

*Article published in Maharashtra Herald, Pune
of January 5, 1986.*

HOPE FULFILLED :

"SWAROOP WARDHINEE"

- Pushpa Chari

Words are often inadequate to capture experience, particularly a deeply moving one. Pune, the city of Tilak, Phule and Pandita Ramabai, with its long tradition of education and social uplift stretching to contemporary commitment, should have prepared me, but I will confess that my encounter with "Swaroop Wardhini" activities and students would best be summed up as 'I came, I saw and was humbled'.

By the humane vision of Mr. K. L. Patwardhan, whose one man crusade has resulted in "Swaroop Wardhini" and his band of self-less workers, some of whom have left well-paid jobs to dedicate themselves to the cause of the self enrichment and growth of bright, under privileged children from socially and economically backward homes.

By the depth of the endeavor itself which draws out the potential of each child in body, mind and persona by giving him a disciplined multi-pronged training in character-building, achievement motivation,

social responsibility and a spirit of sharing, giving and caring.

By the spontaneous selfworth of the students themselves, all drawn from very low income backgrounds with its attendant problems, all academically bright with an I. Q. of 120 or more and all imputed with a sense of social awareness. I spoke to one of them, a 90 percent himself, who had helped a blind student secure 71 percent in the S. S. C. examination, by diligently coaching him for a whole year. Another had donated to "Swaroop Wardhini" 40 percent of his earnings as a sales boy of Diwali crackers; yet another had returned the Rs. 500/- given to him for Diwali by "Swaroop Wardhini", saying that there were more needy boys deserving of cash. Altruism ? Generosity ? No, the boys merely replicate the spirit of service which is the reason d'etre of "Wardhini...."

Mr. K. L. Patwardhan, founder and chairman of "Wardhini" as it is known, is a picture of the spare academician (he is a former

headmaster) but is moved to heights of passion when discussing his cause. As are his dedicated helpers, some of whom V. N. Date, S.P. Patwardhan and Kunti Muzumdar - I had the pleasure of meeting. "Society", says, K. L. Patwardhan goes all out to help the physically handicapped, but neglects the bright potential of children from poor, socially and economically under-privileged homes, some of whom face problems of acute poverty, neglect, drunkenness and illiteracy in their home environment. Our basic idea is to inculcate character-building by giving these talented youngsters a healthy physical, mental and emotional environment in which to 'grow' to their full potential. We aim at making them patriotic, socially responsible as well as, naturally, to nurture their academic brilliance....."

And so "Wardhini" was born in 1979 as an experiment in after-school "schooling, growth and development", with a modest beginning of 12 students chosen on the basis of I. Q. tests. The tasks of going to various schools and slums, identifying the students and persuading the parents was, and continues to be, a challenge. But that the message of "hope fulfilled"

has spread is seen in the strength of the student body which numbers 120 today. More, there are two flourishing branches of "Wardhini" today, one operating from the Ravindra Tagore Vidyalaya and another from Modern School, Pashan, whose 30 students are drawn from the hutments of the Pune University area. "Wardhini" has a staff of 20, all highly qualified teachers and social workers most of who work in an honorary capacity. It depends entirely on donations from the public, and charges each of its students a fee of 50 paise per month.

"Wardhini" activities commence at 6.15 every evening with an hour of rigorous physical training, organized games, group activities and the singing of patriotic songs. This is followed by intensive coaching in Maths, English and Science, by instructors who stress on the 'how' and 'why' of acquiring know-ledge. On Saturdays and Sundays, special motivational training programmes are arranged. On normal days classes in elocution, handwriting, public speaking and general knowledge are also held. This regimen of sports and academics follows a strict three - hour schedule with no holidays.

Emotional guidance and counselling to students is also an important part of "Wardhini" activity and the activists visit the homes of students to apprise themselves of their problems. Regular P.T.A. meetings are also held.

"Feedback and achievements?" asks Shri Patwardhan. "It has been nothing short of fantastic! In the S.S. C. examinations from '83 to '85', out of 36 regular boys of ours who appeared for the exam, 25 secured more than 75 percent, the highest being 89%. Academics apart, many of them participate in social work in their own neighborhood, help out youngster students and participate in such activities as distributing sweets during Diwali time at orphans and hospitals. And the sweets are bought from their own savings! "Do you know two of our boys were invited to Lonavala in '83 to conduct camps for 'Balgram', a home for underprivileged boys? As for their self confidence and demeanour, you can judge for yourself..."

I did. The youngsters I spoke to were spontaneous, articulate, aware of what the "Wardhini" has taught them and what they in turn owe to society. I met, among others, a

budding engineer, a first year Arts student, a laconic young poet and an academic 'over achiever' who admits that before he 'found' "Wardhini" he had spent much of his time roaming the 'gullies' looking for fights! Incredible!! But the "Wardhini" activists demur, to them such 'transformation' is the logical outcome of their caring, humane philosophy, a measure of concern which society owes to all its young.

Yet, as the 'Wardhini' activists tell you, their work has barely begun and there's no room for complacency. Foremost in their agenda - now that land has been acquired - is the construction of their own premises which will house a gymnasium, a creche for hutment dwellers' children and a family welfare centre. Finance is their biggest hurdle, but 'Wardhini' has the same faith in the generosity of the public as it has in its students. And, what, I asked one of the wardhini workers, is the sweetest music to her ears? Pat comes the answer...the reaction of one of the parents at a P.T.A. meeting, "if the 'Wardhini' had been there when I was young, my entire life would have been different". ● ● ●