

Estate Chronicles: 'Ayya Kottai', our local creche

By [Ravindran Raman Kutty](#) - May 14, 2023 @ 7:00am



Parents who sent their children to the creche in the writer's estate — not the one in the picture — were required to provide a mattress, together with the child's milk, hot water and food. - NSTP file pic

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Situated opposite my house was the *ayya kottai* or estate crèche. In today's world it is called a play school or nursery.

When I opened my window, I would have a beautiful view of the crèche. This was where babies and young children were brought for the day when their parents went to tap rubber.

The creche was a single-storey terrace house, measuring about 6 metres by 15 metres. It had a sink with water supply, but no toilet. It had no rooms, but boasted a large play area that had been concreted over to ensure it was clean and safe. Inside, there was a 15cm-high wooden platform covering half the floor. It was mainly for the babies, toddlers and children to sleep on.

The crèche was managed by three nannies or *ayammas*, as we called them. Puvayee *patti*, the most jovial one, sang and joked with an abundance of humour; Bibi *patti* was pleasant and soft-spoken; and another *patti* (*grandmother*), whose name I fail to recall, spoke in Telegu all the time.

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Parents who sent their children there were required to provide their own mattress, mat or a spring cot, together with the child's milk, hot water and food. The estate management would supply condensed milk as a substitute for breastmilk.

Usually, it would be the mothers who dropped off their little ones at the crèche — baby in one hand, a basket with a mat, thermos flask and milk in the other. Some would bring a *sarong* as a cot attached to a coil spring provided by the crèche.

About 20 children between the ages of 2 months and 6 years were housed here. In the wee hours, I would hear mothers dropping off their children.

For some, dropping off a sleeping child was quick and easy, but some children would make it very difficult and there would be tearful scenarios in the cold morning air.

Rest assured, the *ayammas* would be there to receive and coax the child in order to help the poor mothers go off to work with a less heavy heart.

The task of the *ayammas* were tedious and exhausting, but they understood the responsibility; they would care for the little ones like hawks guarding their precious eggs.

Their job was made more difficult due to the range of age groups and the many things that could happen to different children all at the same time.

This crèche had electricity supply in the morning only from 5am to 7am. It had one round candescent lightbulb providing light amidst the dusky and indistinct darkness of the chilly hours of the dawn.

The little ones would be dropped off between 6am and 6.30am, their eyelids still droopy. The *ayammas* would gently receive them from their mothers and put them down on the raised wooden platform to continue their slumber till the skies were brighter.

At around 8.30am, you could hear more of their gleeful screams and shouts; it was fun watching them run about within the fenced crèche in a safe and secure environment.

Breakfast was between 9.10am and 10am, followed by more playing and laughing. There were no toys or electronic gadgets, but the children were happy being together under the loving but watchful eyes of the *ayammas*. Lunch was at noon. Food was shared and everyone would be fed by the *ayammas* from the same plate as there were so many of them.

Frequently, there would be minor cuts and bruises, as were expected when you have many little ones running among one another, but none would go untreated by the *ayammas*.

The *ayammas* would wash and clean them if they had soiled themselves, joke with those who laughed, soothe those who cried.

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Between 12.30pm and 2pm, mothers and sometimes fathers would come by to pick up their little ones. How their hearts would melt when they saw their children happy and healthy.

My cousin Mani, also known as Sam, grew up in the crèche. Puvayee patti was his neighbour, and he loved going there as he had many friends.

The crèche was a wonderful way of helping young parents in the estate take care of their young ones while they were off at work tapping rubber.

However, it would have been much better if it had its own toilet. Also, those days, none of the children wore disposable diapers; they wore cloth napkins that had to be washed thoroughly whenever they soiled themselves. I have always been in awe of the *ayammas* who had to wash so many soiled napkins at various times of the day.

I miss Puvayee patti, Bibi patti and Ayyamma patti. You would all certainly be in the realm of the creator, for you are blessed for your divine duties of caring for the most innocent of beings in the estate with all your heart.

The creche had contributed immensely to the overall wellbeing of the estate workers. I never knew its significance, until reminiscing about the past, sitting on my work table,

I can understand the mechanics and function of the creche and importantly, the role of the *ayammas*. I never had the opportunity to be cared for in the creche though, as my eldest sister Pathmavathi was the person behind my progress.

I miss those moments watching the children and their antics, especially in the morning...

The next instalment of the Estate Chronicles will be published in a fortnight

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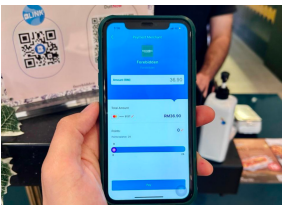
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