urmul-Managed Kolayat Block, Bikaner, Rajasthan

Highest Formal Educational Qualification	Numbers	Proportion
Literate	26	16
Up to 6 Pass	52	32
8th Pass	71	43
10th Pass	10	6
12th Pass	4	2.4
Graduate	1	0.6

If one examines the number of years AWWs have spent in service (see Table 2 below), it is clear that a large proportion of AWWs (37 per cent) have spent more than 15 years in service. In this group however, the number of just literate women rises significantly (see raw data from Urmul available with ISST).

Table 2

Years in Service	Numbers	Proportion
Two years and below	17	11
Two years to five years	35	21
Five years to 10 years	33	20
10 years to 15 years	19	11.4
More than 15 years	61	37

In the early 1990s, the ICDS had placed a floor qualification of Class 8 pass for hiring of anganwadi workers. In all of Rajasthan, which then had the lowest female literacy rates

nationwide, it was difficult to get adequate numbers of qualified, motivated and willing to work women to staff the centres. In Bikaner district, and particularly the Kolayat block, the search proved next to impossible. In many villages, there were no adult women with those qualifications. The few residents in the block who had the qualifications were often young women who had attended primary schools in other parts of the state. These women had moved to Kolayat after marriage and were restricted by strict purdah practices and also had considerable domestic responsibilities.

Many of the women, even those who did not have the qualifications, were keen to work with the project, primarily because it gave them a chance to experience greater freedom. Also, the Urmul team was learning in its other ongoing projects, that the educational qualifications were only part of what was required to run a community-accountable, service in the project villages. Caste barriers tended to be rigid. Hiring women based on appropriate educational qualifications alone often meant exclusion of Dalits and tribals from being recruited, which may have been a factor in preventing Dalits and tribals from sending their children to the centres, though their children were the ones most in need of childcare services. Early on, Urmul had taken a decision that they would open and run centres as far as possible in the vicinity of the cluster where the most socially marginalized caste of each village lived; and as far as possible it would also have an affirmative action policy in recruitment.

While initially it was difficult to recruit women with the required educational qualifications as also those who belonged to socially marginalized communities, the recruitment pattern for the past two years, (see Table 3 below) shows evidence of the progress made in female education and also its spread across social barriers. Testimonial to the change is the recruitment of the project's only graduate anganwadi worker, who also happens to belong to a Meghwal family. Recruitment of anganwadi workers (AWWs) who were only literates ended more than a decade ago.

Table 3

Profile of recent entrants: (Joined after January 1st 2010)		
Educational Qualification	Age	Caste
12th pass	20	Nai
10th pass	26	Meghwal
BA	26	Meghwal
10th pass	27	Meghwal
10th pass	27	Bishnoi
8th pass	27	Swami
10th pass	28	Saath
12th pass	28	Sevag
8th pass	29	Jat
8th pass	31	Meghwal
8th pass	33	Muslim
8th pass	34	Bishnoi
10th pass	35	Rajput
10th pass	43	Brahmin

12th pass	44	Sevag
10th pass	45	Bishnoi

V

In the initial years, Urmul was thus able to bring on board a band of committed women with the necessary temperament, commitment, family background and an interest in childcare, but without the necessary educational qualifications. As the quality of their work began to get noticed, the questions on educational qualifications of the women stopped being raised. Over the years, the floor level for recruitments has been raised from Class 6 pass to Class 8 pass to the most recent rise in qualifications to Class 10 pass. If Urmul is unable to find someone with the requisite educational qualifications, but who fulfils the other criteria, it continues to be able to get waivers and the appointments procedures eased.

For the women recruited as anganwadi workers, especially for those who had lived freer lives elsewhere before their marriage into Kolayat, the Urmul-ICDS project has made a significant difference to the quality of their lives. Kamla Devi is a recent recruit who has passed Class 10 and had moved to Kolayat after her marriage about 10 years ago. She highlights how she now gets a different reception in the village when she goes house to house for surveys. Earlier, even though she observed the obligatory purdah, it was difficult. The *izzat* – respect that the position has given her – she appreciates even more than the money, though the money also makes a difference. Her mother-in-law runs the house, and Kamla Devi, hands over her entire salary to her. Only now, asking her mother-in-law for money to buy essentials or even some non-essentials is much easier. ‘I’ve earned the money, so I don’t hesitate to ask for it.’

For others who have been with the project longer, the job grew in importance as the realities of their lives changed. Anita Devi was among the first batch of women recruited for the project. In 1992, she was a newly married 8th Class pass young woman from Alwar who had just moved to Bajju. Her brother-in-law was then working with Urmul on another project. He suggested she join to give her something to do. The move to Bajju had not been easy for the city-bred young woman, who was used to a completely different level of physical and social infrastructure. In the beginning, the job was important as it gave her a sense of fulfilment. When her own two children were infants, she had brought them also to the centre, thus combining her home and professional lives and responsibilities. After her husband’s death, the job became a lifeline of a different kind – it gave her financial stability and emotional support at a very difficult time. ‘Walking the two kms to the centre from my home everyday was not easy at that time, but it gave me something to look forward to. With the children, I was able to not forget, but park the fears, the worries about the future.’ From being the anchor for the centre, the project became her anchor.

That sense of solidarity that Anita Devi recalls experiencing at a difficult time in her life was not accidental. The training programmes that Urmul has invested in early in the project had emphasized that the project has larger goals of social transformation, along with the immediate objectives of providing good quality childcare at the anganwadi

centre. For the Urmul team, the trainings were designed to provide technical information essential to run the centre to meet the expectations. Along with this, the trainings were about the soft skills that the women would need to do the job in a way that was valued by the community. The management team points out that with regular trainings, the workers have the ability to articulate their views with less hesitation, and, also, it has brought to the fore their latent skills in drawing, toy-making, and singing. Most of the women workers, though, emphasize the competence they developed from the training processes and the language skills they had picked up during trainings. With most only familiar with local dialects, even speaking in Hindi had been difficult. Overcoming constraints, such as speaking with strangers, especially men, and travelling to Bikaner, Ajmer and even Jaipur for trainings were other challenges the women had to meet. Also, the expectation that during trainings, the purdah was to be discarded was difficult to accept. In the beginning, all these processes were difficult, but over time, much changed. Now those early days are recalled with a mix of amusement and sheepishness.

VI

The emphasis on caring, of solidarity and on the overarching value of social transformation as the project goal has meant that the Urmul team has had the internal resources to deal with multiple forms of resistance as also confronting recurring conflicts.

The principal attraction of the anganwadi centre has been also its most potent source of conflict. The dry rations for all children below the age of 6 years and the daily one warm cooked meal that all children between the ages of 3–6 years get were hugely important in the lives of the children. It also made a quiet and positive difference in the household budget. What was a source of friction was the cooking of the meal. Today, these conflicts over the right to cook remain the principal potential area of disagreement. Other conflicts have with time been diffused.

Most of the older anganwadi workers recall that, initially, the team and especially the workers had to spend a lot of time persuading families, mostly the mothers, to leave their children at the centre. There was resistance and probing questions, ‘Why do you want to take the children to the centre? Give us the food, we will feed them at home. Why do you want to keep our children at the centre? What is this all about?’

In the early days, the workers would go door to door, collect the children and encourage the mothers or other family members to come and pick them up early so that they could observe the working of the centre. Within months, the resistance began to dissipate, and the Urmul team found mothers and other family members bringing the children voluntarily.

Unsaid in the early period was the very real social concern about the anganwadi centre being a space where caste hierarchies were dispensed with. The idea that children from Brahmin and Rajput, the common higher castes in the villages, would spend time in Dalit clusters, which was where centres were preferentially opened, learn from women who

belonged to Nai, Meghwal and other socially backward communities, play, make friends and relationships with children of other castes concerned many of the parents and their extended families. 'We used to tell them, we all bleed when we are cut. Let the children, grow up in a different environment. Most parents agreed, though initially it was with reluctance.' With the passage of time, in most villages, it has stopped being an issue of concern. For parents and the wider village, the centre has been accepted as a space where new forms of relationships are being forged.

Only the real benefits of getting food from the anganwadi centre, for both the child and especially the mother, helped to initially mute the resistance.

In most villages, the cooking of food remains an area where some form of untouchability continues to manifest itself. A Dalit cook is frowned upon and is clearly not accepted by the higher-caste families. In many centres, initially, parents from higher castes pulled their children out to put pressure on the system to change the cook. When that did not work, they would attempt to get her changed through influencing the panchayat and through the local elected representatives. Sarita Devi, the cook at one of the centres where the problem is particularly acute, belongs to the Meghwal caste. The anganwadi worker there is also a Dalit, and the centre is located in the Dalit cluster of the village. The pressures to change the cook have come from multiple directions. These days, the demand to change the cook comes up once in a while only. It is not brought up more often, because of a particular set of circumstances. The only local government-run primary school has a cook who is a Brahmin. She, however, is not a good cook. 'There are so many complaints about her. The Rajputs, Brahmins, everyone complains that she gives partially cooked food to the children, that they can't eat it, even that they fall ill. With Sarita, there have never been any complaints. In fact, the same children, who've been through this centre, ask for her to be brought in to cook.' The anecdote brings smiles all around, but it is also testimony to the different facets of the battle.

The centre and the village are testimony to the benefits accruing from modern development, but also to its uneven-ness. There is a recurrent demand to change the location of the centre, move it to the more income-poor clusters, which are also the hamlets of the socially advanced castes. In the village, the Dalit communities have benefited significantly from the IGNP. The proposal to move the centre is made periodically but is consciously refused by the Urmul team. 'They bring up multiple arguments, especially at the panchayat. That it is one of the older centres, has been in the Dalit *basti* for more than 15 years, and there should be rotation.' But, this proposal has not been accepted. 'It is important to have the centre here.'

In a conversation with one of the mothers from the higher castes who takes the dry rations but who had for a long time refused to allow her children to eat the cooked food, the issue was carefully alluded to. She lives in a mud hut, one of the very few in the area and a sharp contrast to the many double-storied large modern houses that dot the hamlet. For her, the issue was one of unquestioned acceptance of a tradition. She herself, never having undergone schooling, knew no other way of living. She had recently begun sending her children to the centre again. Her young daughter, who recently celebrated her

third birthday, being unaware of caste differences eats the cooked meal, while the older boy, who is almost 6 years old and having been made aware of social differences, refuses to eat. The meal is important for the family, she admits, and agrees that the children like going to the centre, but it is still difficult for her to accept the notion of a caste-free space. She reluctantly nods to the idea that caste is not important, but as the team leaves her they themselves are unsure if the conversation had any impact on her belief system.

VII

A recent attempt to move the anganwadi centre out of the Dalit hamlet was based on the condition of the centre's infrastructure.

Within the first few years of the ICDS partnership, the Urmul team realized that in most situations, it would not be possible to push the ICDS directorate to go beyond their understanding of and empathy with problems to meet the needs identified. 'Many of the officials do understand and even appreciate our ability and willingness to highlight issues, but it is not always possible for them to do more than that.' On the need for stand-alone anganwadi centres, which are designed specifically for the children's use, Urmul was heard out but no funds were forthcoming from the department.

This inability to move the system has led to Urmul's often playing a role at the vanguard. Most recently, the Government of India has issued directions suggesting that all state governments could take up construction of anganwadi kendras and has offered Rs 4.5 lakhs as central support. In Rajasthan, though, such anganwadi kendras have been built through state funds for more than six years now.

That decision of the state government to allocate resources for anganwadi construction was a response to pressure from groups such as Urmul. Initially, the kendras operated from either rented or donated premises. In some instances, as part of school construction, an anganwadi kendra would also be constructed on the side. However, there were both logistical as also administrative difficulties in operating from rented premises.



Having attempted unsuccessfully to convince the ICDS directorate to build anganwadi kendras, Urmul raised resources and within 2–3 years, in the early 2000s, constructed 60 anganwadi kendras. With no budget for this in the ICDS, Urmul reached out to other sources of financing. Both the Border Area Development Programme and the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) budgets, as also the then sitting Member of Parliament's local area development fund, were sourced to construct the anganwadi kendras.

Centres that were designed and constructed by Urmul were large, often single-room structures, (see photographs above) airy, with innovations in design and construction techniques, such as leaving space between bricks to allow natural light and circulation of air, which was important to lower temperatures during the heat of summer. All of these innovations not only kept costs low (the construction of each of the early kendras was Rs 60,000) and reduced costs, but they also provided adequate storage and cooking space without compromising on the learning and play area. A certain pragmatism was also evident. Thus, while the need for a toilet was acknowledged, the Urmul team accepted that the construction of a toilet without provision of piped water and drainage facilities would be a useless endeavour. Thus, none of the early anganwadi constructions included a toilet.

The early efforts to construct kendras, as per local needs and specifications, began to receive attention, and a few years later, the state government too began to provide funds for anganwadi construction. The only issue was that the new constructions were as per designs that were developed in Jaipur. Though it was acknowledged that there are problems with access in the kendras, the reasons given for this were unsatisfactory. 'We've never been consulted on design, though everyone knows, even appreciates the construction work we've done.'

Now, a decade later, many of those early constructions require significant outlays for repair and maintenance, except that there is no budget for carrying out repairs. 'We can get sanction and financing for a new Kendra, as per the new design. But to repair the old ones, which we constructed, there is no provision.'

For construction of buildings, initially, a local need was articulated, but which was responded to with empathy rather than resources. Instead of losing heart, the Urmul team, went ahead and designed their own structures and raised other resources to construct the buildings. In time, the state government did accept the need for construction of anganwadi centres, though the learnings from the field of actual construction and the innovations through trial, in terms of what worked and what did not, were not incorporated into the design, nor was the cost structure finalized.

VIII

The trajectory of change, which was evidenced with the construction of buildings, had earlier been experienced with training and most recently with play and learning materials. This sequence of local innovation and a possible systemic acceptance is now being experienced with play and learning materials for children. With a much higher disposable income in the project villages, there has been a growing interest in private education, primarily for the focus on English. In every village now, there is at the least one, in some two to three private fee-charging schools, which offer a combination called Hindi-English medium. The fees range from Rs 40 to Rs 150 per month, per child, for the primary sections. As these private schools accept children as young as 3 years (in some cases even two and a half year olds have been admitted), there is a clear overlap between the

catchment of the anganwadi kendras and the private schools. In contrast, the local government school only accepts children above the age of 5 years. Anganwadi workers often send their own children to these schools. Kamla Devi, who joined as anganwadi worker less than a year ago, used to send her daughter to the anganwadi and son to the local private school when he was only three. She accepts that the atmosphere at the anganwadi is friendlier, less regimented than the school and is happy with her daughter's experience there. However, she does point out that the private school teaches different things, especially English, to their students, which she values. 'Even my daughter, learnt to say Good Morning from her brother. Later in life all of this will be important.' The Urmul team agrees that there is a significant growth in private educational facilities, which have begun to affect attendance at the centres. 'Parents continue to register children at the anganwadi centre even if the children are attending private schools; the parents do come and collect the dry rations.'



For Urmul, being responsive to the aspirations of parents for a different form of education, which includes English, has meant a greater emphasis and strengthening of the early childhood education (ECE) component. Table 4 below shows the kind of materials which are provided through the ICDS in Kolayat.

Table 4: Availability of materials related to ECE

Materials available in AWCs	Kolayat (%)	Dungargarh (%)
Fit in puzzle	75	50
Multi-concept box	35	75
Rubber Balls	70	60
Counting Beads	40	40
Shoe & Lace	95	0
Football	55	0
Skipping Rope	50	45
Rubber Rings	80	25
Frisbees	0	15
Coloured Ring Tower	95	85
Masks	60	50
Slates	0	95
Charts	80	75

Source: ICDS assessment by SIHFW, Rajasthan, 2010

The above table shows that there was a fair amount of material available in the anganwadi centres when the State Institute of Health and Family Welfare (SIHFW) team visited. In all, the team visited equal number of centres in Dungargarh, where the project is managed by the ICDS directorate, and Kolayat, where the project is managed by Urmul. The ECE supplies that were provided were found to be in better shape in the NGO-managed centres, and there were also more recent materials available in these centres. In all of these NGO-managed centres, the research team had also found that children had mats and *durries* to sit on. There was significant contrast, though, in the usage of the materials. This team found that when compared with the use of ECE materials in department-managed centres in Dungargarh block of Bikaner district, the use of ECE materials in the Urmul-managed centres in Kolayat block was much better.

Though there was more material and was better used in Urmul centres, the available materials, however, have been found inadequate by the team themselves. What has helped has been a conscious effort to expand the area of engagement and thus learning opportunities. Along with Kolayat, where Urmul has been responsible for management and implementation of one project as part of its ICDS support, Urmul has also experimented with the facilitation model of ICDS support.



The facilitation model is the principal method by which the voluntary sector has engaged with the ICDS nationwide. In the facilitation model, the ICDS is run directly by the state government and voluntary agencies, such as Urmul, support the programme through ancillary efforts, particularly capacity building of staff and encouraging community participation in the functioning and monitoring of the ICDS in every village. Even in Rajasthan, where the management model has received much appreciation, it is the facilitation model which has been dominant. Urmul, too, has experimented with the facilitation model in its second area of operations in Bikaner district in the village block, Lunkaransar. Here, the project, with support from external agencies, has attempted to build the capacities of the anganwadi workers primarily in the area of early childhood education.

The SIHFW's findings on ECE usage were consistent with other aspects of anganwadi centre functioning. As compared with department-managed centres, the Urmul-managed centres had better quality and more regular child health and maternal health indices. Though not mentioned in the SIHFW study, the Urmul management team was particularly happy with the new growth-monitoring machines that the team had recently distributed to all centres. They had come across these machines and found them better, though more expensive, than the ones that are part of the ICDS kit, as they are able to

provide more detailed weight measurements and more sensitive and reliable results. ‘We wrote to the manufacturer and explained that we were running these centres as a not-for-profit venture and it benefits children in rural Bikaner. They gave us a significant discount, giving us as many machines as we needed at a no-profit no-loss basis.’

Since the study was conducted, Urmul has significantly enhanced investments in toys that promote motor development as also cognitive development, particularly in the learning of select words in English along with numerical abilities. These investments have been made simultaneously, both in Kolayat and in Lunkaransar. As with many other innovations that Urmul has started, this too required financing from outside the departmental financing, indeed even the state sector.

Table 5 Financing Portfolio over the past 20 years: Urmul

Directorate Salaries, Food, Travel, Construction	Funding:	External Funding: Salary Supplement, Capacity building, Toys, TLM
Other State Funds: Construction, Travel		Community Involvement: SHGs and the panchayat for local procurement of oil, sugar, spices; parents and other community leaders, to deal with localized resistance.

Table 5 above is a sliding scale which attempts to show how the financing portfolio of Urmul has operated over the life of the project. While state funding and especially the departmental funds tend to be the largest component paying for all the essentials, it has never been enough for work of the desired level in the field. At different points, external funding has been sought for capacity building as also to meet some supplementary staffing demands, such as, most recently, for a data manager to cope with the increased demand for quantitative data processing and for management information system (MIS) preparation. Despite much efforts made with the ICDS directorate, there continues to be a gap between the salaries of some Urmul staff, deputed to work on the ICDS project full-time, and government salaries, such as the salary of the Child Development Programme Officer (CDPO). Within the government system, the salary works out to more than Rs 40,000 per month. Urmul, with considerable effort made to raise funds, is only able to make up part of the difference. There continues to be a difference of one-third between government and Urmul salaries. Please see tables below.

An area for which the external funding has been regularly sought has been in the learning materials for children to use. Advances in research on cognitive and motor development, while acknowledged by programme managers, take time to translate into new materials for children’s use. External funding has played an important role in ensuring access to new kinds of toys and other learning materials for children (see tables below).

Table 5: URMUL SEEMANT SAMITY, BAJJU
EXPENSES OF URMUL FOR ICDS
Materials provided to AWCs: FY 2011–12

S.NO	PARTICULAR	AMOUNT in Rs
1	Wall Painting	1,59,200
2	Carpets	9,23,269
3	Weight Machine	3,00,000
4	Toys	14,69,681
5	soft board	1,17,015
7	Water Camper	1,37,674
8	Steel Glass	27,280
Total		31,34,119

Table 6: TRAINING & SALARY Additional Expenses incurred

S.NO	PARTICULAR	AMOUNT
1	Capacity Building Training for PRI Members on ICDS and ECCD, AWW, AWH, ASHA, ANM, STAFF, ADULT GIRLS,	Rs 47,650
2	Staff Salary and T.A.	Rs 5,20,752
Total		Rs 5,68,402

X

Following the visit to the field, the small management team of Urmul shared their insights into the journey of the past 20 years. Many of the concerns that had existed when the work had started in Kolayat continue to hamper Urmul's ability to deliver quality of services. Kolayat is the largest administrative block in the state and distances between villages can vary anywhere from 7 to 70 kms. In 2012, Urmul was running ICDS centres in all 229 villages of Kolayat block. In many of the villages, there are multiple anganwadi centres functioning. And the problems continue. Despite many efforts it has been hard to set up mini-centres and find qualified and committed staff to work in the dhans when families migrate there during the agricultural season. Even supervision of the regular centres has proved to be a challenge. The farthest anganwadi centre established to date is 250 kms from block headquarters. While the roads have improved making travel more comfortable, the cost of travel and supervision are inevitably much higher than the set financial norms. 'Everyone is sympathetic in Jaipur. We've even spoken to the Planning Commission in New Delhi; they take it up but nothing seems to move the norm setters,

nothing changes.’ Along with attempting to reason with the ICDS bureaucracy, both in Jaipur and Delhi, Urmul has attempted to broaden the range of experiences with the ICDS. In Lunkaransar, where Urmul had initially begun its activities in the late 1980s, the ICDS has always been government-run. With strong community ties and ongoing livelihoods and health-awareness-generation programmes, Urmul has also been providing external facilitative support to the ICDS. Urmul has given additional training to the workers in Lunkaransar and has also supplied educational toys and games to all the centres. In the past decade, similar facilitative efforts have also been taken up in neighbouring districts such as Nokha, Dungargah, Nagaur and Churu. And now Urmul is expecting to take on the responsibility for the ICDS project in Jaisalmer. After Kolayat, this will be the first major expansion of the implementation model.

For the management team there are advantages to both the implementation and the facilitation models of engagement with the ICDS. With the implementation model, there are significant advantages, because their being part of the system, they are able to push for a particular value-based model of development. In the facilitative model, there is a distance from the actual administration. This allows for a more strategic engagement with the community of care providers.

What appears to have changed, though, are Urmul’s expectations from the ICDS. In a section poignantly titled ‘Urmul’s dreams’, Mankodi had written, ‘What Urmul would really like to do to make the ICDS centres viable in the sparsely populated second stage command area of the Indira Gandhi Nahar Pariyojana are: 1) Drastically reduce the ratio of the number of children to the number of anganwadi centres. 2) Organise a system by which an anganwadi worker can fetch eligible children from their dhans on a “pre-school” bus – a tractor trolley maybe – to the centre since children cannot be expected to negotiate the distances on foot. 3) Assign the responsibility of running the anganwadi centres to some selected mahila mandals on a rotational basis, instead of to a full-time worker. 4) Arrange for the anganwadi centres to somehow travel with their intended beneficiaries during agricultural or labour migration’ (Mankodi 1995).

More than 20 years later, the team accepts that while efforts continue to be made to maintain quality, the emphasis on each individual child and worker has been difficult to maintain. ‘With growth from the 100 centres 15 years ago to the 225 operational centres in 2012, the sheer scale of operations has meant that the in-depth engagement, the quality of relationships that we would like, is difficult to ensure.’

Just as for India, where the decisions taken in the 1950s would inevitably set the country on a particular path of development that make it difficult, almost impossible, to reverse or change course, for Urmul, too, the decision to take on responsibility for the ICDS in the Kolayat block of Bikaner district would set up a path dependency, the implications of which are only now beginning to be noticed.

Introspecting about the first phase, Kashyap Mankodi explains, ‘Urmul took up the challenge of implementing the ICDS and other state government schemes to develop sound institutional linkages at the village level, based on a core of community

participation and a sense of ownership and focusing on qualitative aspects of the programme'(ibid.). As part of the ICDS implementation in Kolayat, Urmul has been focusing on all children in the 0–6 years age group through home-based care for children below the age of 3 years and centre-based activities at the anganwadi, for all children between the ages of 3–6 years.

In 1993, assessing the first 18 to 20 months of the Urmul-ICDS partnership, Mankodi acknowledges that through the partnership, Urmul had been able to reach out to many more villages and that there has been slow but steady improvements in health and development among women and children.

About 17 years later in 2010, when a team from SIHFW, Rajasthan, assessed the work of Urmul, they found that the overall quality of service delivery was better in Kolayat when compared with government-run ICDS centres in the rest of the district and also in comparison with NGO-run projects in select other districts. The SIHFW was conducting a comparative study of NGO-run ICDS projects with those run by the government. That study had been conducted as part of a wider assessment of the public-private partnership model that Rajasthan had opted for to implement the ICDS in the early 1990s. SIHFW concluded that the performance of NGO-managed anganwadi centres was better both in the areas of service delivery and management. The team particularly highlighted the effectiveness of reach, ECE activities, supplementary feeding and community involvement. Among the distinct differentials between the government- and NGO-run centres was the anganwadi worker. Among the NGO-run projects, a higher proportion of AWWs had been found to be locally resident in the villages. This meant that there was a much better chance of the AWC being open every day as also a greater commitment to ensuring delivery of quality services.

While the study effectively captures the nuts and bolts of project management, highlighting that the original decision to outsource the ICDS projects to NGOs had met the objective of ensuring delivery of quality services, what it has been unable to do was assess how far the experiment has also met the goals set by the implementing organizations themselves.

To explain the quality of the relationship Urmul shared with the ICDS, Mankodi had used an allegorical reference to the well-known Buddhist tale of Ambapali and the *Bhikku* (monk). For those who are not familiar with the tale, Ambapali was a courtesan in Patliputra. A bhikku met her and decided to reform her and bring her back to the path of virtue, *dhamma*. Only as their involvement grew did Ambapali also begin to influence the bhikku. At the end of the tale, Ambapali remained a courtesan, and the bhikku lost his chastity. He ends his tale of Urmul's involvement with the ICDS, with a thoughtful epilogue:

'This case has no recipe to offer for a successful implementation of the ICDS scheme everywhere. It has been offered more as a moral tale for the protection of the chastity of bhikkus, rather than as a formula for the reform of courtesans. If in the process, any courtesans are morally uplifted, the effort will not have been entirely wasted' (ibid.).

Talking about the relationship, 20 years on, it appears that the relationship continues, with occasional friction, and yet, seeming to have fallen into a groove of familiarity. Urmul is able to speak from a position of strength on issues of health, education and development, based on the quiet confidence which is generated from having run the single largest ICDS project in the state, and as successive governments and independent studies have acknowledged, the quality of services provided and the impact on the ground has been real and noticed. Urmul's journey has mirrored that of the modern Indian State.

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