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**FROM SAPLING TO A TREE
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By Staff Reporter

On a small playground in the compound of a Municipal School near Pune Railway Station, every evening one sees a group of school children playing all sorts of games and performing exercises. A noticeable feature of the scene is tremendous enthusiasm among the children, between the age group of 10 to 15, coupled with self-discipline. That is "Swaroopwardhini", an organisation devoted to all round development of school children, particularly from the poor or lower income group of the society. A sapling planted in 1979 has today grown into a big tree and the organisation is moving into its own building on February 29.

With a modest beginning of just 12 students in 1979, Swa-Roop Wardhini today has three branches in different parts of the city and a band of about 15-20 dedicated workers handling more than 200 students in these "after school activities", which include one hour of sports followed by an hour of lessons into English, Maths and Science.

It was initiated by a retired school Head-master along with his friend (who want to remain anonymous), after taking an inspiration from leadership development camps conducted by Jnana

Prabodhini. Considering that school children from lower strata of the society were not only deprived of good learning facilities but also extra-curricular activities, a need was felt to make them available such opportunity and to channelise their strength in a proper way. Short of such facilities, children lagged behind in their classes and took to bad ways.

Swa-Roop Wardhinee, after going from school to school in the beginning, brought some students under its roof and made a virtue transformation. The workers of the organization have to narrate such instances galore. A student after overcoming an adverse situation in his house, secured 97 percent marks in 12th standard and got admission for engineering. Another student bagged the gold medal in the three states together in an N.C.C. organized essay contest, while yet another got a job as clerk in the corporation after his father's death and was promoted as a section officer within three years.

A member also narrated a case of a boy who, when he joined the Swa-Roop Wardhini, used to be quite arrogant and hot tempered. So much so, that he moved around with a belt of razor blades

and used to swing at anyone opposing him. He was, however, not driven out nor was he ever asked to stop coming to classes and the same boy, due to continued efforts of all, walked away with a prize of "ideal boy" in the tenth standard of his school.

A boy who was almost on the verge of nervous break-down due to his mother's death and his father's taking to drugs, was brought to Swa-Roop Wardhini and went ahead to become a top ranker in his school.

This has been made possible by personal rapport of members with the students as well as with their parents. Many times students' domestic background-poverty, squabbles between parents or drug addictions, leads children to frustrations or taking to bad ways. The Swa-Roop Wardhini workers, therefore, make it a point to visit the homes of two or three students everyday to know their domestic problems and try to solve them. The confidence reposed by parents in the workers is so much that they come on their own to seek advice on things such as marriage proposals, jobs or to seek financial help.

The secret of the success really lies in the way the students are handled at "Swa-Roop Wardhini", with love, confidence and total openness, which is contrary to the environment they face in their regular schools and homes, which is of total neglect and indifference. That is the reason why the students even after attending 8 hours of regular school, don't miss the Swa-Roop Wardhini activity and are soon to be bubbling with energy and gusto. So much so, that in order to encourage

them to secure more marks, when a condition was put in a batch that those getting less than 70 percent marks in their exams would be discontinued. The students worked so hard that all of them secured more than 70 percent marks.

This is because, as a member explained, they feel more at ease, confident and uninhibited while attending these classes. Occasionally, students are also exposed to happenings in the world around by arranging lectures of experts on various subjects. In addition they avail of supplementary diet twice a week, regular medical check-up, and school fees, text books, uniforms to needy students.

With a meagre 50 paise per month fee still continued, the organization depends entirely on donations and voluntary contributions. And it has found that the donations are also not difficult to come by. They have touched the marks of Rs. 18 lakhs until this year. Surprisingly most of the donors have preferred to remain to anonymous. They have not so far accepted a grant from the state government because it would mean a lot of unnecessary controls which would inhibit their work.

The organisation's new building will house a gymnasium, a library, a day-care centre for the benefit of the children of working parents and class of "Alcoholic Anonymous" for prevention of drug addiction.

Finally, the aims of all these efforts has been, "if you attend children they are a national wealth, if you don't they are a national waste." ● ● ●