

The K.G. Halli 2 Anganwadi

Leading up to the Anganwadi

Tannery Road is a long stretch of chaos, thick with bustling shops, traffic of various kinds, ambling cows, stray dogs and little mounds of garbage. A road Bangaloreans are used to dealing with on a daily basis. It leads to K.G. Halli where the K.G. Halli 2 anganwadi tucks itself behind the main road. Trade does not dwindle; it takes on a different hue. Red, raw chunks of meat hang in dingy shops and people cluster. Back-to-back is a temple, in front of which is Lord Shiva's weapon of choice, the *trishoolam*, or the three-pronged spear, standing sentinel, around it a patch of assiduous, swept-clean neatness.

The Anganwadi

- A few steps ahead and the anganwadi is on the left. A darkened interior enclosed by strong stone walls. Light is a fugitive here, the small, high window reluctantly letting in a feeble, cloud-covered sun. There is a tube light that works but intermittently. The area is without power very often.
- The wooden door at the entrance looks solid, till one notices the tattered tin sheet at the bottom. The lack of real ventilation makes it stuffy inside.
- A plastic refuse bin with a dust-pan beside it speaks up for the anganwadi helper, Thakkamma, who is scrupulous about keeping the premises clean.
- Aluminium vessels and buckets are stacked on trunks at the far end. Empty sacks are stuffed on shelves. They have to be returned to the Department. It is in them that the Department supplies nutritional food mixes for the anganwadi's children.
- An attenuated blackboard is propped on a wall ledge with the alphabets in English. A few charts hang on the walls. Rows of tinsel in silver, blue, gold and purple are strung high up across the room, below the corrugated asbestos roof, a frail attempt at brightening the atmosphere.
- Learning could not perhaps happen in more dismal surroundings, but anganwadis have a way of making do with adversity.
- Forty seven year old Thakkamma has been a helper in this anganwadi for eighteen years. She cannot remember a time when things were different.
- It is a testimony to the anganwadi's strength that six to seven children pass out from it every year and make it to a government or a private school.

The Children

It is 10 am and there are six children in the anganwadi, three boys and three girls.

- Charlie sits without his underwear, his soiled pink shirt hanging loose on this thin frame, his face sleepy and unwashed. Shamshad Begum, the Akshara Field Coordinator, asks him to go home and get dressed. He stares at her without comprehension, the look in his large, dark eyes uncertain.
- Vinita is a bright child with a becoming plumpness, her intelligent face heightened by the little *bindi* on her forehead. She is attired in a strapless pink frock that glitters at every turn and green pajamas. She is friendly, delicate and utterly feminine. Vinita knows her father's name. "Venkatesh," she says shyly. Her mother's name? "Sarsa," she mutters almost inaudibly. What about the English alphabets? Shamshad is unrelenting. A to F spill out in a soft rush and then it is a mauling. Q comes before L, H comes after T. X, Y and Z merge in an amorphous denouement. It sounds something like "Zaaiz." "Now tell me the numbers from 1 to 10," perseveres Shamshad Begum. "1, 2, 3," Vinita begins demurely, swaying gently. There is an indistinct murmur, followed by "6, 7, 8, 10." Shamshad Begum corrects her and asks her to repeat again and again.
- Jeeva sits aloof in her own world in a red, striped shirt and pants and fragrant white flowers in her hair. Shamshad Begum tries unsuccessfully to make her talk and Thakkamma intervenes to say that she has a speech and hearing impairment.
- Charlie comes back just the way he went out, without under clothes, borne on the hips of his elder sister. His face is tear-streaked and sobs well in his throat. His mother beat him for leaving the anganwadi. Thakkamma calms him down while Shamshad Begum requests the sister to fetch her brother his underwear. Charlie sits down sullenly on the mat and refuses to move when called.
- It is 10.50 am and Vijaya, the anganwadi helper, has not yet come. Shamshad Begum calls her on the mobile and Vijaya says she is on her way.
- A few mothers come in and drop their children at the anganwadi – five in all. Puneet has a showy scar on his nose as if from a bruise. He keeps rubbing his right eye, but he has a keen intensity about him. His father's name is "Thakkali," he says, straight-faced. Thakkamma explains. People in the community call Puneet's father "Thakkali" because he is fair and Puneet does not think it is improper to do the same. His mother's name is Sarla.
- The children have all got packets of sweets or crisps with them and they help themselves freely. Five of the children take out their slates, more to play with than to write.

Thakkamma, the Anganwadi Helper

- Thakkamma stands at the door, ready to receive the children, the late arrivals. Her day begins unfailingly at 9.30 am when she reports at the anganwadi. She goes into the community, from home to home, picking up the children, motivating them to begin their morning. For the last eighteen years that she has been here, Thakkamma has done much the same things, but far from inducing monotony it has made her sharper, more focussed, more committed. Work comes easily to her. She slips into her routine smoothly with a light, familiar touch. There is nothing that is new any more, nothing that is difficult.
- Thakkamma cleans the anganwadi and collects the last bits of trash from the previous day into the dust bin. Nothing finds its way outside the anganwadi. She makes a special effort to ensure that the entrance to the anganwadi is neat and clean. When she has the time she dumps the refuse in the garbage disposal area. The mats are spread out for the children. Thakkamma brings drinking water from a tap near the anganwadi. Sometimes the children come to the anganwadi without washing their face or combing their hair. Thakkamma and Vijaya together scrub them and spruce them up for the day.
- At 11 am, Thakkamma lights the stove at the far end of the anganwadi. It is *kesri bhath* (flavoured rice) on Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays and *bisi bele bhath* (spicy rice) on the other days of the week. She cooks the meal with the mixes and ingredients provided by the Department. At 12 noon Thakkamma serves the children a hot lunch, on the plates that are stored in the anganwadi. She rinses the children's hands after lunch and gets them to sleep for a while. Thakkamma then washes the plates and puts them away. At 3.30 pm she sends the children home. Some of the parents come by to pick up their children. When Thakkamma leaves at 4 pm, she locks the anganwadi and takes the key with her so that she can open it the next morning and begin another day all over again.
- To an outsider it would seem like there is a similarity about her days, a repetitiveness that Thakkamma does not feel. Each day is different, even unique, children enlivening it with variety, with laughter and tears, song and dance. That is why she stays on. When she began all those years ago, her salary was Rs. 150 a month. Now it is Rs. 1000. She definitely would not mind the Rs. 2000 the Department is thinking of hiking it to for anganwadi helpers. But that is hardly the motivator. "I am happy about my work," Thakkamma says. "I have no problems with it." She is very fond of children, she says. "I myself have six children." She will retire at sixty, but that is not something she is looking forward to.

Vijaya, the Anganwadi Worker

- Vijaya comes in at 11 am. She is thin, tall, almost gaunt, with short hair and a large *bindi* on her forehead. Her eyes flash. There is a determined thrust to her face. Her blood pressure has been low this past week and she decided, on her husband's advice, to visit the clinic and consult a doctor. But nothing will subjugate this fiercely self-made lady. Vijaya blazes with personality. Her words come out in a torrent, spoken as she involves herself in many things at once – straightening a chair, casting an almost proprietary, but chagrined look at her anganwadi, taking in everything at once, the number of children and what they are doing, how they are turned out.
- The first thing she asks them is whether they have wished the Akshara team. The children are sheepish, they look everywhere but at her. Vijaya's tone gets louder, a ring of frustrated authority in it as she asks, "Are you eating sweets without brushing your teeth?" The children quickly hide the packets of snacks and sweets in an amateur concealment.
- Vijaya gets their attention and rouses them from mid-morning torpor to sing a small prayer in Kannada. She herself circulates among them getting them to fold their hands, not averse to a punitive little slap if they do not comply. It is a prayer that the children sing without a mistake, invoking Lord Ganesha. Its essence is, "Take care of us. We are small children. Take care of us."
- Before the prayer ends a mother rushes in bringing her son, Chandru, who is shedding copious tears. He has a bruise on his right eyebrow caused by a boy who hit him with a stone while they were playing on the street. Vijaya consoles him with biscuits and soon he regains his composure.
- The anganwadi has 35 children, but today only 12 children are present. Summer holidays have begun and parents, most of whom are daily wage labourers, leave for their home town for a fortnight or so. Some of them migrate in search of work and it is the children who get neglected. They miss preschool and the improving quality of a structured environment. When they come back they would have forgotten all that they had learnt, says Vijaya.
- It is seldom that Vijaya is late. When she comes in at 9.30 every morning her first task is to ask the children if they have brushed their teeth, if they have bathed. Are their clothes clean? It takes her a good half hour to enforce discipline, to get the children to listen to her, to settle in. The morning starts with the prayer they just sang. By then the children are ready to launch a new day at the anganwadi.

The Weekly Syllabus

- The Department has a weekly syllabus for preschool learning at the anganwadis and even though it is delivered orally it covers a compendium of topics.
- The syllabus for the first week of April is vehicles – the different types of vehicles, what purpose they serve, how to distinguish between them. Vijaya tells the children their friends have gone to the weekly market by auto rickshaw. What is an auto rickshaw, she asks them? How would they go to their home town or village? By bus? By train? This method of teaching is pivotal to embedding knowledge, but a pictorial representation is invaluable, she says.
- This is where Akshara's charts come in as a handy teaching medium, she says. The Akshara teaching-learning material is good, says Vijaya. It is supportive material, elucidates the syllabus, helpful to the anganwadi worker. She uses it in conjunction with the topic of the week, not every day, though. She suggests that the material be fashioned out of wood, not plastic, for greater durability. It will not get broken, dented or damaged.
- The second week is dedicated to telecommunications – television, radio, telephone. She explains the concept to children, describes these modern-day phenomena that have changed the world. She says she has nothing to illustrate the lesson. So she asks the children if they have seen the gadgets, and who among them has a television or a telephone at home. Their inevitable answer is "No one."
- Currency is the topic of the third week and Vijaya talks to the children about it, and, spreading before them coins and rupees, she introduces the idea to them, why they need money to buy and sell, how countries have their own currencies.
- The fourth week of April has a simple theme, one that children can easily understand – a weekly market. Vijaya brings down the baskets of fruits and vegetables of the Akshara teaching-learning material from a high shelf and explains to the children how they are bought at the market from traders who sell them. This is always a topic that children are enthusiastic about, that they comprehend and participate in. They tell her, "Miss, fruits and vegetables are available in a shop that I know. My mother buys them from there."

Prepared for School

The Department emphasizes the oral component, there is no writing. But Vijaya makes the children in her anganwadi write the alphabets in English or the numbers, 1 to 10. "They have to go to school in June," she says, concerned, aware of what is expected of them in Std. I.

- Rahul and Bharath are ready to go to school, she says. Chandru? He cannot communicate very well, he may not make it, says Vijaya disappointed. Rachel Mary, one of the brightest children in the anganwadi, is on the threshold. She will definitely move on, says

Vijaya. She is in a shining, buttoned-down greenish gold frock, full of energy and enthusiasm. Her parents' names are easy, after which she embarks on the days of the week, every word distinct, her pronunciation correct. It is a striking performance and she instinctively takes Vijaya's hands in her own and claps with them.

Jeeva is in a Quandary

Jeeva's parents exhibit an astonishing lack of interest, says Vijaya. Her mother tells Vijaya that Jeeva talks to them at home, that she has no impairment. Her younger sister, Nisha, though, refutes this claim and is perhaps more truthful when she says that she has not heard Jeeva speak a word at home. Vijaya has been pursuing the matter with the unenthusiastic and unsupportive parents, trying to impress upon them that she would recommend Jeeva's case to the Department, which has a list of doctors that children can consult. Vijaya tells them that she would get for them the name and telephone number of a specialist they could go to. Take Jeeva at least for a preliminary consultation, she advises. The parents refuse to go. This obduracy militates against the very idea of parenthood, says Vijaya, but their situation is not without mitigating circumstances, she adds. Jeeva's parents are illiterate; they do not understand how an impairment can be rectified. They are economically straitened. If they take half a day from work for a doctor's appointment they would lose the whole day's wages, they explain.

Vijaya's Activities

Vijaya has 23 records to maintain. They are:

Sl. No.	Registers
1	Children's attendance register
2	Staff attendance register
3	Pregnant women's record
4	Food distribution register
5	Bal Vikas Samithi ration register
6	"Graded" children's register
7	Beneficiaries' register
8	Household survey register
9	Birth register
10	Death register

11	Survey register of pregnant women, new mothers, births and deaths
12	Parents' meeting register
13	Inoculation register
14	Household visits' register
15	Register of work done
16	Visitors' Book
17	Contingency bills' register
18	Adult girls' register
19	Stock register
20	Medicine register
21	Monthly register of the programme
22	Bhagyalakshmi Bonds Scheme register
23	Empty gunny bags' register
24	Ration distribution register

This gives an idea of the sheer quantum of work Vijaya has to find time for. There are activities, besides.

- The Bhagyalakshmi Yojana for the girl child is close to Vijaya's heart. She makes home visits to enlist new participants. Every newborn girl in the K.G. Halli community is entered in her Bhagyalakshmi Bonds Scheme register and brought into the programme, under the provisions of which she gets Rs. 1,00,000 when she turns eighteen.
- K.G. Halli has three Stree Shakthi women's self-help groups with fifteen members each. Vijaya was at the forefront mentoring these fledgling organizations as they were formed. She trained the members for two years in self-advocacy and self-empowerment. The training included aspects like conducting meetings, maintaining accounts, starting small enterprises and learning to stand up for themselves. Now, this nurture has yielded results. The groups now function as independent entities.
- A gracefully aging Velliamma stands at the door, her springy grey hair in a tight knot, her posture erect, something about her exuding a rustic strength and purpose. She is a senior Stree Shakthi member. She says, "Vijaya takes care of our children very well. She personally cleans them even if they go to the toilet. Nobody can point a finger at her. We are all with her."

- It is not always that Vijaya gets to be the instructor in the anganwadi, imparting preschool education to the children. It is the anganwadi worker who is called for every Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) survey, for census operations, for the pulse polio campaign. Anganwadi workers like Vijaya are the first rung workers of any government scheme, the foot soldiers. Besides, there are home visits, community activities, parents' meetings, the promotion of health and hygiene. It keeps her away from the anganwadi for nearly ten days in a month.

Support Systems

- That is when Vijaya finds the Friends of Anganwadis a staunch support system. This parental support group of her anganwadi has eleven mothers. "Even if they are illiterate they can contribute in some measure, and that's a help," says Vijaya. She tutors the mothers in rhymes and songs and the alphabets and she finds that Friends of Anganwadis can hold the attention of the class and that the children listen to them.
- The Bal Vikas Samithi (BVS) is not quite as effective as it should be, says Vijaya. They offer suggestions and come together for the anganwadi's needs. The BVS members put up the tube light in the centre, supplied the two plastic chairs and the floor mats. The anganwadi building is painted once a year at their behest.

A New Building for the Anganwadi

- The structure is poorly constructed, concedes Vijaya, looking around ruefully. But she takes cautious hope in the uncertain promise that a building is going to come up close by. Land has been allotted, she says, not daring to be optimistic. A sump has been constructed. "But it takes so much time," she says, with flat realism. "If I have to buy something for the anganwadi there is so much bureaucratic hassle."

What it Means to be an Anganwadi Worker

- It is in November 2000 that Vijaya started her work at the anganwadi. She has been here ever since. She lives close by, her home just ten minutes away.
- It was a rough ride initially and she did not like the work. The bonding with the children was instantaneous. It was the community that took its time getting used to her. An alien in their midst, that is how they saw her, and they resented the intrusion. Even if the children cried, people came up to the anganwadi and shouted at her, some of them drunk and unruly.
- Vijaya was however made of sterner mettle. She was determined to survive. She spoke to the people with calm courage and slowly she chipped her way through their resistance. "Now even if I want to go to another anganwadi, they won't agree," she says.

“I Changed their Minds”

- One instance stands out in Vijaya’s mind. The day started as usual. Thakkamma prepared the mid-day meal and served it on the plates. Before Vijaya could reach him, little Puraichi had plunged his hand into the scalding food. Blisters swelled on his palm, his fingers turned dark. Vijaya tried mitigating the damage, to no avail. Puraichi’s father turned a mutinous foe. He took his child in his arms and walked the streets saying that Vijaya had tried to kill him. An extreme reaction, but it won him instant support. The community rose as one, roused into anger, turning against Vijaya with the accusation that she had purposely burnt Puraichi and had applied heat to discipline the child.
- A make-or-break situation confronted Vijaya. She was overwhelmed by the turn of events, but stood her ground. She explained to the community with precise logic the incident that had taken place. Not once did her composure crack. It did not mollify Puraichi’s father. The boy did not show up at the anganwadi for two days. Vijaya went to their house on a peace mission and found an indigent family with four children, the parents barely making ends meet. They were still smouldering. The father scolded Vijaya, but she boldly picked up Puraichi and walked out saying she would look after him like her own child. She treated his wounds, put medicine on them. “I changed their minds,” she says quietly.

A Sense of Achievement

- Vijaya started in 2000 on a salary of Rs. 750. Now she draws Rs. 2500. The Department informed her in April that the pay scales of anganwadi workers have been raised to a respectable Rs. 4,500.
- She hopes to receive this enhanced salary soon, though, as she says, it is not the monetary reward that her striving is all about. It is that feeling of professional achievement, of personal fulfillment she gets out of her anganwadi.
- Every June there is the profound satisfaction of admitting nearly seven children from her centre to a government or private school.
- The incident involving Puraichi gave her standing in the community. She admitted him to a government school, but feels a deep sense of failure that he did not study there long. At seven, he is already working in a mechanical workshop and his ten year old sister does house work, this despite Vijaya’s best efforts.

Feeling Empowered

- Vijaya has participated in training imparted by the Department and Akshara. Her knowledge has grown exponentially, also from the multi-faceted work that she does. She has learnt on the job – how to counsel pregnant women, how to take up community

issues, how to advocate for her anganwadi. She can minister to a patient with tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS or cancer in the community. Her training empowers her to do so. She is also quite an expert on nutrition and healthcare.

- She referred Shanti, a cancer patient, to the hospice, Karunashraya. Shanti is now no more, but she received the best possible care she could get in her last moments. Vijaya sent four patients with tuberculosis from the community to Dr. Ambedkar College Hospital for advanced treatment. Two of them did not survive because they discontinued their medication. Vasanthi, in the last stages of AIDS, passed away peacefully at Freedom Foundation, the non-government organization working with AIDS patients, where Vijaya had sent her.
- Vijaya has enlisted 250 girls in the Bhagyalakshmi Yojana through which, at birth, they receive Rs. 19,300 and at eighteen Rs. 1,00,000 and a sari. One hundred and fifty members under her watch have already gathered the rewards of this government welfare scheme.

“My Courage, My Confidence comes From it”

- Vijaya was working in a private school before her anganwadi days began. “When I come here I get so involved I don’t feel like going home,” she says. Vijaya has two children, a daughter who is studying architecture and a son doing his degree course. They sometimes tell her, “You don’t have to do this. Sit at home. Why do you have to go out in the sun doing all this?”
- Vijaya says wistfully, “They are a new generation, their approach is different, they think differently. Theirs is a fast-paced life, more self-oriented.”
- When Vijaya encounters a problem at the anganwadi or in the community she takes it home for conflict resolution, for a solution, and her family tells her at times, “Leave your problems behind.” “How can I?” asks Vijaya simply. “This is my work. This is the work I like. My courage, my confidence, comes from it. I who never used to stir out of my home. I who never knew how to talk.”
- Now she submits petitions to the Member of Parliament of her constituency, the Member of the Legislative Assembly, to Councillors, for a building for her anganwadi, for a toilet at least so that the children do not have to go through the indignity of squatting on the roadside.
- A building would solve all her problems. A bright new building, light-filled and airy, where the children of her anganwadi can realize their potential. For Vijaya that would be the ultimate achievement, a sublime triumph, and just reward for her work.