

## DIGNITY EARNED DELICIOUSLY

*Darshanbhai and Savitaben have a beautiful fourteen-year-old daughter named Arpita (names changed to protect privacy). She is different from other children and does not like to interact much with people. When we first went for a visit to their place to meet Arpita, she had 'secluded herself' in a room. Her parents said she is very shy, whenever they have guests or relatives coming over, this is how she behaves. We did not get to interact much with her on that day, but we kept visiting the house to make ourselves familiar with Arpita. After some more conversations and inquiry, we came to know that Arpita had developed this behaviour out of habit. Due to her condition, Arpita did not know how to behave in a social setup. Suddenly she would start talking and interrupt an ongoing conversation or take off her clothes on a whim which became a cause of embarrassment for the parents. They did not know how to handle this situation, so they did what they thought best; take Arpita in a separate room and save themselves from the humiliation. They were not bad parents, they simply wanted to save themselves and their daughter from the awkwardness of the situation. So, every time someone visited their house, Arpita was taken in the other room which gradually became a habit; she started isolating herself whenever she saw a new person. Arpita has Down Syndrome.*

*In yet another incident, the mother of a mentally challenged Tabassum, who was the youngest of her four children, would mash all the food in a mixer and feed her. She did not have the patience or energy to wait for Tabassum to be in a good mood to eat, but she was also worried that her daughter would go hungry if not fed the right food at the right time. As a result of this, Tabassum never learnt to eat on her own and her jaw bones became stiff. The child had to undergo a long occupational therapy to make her jaw muscles and bones strong enough to chew.*

At Prabhat we have many children, especially girls whose existing mental framework has been affected by such experiences. We have observed how these experiences impact their overall sense of wellbeing. A couple of other such incidents where parents felt humiliated and disappointed with their girl child, challenged us to change these children's stories and design something that would highlight their abilities rather than focus on their disability. We also observed that when both parents were working, they would give some money to the child to buy a snack and eat. The packet food consisting of dry chips, or a similar fried item would satisfy the child's taste but not their hunger. As a result of this, there were a lot of skin and other health issues that children faced. It is a constant attempt of the Prabhat team to design programs and initiatives that give our children a life of dignity and equity. We decided to observe these children's interest areas once they started coming to the Centre.



Children spend roughly around 5 to 6 hours at the Prabhat Centre. The day is divided into different activities and during the break, teachers serve the children a healthy and filling meal which is made in the Prabhat kitchen. Children were also involved in the process of preparation of this meal. From peeling to chopping to washing the vegetables based on the ability, skill and mood of the child, the tasks were assigned. Initially it was just a fun exercise that loosely

focused on working on their pincer skills, identification of fruits vegetables etc. Children did these activities playfully, without any particular expectation from the teacher. We observed that Arpita and a couple of other children showed a keen interest in doing the kitchen chores; they would volunteer to do various tasks like serving food, assist in making tea, cutting vegetables etc. and did them well too. This sparked a novel idea. What if the kitchen becomes a resource to build self-esteem in Arpita and other children like her?



In 2015, we re-imagined our kitchen as a space that gave dignity and respect to our children. We discussed and designed certain recipes in a way that the entire process of cooking a meal would become a learning experience for the children. Teachers demonstrated and taught children how to wash vegetables, cut them carefully, peel them properly etc. Simple recipes like tea and lemonade making became instant hits! Children loved getting involved in various activities. For the older girls, teachers also started working on simple skills like serving water to guests without spilling, making tea using all ingredients in appropriate proportions, making a roti in round shape etc. As a part of practice, role play was conducted where teachers and a few students became guests and some of them became the hosts. Feedback was given to the hosts about the taste, quantity and service. Similarly, feedback was given to the guest (students) about how to dress, behave, sit, talk etc. Children enjoyed this role play and took it as a game of ghar-ghar that young children play at home.



At times themes were set for the role-play for e.g organising and attending a birthday party. Teachers discussed various aspects of a birthday party with the children again from the point of view of the guest as well as the host. Making a different kind of recipe for e.g a bhel or a chaat with a juice was introduced as a part of the party theme along with discussions around

decorations, music, games, wearing a clean dress, combing hair properly, welcoming the guests etc. on the other hand the guests were taught how to make a birthday card, means of transport to commute to the hosts place, how to greet, wish, behave etc. Over the course of a month all the aspects of a 'Birthday Party' were discussed and practiced. In the last week of the month, a mock birthday celebration was conducted

All activities at Prabhat are designed keeping in mind the 'Power of 9' i.e the 9 key skills that we aim to develop in all children viz; gross and fine motor skills, cognitive and sensory skills, language and communication skills, pre-vocational, socialization, mobility and self-help skills. This one idea paved the way to enhancing all these skills and integrating a lot of concepts which otherwise were taught in isolation. A simple process of lemon juice or bhel making included learning names of different ingredients, learning measurement and proportion along with sensorial experiences of taste, smell, colour. Children started learning the names of different vegetables, fruits dry spices etc. They also learnt the difference between the taste, shape, colour, and texture of raw and cooked food. The wholesome meals became a part of their regular diet, due to which a lot of health problems related to food started reducing.



Parents appreciated the efforts of the teachers saying now our children are asking for vegetables during supper and are happily eating home cooked food instead of the usual packet food they used to eat earlier. The Prabhat kitchen now became a happening place of the Centre. Along with cooking and serving, our older children started focusing on looking presentable by dressing well and combing their hair. They learnt how to place the plates, cups or glasses in a tray and serve guests. They got appreciated for their work by the younger buddies and teachers which built a great sense of pride in the young girls.

This skill was now started reflecting in their homes too. Parents were pleasantly surprised to see their daughters, who earlier did not even know how to sit, talk or dress, were now serving water and making tea for guests. They were no longer an object of pity and chagrin, instead they had become a sense of pride for their family and had built a strong sense of confidence in themselves. An otherwise taken for granted space like a kitchen, had transformed the lives of young children of Prabhat and their families for good.