



# Lessons from the Field: Running Crèches at Azim Premji Foundation

Shankar K

For many working parents living in a tribal hamlet, a village, or a busy city, the daily challenge is always about how they will manage with their child. Without reliable childcare, a lot of young children end up tagging along to their parent's work sites, or getting left with an older sibling, or just spending the day somewhere that isn't really built for a small child with no real care, safety, or proper food. This is something we need to pay closer attention to so we can ensure every young child gets safe, caring, and age-appropriate support during the years that matter most.

The Government of India has tried to close that gap through Anganwadi-cum-Crèches, which offer day-care for exactly this reason. We've run close to 2,000 crèches through our partners across rural, tribal, and urban areas, and along the way we've learned some important lessons about delivering quality childcare on the ground. We think a lot of it will be useful for policymakers, practitioners, and anyone working to grow the Anganwadi-cum-Crèche system nationally.

## Why crèches matter

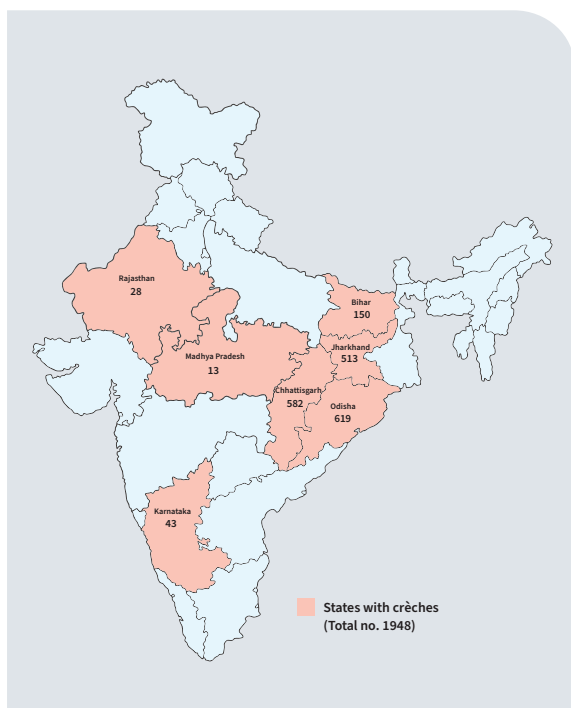
A crèche, at its core, is a safe and structured space where a community looks after its youngest children, from the age of seven months to three

years. When it's done right, the kids get proper care, good food, health check-ins, and time to play, all of which shapes how they grow. There is also a second benefit - parents, especially mothers, know their child is safe, they can go to work and contribute to their family income. The problem is that there aren't enough public crèches right now, and demand is way higher than supply.



## What we learnt from running crèches

We started this programme in Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh in 2023. Since then, we have expanded to Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. We also run crèches in informal city settlements, starting with Bengaluru and Raipur. Right now, we support close to 2,000 crèches, and we're still growing.



Everything we do is guided by one goal: improving nutrition for children at greatest risk. We provide a safe and nurturing space, three hot cooked meals a day, including a daily egg, and support early identification of malnutrition through routine health screenings, referrals, and follow-ups. But food and safety are just part of the impact, as a good crèche also helps more mothers to take up work, opens up easier access to government entitlements and ensures better long-term health for the children.

## Safety first

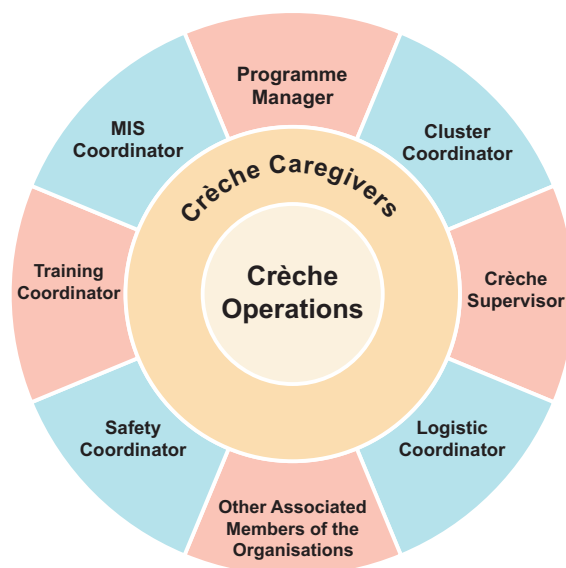
Safety is built into everything we do, from how we choose a building to how often we run audits. It is a shared responsibility that brings together caregivers, supervisors, staff, and the entire community. To maintain high standards

of care and safety, each crèche has a maximum enrolment of 20 children, supported by two trained caregivers. Having two caregivers present is completely non-negotiable, even during nap times when the children are asleep. We are equally vigilant about the physical environment, using safety gates to completely separate kitchens from play areas to prevent accidents, while always keeping our doors open for mothers to drop in at any time to breastfeed or check on their children. Reinforcing these daily measures, safety coordinators conduct regular visits and run monthly audits against a clear checklist to ensure we never lose sight of these safety standards.

## Adequate staffing

Managing these crèches effectively requires a structured, layered team designed for high accountability. At the ground level, each crèche operates with two trained caregivers. Supervision is scaled efficiently, with one supervisor managing every ten crèches and one cluster coordinator overseeing roughly forty.

Supporting this frontline team is a dedicated field staff specialising in Management Information System (MIS), training, logistics, safety, and programme management. Operating close to the ground ensures that the staff can conduct frequent site visits, provide regular mentoring, and resolve operational issues immediately to maintain strict standards across the board.



## Care and nutrition

Every child receives nutritious food daily, consisting of a morning snack like sattua, a hot lunch of khichdi with vegetables, greens, and a boiled egg, and an evening snack such as sooji or ragi halwa. Beyond meals, caregivers keep children engaged with lullabies, storytelling, rhymes, and age-appropriate play materials.



Growth is also monitored closely by checking weight (monthly) and height (quarterly). Supervisors log these metrics digitally through

our Shishu Ghar app to track critical indicators like stunting, wasting, and growth faltering, ensuring that children at risk receive immediate extra support at the crèche or a timely referral to the nearest health facility.

We work hand in hand with frontline public health workers, including ASHAs, ANMs, and Anganwadi Workers, to ensure that children receive routine immunisations, deworming, iron and folic acid supplements, Vitamin A, and Take-Home Rations. For the most critical cases of severe malnutrition, we coordinate directly with Primary and Community Health Centres to secure urgent medical attention, facilitating admissions to Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres or Malnutrition Treatment Centres when necessary.

## Practice-based training

Caregivers are the heart of this entire initiative, which is why we have established clear, practical guidelines and practices covering childcare, nutrition, hygiene, safety, and positive child engagement. Translating these practices into concrete steps ensures consistent quality across every crèche while making it simple for supervisors to quickly spot and fix any gaps.

To maintain these standards, new caregivers undergo an initial five-day training programme that combines four days of hands-on practice training and one day of an operational observation, followed by a mandatory full-day refresher session every month. Our operational staff undergo their own specialised orientations, and the entire team comes together twice a year for deeper capacity-building sessions to ensure everyone stays sharp.

## Community support

We have learnt firsthand that a crèche only succeeds in the long-term if the community truly feels a sense of ownership, which cannot be manufactured overnight. It happens when local communities are actively involved in core decisions such as selecting the location and hiring the staff.

By building these crèches with the community rather than just for them, major choices are channeled through Gram Sabha or Aam Sabha

meetings, and ongoing engagement is maintained through dedicated crèche committees. This deep sense of ownership often translates into tangible support, with community members stepping in to build fences, paint walls, and donate fresh vegetables for the kitchen, ensuring the crèche becomes a permanent, trusted fixture in their lives.



## A robust technology system

Scaling up the crèches made it obvious that data management is integral to the overall effectiveness of the programme. With over 30,000 children enrolled, we handle millions of data points tracking attendance, growth measurements, and health referrals.

To manage this, our Shishu Ghar app provides customised dashboards tailored directly to field needs, allowing us to identify malnourished children, analyse how attendance impacts nutrition, view individual growth charts, and monitor long-term trends across groups. Because these dashboards are accessible at the crèche, block, district, and State levels, our teams can make critical operational decisions based on real-time evidence rather than guesswork.

Ultimately, this data-driven approach has transformed our efficiency by sharpening our monitoring, speeding up our decision-making,

and ensuring immediate action whenever a child needs help.

## Our key recommendations

Drawing from our extensive experience managing crèches across diverse geographies, we believe several critical priorities must be emphasised -

### Build in rigorous safety systems

Establish clear standards, conduct regular audits, employ dedicated safety staff, provide ongoing training, and maintain a comprehensive emergency plan with a mechanism to resolve issues immediately.

### Standardise operational processes

Create uniform guidelines for childcare, nutrition, hygiene, engagement, safety, and caregiver interactions to ensure that quality remains consistent across every single location.

### Invest deeply in caregivers

Ensure every crèche has at least two trained caregivers to maintain a ratio of one caregiver for every ten children, adding more staff if enrolment exceeds fifteen, while keeping training continuous rather than a one-time event.

### Structure robust supervision

Deploy a layered oversight system consisting of one supervisor for every ten crèches and one cluster coordinator for every forty, backed by dedicated personnel handling training, safety, logistics, and data.

### Secure genuine community involvement

Engage local communities in hiring, upkeep, and oversight through regular Gram Sabha or Aam Sabha meetings, while actively encouraging mothers to visit for breastfeeding and ongoing connection.

### Integrate with the public health system

Link every crèche directly to its nearest health facility to establish a clear referral pathway for routine growth monitoring, malnutrition management, and timely immunisations.

### Invest in advanced data systems

Utilise robust digital tools and real-time

dashboards to track enrolment, attendance, growth metrics, and supervisory inputs seamlessly across the entire network.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, a high-quality crèche relies entirely on the ecosystem built around it. It requires a deep, intentional investment in people, safety, health, data, and the surrounding community. As Anganwadi-cum-Crèches expand across the country, these foundational elements will determine whether children receive the care they deserve. While implementation will naturally

vary from State to State, the core principles remain absolute.

For us, this journey remains a work in progress. New challenges in staffing, safety, and coordination emerge constantly, pushing us to learn, adapt, and refine our approach every day. None of these insights represents a final or perfect answer; rather, they are simply the lessons we have gathered so far from doing the real work on the ground, and we will continue evolving to meet the needs of the children we serve.



**Shankar K** is a Programme Manager - Crèche Initiative at Azim Premji Foundation, Bengaluru. He is part of the Central Programme Management team, where he supports the crèche operations across multiple States.