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"A true teacher is conscious of the attention that he or she is paying to each and every child"

I was born in 1926 and grew up in the atmosphere of the freedom struggle. As a child of ten I used to visit the Gujarat Vidyapith to read the works of Netaji Bose, Sharadbabu and Tagore. I also used to attend meetings addressed by Pandit Nehru. I completed my schooling in 1941 in Ahmedabad, just after I had got married. Soon afterwards I became a primary teacher in 1101 village of Himatnagar, Sabarkantha district. My initial aim was to bring out the good that is there in every child. In 1947 I went to Sadra, which was under princely rule. I did not like the work there and resigned.

Making mothers literate for enrolment of girls

I then joined as a teacher in Bavla in Ahmedabad district. My principal there, Ms. Jivkorben, inspired me with her willingness to support me and her readiness to teach me. At that time the enrolment of children from the scheduled castes was very poor. My husband and I used to visit the *Harijanvas* at night and contact the parents individually. I had to face social ostracism on account of this work but it did not bother me. Jivkorben was very supportive and that was enough for me. I felt that the illiteracy of the parents might be a reason for the poor demand for education. I decided to start with literacy classes for the mothers. However, the response of the women was not encouraging. This was in 1948. I then started an informal women's group which had singing bhajans and informal discussions as the only activities. This worked and I managed to establish good rapport with the women. The village was dominated by a particular caste group which did not like my activities. They threatened my husband and myself. Then there was a stone-throwing incident. This was too much and I confronted the village leaders. The problem was resolved and we were allowed to work in peace. By the end of the first year seven girls had enrolled. The next year the number increased and then there was no looking back. I stayed in this village till I went for my teachers' training course in 1956.

Even here, the students were not receiving their regular stipend. We fought and succeeded in setting things right. Soon after my training, there was a serious famine. Inspired by the work of Vinobha Bhave, we went around the unaffected villages and gave an earthen pot to each family. The family was supposed to put some grain into the pot everyday. One large pot was kept in our school. Children used to bring small quantities of grain for the pot. After a few weeks we had collected a sizeable quantity of grain and clothes for the affected people.

In 1959 I was transferred to Ravalpura in Sabarkantha district. The village was dominated by the scheduled castes and the trader caste. The enrolment was poor, and as I had done earlier, I started with the mothers. This time I took up adult education classes in a well-organised manner. I linked enrolment of girls in the primary school with this effort and was successful. The adult education classes took in older girls also and as soon as they

were literate I enrolled them in the primary school at the appropriate level. Many such girls went on to take up various jobs, including teaching. Even today some of them write to me regularly. Along with the educational activities, I started various cultural programmes through the school. I had been trained earlier in drama and dance forms and I used this training to good effect. I tried to involve the entire village in this effort and tried to convey the message that the school was a common institution to which all castes and strata had a right. When I felt this message was being understood, I started a fund-raising campaign for the school. The enrolment had increased and we needed more rooms. The community responded and the two-room school became a nine-room school.

Developing the school

In 1971 I was transferred to a small town, Modasa. The school was situated in a rubbish dump and was crumbling. It had classes one to four. Attendance was poor; it was unreasonable to expect children to be attracted to such a place. There were three other schools in different parts of the town. They were better off. I decided to do something about the physical environment of the school. I was told by many people that "nobody would listen to primary teachers. I went to a leading medical practitioner of the town who could spare me 30 minutes of his time. I took him to the school, pointed out the rubbish and asked him how he could take care of children's health on the one hand and tolerate the school on the other. He understood immediately and mobilised more than two lakhs of rupees from private donors and a cooperative bank. I got the place prepared properly and built a well-equipped six room school with a nice garden. I also mobilised resources on my own from various donors and added another six rooms.

Wherever I have worked I have prepared good school gardens. For the Modasa school I collected saplings from various places and involved the teachers in the management of the garden. Irrigation of the saplings was always a problem given the water shortage, and the teachers worked out a rotation system for bringing water to the school. The garden also gave me an opportunity to involve the leading citizens of the town in the school. I used to organise tree planting functions in which they were asked to plant the saplings. Many of them behaved as if this is my institution. The goodwill that was thus generated came in useful when the school needed resources.

I found that children were very interested in planting trees and caring for them. Many of them brought various kinds of shrubs and decorative plants from their localities.

Small business activities and educational funds

I also established a reserve fund, the income from which could be used for taking children out on excursions and picnics. Such a fund took care of the problem of asking parents to contribute every time. Also, some children were not in a position to take part in such activities on account of financial difficulties. I also taught the children how to make quality doormats. I divided the students into working groups and each group took care of its own activities. The mats were sold through periodic exhibitions held in the school. Each group operated its own bank account and the revenue from the sales was deposited

in the bank accounts. The net income was used for student welfare activities. I linked this activity to learning about basic accounts and banking procedures. I also initiated similar activities like producing wall hangings. While planning such activities, I always used to work backwards, starting from the benefits - material and learning - to be derived by the children. This way I could communicate to everyone else an understanding of the activity from its roots, so to say.

I also encouraged teachers to prepare many teaching aids themselves. Many models like the human body parts and skeletal system were prepared this way. We also designed moulds from which toys could be made by the students.

Even after retirement I have kept myself busy. I have been involved in initiating an informal organisation for retired people. Our members meet regularly and discuss various issues of importance to us. I think it is important to keep ourselves mentally alert. I am also involved in various social service activities.

I think women teachers face serious problems in working and taking care of their children. Support systems for such people need to be evolved. One lesson I have learned is that the teacher is a role model for children who are very impressionable. When I was a young teacher I once changed my hairstyle. The next day I found that all the girls had copied my hairstyle. From that day I was careful to observe my behaviour and see what effect it had on the children. I also learned that it is very easy for a teacher to neglect certain children, for instance physically disabled children. A true teacher is conscious of the attention that he or she is paying to each and every child. Fundamentally, education should be value-oriented and it should help students towards independence.