

ANGANWADI WORKERS: INDIA'S FORGOTTEN TEACHERS

Jean Drèze

As the nation celebrates Teachers' Day, it would be appropriate to spare a thought for our most precious teachers: the *anganwadi* workers who help to ensure the healthy growth of young children and prepare them for school.

It is well known that the first six years of life (and especially the first two years) have a decisive and lasting influence on a child's health, wellbeing, aptitudes and opportunities. In particular, this is the crucial period when his or her future learning abilities are largely determined. It is also a time when children of different social backgrounds enjoy very different opportunities for growth and development. Some attend expensive nurseries where they get a chance to develop their skills in a joyful environment. Others go to the local *anganwadi*, which provides them with rudimentary health and nutrition services as well as some pre-school education. A large majority are left to their own devices, with a little help from parents who are themselves struggling with the burden of poverty, illiteracy and insecurity.

If the right to education means anything, far-reaching action is urgently required to ensure that all children reach the age of six years in a state of good health and adequate preparedness for schooling. This involves providing them with basic health and nutrition services as well as with pre-school education facilities. The best means of doing so is to universalize the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), the only major national programme addressed to this age group. ICDS is a relatively well designed programme, but its reach is limited and the quality of services is also well below potential, because the wellbeing of children is not a political priority. Financial allocations for ICDS, for instance, are extremely meagre: barely one tenth of one per cent of India's GDP, for an age group that accounts for 15 per cent of the population and represents the future of the nation.

The universalization of ICDS is one of the core commitments of the Common Minimum Programme, which clearly states that the UPA government will "provide a functional *anganwadi* in every settlement and ensure full coverage for all children [under ICDS]." Universalization is also required for compliance with Supreme Court orders. Yet little has been done to redeem these commitments and obligations. The Approach Paper of the

11th Plan, for instance, has virtually nothing to say on ICDS, beyond the grandiose announcement that “development of children is at the centre of the 11th Plan”.

The real challenge, however, is not just universalization but also improving the quality of ICDS services – “universalization with quality”. This is where the anganwadi workers have a crucial role to play. Indeed, the success of an anganwadi depends first and foremost on the skill and motivation of anganwadi workers as well as on the support they receive from the administration and the community.

A recent study of ICDS in six sample states (Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), initiated by the Centre for Equity Studies, sheds some interesting light on this issue. In all the sample states, anganwadi workers generally came across as able women who could do a great deal to enhance the levels of nutrition and health in their community, with the necessary support and facilities. The main issue is to create the circumstances that enable this potential to flourish. These include careful selection, regular training, adequate equipment, timely remuneration, close supervision, active community support, among other enabling factors. In Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, anganwadi workers were usually well-educated, well-trained, well-supervised, and fairly motivated. Their work was highly effective, but even there it was often obstructed by various problems, such as an overload of responsibilities, diversion of time for non-ICDS duties, and long delays in the payment of salaries. Improving the work environment of anganwadi workers, and addressing their concerns, is essential to enable them to overcome their current predicament and become true “teachers”.