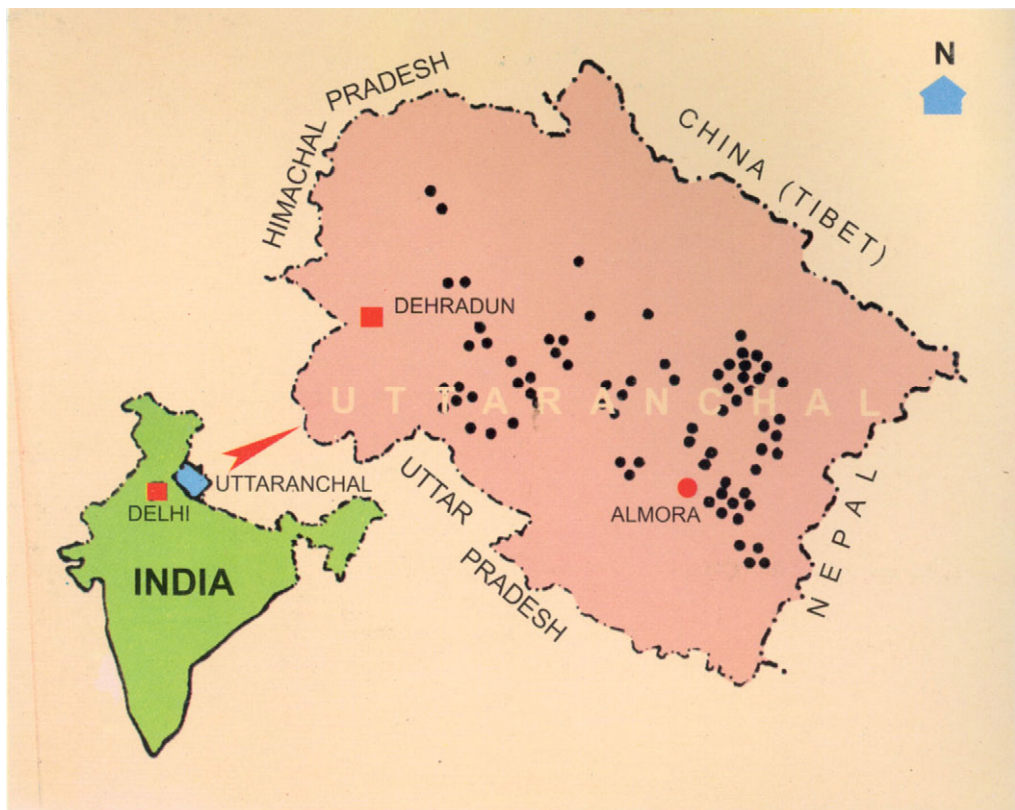


The Balwadi: Binding the Himalayan Village



Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi
Paryavaran Shiksha Sansthan
Almora



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Foreword

When we started our environmental education programme 15 years ago, we decided that we would start with an open mind and avoid rigid time frames and targets. Therefore, rather than us devising a programme we responded to the ideas put forth by local NGOs and village women. It was through this interaction that we decided to support the running of *Balwadis* (pre-school centres). Thus, the starting of the *Balwadi* programme owes much to the enthusiasm and motivation of the local groups. In addition, Laxmi Ashram, Kausani provided invaluable guidance at the initial stages. The financial support of the Department of Education, Government of India made it possible for this idea to come into practice. The *Balwadi* was conceived as a place where the foundation of environmental education could be laid. The programme started with 2 *Balwadis* in 1987. Today there are 355 *Balwadi* centres run by 28 local groups, spread throughout the Kumaun and Garhwal regions of Uttaranchal state. The programme involves 7000 children the majority of whom are girls. Over 1500 women and girls have been trained to run *Balwadis*.

The village women's enthusiasm for the *Balwadi* meant that the programme rapidly took on a new dimension; not just the environment education of young children, but also the active involvement of village women to understand and improve their local environment. Thus the *Balwadi* became a means of social change in the villages, the empowerment of women, and the strengthening of the community.

Mangala Nanda has captured the essence of the programme in this paper, which she has written after interacting extensively with our staff the *shikshikas* (*Balwadi* teachers), village women and many local NGO. She has visited several *Balwadis*, stayed in villages and taken part in training programmes. I would like to express my appreciation of the efforts that have been put in by Mangala. We hope that through this paper, the reader will gain an understanding of our work, and of the situation in the villages of Uttaranchal.

Almora
March, 2001

Lalit Pande
Director

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The Balwadi : Binding the Himalayan Village

A programme for adult literacy in villages in Uttarakhand was proposed in the mid 1980s. The women responded to the proposal by saying that education for them at this point in their lives was redundant. They said, '*Hamara ab kuch nahi hoga, humare bachhon ke liye kuch karo.*' (Nothing will change in our lives, but do something for our children.) It was our policy then, as now, to work in conjunction with the villagers and to value their suggestions and inputs – for who knows what they need better than they do themselves? Two *Balwadis* were started in 1987, and the Balwadi programme had begun: a direct response to the desires of the village women themselves.

A *Balwadi* is a pre-primary centre: a safe haven and a stimulating environment for children. This leaves the mother free to carry out the heavy task of cutting and bringing fuelwood and fodder from the forest everyday, with the reassurance that her child is being well looked after. In a region where women raise children and have the load of all the agricultural work, the *Balwadi* has been a godsend. (Men are unable to contribute to agriculture because of a mass male urban migration to seek employment; many villages in Uttarakhand are almost devoid of able-bodied men.) The importance of the *Balwadi* in such circumstances is therefore apparent.

After a three hour tiring trip to collect fodder for her cattle (a trip made everyday), Rekha Devi comes straight to the *Balwadi* to pick up her little daughter. her hair is dishevelled and streaked from the intense sun. She enters the *Balwadi* and sinks to the floor. Her daughter, bursting with excitement bounds into her lap and starts chanting a song full-throatedly. Rekha Devi, looking at her daughter says, almost to herself: '*Jab yeh goed mein hi naachna gana shuru karti hai, to meri thakaan door ho jati hai*' (When she starts to sing and dance like this in my lap, my tiredness vanishes). Her eyes brim with tears, her exhaustion truly seems to have evaporated.

Village: Gartherha, Kumaun. Year 1994

The *Balwadi* runs for four hours a day. In these four hours, through being given the freedom to play and explore uninhibitedly, the children learn about the world around them. A special emphasis is given to *pariyavaran* or environment, helping the children to relate to their immediate surroundings. As the children learn through play, not from being burdened, their self-confidence and eagerness to learn increases immensely. A searching and questioning mentality is induced in them through this openness.

Community Spirit

The contribution of the *Balwadi* is more impactful than might be expected of a crèche for village children. Through certain aspects of its operation, it also draws the village together into a cohesive and active community. Perhaps the most novel concept is that the *Balwadi* requires village participation to function. This is visible from the very set-up of the *Balwadi*. A *Balwadi* is only started in villages where it is asked for. In addition, the place where the *Balwadi* will run is decided upon and organised by the villagers themselves. The villagers and local NGO also choose whom they want as the *Balwadi shikshika* (teacher), a girl usually above 18. Additionally, the village women decide the daily timings of the *Balwadi* themselves, in accordance with their seasonal workload. This flexibility means that the *Balwadi* can provide for the children during times when help is needed, all the year round. Thus, the general overseeing of the *Balwadi* is done entirely at a local level. This results in a strong sense of responsibility towards the *Balwadi* by the villagers. They know that the *Balwadi* only runs today because of the village's decision to open it. Because it is the village's *Balwadi*, the villagers value it and ensure that it functions well. In many places, the setting up of the *Balwadi* is the beginning of a community spirit – as many decisions need to be made, and the village has to draw together to make them and execute them.

This community spirit is a unique one. It is not a community that remains intact only as long as money is being provided to fulfil a

‘project,’ disintegrating when the project ends. This is something deeper: the binding of the village through everyone’s common interest of education for their child. The foundation for this community spirit is education, not money, which gives it a much stronger base and a long life.

The involvement of the village does not stop once the *Balwadi* is set up. Village interaction is, in fact, one of the principle facets of the *Balwadi*. The *Balwadi shikshika* holds regular meetings with mothers, showing them their children’s work and outlining their progress. Often she also has to explain the value of the ‘play-way methods’ system used in *Balwadis*. (Learning through play is a concept that is not yet recognised fully in the villages. Many parents bring up the issue that children should learn the alphabet by rote, not realising that the child’s vocabulary will be much increased by learning new songs, listening to stories etc.) These meetings are also an opportunity to discuss some points that need attention: for example, that the children’s personal hygiene needs to be given greater importance. The over-worked mothers often overlook general hygiene, and children come to the *Balwadi* unwashed, in dirty clothes with their



A shikshika helping children to wash their hands after a painting session

hair unmade. In villages where this point has been reiterated enough by the *shikshika*, there has been a marked difference in the appearance of the children. On one level this may seem like a small change, but to have convinced the women about the importance of cleanliness is to have changed the face of the village.

This is the story of Maland village. The children used to come so filthy to the *Balwadi*, that Neema and Munni (the *shikshika*'s) took it upon themselves to take the children to the *naula* (spring) every Saturday to bathe them and wash their clothes. They had hoped that the parents would feel ashamed that their children had to be bathed by others, and would soon take on the responsibility of bathing the children themselves. This didn't happen. On the contrary, the parents were quite content with the arrangement! In the monthly meeting of *shikshikas* at the local NGO, Neema and Munni voiced their problem: the village was densely populated. No one had toilets, and so the children had taken to defecating on the village paths. The village was infested with flies. In addition, the adults seemed uninterested in changing the situation; the children had been sent dirty to the Balwadi for months. Neema said in despair, '*Mujhe nahi lagta hai ki yeh gaon mein koi badlav aa sakta hai.*' (I don't think this village can ever change.)

The monthly meeting at the NGO was a great opportunity for everyone to share their problems, and for solutions to emerge. I still remember the excitement and resolve that these meetings filled in me. We discussed possible solutions. Rita, a *shikshika* from another village had a bright idea: 'why don't we all (*shikshikas*) go and see what this Maland village is like?' Another *shikshika* added excitedly, 'we can all go to Maland and clean the village with the villagers!' The idea gained enthusiasm. In a flurry of excitement, we decided to name the day we were to go to Maland village *svachchta divas* (cleanliness day). Preparations were made. Munni and Ninnala collected *daratis** and shovels for the occasion. The next Sunday all of us arrived in Maland. We told the residents that we had come to help them clean their village. Everyone was handed either a darati or

* A *darati* is a sickle that is used for cutting grass.

a shovel. We cut and trimmed bushes that were spilling into the village paths. We removed rubbish from the springs. We cleared the pathways, collected all the waste and buried it. I still remember that as I was digging a pit, an old man came towards me and said ‘*Tum isko nahi karo. Hum ise apne aap karenge. Aaj tum logoen ko aakar hamare gaon ko saaf karna para. Aaj hamara naak kat gaya hai.*’ (‘Don’t do this. We’ll do it ourselves. Today you had to come to clean our village. We are feeling very ashamed.’)

After that day we never needed to go and clean Maland village. As I was a *margdarshika* at the time, I often went to Maland to see the *Balwadi*. Every time I went there, the old man asked me whether I had noticed the clean paths.

Village: Maland, Kumaun. Year 1987

There are many more interactions between the *Balwadi* and the village. *Bal Melas* are one of these. Children put on little skits, sing; and dance; there is also a display of all the work children have done in the *Balwadi*: drawings, garlands made with leaves and paper, and imaginative creations made with clay or mud. Seeing the abilities of their children furthers parents’ affinity to the *Balwadi* strengthening the contact between the village and *Balwadi*. Children’s birthdays are another opportunity for interaction. Village women are called to the *Balwadi* by the *shikshika* to participate in the celebrations. In many villages, the mother of the child brings a little *gurh* (jaggery) to distribute to the other children and women

* A *margdarshika*, or supervisor, is a girl who has already run a *Balwadi* for some time. Because of her wider experience, she is able to guide and direct the *shikshika*. There is usually one *margdarshika* to oversee 10 *Balwadis* and she is required to go to each of her ten villages at least twice a month. Her responsibilities include providing positive inputs on how to run the *Balwadi* more creatively, teaching the *shikshika* new stories, songs etc – for the 10 day training course in Almora cannot provide a comprehensive store of these. She also helps with village interaction, as when *shikshikas* start work, they do not feel they can take on the task of running village meetings on their own.



Children performing at a 'Bal-mela'

on the occasion. It becomes an event, an opportunity to gather together as one. It is through meetings like these, where all the women of the village come together that the sense of community is intensified. In this manner, *Mahila Mangal Dals* or Women's Groups are formed. The *Balwadi's* role in creating these Women's Groups is easily discernable: the interest in their children's education securing them as a strong entity, with the ability to do great work.

Mahila Mangal Dals

While in the *Abhibhavak goshtis* (meetings with mothers) discussions pertain primarily to *Balwadi*-going children, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* addresses a much wider range of issues. These issues relate to themselves and their village: problems they face as a



community in their day-to-day life. The *Balwadi shikshika*, and Local NGO provide the *Mahila Mangal Dal* with support at the beginning, by coordinating discussions and meetings. The ideas and decisions taken are those of the women though, and as the *Mahila Mangal Dal* becomes stronger, the *shikshika* and local NGO cease to play an important role.

Declining forest cover is one of the greatest problems that the Himalayan village faces. Severe deforestation and degradation of the land has meant an extreme shortage of fuelwood and fodder. This issue is one that has been raised in *Mahila Mangal Dal* meetings throughout Uttarakhand. As a result determined action has been



Plantation: village women and girls at work

taken – not just the plantation of trees, but also the protection of the jungle, which requires long-term perseverance. In several villages an understanding has been reached; everyone only collects wood for the day's requirement, rather than felling vast quantities and hoarding – which often rots before it is used. In addition, women have begun collecting dry wood from the forest floor, thereby minimizing the amount that they have to cut. This is despite the fact that collecting wood is more labour-intensive. Areas of newly planted trees are sectioned off, thus preventing cattle

from grazing or trampling upon them and hindering their growth. Once trees in this patch have grown somewhat, a new area is sectioned off to plant more trees. Villages where the *Mahila Mangal Dal* has been active for some years are already seeing a difference in the quality of their forest. Chaurasthal (Bageshwar, Kumaun) and Doodhatoli (Pauri, Garhwal) are just two examples where lush forests have replaced the sparse habitation of trees observed before.

Cleaning the village paths and springs is another responsibility that many *Mahila Mangal Dals* have undertaken. Collectively organising and cleaning the village on a regular basis has also resulted in instances of disease and illness diminishing. The construction of lavatories is a further task of *Mahila Mangal Dals*. Especially in closely populated villages this meant a trip to the jungle every time, something that is particularly hard for aged people and small children. Seepage of sewage into the water sources of the village also resulted in repeated water borne diseases. The construction of lavatories, even crude ones, has made an enormous difference to villagers. In this manner, *Mahila Mangal Dals* take steps to better their life in the village in any way they can. According to their varying circumstances, these women have embarked on many different tasks.

There was the provision for electricity in Mayoli village, Suraikhet. Electricity didn't come to the village though, owing to a faulty transformer. After a few fruitless attempts by the village men to get the transformer replaced, the *Mahila Mangal Dal* decided to take on the responsibility themselves. A few women were sent as delegates to the Hydel electricity department in Dwarahat to complain about the faulty transformer and ask for it to be repaired or replaced. '*Haan, haan, ho jayega*' (Yes, yes, it'll be done) was the lukewarm assurance that they received. While relating the incident here in Almora, one of the women indignantly told us '*Humne kaha ki humein In-Charge Sahib se milna he, lekin humse kaha gaya ghar jao, ho jayega.*' (We said that we wanted to meet the In-Charge Sahib, but we were told : go home, it'll get done.) Nothing happened.

Not deterred, the women discussed what their next step should be. '*Hum sab jayenge*' (We will all go) was where the discussion culminated. About forty women, from Mayoli village as well as women from neighbouring villages left their homes at 4 am, walked to the main road, paid for the bus ride to Dwarahat, and landed up outside the Hydel office at 7 am. The office was closed, so they seated themselves outside and waited. People started trickling into the office at 10 am. The In-Charge Sahib arrived at 11 am, and entered the office, ignoring the women who tried to speak to him. The women were told, '*In-Charge Sahib abhi baat nahi kar sakte hain. Baadme aao.*' (In-Charge Sahib can't talk to you now. Come back later.) They kept sitting outside the office anyway. A few hours passed. They were not allowed inside. When they began to brandish their daratis and shout slogans from outside, the officers must have got worried; the door leading into the office was shut and locked. It was only when the door was opened to let in the peon serving tea, that a few women managed to enter the office. The rest of the women soon followed. In-Charge Sahib's evasiveness began to disappear in front of the women's wrath. They fumed: '*Tumhara bijli dene kaa kaam he. Agar bijli nahi de sakte ho, tho apni kursi ko chorh do*' (Your duty is to give electricity. If you cannot provide electricity, then leave your chair now). '*Agar tum bijli nahi doge, tho hum roz yahan aakar baithainge*' (If you don't give electricity, we will come and sit here everyday). In-Charge Sahib was obviously rattled enough. He promised them that the transformer would be replaced.

The next day he came himself to drop off a new transformer by the roadside, and told the villagers to carry it to their village. This wasn't enough to satisfy the women. '*Isko gaon tak le jaane ke liye sarkar se bharha milte hain. Agar hum ise gaon tak lay jayen, tho humen vaha bharha milne chaahiye*' (The government gives money to take this to the village. If we carry it, we should receive the money). The labour charge was given to the villagers for carrying the transformer to their village. The new transformer was installed, and electricity came to Mayoli village. It was only then that the *Mahila Mangal Dal* was satisfied.

Village: Mayoli, Kumaun. Year 1999

The determination and extent of cooperation between the village women can only be attributed to the fact that theirs is a strong and unified community. We strongly believe that this stems from the fact that they are their own masters: thus the responsibility for the welfare of the village lies with them. If they were told what to do by anyone else – either by us, the local NGO or any other organisation, then it would be our responsibility, and they would simply be fulfilling the task. Their freedom gives them confidence in themselves and in their ability; they gain strength, self-belief and a voice.



Health

The question of women's health was another topic that was raised in *Mahila Mangal Dal* meetings throughout Uttarakhand. Many women suffer from ill health stemming from constant drudgery: anaemia and chronic backaches are common complaints. Reproductive health is another aspect that needs attention. Women, however, are reluctant to visit doctors because they have to travel great distances for consultation. Their reluctance is compounded

by the fact that the doctors are generally male. *Svasthya Sevikas* (health workers)* play an important role here in convincing the women to visit the doctor, and accompanying them if necessary. This support has been valuable in increasing health awareness and reducing the burden of ill health in women. Health issues are discussed in *Mahila Mangal Dal* meetings, and the use of herbal remedies (freely available as herbs grow locally) is promoted for common ailments. There has been a marked increase in the health consciousness of many women. When the height and weight of children is taken in the *Balwadi* by the *svasthya sevika*, it is not uncommon to hear mothers asking *Iska vazan theek hai? Khoob lamba/chaura hoga, naa?* (is his weight is alright? He'll be healthy, won't he?) In villages where the health programme is in operation, all children without exception are vaccinated. The *svasthya sevikas* also work with adolescent girls to raise awareness in health issues, with a special emphasis on reproductive health. The training of *dais* (midwives) is another aspect of the health programme. This has made deliveries much safer, as children are traditionally born at home, and doctors are generally inaccessible. The health programme has started recently, and is in operation in 50 village at present.

Role of the Balwadi Shikshika

In addition to the vital job of looking after the children in the *Balwadi*, the *shikshika* has other responsibilities. She is instrumental in the early stages of the formation of the *Mahila Mangal Dal*. She plays an important role in rallying the women together, and bringing about the sense of community that is so important. However, for her to achieve this, it is vital for her to gain the respect of the villagers. One of the first problems the *shikshika* encounters in running a *Balwadi*

* *Svasthya sevikas* receive training from doctors (in Almora) in preventive health education and the use of locally available herbs. It is not the *svasthya sevika* job to dispense medical aid to the women, but rather to promote awareness about health issues in the village. *Svasthya sevikas* are women, so that the village women feel comfortable to discuss any health related problem with them. They work in *Balwadi* villages through the Local NGO

in her own village is her status of a 'daughter'. Thus, it is hard for her to address serious issues to the village populace, who have seen her since her childhood, and consequently do not listen to her particularly seriously. There are more problems that the *shikshika* faces. Despite not wanting to, she cannot help getting embroiled in internal village politics. It is inevitable that there will be *gut baazi* (local politics) in the village; some families will not mingle with others. Being the daughter in a family that does not mix with other families poses a problem: how does the *shikshika* draw the entire village together?

These difficulties are entirely eliminated when the *Balwadi shikshika* comes from a neighbouring village. Her family situation does not constrain her and she is able to look upon everyone equally and bring them together. By coming together often enough, the village barriers reduce considerably, and once the *Mahila Mangal Dal* starts to see the benefits of coming together, it ceases to be an issue altogether. The other big advantage is that instead of being looked upon as a daughter, she becomes known as *behenji* (sister). This makes a marked difference to the attitude with which she is viewed by the villagers. Suggestions she makes and her efforts to hold meetings are well received; she is respected by the village community. The community inevitably strengthens as a result of this. Regions where *Mahila Mangal Dais* are the most strong and cohesive are those regions where no *shikshika* runs a *Balwadi* in her own village. Going to another village is also a big step for the *shikshika*. She gains confidence by venturing out of her village, and this is reinforced by the respect that she gains there.

The *Balwadi*'s effect on the *Shikshika*

The transformation of *shikshikas* through their association with the *Balwadi* is immense. Through new experiences they are able to increase their confidence and further their horizons. The first milestone is the trip to Almora for *Balwadi* training. Many have never left their village before; convincing their family to let them attend the ten-day training is in itself a huge feat.

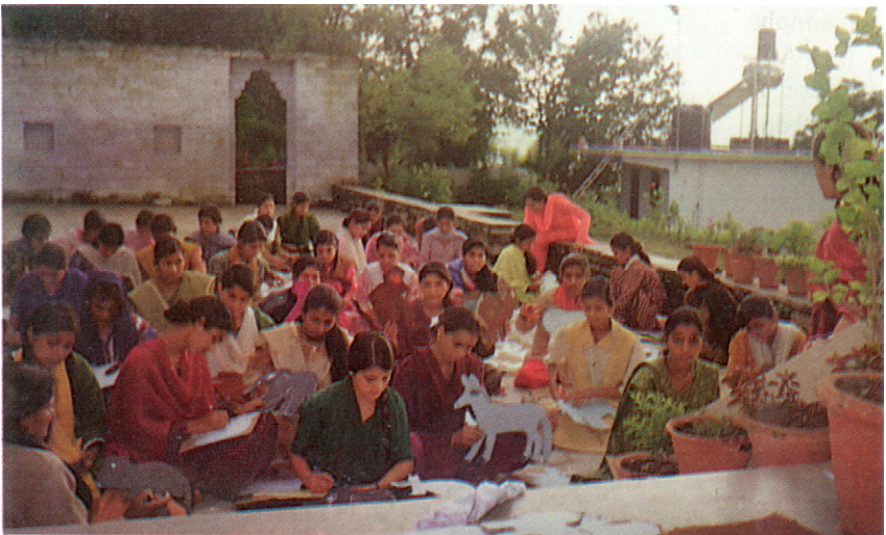


Four untrained Balwadi shikshikas from Dhangu, due to come to Almora, didn't arrive for the training course. The explanation followed in a letter from the local NGO: the girls' parents had been unwilling to let them travel out of the village. The letter added that it might be necessary for the training course to be given to the girls in Dhangu itself, as it seemed unlikely that the parents would relent. Would it be possible to train the shikshikas there?

We strongly felt that giving the girls the training there would not solve the root problem. A trip to Dhangu seemed appropriate though, as it would allow us a better understanding of the situation. I went to Kharikh village, where Anandi was the Balwadi shikshika. After the Balwadi session, when all the children had been picked up, I asked her if she would like to come to Almora. 'Of course I want to didi' (elder sister), she said. 'But my parents won't allow me' she added ruefully. She led me to her house, saying 'Aap unse baat kijiay' (Would you talk to them?). Anandi's mother staunchly pursued her point, and fired off several reasons as to why Anandi could not come to Almora. All these reasons revolved around the idea that 'Achche ghar ki larkiyaan idhar-udhar nahi ghoomti hain' (Girls from good families do not wander here and there.) I told Anandi's mother about myself then: how my parents had worried

about me the same way when I had first become a *Balwadi shikshika*. She asked me many questions about my family, about Almora, and about the training. I answered all of them. I told her about my brothers, my sisters, what crops we grow and how many cows we have. I told her all about the training, about what we teach and why it is important. I told her that it would be me, and women like me who would be giving the training. I told her about their families, their land, their cows. I reassured her that there would be no men involved in the training course. After grilling me for a long time, she seemed convinced of my sincerity. When I asked her if Anandi could come, she said. '*Mein kahan mana kar rahi hoon? Uske pitaji se baat karo*' (I'm not stopping her from going, talk to her father).

Anandi's father was not at home, nor in the village. But Anandi's hope was gaining momentum; she told me '*Didi, woh bazaar mein hain, chalo hum udhar chalte hain*' (Didi, he's gone to the market, come on, lets go there). We set off up the hill, excited at the success we'd achieved so far. We met Anandi's father a little further on; he was returning from the market. He was firm in his stand.



Shikshikas preparing material for use in their Balwadis

‘Humaree larki kahi nahi jaa rahi hai. Training karnee hai, tho yahan kar l’ (Our daughter is not going anywhere. If you have to do training, do it here). I was determined to convince him, though. I told him all the things I had told his wife. I even told him that he was welcome to accompany Anandi to Almora; that we would pay for his journey, and take care of his arrangements there. He began to show signs of relenting. My openness in inviting him to Almora seemed to assure him that I was not hiding anything from him. He agreed finally.

When the next training course took place a couple of months later, all four untrained shikshikas from Dhangu came. In addition to the local NGO/margdarshika (who always drop and pick up the shikshikas), five guardians accompanied the four girls. Anandi’s father was one of them. They spent three days peeping curiously into the classroom while the training took place, after which they were convinced that the girls were safe. They went back to Dhangu, and only one of them returned to escort them back at the end of the training course.

It was a joy to see Anandi again at the training course. She was ecstatic to have made the journey. I was ecstatic because small triumphs like these have huge outcomes. It was through that trip that Anandi made to Almora that it began to be acceptable in the region for girls to venture out of their village. The margdarshika in Dhangu today, Maya, now makes the trip from Dhangu to Almora alone when she comes to drop and pick up shikshikas who come for training courses.

Village: Kharikh, Garhwal. Year 1995

Once in Almora, the girls experience a constraint-free environment. There are no caste barriers, they are expected to be open, and encouraged to talk and voice themselves. This is an atmosphere that most have never even conceptualised. The fact that our staff have grown up in villages and been Balwadi shikshikas themselves is a big contributor to the openness during the training. They too initially encountered the problems that the shikshikas encounter today: an unwillingness to let the girl out of the house,

pressure for early marriage and so on. The fact that they successfully overcame these difficulties gives the girls faith and inspiration. Their similar background allows the *shikshikas* to bond easily and relate with the staff, calling them *didi* affectionately. They can speak to them uninhibitedly, knowing that they will be understood.



Shikshikas learning games to teach in their Balwadis

Although she was young, Shobhita had a sober face. Her eyes were jaded. In the ‘cultural programme’* in the evening, she didn’t dance or take part in skits with the other *shikshikas*. When she was persuaded to sing, her songs were those of sadness. Her voice, rich and melodious, permeated me to the core. When I spoke to her later, she told me her story. Her body shook as she cried; she spoke of her life in the village after her husband had left her. There is no need for me to write about this in excruciating detail. I could not

* Cultural programmes are held in the evenings during training courses. Girls dance, sing or put on little skits. It is an excellent means of helping the girls to open up, as they are generally very shy when they first arrive.

convey on paper the sadness that exuded from her very pores as she convulsed from crying. There was a calm that followed this outburst. I suppose some of her bitterness, mingled with tears, had flowed away. She had told someone of these feelings for the first time.

Though still quiet, Shobhita threw herself into participating, and absorbing as much as she could during the training course. She was rapt as she listened to the class on ‘personal development’. She told me later that after listening to the class, she had decided to increase her education level (she had only studied till Class 8) by studying ‘privately’ when she returned home. I was thrilled at her enthusiasm. When Shobhita left after the training course, I had an overriding feeling of hope that she would overcome her despair with a new purpose in life.

Shobhita did just that. In addition to running an excellent *Balwadi*, after three years she successfully passed Class 10. When she came for a refresher course, she greeted me affectionately. I was joyous to see her with her newfound confidence. In the cultural programme that evening, once again she sang. This time, though, her song had changed.

Year 1998

After the training, it is not only the knowledge of how to run a *Balwadi* that they take back with them, but strength and courage.

Back in the village, the *shikshikas* must work to bring the community together. She is helped by the *margdarshika*. Together they work to draw the village together — through meetings, discussions and *sangeets* (gatherings to sing songs). In villages where a community spirit is proving hard to form, all the *shikshikas* of the region gather together and perform skits to illustrate the merits of a cohesive village. Organising and participating in these events furthers the *shikshika*’s self-assurance and ability in herself. She gains the confidence for public speaking, and the subordinate mentality that is engrained in her as a girl starts to disappear.

When we met Bhagavati for the first time, there was one thing that stood out about her: the fact that she either couldn't, or wouldn't stop crying. Her husband had just died, and she had no in-laws, so she could not depend on that traditional support. She had no option but to return to her maternal village. Because of this, she was treated with the odd mixture of pity and disdain. Her slight physical disability (she limped while walking) was a further reason for her feeling dejected. She lamented about her misfortunes, she mourned about her life and grieved for her cursed leg. She cried at the cruel taunts of *dooni* (cripple) and wondered how she would make it through life. When she arrived for training, we wondered how she would be able to take on the role of the *Balwadi shikshika*. The joyousness and light heart that one requires to work with children seemed nonexistent in her.

In the *Balwadi*, Bhagavati found a place where she could shed all her worries, and just enjoy the simplicity and beauty of being amongst children. She was an excellent *shikshika*, and the *Balwadi* sparkled under her. After some years, the position of *margdarshika* became vacant. The local NGO asked her if she would like to take on the responsibility. The *Balwadi* villages in that area were scattered, and she would need to walk great distances everyday to get to different villages. Bhagavati didn't think about her leg in accepting the responsibility. She had attained self-worth, and that was all she needed to drive her forward.

Bhagavati's entire being has changed. She now emanates happiness, not sorrow. The best test of this is the way children relate with her. When she goes to the *Balwadis*, the children immediately run to her, tug at her *sari* and attempt to clamber into her lap. Children are very intuitive. They would not go near her if they sensed anything but joy and love in her.

Village: Talla Kendul, Garhwal. Year 1990

Running the *Balwadi* also brings the issue of education back into focus for the *shikshika*. Many girls, alongside their work also decide to increase their education level. Generally, parents do not educate their girls above class 8. The distance of the school from the village,

the fact that the route to the school is generally through forest, and the pressure of household chores all culminate to the parents' decision to withdraw their daughter from school. Out of the 1500 *shikshikas* who have received training and run *Balwadis*, more than 60% have increased their educational qualification. With the money they earn, the *shikshikas* are able to assert their right to study. As they run *Balwadis*, the *shikshikas* further their education private! – in that, they do not receive formal education, but study from the relevant books themselves before giving the examination. This determination can be credited to the fresh resolve and confidence instilled in them.

Aarti had received no formal education whatsoever. However, in preparation to run the *Balwadi*, the local NGO gave her some informal schooling, and she learned to read and write. After a while, she decided to read the books set for Class 5 and give the examination. At that time, she was 18 years old. When the children taking the exam saw her arriving at the examination centre, they started talking amongst themselves: 'look, look, the examiner is coming!' Much to their amazement, she sat down and took the examination with them.

Aarti told me later that she had never cried as much as she did out of shame the day she sat in the midst of a group of 10 year olds taking the class 5 exams. That didn't stop her from sitting for the class 8 exams, or class 10 exams, though. Shouts of '*Examiner as gai hai*' (The examiner has arrived) followed her each time. Although she was mercilessly teased, she persevered. From no schooling at all, she increased her educational qualification to that of a high school graduate.

Village: Lohathal, Garhwal. Year 1988

Above all, running the *Balwadi* gives a sense of self-worth to the *shikshika*. From the start she knows how vital her job is; not only providing for the village children, but drawing the village together to make it a formidable force. Viewing her work as *seva* (service) and not as routine employment allows her to feel that she

is facilitating positive change. This is why she is willing to walk even 5 kilometres on steep mountainous terrain to a neighbouring village everyday to run the *Balwadi*. She knows that through her work the *Balwadi* will be more effective in another village, and her enthusiasm for her work takes her there. Taking up the responsibility to run *Balwadis* gives the *shikshikas* a purpose that as girls they have never experienced before.

A programme for girls

It is now widely known and accepted that the *Balwadi shikshika* must be a girl around the age of 18. Without the responsibilities of her own family, the *shikshika* is able to dedicate the time and effort that the *Balwadi* requires to be successful. The sense of purpose her work gives her gives rise to enthusiasm: an assurance that she works to make her *Balwadi* a success.

When the programme started initially, in many regions there were simply no available girls – it was a rarity to find an unmarried girl of that age. This meant having to appoint either young men or married women, neither of which proved satisfactory. While men were fairly capable in the *Balwadi* with children, they were largely unsuccessful in drawing village women together. The difference in gender meant that the women were unwilling to become close to him – and because of this distance between the *shikshak* (male teacher) and the village, community spirits could not be formed. Thus, the *Balwadi* remained limited to children, overlooking the wider aim of forming a cohesive village. With married women there were other problems. With young married women, it was noted that household chores (collecting fuel wood/fodder) and looking after their own children left them too preoccupied to do the *Balwadi* justice. In addition, as a *bahu* (daughter-in-law) it was not generally permissible to dance, sing or play games, all criteria that are invaluable in a *Balwadi*. Thus, a young married woman was not an effective substitute for a young unmarried woman. Older married women were found unsatisfactory as well. Having brought up their



Running a Balwadi builds self-confidence in girls: A shikshika is conducting a village meeting

own children with an iron hand it was hard for them to change this attitude while in the *Balwadi*. A *Balwadi shikshika* is meant to guide children, allowing them to explore and learn themselves. Older women tended not to do this. Rather, they imposed strict rules on the little children. It was typical for them to burden toddlers by forcing them to learn the alphabet by rote at age 3, and punishing them if they uttered it wrongly. Thus, we stressed and re-stressed the importance of girls as *Balwadi shikshikas*. When it became clear that we would no longer keep women or men as teachers, a change began to occur. Girls as candidates to run the *Balwadis* slowly began to emerge. An unmarried girl at age 18 used to be a burden. Now, with their daughter running a *Balwadi*, parents are satisfied with her respectable work; one that even contributes a small amount of money to the family. Consequently, the despair of having an unmarried daughter reduces considerably. While the pressure for marriage is still present, the urgency becomes much less, and marriages have begun in general to take place later. About 80% of all *shikshikas* are unmarried and above 18.

Manju was 17 years old when her parents found her a suitable boy for marriage. She told her parents that she did not want to get married yet. They ignored her. Finally, in a fiery mixture of frustration and anger she told her father: '*Mein athahra saal ki nahi hoon. Agar aap meri shaadi karvaaoge, mein police ko bulaoongi*' (I am not yet 18 years old. If you make me marry, I will call the police).

I must admit I was stunned at her ability to assert herself. As she related the story, she laughed at my incredulous look. Her parents, she added smilingly, have agreed that since she is running a *Balwadi*, there needn't be talk of marriage for a few more years.

Village: Dhamandha, Garhwal. Year 2000

The girls, however, do not usually remain *shikshikas* for more than four or five years, leaving their village for their *susural* (in-laws) when they get married. Thus we need to continuously run training courses for new *shikshikas*. It would certainly be easier and more economically viable to place an older married woman as the *shikshika*, for she could continue to run the *Balwadi* for years. However, we feel that a large turnover of *shikshikas* means that we have touched more lives, and given more girls the opportunity to gain some self-worth through their work. Their experiences will stay with them: as a result of the *Balwadi* training they will be able to deal with their own children in a more understanding way, they will ensure strong *Mahila Mangal Dals* in their villages, and they will keep working to improve their lives wherever they are.

The regular changing of *shikshikas* in the *Balwadi* has two very important side effects. Since it is the village that remains constant while the *shikshika* changes, the entire responsibility for *Balwadi* can never be placed upon the *shikshika*. It remains without a doubt the village's *Balwadi* – the villagers' support for it necessary for it to function: be it doing the *lipai-potai** in the *Balwadi* room or

* The periodic application of mud plaster on the walls and floor.

dropping and picking up their children from the *Balwadi* . Besides this, the changing of *shikshikas* has another valuable effect. As the *shikshika* only works for a few years, there is never an opportunity for stagnation in her work. Her eagerness keeps her active; this is in turn fuelled by the respect from the villagers. When she leaves to get married, the new *shikshika* is presented a firm foundation on which to build.

Effect of the Balwadi on children

For most children, the *Balwadi* provides an entirely new atmosphere: a place where they get immense individual attention as well as the freedom to jump about and play uninhibitedly. The *Balwadi* curriculum is firmly founded in the idea of learning through play, which is recognised to be the most efficient way of promoting a child's eagerness and interest in learning at the pre-school age. Every part of the curriculum aims to further the child's



- * It was common for the mother to simply tie up her toddler during her trip to the jungle (to ensure he does not get lost/wander off while she is away). By consciously dropping her child to the *Balwadi* and choosing not to avail of the former option, the mother is in her own way supporting the existence of -the *Balwadi*.

understanding of the world around him/her, while simultaneously building up the child's self-confidence.

These criteria are fulfilled by all the elements in the syllabus. With stories, the first important effect is the increase of the child's attention span. In addition, through the content of the story, the child learns not only new vocabulary, but also an understanding of the interactions between characters. After the story has been told, by assuming roles of different characters, children often act out the story. This element of drama and being able to perform is vital in building up the child's confidence. *Bhav-geets* (songs accompanied by expressions) are also an important means of allowing children to express themselves. Children cease to be inhibited, their enjoyment furthering their desire to learn more *bhav-geets*. Thus, they learn more words and are introduced to more ideas. There are many different varieties of games, all providing the child with different stimuli. Many games help the child to understand concepts of numeracy, others improve their memory, active games promote the fitness of children, and all games require the children to listen carefully and respond quickly and appropriately accordingly. This is vital for increasing the receptiveness of the child

Children are romping about in the *Balwadi*, and seem rather overexcited. The *shikshika* picks up a chalky stone and draws a large circle in the centre of the room. The children notice this. Meena runs to the dollhouse made of twigs and leaves, and extracts a little chiming bell. Didi *mein shuru kar Sakti hoon?* (Didi, can I start?). The following game is one of several *shanti-khels*. *Shanti-khel* literally translates to 'calming-game.' It is played to focus children's attention, and at the same time, to calm/quieten them. Some *shanti-khels* also sharpen motor skills and/or receptiveness.

The room is suddenly silent. Meena holds the bell in one hand and walks very, very slowly along the circumference of the chalk circle. Little frown marks form on her forehead as she concentrates on keeping her hand so steady that the bell does not chime. The other *Balwadi* children strain their ears in suspense. They need to be

entirely quiet to be able to hear the bell if it rings. The bell tinkles ever so gently. *Baj gaeee! baj gaeee!* (It rang! It rang!) A brief euphoria ensues and hands clap excitedly. Absolute silence is regained when Meena passes the bell to Subhash next to her.

The fact that the children stay silent and focused for such a long time (all the 22 children have a go) is quite remarkable. Through this game, not only does the children's attention span increase, but also their control over their body. Children also learn to wait for their turn, and because they receive such an ovation when the bell rings, they learn not to mind 'getting out.' The best part is the fact that they enjoy it so much.

Village: Jarbeela, Kumaun. Year 2001



A brief pause during an active game; the children are intrigued by the camera

Another important aspect of the curriculum is that of the *balkarya* : practical work that improves the eye-hand coordination of the child. The inclusion of these tasks is vital to advance the motor skills of the child – skills that are central to overall growth and development. There are several different *balkaryas*. A few

examples follow: pouring water into bottles, tying knots in pieces of cloth and making chains out of paper. Locally available materials are used abundantly. Twigs and leaves are utilized for making collages. Resin from the pine trees is extremely effective as glue. Children also make ‘paint’ themselves – for example, by squeezing tomato leaves for colour. Using locally available materials is essential in allowing the children to bond with their surroundings. Working with soil is another important *balkarya* – adding water to it, kneading it into a dough like consistency and then creating things out of it. The importance of these children working with mud is invaluable – it means that from a young age a link is made between their soil and themselves: soil that is the centre of agrarian life.



*Munni displays a cup she has made out of mud.
Other mud creations, glasses/bowls made from scra
newspaper can also be noted*

Paryavaran or environment is the most important topic included in the *Balwadi* syllabus, and one which is integrated into every aspect of the course. The acute urban migration from Himalayan villages is a reminder of the issue that people are dissatisfied

with their agrarian life. This has led to immense contradictions being embedded amongst the people: older women complain about their daughters-in-law who are not devoted to work on the land. Yet at the same time they do not want their own daughter to be dependent on agricultural work, and therefore arrange her marriage with a man who is with a city job. '*Parhe-likhe log mitti mein hath nahin dalte*' (Educated people do not put their hands in mud) is a refrain well versed in the villages. Thus, from a young age children are taught not to get their hands dirty in mud. This is especially true for the male, for whom a job in the city is vital if he is to be considered a success. This has resulted in a generation of youth with a condescending attitude to their soil. A huge gap has formed between them and their land. By emphasising the value of *paryavaran* in the curriculum, we are trying to bridge this gap – to instil in children from a young age a love and respect for their surroundings. *Bhav-geets* and stories, even games teach the children and help them relate to their environment. The songs and stories are not simply about trees, but animals, the seasons, the growth and cycle of crops and their own health/cleanliness amongst other things. Many games and *balkaryas* address similar themes.

It is *naashtha* (tiffin) time in the *Balwadi*. Suddenly all the 17 children have rushed outdoors and have aligned themselves behind a row of tiny flowerpots, in which little green shoots are beginning to appear. '*Didi, mera paudha dekho! ..mera paudha!*' (Didi, Look at my plant! ..my plant!) It is revealed to me through a mixture of high-pitched voices, that the children made the flower-pots out of mud themselves, and now, with the *shikshika's* help are growing plants in it. '*Mera paudha ITNA barha hone vala hai*' (My plant will be THIS big). Mahesh stretches his hands as far apart as he can to emphasise the proposed height of his plant. '*Mere se bhi barha hoga*' (It'll even be bigger than me). He looks at me and adds impishly, '*Aapse bhi barha hoga*' (It'll even be bigger than you). I smile at him. Suddenly embarrassed, he dives behind a fellow playmate.

The *shikshika* has brought out the pail of water and mug from the *Balwadi*. The children will wash their hands over their plants before going into the *Balwadi* to eat their *naashtha*. As she pours water from the mug, the *shikshika* starts a *bhav-geet*. The children take over enthusiastically:

*‘Hum dono kha-peekar khoob barhe ho jayenge
mein aadmi aur yeh perh, dost-dolt kahalayenge
ek doosre ki raksha karke dono saath nibhayenge,’*

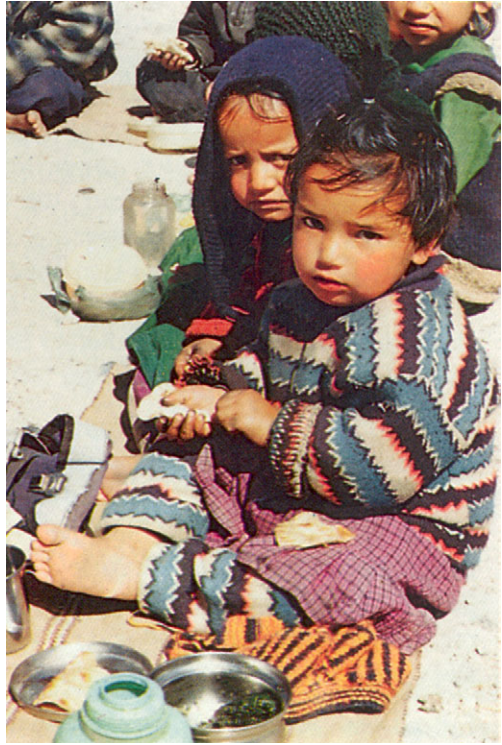
(‘When the two of us have eaten well and grown up,
This tree and I will be known as great friends
By looking after each other, we will live happily together...’)

Village: Gangaun, Garhwal. Year 1999

Naashtha is an important facet of the *Balwadi* curriculum. Children bring their own food from home. This is a significant point, indicating that parents are sending their children to the *Balwadi* because they value what the *Balwadi* has to offer – not simply because of the free food. (It is important to stress here that Uttarakhand does not host the extreme poverty seen in other parts of India. Since there is no *zamindari* system*, everyone has both land and a house. Some people have more land than others, however all have enough provisions for day-to-day consumption. While there is undoubtedly an acute shortage of cash, the issue of hunger or starvation is nonexistent. This is owing to the fact that everyone has land on which to cultivate crops. Thus, by asking children to bring their own food, the family is not burdened in any way). A point frequently brought up by other organisations is that since parents do not send nutritious food for their children, food should be provided in the *Balwadi*. It is true that often children simply bring a *roti* (unleavened bread) with *guruh* (jaggery). However, we believe that convincing the parents to give more nutritious food-making the change in them – is more

* Rich landowners who own the majority of land, leasing it to other people in the village

valuable than the easier option of us providing the food. In several *Balwadis*, the *shikshika's* effort has been rewarded and children bring vegetables with their *rotis*. A significant attitudinal change is also noted, where the village women have actually begun to grow different varieties of vegetables. Thus, we choose to change the mother's outlook so that she herself gives her child healthy food, rather than masking the problem by simply providing it ourselves. In an area where people are able to provide their children with nutritious food, we feel it is inadvisable and unnecessary to heap food upon them regardless.



Manisha eats her 'roti' and 'palak' (spinach) at 'naashta' time

There is also great social significance in children bringing their own *naashta* and sitting together to eat: the loosening of caste divisions. The *shikshika*, the *margdarshika* and the local NGO invest considerable effort to counter caste barriers. The necessity of *naashta* is brought up in *Abhibhavak Goshthis* and reiterated constantly. The performance of skits, (by *shikshikas*) has also proved to be effective in allowing people to realise the advantage of coming together. In the *Balwadi*, the *shikshika* shows her acceptance of all the children – by sharing her tiffin and accepting food from them, irrespective of both her caste and theirs.

There are two parts of the village. In Bheinkurha live an upper caste extended family, while in Lohakurha a scheduled caste one. As the *Balwadi* belongs to both, the children (16 from Bheinkurha and 14 from Lohakurha) attend and play together. The problem lay in the fact that the children did not bring *naashta*. When I went to Bheinkurha-lohakurha on tour, the topic of *naashta* inevitably surfaced in the meeting that evening. Although the *Balwadi* had run for some years, the *naashta* issue had not been resolved. I decided that it could not continue like this. I put forth an ultimatum, and asked the women to decide whether they would rather send *naashta* with their children, or face being left without a *Balwadi*.

I arrived in Bheinkurha-lohakurha after a year. At 12 'o'clock, the children rushed out to the *naula* to wash their hands before they ate *naashta*. Shanti (the *shikshika*) had worked hard to persuade the women after that meeting. She renewed the threat that the *Balwadi* would be shut if all children were not bringing *naashta* after a period of three months. The women had finally laid aside their reservation at sending food if it meant they were going to lose their *Balwadi*.

I don't choose to view this as a small achievement. In fact, at the village level, it is a huge accomplishment. It is imperative not to view this work on a macro-scale. The joy and satisfaction from each positive change can then never be experienced. That day, when the children, the *shikshika* and I sat and ate *naashta* together, I was immensely happy.

Village: Bheinkurha-lohakurha, Kumaun. Year 2000

The desire for a *Balwadi* is such that caste begins to be overlooked. Sending *naashta* might be an issue when a *Balwadi* first opens in a village, but it soon ceases to be a problem.*

* Caste is not something that has traditionally played an exceedingly important role in the Himalayan villages. While, it is adhered to, it is not with the same fanaticism that may be seen in other parts of India. The segregation between castes does not permeate into all aspects of life, but is generally restricted to issues like inter-marriage and eating. For example, all the villagers are

Role of the Local NGO

Many people wish to do progressive work in the villages of their own region, but require some assistance to do this. They approach us for help in the setting up of *Balwadis* in villages in their area. These people, the local NGOs, are the support system of the *Balwadi*. It is their responsibility to oversee that the *Balwadis* function regularly and well. While the *shikshika* and *margdarshika* are motivated, it is imperative to have some backing: someone who they feel they can rely on and come to with problems. This is especially necessary for new *shikshikas* who are unused to asserting themselves. They need to be fuelled with resolve by the NGO until they are able to take on the full responsibilities themselves. One of the principle ways of doing this is through meetings at least once a month. All the *shikshikas* running *Balwadis* through the NGO attend; this is an opportunity to voice problems, and solutions can arise from everyone's varied experiences.

The NGO has a complete knowledge of the progress/problems of all the villages in which it's *Balwadis* run. Thus, it is an important means through which we can communicate and understand the situation of the entire block of *Balwadis* in that region. The NGO is also responsible for certain administrative tasks. In addition, it plays a role in meetings in the village, though it is the village women who are in the foreground. The NGO's support from behind the scene is, however, vital. A good community spirit is a characteristic of an NGO that has worked hard on the *shikshikas* and *margdarshikas* – awakening in them a drive for work.

expected to participate together in social events like marriages, festivals etc. In addition, all village women go to the forest together to fetch fuelwood and fodder. As the barriers are less to begin with, with the pressure of the *Balwadi* the issue is able to dissipate somewhat, and the community is able to draw together.



A skit put on by shikshikas at the local NGO; village girls and women look on, amused

Since the NGO is local, there are no gaps to be bridged in the villages. By regularly visiting the villages in which *Balwadis* run, they come to be recognised and well respected. Thus, a mutual understanding grows between the NGO and the villagers, and there is much interaction between them. For this reason, they are trusted by the villagers. This in itself is a huge accomplishment. Organisations that put forward ‘projects’ to be implemented, but never visit the villages are viewed with distrust by the villagers. Since the local NGO is constantly in touch with the villagers, this is never an issue.

There were two *shikshikas* who came to Chantana village to run the *Balwadi*. They walked there everyday from their own village in Kheti, a distance of three kilometres through the forest. Radhika (one of the *shikshikas*) was unable to go to run the *Balwadi* one day because her mother fell very ill. The rest of her family had gone to another village to visit relatives, and Radhika could not leave her mother alone. The dense forest between Chantana and Kheti meant that there was a real fear of leopards. Shashi, (the other *shikshika*) was reluctant to make the trip alone. Thus, no one went to run the *Balwadi*.

As usual, the mothers came to drop off their children. Neither Radhika nor Shashi were there. The women waited awhile before dropping their children home and going to the forest. The same procedure took place the next day. In response, a few women walked to the local NGO, some distance away, and asked, '*Humaree Balwadi do din se band kyon hai?*' (Why has our *Balwadi* been closed for two days?) Some enquires were made, and the reason found. The next day, (as Radhika's family had returned) she was able to leave her mother; both the *shikshikas* came to run the *Balwadi*. The village women first asked about Radhika's mother's health. After finding out that her condition was much improved, they then reprimanded the *shikshikas* for not sending a message that they would be absent!

The fact that the women went to the NGO to question the closed *Balwadi* showed that they valued the *Balwadi*. It also presented a healthy interaction between the NGO and the village; the village women felt able to openly state their opinions and ask questions. This point makes the value of the local NGO apparent.

Village: Chantana, Kumaun. Year 1986

The NGOs are often small organisations, some consisting of just a few people. The principal fact though, is that they are motivated to do work. A dedicated NGO and a committed *margdarshika* can, between them, ensure that the *Balwadis* excel.

Our role

In the day-to-day running of the *Balwadi*, the *shikshika*, *margdarshika* and NGO are indispensable. Our role is one that perhaps is less obvious, although it is nevertheless important. We provide the basic framework for the *Balwadi*. While the suggestions of *shikshikas*, *margdarshikas* are invaluable inputs, it is we who compile the *Balwadi* curriculum. The curriculum is not static, it is continually changing as it is tested and retested in the *Balwadis*. We also provide the training for the *shikshikas*. It is through this that they learn how to run the *Balwadi* effectively. Refresher

courses are held every year, introducing new issues and ideas to keep the freshness and novelty in the running of the *Balwadi*. *Margdarshika* trainings are held regularly as well. In addition, workshops are held for the local NGOs to ensure that they understand fully the aims and concept of the *Balwadi*. This constant stimulus from training courses is important in preserving the freshness of the *Balwadi* workers.

Another important part of our work is that of field visits. Our staff visit all the villages in which *Balwadis* run at least once a year. They generally stay one night in the village, normally in the house of a *Balwadi shikshika* (though the *shikshika* would usually be teaching in another village). Staying in the village is an important part of our work. It gives enough time to see the *Balwadi* and hold a meeting in the village in the evening*. It also gives the opportunity to talk to the *shikshika*, to see how she has changed since the last meeting. New developments in the village in the space of a year can also be noted. Field trips give a deeper understanding of the village and its situation, and allow us to deduce for ourselves the changes that have occurred. Constantly travelling to and staying in the villages where we work is a unique aspect of ‘Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi’. It means that we get first hand experiences of the happenings in the villages, and that we are constantly in touch with villagers. While the vast amount of walking required to visit Himalayan villages (many are even 10 kilometres from the road on steep mountainous terrain) deters many people, our *Balwadi* staff, having been *shikshikas* themselves and grown up in villages, have no contention with the steep slopes. In fact they proclaim that they are happier in village surroundings than in the office – an exceptional aspect of this organisation.

Providing financial backing for the *Balwadi* is also our responsibility. While the villagers provide the room for the *Balwadi* and its upkeep, there are other expenses that need to be met. These

* Evenings are the best time for meetings as the village women are not occupied with work.

include the stipends of the *shikshikas* and *margdarshikas*. In addition, some educational aids are required for the *Balwadi* itself. The money is sent to the local NGO, which is responsible for its distribution.

Thus, our role, though essential, is to some extent covert. We prefer to put the locals first; to allow them to further their own personal growth, giving them the responsibility that empowers them. By overseeing but not intervening, we allow them to gain strength. The *shikshika* and the *margdarshika* become self-confident and learn to voice themselves, and the community becomes a strong entity – without being dependent on outside forces to function. Many local NGOs initially supported by us have grown and expanded, and are now working independently of us. We view all this as a healthy sign. Seeing this growth of strength, ability and motivation is something that as an organisation gives us immense satisfaction and fulfilment.

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It would not have been possible for me to write this paper without the help of the local NGOs, village women, *Balwadi shikshikas* and children – all of whom enriched my understanding of the Himalayan village. I would, in this regard, particularly like to thank Rama di and Champa di, the moving spirits behind this programme. The many human-interest stories included here were related to me by them; I have just presented them as they were told to me. I would also like to thank Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi for the opportunity to undertake this project.

Mangala Nanda

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N.B. Some names have been changed in the human-interest stories.

