CHAPTER VI

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

Environment plays a vital role in the development of personality in every individual. Its influence is maximum, determinative almost, during the early formative period of life.

The environment of an institution implies the conditions, particularly the physical and material, with which the institution carries out its functions. The site or the location of the buildings including the physical facilities made available therein, the approach to the institution, the surroundings and even the neighbourhood of the institution may be included in the environment. To derive maximum benefit from the environment, particular attention is being paid in some countries relating to all these factors in establishing and managing the educational institutions. The school, an institution for formal education is an environment created by a community or a state to foster optimum development of the young generation through certain pre-planned activities within the prevailing general environment. It is more so in the case of a preschool institution. Ideally, a preschool institution should be an extension of the normal home environment in which the child finds himself. Sustained and deliberate efforts must, therefore, be constantly at work to create such an environment in a preschool in-
stition. Every detail must be well thought out and planned beforehand to be placed in natural sequence, incongruities in any form and appearance shall have to be reduced to a minimum. The entire environment should be pleasant and soothing to the eyes besides being most attractive to the young children. It should be devoid of any physical threat or danger to the users.

A school is not merely a building but planned environment to enhance and ensure proper growth of the child. A school, as Dr. Maria Montessori defines it, is 'a prepared environment in which the child set free from adult intervention can live its life according to laws of its development.' A preschool institution should have enough provisions to ensure sufficient freedom to allow normal growth of the children under the care and supervision of well-trained adults. Ruth Kohn wants the preschool institution to be 'an environment conducive to focusing, guiding, expanding the experiences, understanding and skills which the child will naturally develop in the course of growth.' It is now easily discernible that the centre for all such activities should be housed in a building which has got all the

1. As quoted by Ruth Kohn in 'The Exploring Child, P.18 op. cit from Standing, M. Maria Montessori (Academy Library Guild, Tresco, Colo; C 1957,99).
provisions necessary for carrying on in a preplanned manner.

The building which houses a preschool institution must be spacious enough to allow free movement of the child and to have adequate furniture and equipment to enrich the child with experiences helpful for proper growth. A general agreement seems to exist among all who are involved in preschool education, i.e. the educators, psychologists and psychiatrists, that certain basic needs must be satisfied through physical facilities provided by the institution.

The young children are curious about the physical environment. The physical phenomena provide strong and continuing motivation. Interest in the natural and physical phenomena suggests that provisions be made for children to have direct contact with their physical world through different sensory experiences. The site and the buildings offer a direct opportunity to children for such sensory experiences.

The school should be located in such a place which is free from any potential danger to the children. A clean, safe, secure and hygienic premises with sufficient light and air is needed for a preschool institution. Care should be taken to make the school premises not only beautiful but also most
attractive to the children. The school plant should provide outdoor space for physical activities, a garden and enclosures for keeping pets.

The classroom should be such that can protect the children from the hazards of weather, it should be well lit and well ventilated and spacious enough to allow sufficient freedom in movement during different activities. The classroom should have storing space for equipments and teaching aids, open shelves for display materials, walls decorated with different pictures and charts to stimulate children's interest and to increase the sources of learning.

In addition to class rooms, there should be other rooms for organising activities, recreation and rest suitably equipped with materials for children of different age groups. Sections for office, reception and medical attendance and for teachers should be located in such areas of the premises that all the adult members can supervise the children easily.

Adequate toilet facilities, both for the children and other adult members separately should be there in the premises. Those meant for children should be located within the building or attached to
it in such a manner that these are easily accessible to and within easy reach of the children. Separate provisions for lavatories and urinals adjusted to the height and physical capability of the children should be there. Adequate arrangements should be there to have a wash whenever needed at suitable points in and outside the buildings besides providing points for drinking water. Proper arrangements should be made for storing personal belongings of the children such as a towel, handkerchiefs, a comb, a cake of toilet soap, etc. either in the classroom, toilet room or in an adjacent room.

The kitchen and the dining room should be well ventilated, clean, furnished adequately with appropriate equipments to suit the needs of the children. Safe drinking water should be available in plenty not only in the dining room and kitchen but also in and around the areas where the children spend most of their time; the taps and fountains adjusted properly to the height of the children.

Educational and play equipments used in the preschool institutions must be suitable for different age groups. The play materials particularly should be durable, economic, hygienic, easily washable and repairable and attractive to the children. The number
of equipments should be adequate enough in consideration of the number of children. Maintenance and storage of equipments should be in a neat and easily accessible place. There should be a place for storage of everything easily seen and easily reached by the children. The equipments must be kept in a systematic order, easily understood by the children. Whatever materials and equipments are there not for immediate use of the children should be isolated and stored beyond the reach of the children. The play materials for outdoor activities should be strong enough and amenable to be handled comfortably by the children. Different types of teaching aids, audio-visual implements, etc. should always be maintained in usable conditions. The materials, meant for use in different activities, like paper, colour, paints, chalks, brush, etc. should be made available in sufficient quantity.

Most of the countries have laid down rules and regulations with specifications relating to the sites and premises, buildings with different components, fittings and fixtures, and also for sanitation and hygiene, equipments and accessories, etc. for the preschool institutions in their countries. These specifications have been drawn to ensure utmost care and security for the young children. But in a country like India, such specifications, rules and regulations are yet to be formulated.
Resources, both material and human, are the major constraints on the Governments at the Centre and the States to formulate any policy on pre-school education. A country with a population of about 121 million of preschool age children can hardly think of evolving and accepting a uniform policy of preschool education to attain any specific standard where the needs of these children are staggering. The first problem of the preschool child is to survive. Forty percent of all deaths in the country still takes place among children below the age of 5; the death-rate among preschool children is 21 to 35 per mille. It is estimated that seventy five percent of the child population of the country can be classified as 'not healthy' due to major and minor illness. The major causes of morbidity (and mortality) are gastro-intestinal complaints and respiratory infections (complicated by malnutrition) and nutritional disorders of various types. Even where death or disablement does not result, the enormous suffering entailed can very well be imagined besides the loss in growth, health, efficiency and the sheer wastages of human resources.

Mentally and physically handicapped children form another segment of this population with its own problems.
Illiteracy coupled with wretched economic conditions of parents of a great majority of pre-school children poses the second major problems. A huge number of these children comes from families where both the parents are illiterate. These parents can hardly appreciate the idea of doing something that requires systematic and sustained efforts continuously over a long period of time that has no apparent and direct link, with the realities of life. From a very early stage in their life, these children are required to participate in economic occupations or to care for younger children when the adults are at work.

The third major problem relates to the underprivileged. These children have been classified as underprivileged in relation to the satisfaction of the basic needs of childhood. The most vulnerable groups included in this section of the pre-school children are those coming from the rapidly growing urban slums consisting largely of the first generation rural migrants; tribal peoples in the remote, isolated areas and the large rural proletariat consisting of the landless and the low caste groups confined to certain low income and low status occupations.
This does not mean that nothing has been, or is being done in India in respect of preschool education. Mina Swaminathan in her article on 'The preschool child in India' holds up a picture of activities in the area of preschool education in India. The following lines quoted from her article would give an idea of the work done in this field not inspite of but instead of a policy of preschool education in India:

"The staggering dimensions of the problem of the preschool child in India should not lead one to suppose that nothing is being done to meet these needs. On the contrary, Indian services are far in advance of these provided by any other developing country, and are substantial in relation to the resources available.

India is the first country to have a national nutrition policy, with special provision for the preschool child. Preschool education has a long and rich history in this country, and the network of rural balwadis which has brought preschool education and care within the reach of thousands of rural children is a pioneer achievement. Numerous other programmes serve the preschool child."
Yet with all this, the services are inadequate in both quantity and quality when measured against the needs. With this proviso, a clear look can be taken at the existing programmes and services for preschool children.3

It would be relevant here to mention that in the Draft National Policy on Education,1973 it was indicated that some action would be taken up by the Government in the area of preschool education for the children of a special group of people under section - The Equalisation of Educational Opportunities, which is quoted below:

"Provision for preschool education for children who are first generation learners to prepare them for schooling may prove extremely useful. Preschool education may have to be provided through home and other facilities including traditional village resources made available by voluntary organisations and local bodies.4


The Report of the Study Group on the Development of Preschool Child, 1972 recommended in respect of buildings and premises necessary for carrying on the preschool programmes as follows:

*10.06 Buildings: Another important contribution which the local community can make is to provide buildings required for the programme.

Very often, existing public buildings like Panchayat Ghars, primary health centres etc., could be utilised for the purpose. Other public buildings or even private buildings could be made available by the community. Wherever feasible, the centres may be housed in the local primary school. In fact, we have made no provision in these estimates for any payment of rent on account of buildings because we believe that the local communities will either make a building available for these programmes or raise contributions to cover the rent. However, it is quite possible that some communities may be unable to make even this contribution, in which case the State will have to support this item also.5

It is on the basis of this recommendation that the Integrated Child Development Services Programmes have been developed and are being implemented.

The report of the committee on Child Care set up by the Central Social Welfare Board suggested in this connection as under:

"Any available clean space, especially an open space and some additional indoor space ought to be adequate to start a preschool for between 20 and 30 children".  

The National Policy for Children as enunciated by the Government of India against Article iv under Free and Compulsory Education states:

(iv) The State shall take steps to provide free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14 for which a timebound programme will be drawn up consistent with the availability of resources. Special efforts will be made to reduce the prevailing wastage and stagnation in schools, particularly in the case of girls and children of the weaker sections of society. The programme of informal education for preschool children from such sections will also be taken up.".  


It will not be difficult now to understand the unsuitableness of physical conditions prevailing in most of the preschool institutions of the state of Assam on this background.

The pre-primary class attached to a primary school is either provided with a separate room or the children of class I of the primary school are required to share a room with the preprimary children, the former mode of accommodation being more common. But in either case, the accommodation provided does not appear to be adequate in consideration of the mere number of children in the preprimary class. The responsibility of maintaining the primary school buildings and the premises being vested on the Managing Committee of the school and the Department sanctioning insufficient amounts as grants for maintenance and repair and that too irregularly, the physical conditions of the primary schools in the state are gradually deteriorating. The help from the community in the maintenance and upkeep of the school buildings and premises depends on the initiative of the teachers, particularly on the head of the institution and his relationship with the community.

The government specifications relating to the buildings and premises of the primary schools are in the statute books only and there is nothing of the
sort as yet in respect of the preschool educational institutions.

The environmental conditions of the primary schools are, in general, poor. Those in the urban areas previously managed by the Municipal Authorities are comparatively better. The primary schools in the urban areas have well-defined compounds with sufficient indoor space and outside play grounds and drinking water connections (or tube wells) and arrangements for urinals and latrines. But the locations of many of the schools are not suitable as the premises are not free from the potential danger from heavy traffic, noise, dust and effects of congestion.

The conditions of the rural primary schools are pitiable. Although these schools have large compounds with enough scope for expansion, these seem to be neglected so far as the upkeep and maintenance of the buildings and premises are concerned. The school buildings are hardly secured against theft or these being used by the anti-social elements. The majority of these schools have tube wells for drinking water, and metallic drums, buckets or earthen pots (pitchers) are available for storage for daily use.

There is no sanitary arrangement as such in any of the rural primary schools. Urinals are there
in some of these schools, but most of them are not in proper condition for use; provision for lavatory is almost nil in these institutions.

Furniture and equipments in all the schools are inadequate. As these items are supplied by the Department (through contractors), these are mostly not available in time, are in short supply and suffer generally in quality.

Some of the primary schools to which pre-primary classes have been attached were, initially, supplied some teaching aids also by the Department. While no principle of equitable distribution appears to have been followed, the teaching aids supplied were also meant for those schools applying Montessori Method of teaching only. Outdoor play equipments like swing, see-saw, etc., are not installed in any of the schools, but small play materials like rubber balls, Ludo, etc., for indoor engagements have also been supplied by the Department. No provision for gardening has been noticed in any of the schools visited.

The children of pre-primary classes attached to primary schools are not covered by any nutrition programmes nor there is any provision for health care or medical check up of these children. There is even no provision for giving first aid in case of minor injury in the school.
The privately managed primary schools (English medium) with attached preschool classes are mostly urban institutions housed in rented buildings. A substantial amount of fee-incomes of these institutions are diverted for paying the monthly rents of the buildings, charges for electricity, water connections, etc. to allow the management to provide the institutions with adequate number of equipments and teaching aids. Some of these institutions receive regularly annual maintenance grants from the government without any departmental supervision and inspection. Except in a few institutions the open space within the compound is not adequate for conducting open air activities for the children. The sanitary arrangements in these buildings are tolerable and just adequate in consideration of the number of children. A few schools have arranged for annual medical check up of their children in collaboration with some philanthropic, voluntary organisations. There are arrangements for providing first aids in case of needs in these institutions.

The play and educational equipments of different types found in most of the institutions are not adequate in consideration of the number of children. Moreover, the upkeep and maintenance of these equipments and materials are very poor.
There is no provision for allowing the children of these institutions to have a nap or lying down for a few minutes comfortably for rest at mid-day. The children are asked to keep quiet for few minutes in their respective seats in the class rooms keeping their heads on the desks or tables provided. This appears to be torture rather than rest for children. There is no provision for kitchen/dining facilities. These children are neither covered by any nutrition programme. They are, however, allowed to take snacks carried with them from their respective homes either in the class rooms or in the verandah under supervision of teachers.

There are few institutions with transport facilities of their own. Children availing such facilities are required to pay extra charges; but in all other schools children are required to come in and go out of the schools under adult supervision arranged by the parents. Most of the schools keep their main gates closed during the school hours.

Balwadis other than those organised by the Department of Social Welfare of the State are housed in buildings provided by the sponsoring organisations. These buildings may, in some cases, be also used for other purposes at some other times. The balwadis established and run by the Department of Social Welfare are at present housed in rented buildings excepting a
few that are housed in the premises of the primary schools with timing of their functioning arranged not to coincide with that of the school. The furniture and the buildings of the primary schools are utilised by these balwadis besides the play materials, equipments, utensils, stoves, etc. supplied by the Department of Social Welfare.

The buildings and premises provided by the voluntary organisations, and for that matter, arranged by the Department of Social Welfare and other administrative departments thus can not have a uniform feature to maintain certain minimum norms or specifications. Whatever is the location, size or type of the buildings and the premises, since money is provided either by the Central Social Welfare Board through its State counterpart or by the Department of Social Welfare or some other administrative departments of the State Government separately for the upkeep and maintenance to these voluntary organisations, the institutions are clean enough at functioning levels.

The children of the balwadis are covered by one or other of the different nutrition programmes. Some sort of food (locally available), its worth not exceeding Rs.0’25 per child per day is provided to these children which is obviously not adequate. There is no kitchen or dining room. Children are served few food (normally fruits and sometimes bread or biscuits) either in the verandah or in a portion of the house.
Proper sanitary arrangements are not there in any of the balwadis. Permanent drinking water supply is also lacking in some of the centres. Play materials, teaching aids and other equipments are maintained well though these are not adequate in number and variety for all the centres.

There is annual health check up of the children organised by the sponsoring organisations, but there is no provision for regular health care of these children by the concerned authorities. The children are escorted to and from the centres under adult supervision.

It was indicated earlier that an anganwadi is a comprehensive care centre and not a preschool institution proper.

But it has all the components of a preschool educational institution. To derive maximum benefit, therefore, the anganwadi should have the environmental conditions most conducive to producing the desired effects. It has been found that in Assam (in six Development Blocks) the anganwadis are housed mostly in small huts provided by the local communities to be served by these centres. The general environmental conditions of these institutions are very poor. There is no provision for latrine or urinal nor there is any provision for drinking water. A small table with one or two chairs are there for furniture;
the children sit on mats on the floor of the huts. A black board, chalks, picture charts, papers, painting box with brushes, slates and pencils, etc. are provided to every anganwadi as teaching aids and equipment by the Central Office located in the Development Block under the ICDS Scheme. No storing facilities are there in these huts; Equipments and materials belonging to the centres are stored in the house of a neighbour.

Children get the services for regular health check up and medical care from the primary health centre of the Block through the anganwadi worker and the Health Visitors of the Block. The Children in the anganwadis are covered by the supplementary nutrition programmes.

It can be seen that the existing arrangements for preschool education in the different categories of institutions of the State fall short of the minimum requirements of standard of the advanced countries in respect of the environmental conditions expected. Conscious and determined efforts on the parts of all concerned and with a zeal to serve the children, and so the nation, the situation can be very much improved.