

A PLACE FOR CHILDREN

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Opposite the Saras Bagh in Pune is a landmark institution – the Garware Bal Bhavan – a place where children come after school to play and do a variety of creative activities. Shobha Bhagwat – a very sensitive educator, founded and nurtured this “centre of excellence” 25 years back. There is nothing swanky about the place. The atmosphere is non-hierarchical, egalitarian and austere – a bare multi-purpose hall built by the Garware Trust on a 2-acre Municipal plot.

The centre arose out of a genuine need. Children have few safe places to play and express their creativity. Where would one find people with the right values and sensitivities to run such a place? Many parents – especially creative mother’s pitched in as staff. Simultaneously, young girls were taken in and groomed over the years. Along with Shobha they visited many institutions doing creative work with children and absorbed the best practices. Everyday seven hundred children come here after school hours from 4 to 7 PM to simply play and engage in a series of hands-on activities. During the summers the numbers swell to 1500 children everyday.

Left-Right-Left

The children started with physical exercises. But they soon got bored with ordinary PT. Slowly, gymnastics, judo, karate, yoga were added. Children love exploring the various things they can do with their bodies. They disliked the violent way of saying Left, Right, Left... The shrill, regimented, harsh notes hurt the ear. So, they started exercising on musical notes of Sa, Re, Ga, Ma ...and while learning rhythm and movement they also had loads of fun. They made variations, exercising while singing names of days, months and their own names! The little ones often went home and coaxed their grandparents to do the same exercises!

Children play games from different regions - Musical Chairs and Relay Races are common. In *Queen of Sheba* an object is hidden and two detective teams have to find it. While playing *Lion-Goat* the children are always on a high alert. They also learn to identify the trees, birds, butterflies and insects on campus. Sometimes the children are taken for a long walk to the Pune University or the Empress Garden where they touch leaves, and feel their texture, or make paper rubbings of tree barks.

Groups of 10-15 children do different activities – paper folding, painting, clay work, toy making, tending a vegetable patch, skating in the hall. The hand, heart and the head are all integrated. Most children at best spend 5-6 hours in school. When they return from school they find the door locked and the parents not at home. The parents return from work only in the evening. To while away their time the children play computer games or watch TV serials. This is not a very healthy situation. This was the rationale for starting this activities centre.

Bond of love

In many families children have no siblings. They remain shy and do not get to socialize. A place where they can meet their own age group and play is very liberating. One girl tied a rakhi to a young boy on Rakshabandhan. That boy had no sister. This was the first time he

experienced this affection of love. He kept wearing the rakhi for months on end, removing it only while having a bath!

Wall in a hall

There was a bare wall in the hall. A painter was invited to decorate it with a painting. The children saw him painting and wanted to paint too. Soon the children got into the act and painted a wonderful collective painting. Everyone wanted the painter kaka to come and see what he / she had done. So the poor chap just kept running from one end of the wall to the other!

Factory Facts

Saturdays and Sundays are reserved for the outdoors – for picnics, hikes, treks and educational trips. Children go to see various “work places” where real things are made. One child’s father invited them to visit his “Tooti-frooti” factory. Here raw papayas were cut into bits then soaked in colored sugary syrup. The whole place had such an awful, disgusting smell that the children ran out swearing never to eat the nasty stuff! Another time they were taken on a visit to the Cola factory. For a while the children looked around the plant with interest. Then they were told that each one of them will be given a “free” cola to drink. After that the kids were just interested in the drink and not its manufacture! They were also taken to the Chakan oil mill where there were mounds of ground nuts which were crushed to squeeze the oil out of them. The children were allowed to climb up the ground nut mounds and slide down them. They probably enjoyed it more than any outdoor game! Children love seeing the real world. While visiting Urli Kanchan they were instructed not to pluck ripe grapes. The gardeners were so happy with the children’s exemplary behavior that later they gave the children a whole basket of grapes to eat.

Street Smart

There is a ten day camp called “Pune darshan”. Children walk two hours every day and get to know some important and beautiful landmarks of their city from close quarters. While walking they talk about the architecture, the genesis of road names, the statues and buildings of historical importance. They visit Shaniwar Wada, Aga Khan Palace, Empress Garden, Parvati Hill, Market Yard, Pune University etc. First the destination is marked on the map and then the route is decided. This helps children measure distances on the map.

Children find this experience to be deeply enriching. How to walk safely in hectic traffic, cross the road; look around for speeding vehicles etc? How did the localities / colonies get their names? During summers children familiarize themselves with the blossoms of the Kachnar, Gulmohur, Semal and Pangara trees. While in the Empress Garden the children were first a bit chary of the flowing stream. In the beginning they touched the water with their toes, but a little while later they were all jumping and diving having a ball of a time. The Pune University is a very long walk; though worth taking to just see the 250 year old grand father “Baobab Tree”. It takes half a dozen children holding their hands together to embrace the girth of this fat tree. After resting there for a while all children go to the old canteen to have a “batata-wada” snack before they take the bus back.

This amazing, cost effective, rooted children’s centre has inspired over a hundred small such “safe niches” for children in and around Pune. How I wish there would be more such places for children in all our towns.