

THE SARVODAYA SHANTI SENA (PEACE ARMY)

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Introduction

Formal school education is based on the assumption that children have to play a future role in society as useful citizens. Currently the children are to a large extent passive recipients of knowledge and obliged to acquire skills which are very often not relevant in the context of personal or social development. However, they should not be mere consumers of the social product but be conscious participants and accelerators of the process of change. To ensure this we have to develop alternative structures and strategies involving the entire community and the resources available within it. What children learn in school should bring about behavioural changes applied to real life situations, for example:

- (a) Health lessons should result in changes in health habits of the people in each home.
- (b) Agriculture lessons should be the basis of home gardening either individually or collectively bringing an additional income to the family.
- (c) Religion should have a practical expression in that children engage in social welfare activities in the school and its neighbourhood.
- (d) Concepts and skills realised through physical sciences should lead to the enrichment of their day to day life and the production of goods either as a hobby or for profit.
- (e) Children should play an active role in the protection of the environment.

Activities in school should be immediately purposeful. This brings up the question of resources. Resources within the school both human and material are limited both quantitatively and qualitatively. Hence we have to use community resources in conjunction with other government departments, voluntary organisations, the private business sector and knowledgeable and skilled individuals.

Learning involves the three major domains of cognition, psycho-motor skills and affective (emotive) development. Under the existing system of education they are made mutually exclusive and disconnected. They could be made to occur simultaneously if a strategy as detailed above is adopted. Doing, knowing and feeling occur simultaneously if children are involved in activities planned for the purpose. As regards

teaching itself, one could identify two primary methods: the banking system, and the problem-solving method. In the former, the children are passive recipients of knowledge. In the latter, they acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes simultaneously through a series of goal-directed activities which lead to a sense of personal fulfilment and self-realisation. Relevant activities could be developed on the basis of infra-personal development, in relation to the child as a member of the family, the school neighbourhood, the national community, and the international community. In each of these activities, the subject should be designed to fit the level of the physical and mental development of the child and should inculcate correct and relevant attitudes.

Although it is assumed that the free education system will ultimately reach out to every young learner and bring about equitable access to education, national surveys in Sri Lanka have repeatedly shown that many children do not enter the school system or even if they do, drop out early. Even the learning gained by being in school does not seem to throw much light on the future. So much so that even a successful learner often isolates himself from real life situations and the longer he stays in the system, the less able he is to relate to his environment.

The Shanti Sena (Peace Army) Programme of Sarvodaya is an attempt to give form and direction to the development oriented system of education, embracing all young people of school age who are currently in school or out of school. They act as catalysts directing their services and activities to all other age groups within the community.

The Sarvodaya Movement is striving to build a new person and through him a new village and a new world based on the Sarvodaya philosophy and its activities. As envisaged by the Leader of the Sarvodaya Movement, the ultimate aim is to provide every one with at least the "ten basic human needs" - environment, water, clothing, food, housing, health care, communication, fuel, education, spiritual and cultural needs. The Shanti Sena training and its action programme attempt to fulfil the building up of a new person. In this process the community is involved both as participants and beneficiaries.

Methodology

It is expected that through a sustained programme of training in Shanti Sena, it would be possible to widen the outlook of the Shanti Sena members, and to endow them with qualities of leadership, so as to enable them to create better villages and towns, and turn out bands of dependable workers who will persevere in their effort for the betterment of the rural and urban areas. The integration of Shanti Sena training techniques and service methods to already existing Shramadana and other techniques and methods of the Sarvodaya Movement, will undoubtedly and radically alter the old ways of thinking, to suit the new spirit and will serve as the creators of a new Sri Lanka. The following methodology is used.

Character Building

Training consists in enabling Shanti Sena Units to develop character and a keen sense of responsibility by the service they render to the people through the activities of their units. The units take responsibility for the building and maintenance of a clean and beautiful physical, social, emotional and mental environment. Special emphasis is given to the construction of soak-pits, manure pits, maintenance of roads and wells, assistance during national calamities like fires, cyclones and floods, organisation of religious feasts, festivals and cultural activities, and motivating people to understand and appreciate the real significance of their culture and religion.

Physical Development

This is done by the units meeting regularly, at least once a week, and working on a planned programme which includes games, shramadana, swimming and rescue training, camping, home gardening, nature expedition, soil conservation, tree planting and vigilance work.

Economic Improvement

Village units utilise adult education methods, to teach improved home-gardening, bee-keeping, collection of vegetable seeds for the seed bank programme, herbal nurseries and handicrafts.

Preventive Health

For the protection of health the Shanti Sena members are given an elementary knowledge of the common diseases and their prevention and cure, particularly through indigenous medicines prepared from locally obtained herbs. Nursing the sick, elementary first-aid in the event of snake-bites, and maintenance of village sanitation are part of the course.

Spiritual and Cultural

Shanti Sena Units organise regular meditational occasions and religious activities such as Sil Campaigns (Buddhist vows renewed on full moon days), "Bodhi Poojas", sermons and feasts. It is one of the important endeavours of the Shanti Sena units to revive folk dances and folk songs and encourage community singing and participation in drama performances.

Socio-civic Work

This is a very sensitive field of activity due to party politics. However, every effort is made to impart knowledge of the nature and functions of the Local Bodies, District Councils and Gramodaya bodies. A concerted effort is made through training camps, village link-up schemes and other activities to maintain the national unity of the people of Sri Lanka.

Organisation of the Programme

The initiative comes from the Youth Group or Shramadana Samithiya. All those who are 15 and above and who desire to derive the benefits of the Shanti Sena, band themselves as a Group which is divided into smaller units of not more than eleven for purposes of activity and training. Membership is open to both boys and girls.

At the initial training, a membership card is given. The initial training includes subjects such as principles, aims and methods of the Sarvodaya Movement, forms of meditation, environment conservation, etc.

The initiation ceremony is the next step in the organisational set-up. The member is expected to take a pledge of service and then the Membership badge is presented. This is followed up with proficiency training and it continues as an ongoing programme.

To ensure collective training and self-management, the leaders of units form themselves into a Leader's Council. To this council of leaders are co-opted personnel such as the Chairman of the Shramadana Samithi, Sarvodaya Village Organiser, the Religious Leaders of the village (the Buddhist Monk, Christian Priest) who function as advisers. The Leaders' Council is responsible for the planning and execution of work programme, training and service activities, and the discipline and finances of the group.

The Programme in Operation

All activities of the Shanti Sena are programmed and directed in a non-formal manner with a view to providing an educational alternative to the entire community and aim at mobilising the community for active participation at field level. The existing Sarvodaya organisational structure comprising the children's group, youth group, mothers' group, farmers' group and the general elders' group, forms the base through which activities are planned and implemented enlisting the co-operation and participation of all members of the community. The interaction thus created enables the community to learn from relevant experiences. Acting on the primary principle of "learn by doing", the Shanti Sena Youth Volunteers monitor goal-directed activities basically for the moral, spiritual, cultural and social development of the community. Participation in such programmes enables the participants to acquire the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for social well-being. It also provides them with the opportunity to play the role of an agent of change at the grass roots level.

Some of the service projects currently launched are briefly discussed below.

(a) First-Aid and Health-Care (Waidyadana Centre) in the village, is organised and operated by the members themselves. The first aid centre functions almost on a daily basis while the health programme is more comprehensive with periodical eye camps organised with the assistance of the Medical Officers and other experts.

(b) In the Health Programme, groups of two or three members share the responsibility for looking after 10 to 20 households. They assist each house-holder at an agreed time of the day to deal with his problem, to look after the sick and to render first aid.

The members help in keeping things inside and outside the house in an orderly manner and assist in maintaining the plants, nurseries, home-gardens, herbarium and compost pits. Cleanliness and neatness are emphasised.

(c) Hospital Service is looked upon as a most humane service. Patients in hospitals in the country are provided by the Shanti Sena with an organised service to meet their spiritual needs, and with measures to relieve them of mental pain and perhaps boredom.

(d) The National Amity Programme of the Shanti Sena is a special programme, designed to bring about unity among the Tamils in the North and the Sinhala people living on the rest of the island.

The Shanti Sena groups come into action in time of distress and during national disasters. Also, assistance is given at religious services and cultural activities.

The Unit Leaders are trained in techniques of leadership including group dynamics and conflict-resolving techniques, and in methods of organising and conducting proficiency service schemes for their members.

The Training Programme for Instructors in first aid, ayurveda home remedies, snake-bite, and in health and environmental conservation which is intensive and residential is conducted on a central as well as district basis, and normally lasts for one or two weeks. Practical training is given in the General Hospitals in the island and other Health Institutes. The training concludes with a special aptitude test for both theoretical and practical work.

For Shanti Sena members, training takes place in their own meeting grounds. Once a week the Instructors visit the village or the urban centre for conducting training. A booklet giving the syllabi for various subjects is made available to all the participants together with a training handbook.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The Shanti Sena Unit District Co-ordinators meet at the beginning of the year to draw up a target programme for their respective districts which is then made known to the units of the districts through the Unit Leaders' Councils.

The Shanti Sena Unit Leaders' Councils in the villages meet once a week for preparing programmes, discussing the methods for implementing the programme and evaluating the activities of the week. The Unit Leaders' Councils submit their reports at the end of the month to the Shanti Sena

District Co-ordinator with a copy to the National headquarters. On receipt of reports, an evaluation is made and wherever necessary visits are made to the units for guidance and assistance. These help to remedy any shortcomings in methodology and training.

Responsibilities of the Centre and Field Units

The Centre is responsible for assisting the Field Units mainly with the necessary expertise for training members. It may be necessary to contact experts and arrange for lecturers. In remote areas, where facilities are not available to obtain experts, special training courses have to be organised for which purpose it may be necessary to arrange transport and other facilities for the instructors. Another responsibility of the Centre is to provide the equipment necessary for training.

When such services as the Hospital Service, Waidyadana Service, Conservation Service, and Preventive Health Service have to be rendered it may be necessary to support the Units initially with materials, equipment and organisational assistance.

In the event of national disasters such as cyclones and floods, it will be necessary for the Shanti Sena Units to render help with rescue and rehabilitation services. The organisational responsibility may have to be taken by the Centre in providing transport and other facilities, and perhaps for co-ordination of the Rehabilitation Programme.

Conclusion

Non-formal alternatives in education as carried out by the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka have developed a harmonious linkage between all age groups, and between organisations in the state and the private sector. The multiple range of activities carried out are designed and monitored, primarily by mobilising each age group for co-ordinated development within the community. Inculcation of a correct attitude, impartation of knowledge and of development skills form the basic core of such programmes. The children's groups, youth groups, mothers' groups, farmers' groups and elders' groups though identified separately, merge together in the course of collective action for specific purposes. The services rendered flow from one group to the other in smooth collaboration, maintaining the social balance that is so vital for community development. The Sarvodaya Movement has from its very inception taken a non-political stand in its relations with the State while maintaining a strong and healthy co-ordination of all activities within. However, Sarvodaya continues to give every assistance to the efforts made by the State to alleviate the conditions under which the people, particularly the rural people live, provided that the measures taken by the State are consonant with the objects, ideals and methodology of the Movement. A major component of assistance is generally in the form of non-formal education programmes to create awareness and to inculcate correct and relevant attitudes in the minds of State extension workers and the members of the community.