



# MOTHER TEACHERS

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT

AKDN

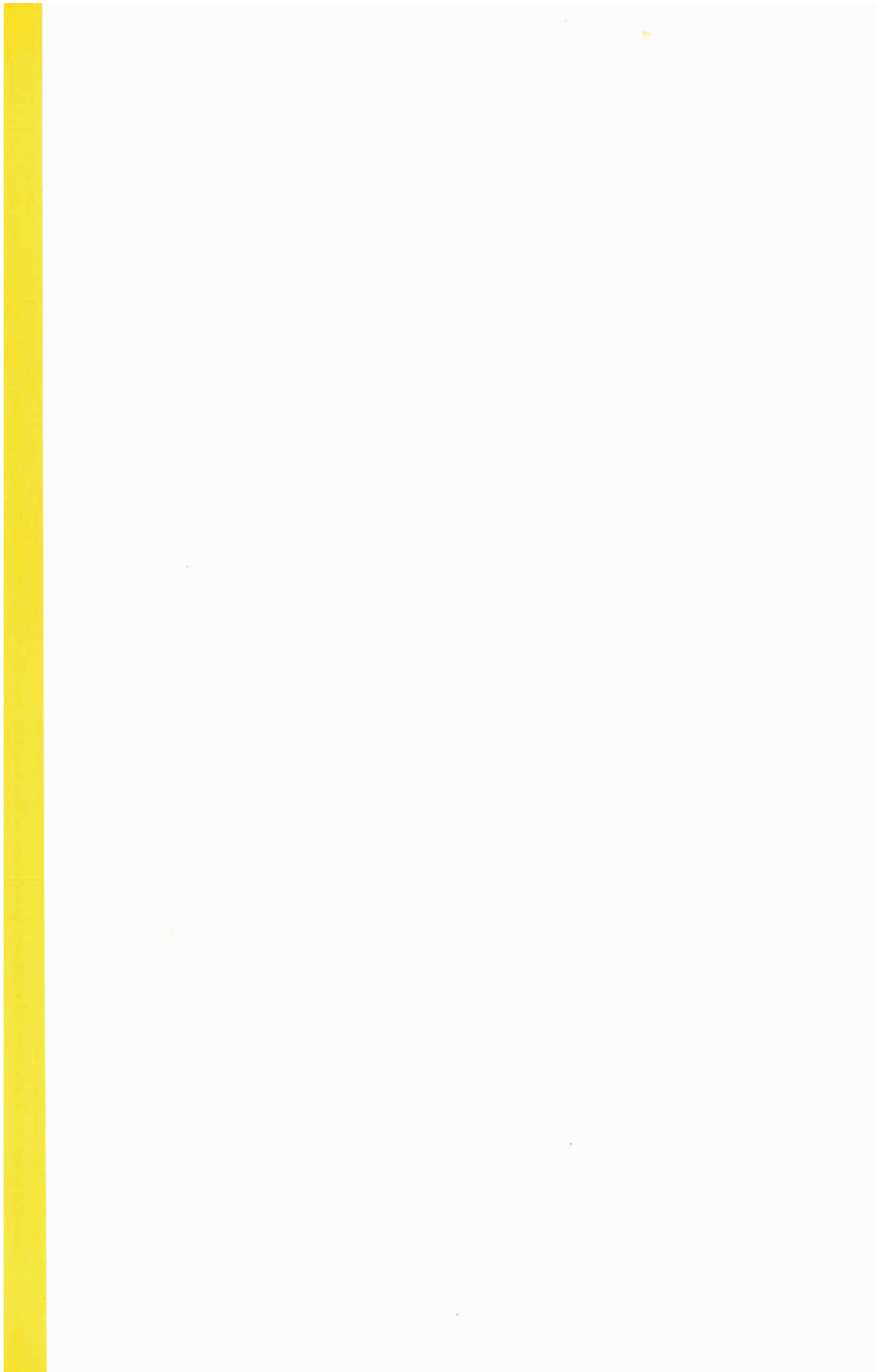
AGA KHAN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

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# Mother Teachers

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT



First impressions are lasting. The image of a mother teacher is still fresh in my mind from the first time I visited Bodh's community schools.

I watched the faces of happy, concentrating children busy with some or the other activity. Amidst them I saw another face — a proud, confident woman whose appearance was quite different from that of the other teachers I saw there. Interested to find out what this community woman was doing in a classroom amidst children, I decided to quietly observe.

She demonstrated a few exercises, which the children followed with excitement. After this, she made them clap at varying paces. Having helped these little 3- and 4-year olds to warm up, she started reciting lines from a nursery rhyme in English.

This was indeed a glimpse of a part of her daily routine. Looking at the confidence, poise and ease with which she worked with the children, it was hard to believe that these were skills that she had acquired as a mother teacher.

What came as a bigger surprise was that she seemed to have in her repertoire focused activities for children belonging to different ages, who were at different stages of development. She conducted activities and carefully observed children with different learning levels while simultaneously spreading out activities for each child.

#### **Observations of a visitor at a Bodhshala**

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The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF), an agency of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is among a group of private development agencies working to empower communities and individuals, often in disadvantaged circumstances, to improve living conditions and opportunities, especially in Africa and Asia. AKF is a private, non-denominational, development agency, established by His Highness the Aga Khan in Switzerland in 1967. The Foundation seeks sustainable solutions to long-term problems of poverty through an integrated, community-based, participatory approach that reinforces civil society and respects local culture. Its underlying impulse is the ethic of compassion for the vulnerable in society.

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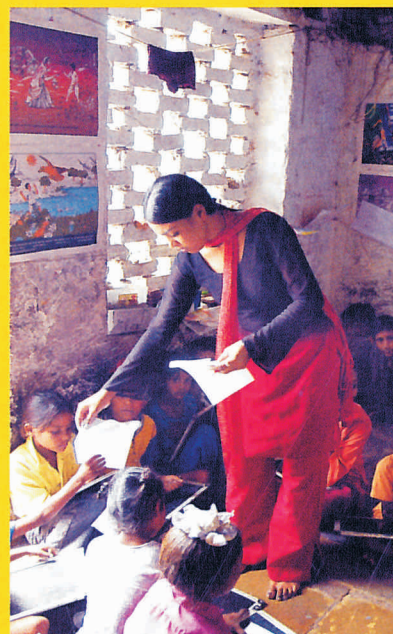
#### **Mother Teachers**

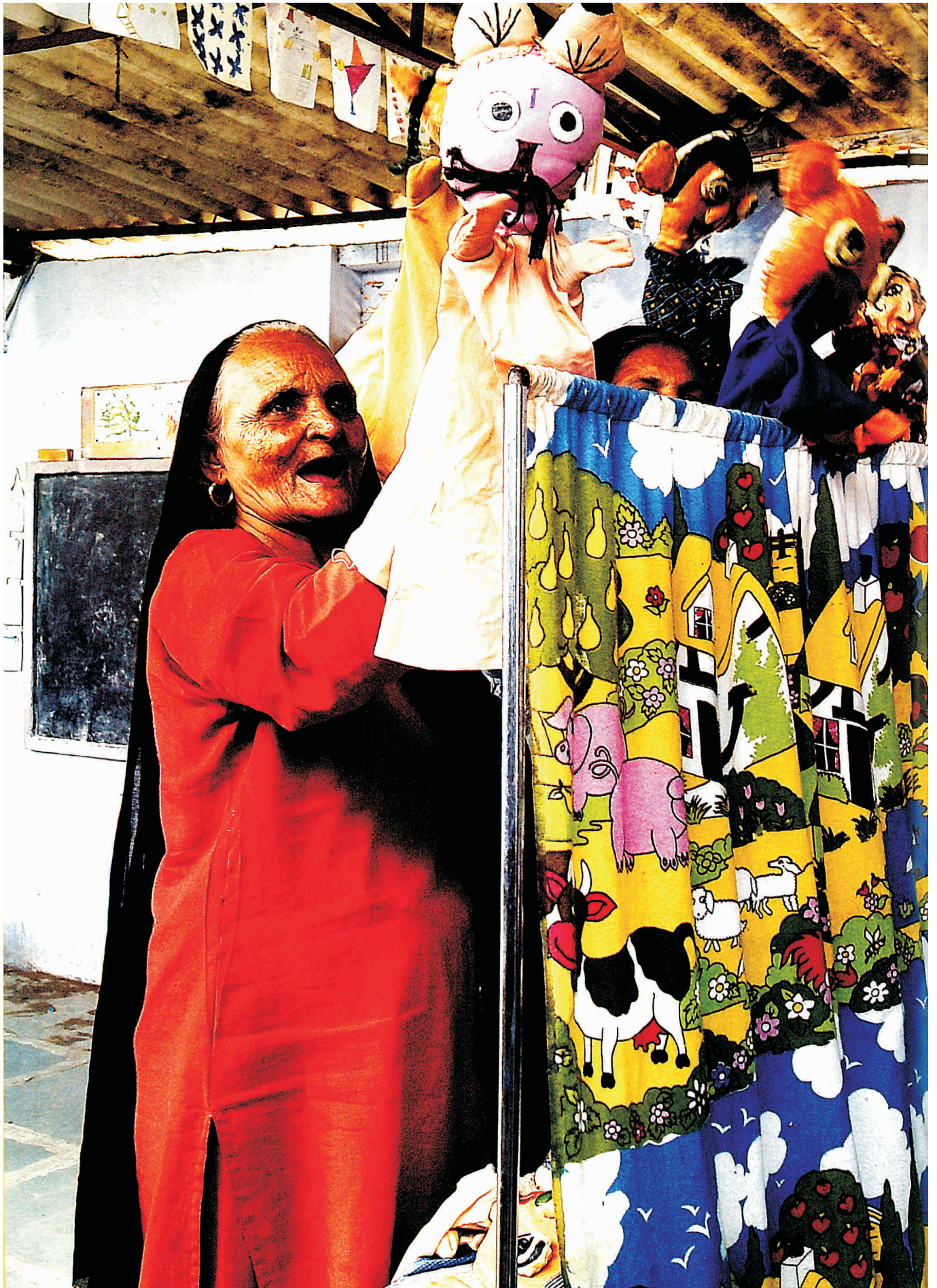
Community Involvement in School Development

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## P R E F A C E

Communities and their participation are central to all development initiatives supported by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF).

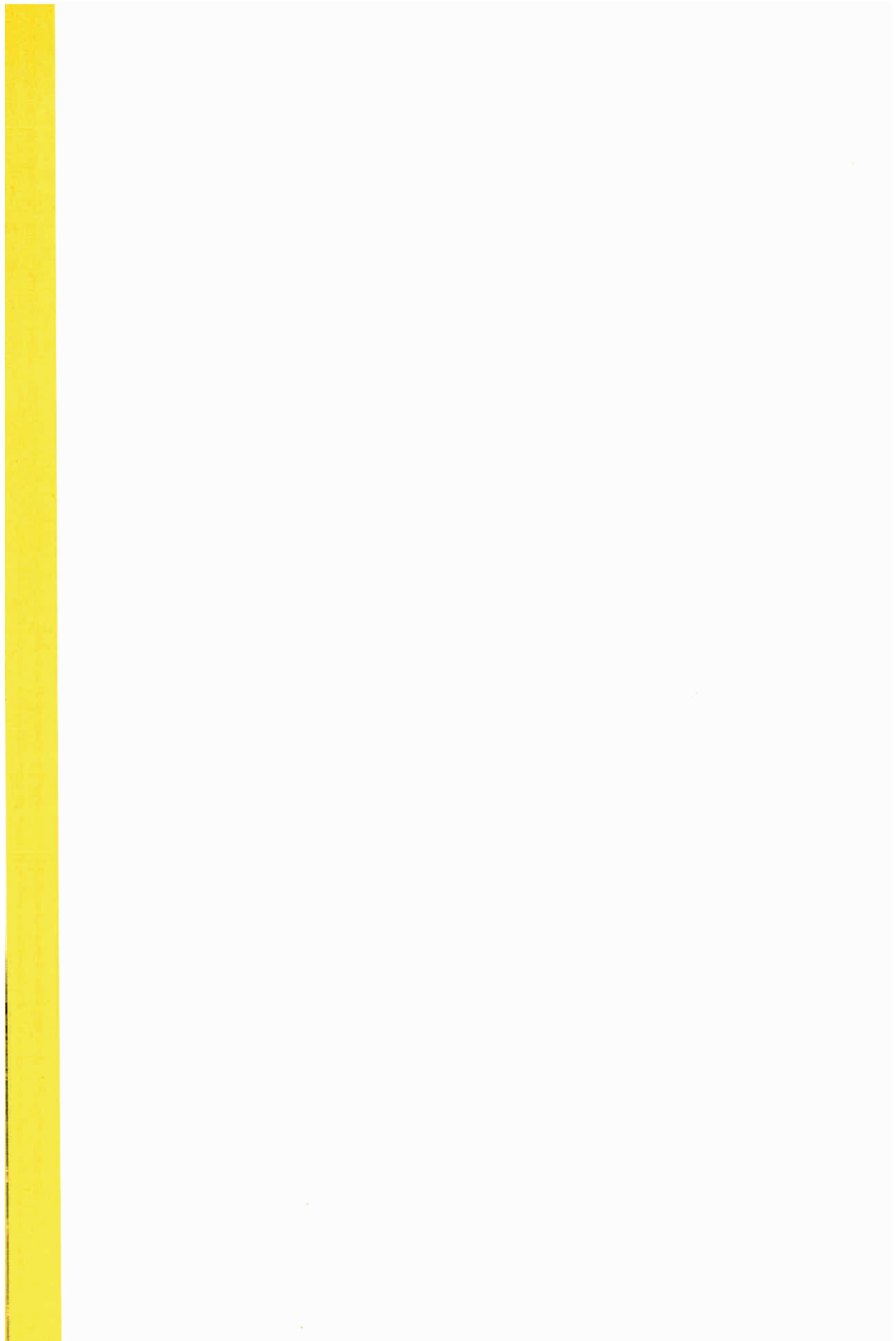
The Foundation considers education as a continuum where the habits of learning must develop early in life and need to be nurtured over time. These considerations inform the educational interventions of the Foundation in India through the Programme for Enrichment of School Level Education (PESLE).

The programme has been designed in a way in which the school-level educational interventions for children take into account the peer-influences in their learning processes. The responsibility is greater as the programme addresses the needs of children from socio-economically and educationally disadvantaged families. While working with such children, the challenge of designing complementary approaches for influencing the socio-familial environment also becomes part of the intervention.

Bodh Shiksha Samiti, a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works in the slums and villages of Rajasthan is an implementing partner of the Foundation's initiatives. The organisation works with local communities by establishing its '*Bodhshalas*' (community schools) to provide elementary education to disadvantaged children including those from the minority communities. One of the key interventions of Bodh for community participation has been through the engagement of community women in the educational development of children and communities. Bodh calls these women mother teachers. Today, mother teachers as a concept has gained immense popularity and is being replicated by a number of other organisations across the country. Not only has the concept instilled confidence in the once shy community women, but has given them a focus in life — education.

Mother teachers is among the series of documents on partner (NGO) innovations of PESLE, a school effectiveness programme initiated by the Aga Khan Foundation in India.

This document highlights the various components of the concept of mother teachers, while tracing its evolution. It has also provided an opportunity to reflect on the concerns and emerging needs thereof.



## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

The Aga Khan Foundation would like to acknowledge the financial support provided by the European Commission (EC) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) towards the implementation of the Programme for Enrichment of School Level Education (PESLE) in India.

Mother Teachers is a concept that was conceived and evolved by Bodh Shiksha Samiti in Rajasthan. It is a result of years of dedication and patience, and has contributed to a visible transformation in the lives of the communities with whom they work.

The Foundation wishes to acknowledge Yogendra, Virendra Narain, Anjela, Chhote Lal, Surjan, Manjot Kaur, Kumud, Lekha, Razesh, Harish and the many teachers, community members and students that have been instrumental in documenting their reflections and experiences.



Researchers and child-development practitioners have realised the importance of working with parents and other care-givers to influence the family environment in order to enable an overall development of young children.



## Community Participation and Child Development

**A**ddressing a gathering of students in October 2000, His Highness The Aga Khan significantly stated, *'It takes a great deal for a student to succeed in a rigorous academic programme. Support from loved ones in many forms — support to meet the costs and other material needs of an education, support in adjusting to new surroundings and new demands, support at times of stress, and sharing at times of celebration, are all critically important.'* Indeed, the discipline of child development recognises the critical role that family and community environment play in the early years of the child's life. Researchers and child-development practitioners have realised the importance of working with parents and other care-givers to influence the family environment in order to enable an overall development of young children. As they grow, they begin to spend more and more time with their peers; interacting with other children of their age, as well as the community at large. Thus, a key aspect that determines the success and effectiveness of child-development initiatives of the government as well as NGOs is the nature and extent of participation and 'stake' of families and communities in these initiatives.

Education often serves as the key intervention point for all development initiatives. It has been seen that through initiatives in the health and education sectors, communities are beginning to develop a greater understanding of issues that influence the way children grow. They also realise the need to develop the local capacities of care-givers and others in the community to respond to these challenges of creating enabling environments for children to grow in.

Working in the slums and villages of Rajasthan, Bodh Shiksha Samiti follows a child-centred teaching methodology in which basic child-development principles form the basis of pedagogy (teaching methodology). The organisation believes that every child is unique in the way s/he learns. Bodh also realises that concept-formation occurs only when there is 'demonstration' as opposed to rote memorisation. The teacher, in this case has to create an environment for all

this to occur. Therefore, teaching-learning processes are carried out through active interactions with children.

*Bodhshalas*, as the community schools of Bodh are called, are organised in a manner that enables multi-level teaching. Children are divided into four groups — ‘*shala poorva*’ (pre-primary group), ‘*shala arambh*’ (equivalent to grades one and two), ‘*shala madhya*’ (grades three and four) and ‘*shala samooh*’ (consisting of grades five to eight). Each level assigns not more than 20–30 children to a teacher. Within each of these groups are smaller sub-groups (usually, three sub-groups) devised on the basis of the learning ability of the child. The rationale behind this grouping is that it affords flexibility to the learner, and enables him/her to define the pace of learning concepts. This is in contrast to the rigid grade-wise system that many schools follow. *Bodhshala* teachers like to closely observe how children in each of these groups progress with their tasks. This also forms the basis of their day-to-day planning, assessment and feedback.

The teaching-learning processes followed in the *Bodhshalas* take into cognisance local circumstances, contexts and realities. The context is related not just superficially but through the active involvement of members of the communities themselves in a number of ways. One of the most successful interventions is through the involvement and engagement of mother teachers. Although mother teachers are today an integral part of the entire school-community relation, the origin of the concept goes back several years. It may be said that mother teachers are a demonstration of Bodh’s sincerity and trust in involving communities in the process of developing their children.



## Genesis of the Mother Teachers Concept

A mother teacher is a woman from the local community, having a good understanding of the given socio-cultural context and chosen by the community members from among themselves. A mother teacher acts not only as an assistant teacher (at times also single-handedly taking care of the pre-primary class) to the pre-school teacher after receiving intensive training which enables her to address the developmental needs of children in the age group of 3–4 years; she also involves herself with the community and takes on the role of a local resource person who provides valuable information to the women, adolescent girls and other care-givers on issues related to health, child-care and child development. Since they are from the local community itself, they are able to assume more responsibilities beyond those of the classroom, by becoming active advocates for children and women, and working more broadly for educational awareness and development within the community. For example, mother teachers have often helped women from the community to gain access to various basic amenities and facilities such as the local hospital, water works department and so on.





The genesis of the concept of mother teachers may be directly attributed to the need for a conducive environment for the overall development of children. Since education had proved to be the most successful means in this endeavour, Bodh decided to use it as the nodal point for intervention in child-care practices. The responsibilities of the present-day mother teachers have evolved over the years; consequently the concept itself has undergone considerable change.

Women from the local communities were regarded as potential change-makers in this process. The prime reason for the involvement of community women was to achieve the broader objective of empowering the community and bringing about a change in the attitudes of its members regarding the development of young children. The key challenge perceived by Bodh therefore was to facilitate processes of community reflection that would result in increased awareness and understanding of the need for Early Childhood Education and Development.

When Bodh began its work of children's education in the slums of Jaipur (Rajasthan) it initially focused on the primary education needs of the children from the marginalised communities. At the time, it was observed that children coming to the *Bodhshalas* were constantly being accompanied by younger siblings. Although mothers are natural care-givers to the child, Bodh teachers observed a clear shift in the pattern as older siblings increasingly took on a maternal role towards their younger siblings while their parents were away earning a livelihood. Interestingly,



with Bodh's expansion of interventions to rural villages in Rajasthan later, it was found that this trend was common to both urban and rural families where working mothers were unable to tend to their young ones, either out of compulsion or at times owing to lack of awareness about proper child-care.

A realisation gradually dawned within the community that these were factors influencing the quality of education and that they extended far beyond merely issues of access. The members of the community understood that although children were able to access the schools, they were still unable to concentrate on anything other than their younger siblings in the classroom. This, despite the active learning methodology followed by the schools!

After careful thought and observation, Bodh and the local communities became convinced that the problem was not so much due to the teaching methodology being applied — there were other external factors that had a direct bearing on the way children learnt in school. Younger siblings accompanying these students distracted the older children in the classroom. Sibling care often took precedence over learning. The recognition of this reality opened up a whole new dimension in the work of the organisation.

While this was a worrisome reality, there was a rather interesting and eye-opening angle to it. The toddlers coming to school with their elder siblings had started relating with school and its activities. While trying to imitate their elder brother or sister they gradually picked up activities, which were simpler. They were showing signs of change in behaviour and mannerism since they first came to class. Bodh's classroom environment and processes were gradually touching these very young children!

The challenge at hand was to cater meaningfully to the emerging development needs of these young children. Constant reflection resulted in the realisation that pre-schools had to be integral to the community schools. The community response to this issue was in the form of involvement of local women in helping the pre-school teacher to manage the young children. It was felt that a woman belonging to the community, who understood the local contextual needs of these children, would be in a better position to support teachers in formulating activities appropriate to their needs. This argument forced Bodh to consider the involvement of community women in the pre-primary classrooms more seriously. The concept of mother teachers was thus born. The choice of the compound term 'mother'-'teachers' is deliberately used in this context to emphasise the role of the adult as a caring, sensitive and empathetic teacher.

The first group of mother teachers emerged as a result of the need created through the observations discussed above. Therefore, the initial efforts in engaging the women took a lot of time and patience for Bodh. While the need remained the same in rural areas also, the mother teachers identified in the villages (a more recent intervention) were approached in a more systematic manner. Experiences gained in the slums have provided greater insight into the intervention mechanisms and induction methodologies in the rural areas.

One of the most interesting take-off points was the non-permanent induction and engagement of these mother teachers. It was a conscious decision to extend this opportunity to become a mother teacher to more and more women of the community so that there would be a critical mass of women within the community. They would understand the various educational concepts and important aspects associated with child-rearing practices and work to bring about change in beliefs and practices related to young children.

It was decided that community women would be engaged to work as mother teachers for a limited period of time ranging between six months to a year. At the end of one such tenure, another woman from the community would be given the training and inducted as a mother teacher and so on. After a few years, Bodh expects that there will be a group of trained mother teachers with adequate knowledge of children's educational needs. In this way, there would be a growing nucleus of aware care-givers and community workers who would continue to influence the educational awareness of the community in a positive way.

According to most Bodh coordinators, a period of one year seems like a reasonable period of time as a tenure for a first-time mother teacher since the first month is largely taken up in the training and familiarisation with classroom practices. The subsequent months would be an opportunity for her to demonstrate her skills with children and work in the community as an advocate for children. Such a tenure is considered appropriate — not too long nor too short. One may not be able to see a hundred per cent foolproof impact of this decision immediately, but it seems to work better in the long run as many more women get an opportunity to understand and familiarise themselves with Bodh's philosophy of education and basic principles of child development.



## Agents of Change: Roles and Responsibilities

**M**other teachers have become an accepted practice beyond Bodh in many programmes in the country. It is interesting to see how these energetic ‘magicians’ juggle their time between classrooms, community visits, adolescent meetings, women’s group meetings, daily experience writing, planning for the next day and not to forget, their own homes!

Bodh has mobilised community women and adolescent girls to constitute women’s groups and adolescent girls’ groups. Primarily, mother teachers play an important role in the women’s groups. When it comes to literacy and numeracy trainings of other community women, the primary role that the mother teachers play is that of encouraging more and more women to participate and become literate — here the teacher provides the inputs. But when it comes to discussions on social issues mother teachers play a very important role. They are able to communicate more effectively with the local women, using examples from either their own lives or from their context in order to illustrate their point, and hence to provide information more concretely and efficiently. However, when it comes to providing factual/technical information about an issue, the teacher plays the key role. It must be said that here too the mother teacher facilitates effective communication with the other women as discussed before.

In today’s context, the mother teachers of Bodh are often described as the ‘agents and advocates of change for young children’ in their communities. This will be a satisfactory summary of the complicated role that these ordinary community women fulfil. They attempt to provide a bridge between the family, community and school with respect to the young child, and promote a convergence of efforts, leading to the overall development and well-being of the child.

More specifically, the roles and responsibilities of mother teachers have been conceptualised to facilitate the child development process through a two-pronged approach — community mobilisation and the classroom environment. While the classroom remains the laboratory

where the mother teacher's skills in educational development for children are honed, the real performing ground remains the community.

By engaging them to play this critical role within the community, Bodh has turned the conventional notion that illiterate women cannot be teachers on its head. It has proved incorrect the view that their lack of exposure to modern schooling methods, coupled with the barriers of caste and religion will come in the way of their efficient functioning both within the school and community contexts. By demonstrating that these women can assume much larger responsibilities outside their homes over long periods of time, Bodh has shown that money is often not the main attraction for local women to become mother teachers — what attracts them is the opportunity to develop their identity and self-esteem, overcome disparity, and assume the responsibility of working towards the development of the community as a whole.

It might be useful here to draw attention to a few stereotypes associated with the role of mother teachers, which have not been borne out in the Bodh experience:

- *Illiterate women will not be good mother teachers.*
- *Rural women owing to lack of exposure are weak contenders for the position.*
- *Caste and religious barriers will prevent women from effectively carrying out their role as mother teachers.*
- *Money is the main attraction for becoming a mother teacher.*

The activism of these community women beyond their work in classrooms with children, however, depends entirely on their maturity and intelligence to perceive key issues which they confront in their day-to-day lives. Often, their own experiences serve as an impetus to enable them to create a different situation for themselves. Living for years in a male-dominated society that looks down upon women, mother teachers have often been victims of one issue or the other. Their transformation despite the reality of such victimhood into valuable members of the local community have not only affected them as individuals, but also their families, besides other women in the community.

Maya, a former mother teacher in Agar village in Alwar is one such case in consideration. Before becoming a mother teacher, she lived as an average home-maker agonised by her husband's profuse alcoholism and violence. Maya's entry into school not only led to her better understanding of children's needs but also changed her family circumstances. 'Maya's

*colleagues and senior staff from Bodh often came to our house to meet us. I was mostly drunk when they came so I would feel embarrassed to go before them. Gradually, my wife insisted and explained to me the benefits of leaving alcohol and the embarrassment I caused to her because of my addiction. I decided to leave alcohol forever. Now that I have quit drinking, I am able to concentrate on my work. My business has grown and all this has happened because of her association with the school,'* remembers a proud Kallu Ram. This is not just the story of Maya but a lot of other families in the community whose lives have been touched by the school in more ways than one.

A religiously inclined middle-aged woman, Sita (Gokulpuri slum, Jaipur), never missed a single festival or religious ceremony. With her association with children in *Bodhshalas*, her religion today has changed — *'for me the real penance is in shaping the lives of all the children in our community'*.

An interesting determinant of the gradual evolution of the role of mother teacher has been the developmental need of the communities. Whether it was the lack of awareness on basic issues like health and hygiene or sensitivity to girls' education, mother teachers are creatively utilising their exposure and education in all aspects of their lives. The emphasis has always been on self-initiated activism because Bodh has believed that issues are only resolved once the solutions are owned by the individual. Logic and rationalisation, besides exposure to other disadvantaged groups in society have been the drivers of the role-establishment of these women.

For women like Batool (Amagarh slum, Jaipur), an elderly woman in her late 70s, it may have seemed like the final years of her life's journey where there was nothing else to be discovered. *'Having seen generations after generations of children, I thought I knew everything it took to raise children. Through my work at Bodh, each day has been a revelation into several fascinating aspects of children's development.'*

The roles these community women play is remarkable given the extent of their engagement with children and dialogue with the other community members. They have also been instrumental in most places in allowing *Bodhshalas* to function in their courtyards or even inside their homes. Feroza, a former mother teacher in Amagarh slum, Jaipur, remembers, *'Initially since there was no building or room or even covered space for us to sit and teach the children, we would sometimes sit under a tree, sometimes outside a house; wherever we found a little space to accommodate a few children, we would sit there and conduct the activities with them. We had a big 'aangan' (courtyard) outside our house and my mother-in-law saw how hard we were*

*working to engage children and get them interested in education. She offered to give out some space in the huge verandah we had...that was where we then worked for some time as more and more children came into the fold of the Bodhshalas.*

*The aangan was an open space so neighbours would keep looking at the different games, stories, children's songs and fun activities that the children engaged in and gradually learnt the basics in educational concepts. There was clearly a lot of improvement in the children — their behaviour, cleanliness, tolerance and gradually, not just other children, but also older members of the community — both women and men, sat with the children and engaged in the activities that the children were undertaking.'*

**Building a bridge  
between the family,  
community and  
school.**



Besides their active role in influencing child-care practices in the community, the primary role of a mother teacher is in the classroom with children in the age group of 4–5 years. Special training is imparted to mother teachers about the various aspects of child development, which helps them gain an understanding of the issue, and these become the basis for their work in the class. Classroom activities are specially designed keeping in mind the various aspects of child development and are mostly focused on the learning levels of children. Since, these activities have to be engaging, fun as well as focused on the learning achievements of children with varied levels of learning, the task of the mother teacher becomes very challenging. Therefore, activities with certain objectives in mind are conducted. The aim is to make difficult activities manageable/doable by introducing elements of interest and motivation. The simplest of activities are listed so that the mother teachers find it easy to understand the co-relation of the activity with the objective. There are mainly five areas of child development that mother teachers focus on through such activities :

- *Language Development*
- *Physical Development*
- *Creative Development and Motor Skills*
- *Cognitive Development*
- *Arts — Drama, Music, Craft, Drawing*

These are considered critical for an overall development of any child — the level of development in each component may, of course, vary. With focused training and help from the pre-school teacher as well as other teachers, the mother teacher is able to observe the finer aspects of each of these components in each child carefully. She also relates these components to the child's environment outside the *Bodhshala* and is able to constantly monitor his/her growth and development.







## Daily Routine of a Mother Teacher

A mother teacher's daily routine is nothing short of an action-packed, energetic series of chores and activities that demand a high level of energy. *'For younger women, the day begins much earlier as they have to shoulder the home responsibility also. For women like me, who now have daughters-in-law and other support systems at home, we can afford to take it easy on the home front,'* says Sayeeda, a mother teacher at Amagarh slum in Jaipur. She further elaborates on the detailed daily routine, *'Normally, the day begins at around 5 a.m. or 6 a.m., with the basic home chores — kitchen, washing, cooking, etc. Then around 8 a.m., when the men in the family are ready to leave for work, the breakfast and tea have to be prepared. Soon after the men (husbands, fathers, father-in-laws) have left, it is our turn to get ready as also the children's turn to get ready. Often the children get ready before the men or with them and leave with them only.'*

Once the mother teacher reaches school, the classroom activity for her includes work with varied teaching-learning material with the pre-school group — *shala poorva* (pre-primary level group). The daily routine in the classroom includes a warming-up session wherein some children's songs, rhymes and poems are recited and sung to lighten the mood. It is the mother teacher who often conducts this. These are followed with some physical exercises — often the exercises are performed along with the rhymes to make the experience more enjoyable for the children. The children are then asked what activities they wish to do on that particular day and the activity material of their choice is then distributed among them.

The activities are devised based on the day's plan worked out on the previous day in the pre-school teachers' group. At the end of the day's work, mother teachers (as also the other teachers) note down the day's observations in their observation diary. These observations are undertaken on a child-to-child basis. However, important observations are noted down for further reflection, discussion and sharing. The table below details some of the activities with

the five child development focus areas in mind which mother teachers perform within the classroom with children in the age group of 3–5 years.

#### WORKING WITH CHILDREN AGED 3–5 YEARS

Objective	Activities
<i>Relationship-building with educator and school</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring children from their homes</li> <li>• Befriending children using basic rapport-formation techniques</li> </ul>
<i>Relationship-building with other children</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing play material with other children</li> <li>• Associating with other children during lunch</li> </ul>
<i>Building focus (in the classroom)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducting activities of children's interest — stories, play material, clay, games, songs and rhymes</li> </ul>
<i>Training children to work independently and working on behaviour</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training children to sit in a group</li> <li>• Putting the learning material back in its place</li> <li>• Helping children learn about hygiene (Using the dustbin for waste disposal, washing hands before eating, taking a bath everyday)</li> </ul>
<i>Focus area: language development</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Communicating with others</i></li> <li>• <i>Utilisation of new vocabulary through easy conversations</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Through story telling</li> <li>• Simple conversations</li> <li>• Talking through puppets</li> <li>• Conversing through picture calendars</li> <li>• Simple songs and lullabies</li> </ul>

Objective	Activities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talking about family</li> <li>• Drawing</li> <li>• Playing games which require maximum conversation</li> </ul>
<i>Focus area: physical development</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Helping children in physical development through bodily exercises</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making children perform exercises of the arms, legs, neck accompanied by rhymes</li> </ul>
<i>Focus area: motor skills and creative development</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Work on motor skills development</i></li> <li>• <i>Working with learning material</i></li> <li>• <i>Creative skills development through craftwork</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drawing on the floor with a chalk for enhancing motor skills and coordination</li> <li>• Drawing and colouring on paper (worksheets)</li> <li>• Using learning material like thread, buttons, pipes, etc. in activities</li> </ul>

A number of activities with children as well as with the community are planned and integrated in the form of a work-plan. These activities are checklisted and responsibilities are distributed among the staff manning the *Bodhshala*, including the mother teachers. These activities are planned at the beginning of each month and are filed in the form of a work-plan for the month. The work-plan acts as a guide to the focus on activities. However, this work-plan is not rigid and modifications depending on needs identified are made even in the course of the month — certain activities may be added, modified or removed as and when required. The routine of a mother teacher (as also the other teachers) includes a whole range of activities which have been described below:

- **TEACHING-LEARNING MATERIAL** is critical to all activities being conducted with children. Both the preparation of teaching-learning material as well as its utilisation in the classroom form the mother teachers' area of work. Since it is the most important means for facilitating the transaction of curriculum, the preparation of the teaching-learning material is undertaken based on the needs and varying levels of learning achievements of children as also the available environmental context.
- **COMMUNITY CONTACT FORMS** an integral part of the daily routine followed by everyone working at a *Bodhshala*. Communities are central to all the work done. Therefore, for bringing them on board with the daily developments in the *Bodhshala*, updating the parents on their children's progress, even at times generally to discuss the broader vision and the future plan with the community members, community contact is undertaken. In fact, for most mother teachers, this is one of the first activities that they are expected to do in order form a rapport with the residents of the locality as also to understand their contexts better.
- **WOMEN'S AND ADOLESCENT GROUPS** may be considered a logical step emerging out of the community contact. In the women's and adolescent girls' groups education is imparted to those who have been unable to benefit from any kind of schooling. Moreover, focused discussions on mother and child health, hygiene (including personal hygiene), sanitation, and so on, are held and important information regarding these issues is shared with the women.
- **EVALUATION IS A** continuous mechanism for gauging the progress of a child in Bodhshalas. This is done through focused child observation (in the classroom as well as home), subject-wise progress to assess learning achievements in daily classroom processes as also the physical development of the child.
- **PLANNING IS DONE** every day with focused groups primarily to organise the next day's classroom processes. Teachers working with the same groups of children sit together and share observations with each other and then plan for the next day. Planning includes deciding which outdoor games will be undertaken, what subjects will be taken up, which field exercises may be given and how two or more subjects may be integrated in the classroom activity. The mother teachers, over a period of time, gain a considerable amount of confidence in planning unlike in the early days of their involvement in the classroom. Initially, they are a bit nervous and unsure of their observations and how to plan the next day's activities. Gradually, with daily exposure to this planning routine, they begin to share more in-depth observations about children since they belong to the same neighbourhood as the children in question. Regularity

and participation of children in the classroom is a result of the daily routine followed at the *Bodhshala* and this is considered an important goal by the teachers, and more specifically the mother teachers.

Besides planning the kinds of activities to be undertaken in a month, a daily time-table helps the mother teacher in maximising the effect of these activities. The daily activity plan of a mother teacher primarily comprises three main activities: Working with pre-schoolers in the Bodhshala, community contact and planning for the next day. She is expected to devote roughly around 4–5 hours at work. The work-plans are devised by mother teachers themselves depending on the convenience and contextual requirement of the community. The task and time distribution is an important factor, whose importance is also discussed during the induction training at the outset. Thus, a typical daily work-plan of a mother teacher looks like the following:

#### CLASSROOM SCHEDULE: TASK AND TIME DISTRIBUTION

<b>Task at Hand</b>	<b>Hours to be devoted</b>
Working with children	3 hours
Interaction and contact with community women	1 hour
Planning for the next day's activity	1 hour
Total time devoted	5 hours





## Selection of Mother Teachers

Identification of the women from the communities to be trained as mother teachers is an important process but is not conducted in isolation. The field-level workers at Bodh are constantly in touch with the community members — both men and women since they visit them regularly, meeting almost everyone daily!

Since the time that the concept of mother teachers came into being, the selection process has changed little. As soon as the tenure of a mother teacher is approaching its last few months, informal discussions during community contact are carried out to gauge the next potential mother teacher/s. The discussions are initiated at forums such as women's groups and community meetings. They are then taken up individually with the nominated women. Thus, continuous rounds of discussions lead to a clear understanding of the qualities required to be a mother teacher. Once it is decided which woman/women will undertake the training, they are sent for residential training organised by Bodh.

It will be useful to reflect on the kinds of qualities that a community woman is expected to possess so as to qualify as a mother teacher. Since, she is expected to work not only with children at the most tender and formative ages but also with other community members (both men and women), she ought to have the compassion as well as the acceptability to fulfil this dual responsibility. To enable a fair selection, Bodh entrusts the task to the community members themselves to nominate at least two or three such women from among them to suit this role.

Batool, a mother teacher in the Amagarh slum in Jaipur was an old woman with no ambition apart from daily sustenance when she was nominated for the mother teacher training programme at Bodh office; *'I used to make quilts when Suman, a pre-school teacher, came to Amagarh to set up the school. She was working with these very young children. Among these children were also my grandchildren. Those were the days when Bodhshalas didn't have*

*a proper separate structure and classrooms. She used to work with children in the angans of our houses in the neighbourhood. I often sat nearby looking at Suman conduct interesting activities with children, telling them stories and I was very fascinated by her way of talking. She never ever lost her patience with the children, never became angry. Fascinated as I was with her work, I slowly saw myself sitting with the children and getting involved in the activities myself — moreover, enjoying it all! One day, Suman asked me to go with her to the office for a training programme. She said there was a training programme for a lot of community women who would work with children and in the community. I was shy and very hesitant. I tried to evade this offer but my children insisted that I should go. I still resisted the offer but her persistence made me give in.'*

*'When we started thinking of having mother teachers work with us, we were looking for mothers in the same slum/village. The selection was based on the important factor that the women selected should be familiar with the living conditions and needs of the children and should be capable of tending to the children just as a mother would tend to them,'* says Suman, a pre-school teacher at Bodh who was involved in initiating the mother teacher concept in the slums of Jaipur.

Moreover, according to Bodh, there are reasons why community women will make better mother teachers :

- *Women residing in the same community understand local children's problems and needs better and they would thus be able to motivate more children to be a part of the educational initiatives.*
- *These women are an inspiration for other women in the community and they play a major role in creating awareness on several important issues among them.*
- *Mother teachers are able to contextualise everything they learn and they thus play an important role in transforming the rigidity in the mindsets of the community members.*
- *They act as agents of change in influencing the overall socio-familial environment.*
- *They will be able to advocate awareness about cleanliness, a balanced nutritional diet, self-hygiene and better child-rearing practices, as well as compassion and empathy towards children in the community.*





## Training of Mother Teachers

One of the biggest challenges in mentoring mother teachers was to influence the mindsets of women, which was mostly dependent on the level of their exposure to the world beyond the four walls of their homes.

The induction of mother teachers through a focused training programme is therefore critical. It is not a one-step methodology in isolation. Once a few women from each community are nominated by the other members, these women are required to participate in an initial induction training programme designed and conducted by Bodh. The training may be residential or non-residential: residential trainings are preferred since they provide a rigorous and conditioned environment for mentoring. During the initial orientation discussions, the need for identifying women who can work for the development of young children from the same community is raised with each batch of community women nominated for training.

There are three different kinds of trainings that are organised for the mother teachers:

- **INDUCTION TRAINING** There is an induction and orientation training programme (mentioned above) organised for the new batch of mother teachers. This is organised for 21 days in the case of a residential training programme and for a month in the case of a non-residential training programme.
- **REFRESHER TRAINING** The trained mother teachers are then sent into the field. However, each month, a refresher training programme is organised for one day in an urban area and residential training is provided for two days for rural areas. The intention here is to make available regular feedback and support to the trained mother teachers so that they are able to perform better in the one year of their association with the mother teacher programme.

- **TLM DEVELOPMENT TRAINING** and other need-based trainings. Every year at least twice or perhaps three times, training programmes are organised to provide support in TLM development to the mother teachers. This is done depending on the need for such training. These programmes are organised in the form of workshops.

It is interesting to note here that most women who are identified for the training are illiterate or just about literate. Their writing and reading skills are a focus area of training. Having spent her entire life in the tough, conservative environment of a village, Savitri from the Nagtalai slum in Jaipur city moved to Jaipur proper after marriage. Everything about the city was glamorous and new to her — something she had encountered for the first time in her life. But, even as there was a lot to be discovered and experienced, her life was limited to the daily chores of home. The proposal to become a mother teacher came as an opportunity to fulfil her life's only dream — *'I was hesitant as I was from the village and didn't know anything. At the same time, I was more excited about the proposal since this would mean I could fulfil my life's only dream, right from childhood — to study!'*

**Each exercise is a learning experience and a methodology trial.**



During the induction training, the new mother teachers are encouraged to document their experiences so that they can share these with other trainees. Says Kumudji, a Senior Trainer for mother teachers, *'We make the trainees share some anecdotes or observations at the end of their field visit each day. Some of the ones who can write, document their experiences which they read aloud in the sharing session. We make the participants realise that it helps to reflect upon one's own and others' experiences if one wrote them down. This motivates a lot of women to learn reading and writing quicker than normally.'* Vijayanti, a mother teacher from Guru Teg Bahadur Basti shared her experiences during an initial training programme: *'When*

*I went back from the training yesterday, my children came to me and I made them sit on my lap and started reciting the stories and children's songs I learnt here. Slowly, one or two other children also came to me and sat with me. I enjoyed the experience of being able to relate with my children like that — which I had never done before!*

These training programmes have been designed based on the varying needs of each batch of trainees. The structure and contents of the trainings may however, adhere to the standardised formats evolved over a period of time. The primary concern of the trainers is to provide inputs that meet the needs of childcare services in the community as well as the likely challenges encountered by the women as they assume their new roles. As mentioned before most of the women participating in the training programmes are illiterate, with a few exceptions, that is, women having very basic literacy levels. They are thus often short of patience required in concentrating within a classroom setting. They do not like to remain inactive for long periods of time, and because they are unable to leave behind their family duties and household chores, they often prefer the evening sessions to be shorter. The training programme has to be designed keeping in mind all such constraints.

In the course of explaining the best option of working with these women, a series of two- and three-day 'training retreats' was developed by Bodh. These residential training programmes gave the women an opportunity to get together, share experiences, disconnect from the mundane daily routine and chores, relax, and learn together in groups that bore little resemblance to the traditional classroom environment.

The learning strategies adopted in these training programmes are innovative and deeply rooted in the traditions and culture of these women, making full use of their own forms of expression and communication. Popular songs, games, drama, art and crafts play a central role in the training process. For example, drama and role-playing, drawing, and traditional techniques of pattern-making are used as means to elicit women's perceptions on various issues, such as how children learn, what children of different ages do, what the women themselves did as children, and what activities are appropriate for enhancing children's development. Various types of games — traditional and modern games, riddles and puzzles, guessing and team games, relay races, matching and pairing games — are utilised to introduce new concepts, and to practise diverse activities. Songs and drawings are used to reinforce, recapitulate, and memorise what has been taught. In this way, each exercise is intended to become both a learning experience for the trainees and a methodology trial for the trainers. Thus, training is

perceived as an ongoing process by all concerned. On each occasion, the women come back with new challenges, and new training techniques have to be developed to help them solve their questions and problems.

At the same time, the supervisors undergo a similar process, learning how to teach, where to find the resources, how to supervise the training process, and relearning what the trainees have learned. Kumud, a Senior Trainer mentioned above, remembers one such training session when she was working with a batch of women from Uttar Pradesh. *'I was talking about providing adequate nutrition to children in the context of child development with the trainee mother teachers and in doing so, I asked them their experiences in monitoring children's growth. One of the women from Faizabad said that she had been associated with the Anganwadi programme and growth monitoring was done regularly by measuring the weight and height of children periodically. Although, this was not the direct focus of Bodh's intervention, talking it out with the women logically helped. I asked them if simply weighing the children and measuring their height would be able to ensure the children's intake of nutritious food. Then we went on to discuss what all would make for a good nutritious diet as far as our daily eating habits were concerned.'* This anecdote indicates how the training programme has an innovative characteristic wherein it draws on the strengths of both traditional wisdom and modern knowledge whilst combining participatory development with a process-oriented pedagogy.

The principal components of the mother teacher training process are listed below:

- **UNDERSTANDING OWN ROLE** This session enables the participants to know and understand each other and their backgrounds well. The resource persons too are able to understand the backgrounds of the participants with reference to their social, economic and family contexts, and this enables them to train the participants better. Another important aspect of this component is that each participant is given adequate time and opportunity to talk about herself and reflect upon her role as an individual and in a group.
- **UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN** The participants are made to discuss their children's behaviour and habits, as also their own attitudes towards children.
- **ROLE OF A MOTHER TEACHER** What is the need for a mother teacher? What will her role be after the training? Questions such as these are answered in this session.

- **UNDERSTANDING THE TEACHING METHODOLOGY** The participants are made familiar with the concept of Bodhshalas as well as the various activities undertaken by the educators with the children, through a 'hands-on' approach. Preparing stories for the children is also undertaken as part of this component.
- **MUSIC (SONGS AND POEMS)** Singing children's songs and reciting poems are considered important tools while working with children.
- **CRAFTS** This component involves the preparation of different kinds of teaching aids to help in training with children. The usefulness of introducing activities focusing on crafting skills was also undertaken to make clear the utility of creating the teaching-learning aids in-house rather than purchasing readymade kits from outside.
- **SPORTS AND EXERCISE** Physical activity is very important for children's development and this component focuses on understanding such exercises and games that could be used as part of the classroom methodology.
- **READING AND WRITING** Women who cannot read or write at all, are made to familiarise themselves with reading and writing. The levels of those who manage a little reading and writing are further enhanced.

The total duration of training is fixed at 9 hours a day keeping the above components in mind.



Time scheduling is as follows:

Reading-Writing	1 hour
Lullaby and Children's Songs	1.5 hours (1 hour during the morning session, 1/2 hour during the post-lunch session)

#### GROUP EXERCISES

Brainstorming and Group Thinking	4 hours
Games and Exercises	1/2 hour
Handicraft	1 hour
Revision of Songs, Poems, Sports, etc. learnt during the day	1 hour (night session)

This is an activity plan and is subject to variation depending on the trainees' interest and engagement — the time period for each activity may be reduced or increased. The methodology followed by Bodh has always been to observe and evolve an intervention. This also applies to its training programme, which is interspersed with ample opportunities for the participating women to go into the community and gather some field experiences through observation and hands-on work. These observations and experiences are then discussed at length along with the sharing of personal experiences from their own lives. Solutions to problems are not provided by trainers; on the other hand, the trainers encourage the participants to generate solutions themselves, who often come up with profound insights and effective intervention mechanisms to address the problems discussed.

The training programme is also an opportunity to break in a demonstrable manner a lot of caste, cultural and communal barriers which may prevent the participants from interacting freely with each other. Sita, a mother teacher in the Gokulpuri slum in Jaipur city recalls, *'The experience sharing time was an eye opener for most of us as we realised that the other women belonging to other communities (caste backgrounds) also went through similar experiences as us. Initially, I would not even drink water at the office as I suspected the low-caste women had drunk out of the same glasses. Gradually, I began to understand that caste and cultural differences were created by us and did not mean anything. We have now become such good friends that we keep looking forward to opportunities where we can go and meet our fellow trainees. Moreover, I have myself gone to a few of the mother teacher trainees' bastis to meet them!'*



## Possibilities and Challenges

**M**other teachers are today a growing nucleus of activists for women's empowerment and practitioners of good child-care in their communities. At the same time, they are also bringing communities and schools closer to each other. These women have been successful not only in changing their own circumstances but in doing so, they continue to influence their peers. They are not just talking about issues but are also demonstrating change — as a result they are gradually becoming role models for a number of other women in the neighbourhood.

The constant increase in the number of mother teachers in the communities would create a critical mass necessary for bringing about change in the attitude of community women



towards education and child rearing practices. Though they start with education and child rearing issues, the reflection and questioning attitude developed in this process also throws up greater possibilities of utilising their energies and activism to overcome bigger challenges. It could even be possible to facilitate wider roles for these women in community empowerment with better understanding and programmatic planning. One way of doing this seems to be the creation of a platform for collaborative action.

While bringing these women together on a platform is a possibility, attention will need to be paid to the manifold roles they perform once they are empowered! A closer look at their activist role in the community throws up exciting observations — they constantly engage in dialogue with community women on a range of issues such as gender indiscrimination, mother and

**Successful activists  
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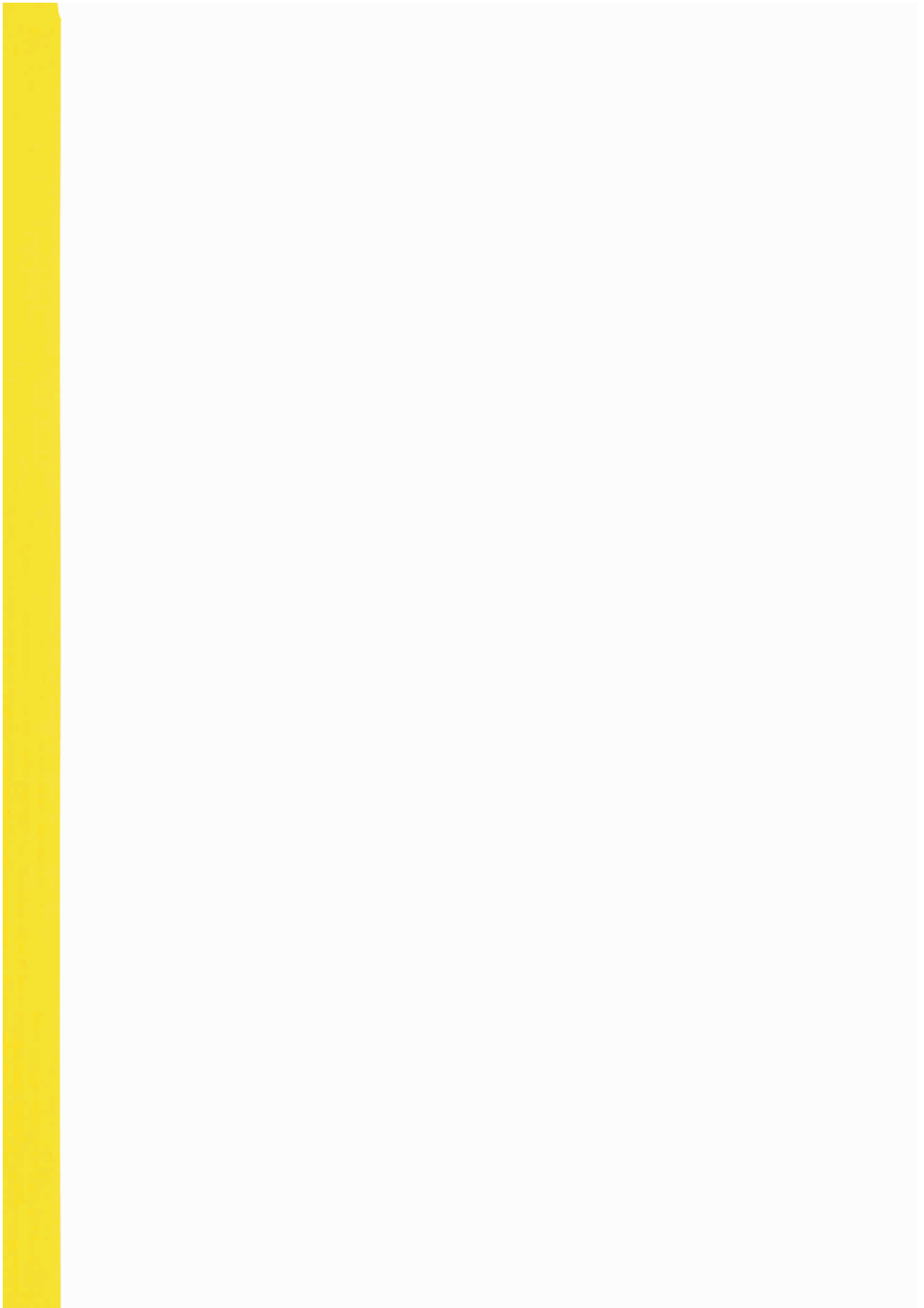
child health, family planning, immunisation, etc. Therefore, it is possible to further utilise their potential in divergent developmental activities and create integrated opportunities for their involvement in larger development issues. Now, keeping in mind that these varied subjects need constant engagement and the level of information involved also needs upgradation, training inputs currently being given would also require review and upgradation.

One of the challenges faced by Bodh has been the feeling that the pre-school has become the focus of the mother teachers' attention, that is, they are seen as practising their skills more in the pre-school centre. Since, to begin with, their role within the community was considered to be more critical than that in the classroom (where the teacher plays a primary role), the organisation needs to reflect upon how to mentor mother teachers to build on their roles in the community and also to overcome such restricted perceptions of their role.



Moreover, even within the schools, beyond a point, the mother teachers' capacities become limited in the teaching-learning process owing to their limited exposure to education. It is felt at times that although they can undertake activities defined in the curriculum effectively, they often need hand-holding and technical assistance.

Notwithstanding these challenges it can be said with full confidence that mother teachers are making an immense contribution to excluded and marginalised communities in the areas of education and child rearing practices. This has brought about a tremendous change within their own lives and they have also successfully demonstrated to many other illiterate and marginalised women that they are no less capable than these mother teachers in changing their life situations.





## ABOUT THE SERIES

The publication is a compilation of the experiences in education from the Aga Khan Foundation. It illustrates various methods and techniques that have been used to reach out to marginalised and disadvantaged communities to improve the availability and quality of education.

The Programme for Enrichment of School Level Education (PESLE) was initiated by the Aga Khan Foundation in India in 1999. The programme, through support to a number of partner NGOs, piloted and expanded innovative approaches in school improvement and integrated important elements into the formal system. These have included new approaches in teacher training, professional development, curriculum innovation, school management and governance. All approaches have the active participation and involvement of the community. The impact has been measured against improvements in three areas: enrolment, retention and learning achievement.

Over the years, working closely with the various communities and educators, a number of good practices emerged that have resulted in a transformation and a visible impact on the quality of education, have now become institutionalised. Some have been adopted, both in the government and non-government sectors.

It is hoped that the series will prove useful for practitioners, policy-makers, implementers and scholars, as illustrations of experience and practice that started small but with the potential to address the larger issues in education.

We would like to extend our gratitude and appreciation to all those that have made this series possible.



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