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'Pre-schools amount to child abuse'

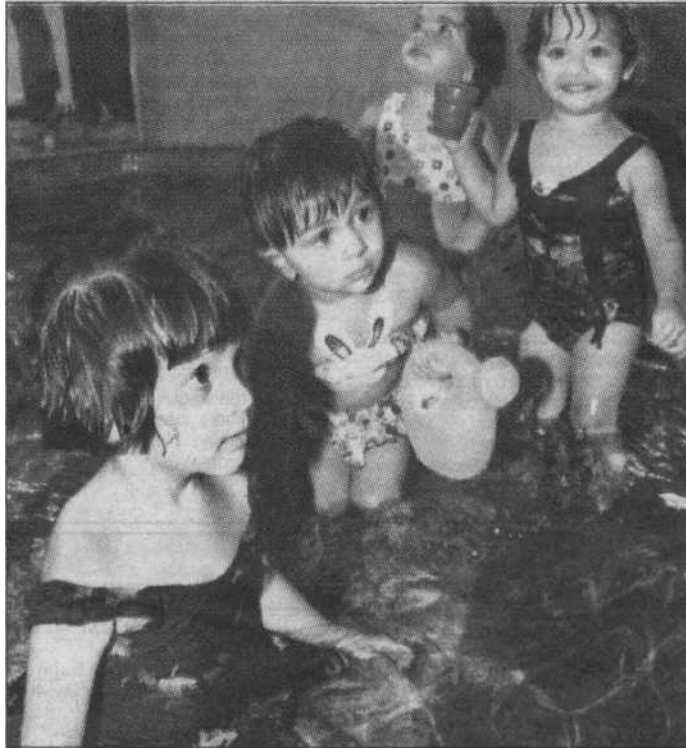
BY SUMEDHA RAIKAR-MHATRE

Mumbai, June 25: In this second part of the series on unregulated play-schools and nurseries in Mumbai, *The Asian Age* focuses on the objections raised by Early Childhood Care and Education experts against the commercialisation of the pre-school sector in Mumbai.

"A pre-school should be purely non-formal, with no element of competition, examination, and least of all admission pre-conditions," recommended the state-level Ram Joshi Committee on Early Childhood Education in 1995. The committee's recommendations formed the crux of the Pre-School Admission Act, which could however, not be passed due to severe opposition from educational institutions. Six years have passed thereafter, and the pre-school sector, particularly the fancy unregistered nurseries, continue to negate every concept evolved in the policy document advocating well-rounded non-competitive education for the vital early years.

To start with the beginning, the play-groups and nurseries admit children below two years of age, much to the concern of pediatricians and Early Childhood and Care experts. As Ms Nalini Chhugani, Mumbai president of the Indian Association for Pre-

INVESTIGATION-II LOST CHILDHOOD



SPLASH: Children at the play-school Just For Kids at Versova take a break in the splash pool. The school charges Rs 20,000 for two terms in a year. A photograph by Kedar Nene

school Education, also a member of the Ram Joshi committee says, "Any pediatrician would agree that children, however outwardly smart they may look, are not eligible for any structured environment before they turn three. But our pre-schools admit even one-year-old children. Neither the government nor the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation initiates any action against this blatant violation." Ms Chhugani laments the lack of governmental attention given to bodies like IAPE which oppose admissions for children below three years of age.

She further adds that it does not even need a pediatrician to realise that a toddler who has barely gained toilet-training, cannot and should not sit in a classroom. "All those pre-schools which claim that below-three children come to them without any force, are lying. Being a principal of Saifee Teachers' Training College and also being associated with a large number of play-schools, I know how much children regret going to schools. Fortunately for parents, children just stop crying after a while," she adds.

IAPE often conducts workshops for pre-school teachers, which throw light on the current trends in pre-primary education. For instance, it is seen that play-schools and nurseries, except for

those attached to full-fledged schools, lack trained personnel. Their teachers claim to have ECCEd diplomas, but they actually do only short-term courses. These teachers, even those employed in high-cost nurseries are usually under-paid. As a result, pre-school teaching does not become a specialised field of education. It is found that most of the pre-schools are actually converted residential flats, obviously leading to cramped classrooms. As Ms Chhugani puts it harshly, "This kind of education borders on child abuse. The most vital years of a child's life are wasted in small, closed rooms, which are away from clean, open spaces. Arid worst of all, parents pay high fees for this torture."

According to IAPE, pre-schools are used as extensions of the city's ill-equipped day-care industry. "Not just working parents, but also the mothers at home, look upon these play-schools as relief-giving centres. Parents conveniently conclude that children should be kept busy singing English (read only English) rhymes for at least two hours a day. But they do not know that irreparable harm is done to the child's brain in a crowded environment. Unfortunately, this harm does not show easily," Ms claims Poornima Contractor, IAPE honorary secretary and principal of Greenfields Nursery. She feels that day-care centres are much more preferable than play-schools in the case of working parents. "A day-care centre, even if it is ill-equipped, is an alternate home playing a social role. But play-groups have a very synthetic make-up. They do not provide a secure environment," she adds.

Ms Contractor has counselled many parents who are eager to admit their toddlers before they turn two. Her findings show that parents want their children to become "smart, outgoing and English-speaking" at the end of the year and at any cost. Many parents are ready to travel long distances due to their choice of a particular school. Very few parents speak in their mother-tongue with their children. "Parents have their own compulsions in this overly competitive city, where play-school managements equate education with sophisticated games, costly gadgetry and fancy fads," Ms Contractor claims, voicing her strong objection to the use of computers for pre-schoolers.

Professionals in the Early Childhood Education also feel that these unregulated hi-tech pre-schools also cut off children from the indigenous cultural ethos. Ms Joyeeta Sengupta, lecturer in two training colleges for pre-school teachers, feels strongly about the fly-by-night nurseries which follow foreign teaching models and aids. "While flaunting their foreign connection, they forget that teachers need the basic grounding and perspective of the Indian tradition. Ready-made manuals and syllabi imported from abroad cannot shape young minds."

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