

Balsena

Through its work in the city of Bhavnagar, Shaishav is committed to realising the basic rights of children, particularly the underprivileged. Balsena is the organisations flagship programme, an independent, child-run collective, and the first of its kind in Gujarat. Balsena enables children to experience the power of collective strength, take up issues they face, satisfy emotional needs, develop empathy for other children, and derive support from each other. It unites children, regardless of class, caste, gender, religion, or language. Shaishav acts as a facilitator to Balsena, with the aim of helping children evolve their own understanding of issues such as child labour, education, gender bias and communal prejudices, allowing them to become change makers in society.

Structure

All children aged between 6 and 18 are eligible for membership. Children become members by paying an entry fee of 21 rupees, and then pay fees of 5 rupees to take part in events such as study tours and picnics. Members are also required to sign a written agreement to follow the Balsena rules developed by the children. Every school and community where Shaishav works has a Balsena team. At present there are 60 teams (Balsena Points) spread across 18 schools and 42 communities, with a total membership of almost 2500 children.

Each team is split into two groups, one for children aged 6-12, and one for those aged 13-18. Children aged 13-15 are eligible to stand for the positions of Captain and Vice Captain for each team, while children aged 10-12 are eligible for the two core group positions per team. These positions are won through an election by the members of each Balsena team, and the elected representatives of all the teams make up the Balsena Council. The Council meets at monthly meetings and is the supreme decision making body of Balsena.

The Executive Committee is made up of 16 members; the current President and Vice-President, the previous years President and Vice-President, and elected members from Balsena's six different zones. Each zone will elect two members who should have at least three years membership and be at least 14 years old. The Executive Committee is there to enhance the collective leadership process and support the President and Vice-

Objectives of Balsena



- Bridge the inequality gap, and promote unity and solidarity between children
- Bring about qualitative changes in children, such as growth in confidence, sensitivity and the ability to speak their views
- Empower children by developing leadership qualities and life skills, allowing them to contribute to problem solving and decision making
- Increase their economic independence through a children's savings bank
- Increase levels of awareness on child rights among children and the community
- Encourage children's participation by providing a platform when they can raise issues related to child rights
- Strengthen the collective by increasing the membership of Balsena
- Involve parents and the community in programme activities

President. They meet more frequently than the Council and speed up the decision-making process. However, the final decision for all matters lies with the Council.

The President and Vice-President lead the Council and represent the whole of Balsena. They must have been members of the Executive Committee at some stage, have had at least four years membership, and be at least 15 years old. They are elected by the council and are responsible for guiding the overall direction of the Balsena programme, representing the collective to other organisations, building relationships with other NGOs, and attending and monitoring the activities of Balsena teams.

All elected positions are for one year only and previous holders cannot run for the same position again. There must be an equal representation of gender in all positions. If the President is a girl, the Vice-President must be a boy, and this is the same for Executive Committee members, Core Team members, Captains and Vice-Captains.

Programmes

Balsena members are involved in a range of different programmes, described below.

Savings Bank

The Savings Bank enables children to save money independently, giving them skills in financial responsibility and decision-making. This promotes a sense of economic independence and self-reliance. The minimum saving required is 5 rupees per week, approximately US\$0.10. To further encourage saving, Shaishav gives a gift to the individual who has saved the most, and the community with the most members. Money is deposited in a regular bank account in the name of Balsena, and every year Shaishav produces a progress report that is shared with all Savings Bank members. In total, approximately 1100 members have saved almost 650,000 rupees, over US\$14,000.

Book Bank

Many school-going children in both private and government schools do not have access to the educational material they need to complete their studies. It may be that schools are unable to provide books, that those provided are mainly textbooks rather than exercise books, or that children are simply unable to afford the books they need. There are now three book banks operating, allowing Balsena and Balghar members to borrow books for a week at a time. The banks are constantly being topped up with books donated from Balsena students who have completed their studies.

Adolescent Programme

The adolescent programme was developed from the need to provide girls with quality education on the issues they face during adolescence, and give them an opportunity to ask questions. Kishori Mandal (Adolescent Girls Club) was started in 2005, and was initially run by Shaishav. However, after receiving training from Shaishav staff, Balsena girls were able to lead the club activities in their communities. Topics covered include gender, equal rights, child marriage, friendship, sexual harassment, personal safety, and information on the physical, physiological and social changes during adolescence. The aim is to provide girls with the information they need, through discussions, films, games, and other activities. The programme has led to changes in the way that girls see themselves and their position in the family, and in society. Kishori Mandal members are part of the Girls International Forum, an international network focusing on the rights of



adolescent girls. In 2006, five girls attended a GIF event in the US, the only participants from India. Recently it was decided that boys in the community were in need of the same type of support, and thus Kishor Mandal was established in 2010. In 2011, there were over 350 children taking part in the Adolescent Programme.

Child Line

The Indian Government, in conjunction with local organisations, created a helpline to provide emergency support to children across India. Shaishav have set up the line in Bhavnagar, and Balsena children have played an important role in spreading awareness of the line. The Child Line provides a 24-hour, toll free service for children in crisis, and in need of care and protection.

Events and Training

Balsena members are involved with many different events and training programmes throughout the year. The annual Vacation Camp keeps children engaged in learning, and out of the workforce during the vacation period. During the camp, children play games and are involved in activities in which senior children play the role of facilitators. These camps are followed by a drive to increase enrolment in schools before the start of term. Regular Leadership Camps give training on topics such as leadership, event planning, team work, and child rights. Children who are actively and regularly participating in Balsena are given intensive training at residential camps, on topics such as child rights, life skills, leadership development, and teambuilding, through games, role-playing, stories, songs, films, group discussions and exercises.

In collaboration with schools, Shaishav organises educational themed fairs called Balmelas. Each Balmela has a theme, such as science, geography, creativity, or child rights. In each classroom a different themed activity is conducted, and children rotate between classrooms. The prime focus of Balmela is on experiential learning and active participation of children. Shaishav has developed innovative experiments for Balmela that have been adopted in all primary schools in Gujarat.

The Balsena Council organises a monthly Friendship Camp, a four hour event with generally 200-250 participants, and a different theme for each month. The Council also organises Sunday programmes, which range from making friendship bracelets, to quizzes and festival celebrations. In addition, each Balsena team has a monthly meeting in which they organise their own independent programmes. Finally, Balsena holds an annual function, where all members have the opportunity to get together and participate in activities. The function includes a child rights rally, educational and creative activities, presentations on the work of Balsena, songs, and the election of a new President and Vice President.

Linking Children

Once a year, Shaishav organises a state level convention to promote networking among children and organisations, and to spread the message of Balsena. In previous years these conventions have brought children together from all across Gujarat, strengthening ties between children living in different areas and coming from different castes and cultures. The 2005 convention involved over 2000 children from 15 different districts, while more recent conventions have been more focused on specific issues with a more select set of participants. The 2007 convention focused on adolescent girls, and 90 girls from 17 organisations participated. In 2008, Shaishav organised a national consultation titled "Learning Together; Moving Ahead". 95 children from 16 children's collectives in 8 different states participated. It was the first such attempt to bring different children's collectives together on one platform and was a great success. In 2009, Balsena

children visited 42 different villages in the district of Bhavnagar to gain a better understanding of the livelihoods that other children face. They met other children from a variety of different backgrounds, as well as parents, teachers, Anganwadi (pre-school) workers, village leaders and others who are influencing the lives of children in the areas.

Tarunsena

Once graduating from Balsena at age 18, members have the opportunity to join Tarunsena, a group dedicated to young adults. The collective has approximately 60 members, who are working together to tackle children's and community issues, as well as providing guidance and support for Balsena. Tarunsena is open to all youths, whether or not they were a member of Balsena.

Involving the Community

Shaishav closely collaborates with the communities where we intervene. In order to involve society on a larger scale, Shaishav formed the community support forums Lok Samarthan Manch and Baldost Manch. Lok Samarthan Manch, literally "people's support forum", is comprised of adults belonging to the same underprivileged communities that Shaishav works in. Baldost Manch, "forum of children's friends", is made up of enlightened citizens of Bhavnagar who wish to contribute to the local child rights movement. Women constitute an important part of both groups. We are also in the process of establishing Area Committees, where representatives of Balsena, Tarunsena, Lok Samarthan Manch and Baldost Manch form executive bodies to plan and direct local action in different communities. These forums further enhance the collective strength of the child rights movement, and help provide a child friendly environment.

Since its creation, Balsena has successfully increased awareness of child rights and child labour in Bhavnagar and the surrounding communities. It has helped empower children to take charge of their own lives, and has enabled them to further spread the concepts and ideas that Shaishav and Balsena are based on. In the coming years, Shaishav hopes to further expand the reach of Balsena, spreading the ideas, concepts, and messages of the collective at local, national, and international levels. Through sharing what we have learnt with other organisations, there is the potential for much wider change.

Impacts & Achievements



- More than 10,000 out-of-school children have been admitted into mainstream schooling
- Unity and solidarity have been demonstrated between Balsena children
- Children show greater confidence, sensitivity, and a greater ability to speak their views
- Children have started to organise their own activities independently
- The concepts of Balsena and child participation are spreading to other parts of the state and country
- Balsena takes an active role in raising community issues
- Members successfully campaigned for a new high school in Bhavnagar's largest slum
- Children take an active role in decision making and problem solving in their communities
- Child rights awareness is increasing among children and in the community
- Parents of Balsena children are taking an active role in programme activities