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When I was in school, my ambition was to attend college and then become a film artiste. However, my performance in the school examinations was not good. My family's economic status was also difficult and I could not study further. One of my relatives, who was a deputy collector at that time, felt that I had the potential to become a good teacher. He arranged for my admission to the teacher-training course. I underwent two years training in Bhavnagar. I consider this period very significant since it gave my life a definite direction. After training, Ms. Usha Patel, my teacher, made me promise to be a good teacher and to this day I have kept that promise in mind.

The Pipal experience

I first went to Pipal school in Valbhipur, in 1972. It was a one-teacher school. When Shri Manubhai Pancholi was the minister of education in Saurashtra he had introduced a recess of four hours during the day to enable children to do some housework. During those four hours, I used to visit neighbouring villages to discuss with other teachers the use of stories and poems as teaching aids. They ridiculed me and I was struck by the cynicism with which they looked upon their work. But even today I treat these teachers as my gurus since they did teach me something. Since support from my fellow teachers was not forthcoming, I decided to concentrate on improving the physical environment of the Pipal school. One wall of the school had cracked and was about to collapse. I requested the sarpanch to support me with funds. Unfortunately, the community to which I belong was perceived as not reliable when it came to money matters. The sarpanch refused. I then put in some money of my own and the contingency grant given to the teachers; and with my own labour filled up the cracks, whitewashed the school and pasted calendars on the walls. The sarpanch was surprised and granted me Rs. 200.

Lakhanka: Education and development

I was transferred to a nearby village, Lakhanka, in 1974. I spent a fruitful period of 15 years in this village. The Lakhanka school was also a one-teacher school. When I first saw the school building I was depressed. It was in very bad shape. I immediately decided to improve the physical environment of the school. I felt that children should feel enthusiastic about coming to school. They should feel happy about going to a pleasant place, a place which is perhaps even better than their houses.

I first went to Surat to meet some of my friends who were working as diamond cutters. I explained the problems of the school to them. They were suspicious about the use to

which the money was going to be put. To overcome these suspicions I promised to return their money if, during their visit to the village during the Diwali vacation, they did not find anything concrete. I even offered to give a guarantee on stamp paper. They then helped me. The villagers were also suspicious of my initiative because they had bad experiences with teachers in the past. When they saw me buying bricks and sand, they gave me Rs. 800 for roofing material. Once the immediate repairs were done I started thinking about how to improve the infrastructure of the school. If more children had to come to school, one room would not be sufficient. This is where cultural and religious traditions came in handy as tools for resource mobilisation.

Cultural traditions and fund raising

There is a tradition in our area that whenever a marriage party comes to the village the family members of the bride or bridegroom donate for a common cause like temple maintenance. I decided to use this tradition to raise funds for the school. Whenever a marriage party arrived in the village, I prepared tea for the entire party. After serving tea I spoke to them about primary education as a common cause, equivalent to praying to God. I then requested them to donate liberally for the school and for the children. Since the occasion was an auspicious one, the family members were most happy to contribute. This way I built up a school fund.

Religious traditions are also strong in our area. People love to listen to *Ram kathas*. I obtained a set of *katha* audio cassettes prepared by a well-known religious leader and organised a function in the school. People could attend the daylong function and listen to the stories from the epics, but they had to donate for education. I collected Rs. 8,000. In addition, a businessman liked the idea and contributed Rs. 10,000. I took this money to the Taluka Development Officer and asked him to match the amount so that the village could build additional rooms for its school. He did not have any money. I then approached the District Development Officer (DDO) who sanctioned an ad hoc grant. The government stipulated that a contract had to be awarded for the construction. I did not like this system since the scope for corruption is high. The village sarpanch, who in the meanwhile had seen my efforts to build up school-community relationships offered a way out. He was a licensed contractor. He would obtain the contract but put me in charge of the building work. This was an example of teacher-village cooperation for the good of the school. While the construction was going on the DDO wanted to visit the school. He did not come during the time he was supposed to visit and so I left the place. When he reached the place, the junior officials were angry that I was not present. But the DDO had trusted me and told his officials that my absence was not important, but the work was important. He was happy with the work and felt that the real credit should go not to the teacher, but to the village for building up such a healthy relationship with the teacher. The building was inaugurated by a religious leader. With the help of the Hari Om Ashram and the government I built an additional room in the school. In 1986, this school received the best school award

Organisation of youth for the school

The village youth used to gather near the village temple which was dedicated to lord Ram (Raghunandan). This inspired me to channel their energies into a formal youth club. I called this the Raghunandan Seva Parivar. My aim was to integrate the youth of all castes and religious factions. I consider this a great achievement. The members, about 80 of them, used to meet every fortnight. Each member contributed Rs. 2 every month to the school. Whenever the school needed small amounts of money, they worked at night, especially on Fridays since Saturday was a holiday. They then handed over the wages so earned to the school. The compound wall, water facilities etc. were built this way. The artisans of the village were also brought into the schoolwork. For instance, the children of *Kunbars* (potters) did not participate in schooling initially. Once they started coming to school, they told their parents: "Our teacher does good work for us, can't we do something in return? The artisans then undertook plastering work and brick making.

Developmental activities

There were no toilets for women in the village. This was a challenge for the youth club. *Ram Navami* is an important festival which the youth celebrate by visiting their friends in other villages. One year, we decided to celebrate the festival differently. We asked the villagers to contribute their labour on that day and requested two masons to provide their skills free of cost. In one day we had built the toilets. The government supplied a diesel engine and pipelines for the water supply. Soon the pipeline was extended to the entire village.

Tree planting is an area which is important for improving the environment of the school. I involved the village people in planting about 500 trees around the school. The children were given the responsibility of nurturing the trees. They brought water for the plants. Today the trees are a pleasant sight. The elders told me that there was a Hanuman temple near the village which used to be a protected patch of forest with religious significance. With the disappearance of the sadhus, the village had not maintained the forest and it had become wasteland. I decided to rejuvenate this patch. With the help of the youth we planted trees like babool, neem and other trees which are mildly salt tolerant and of economic value. Water was in short supply. I had read about the drip irrigation system. I approached a private agency which was in the drip irrigation business. They supplied the system at cost. Once a few initial problems were overcome, the system worked well. The trees are quite big now. The forest has become a picnic spot for the children of surrounding villages. It gives me great satisfaction to see the forest being used like this. I visit the forest every two months. Interestingly, the forest department wanted to take it over. I politely told them to consider it as their own *upvan* and let the present system continue.

The forest needs maintenance, and therefore, funds. I organised a *Ram katha* function and mobilised Rs. 20,000 - not as donations but as loans from individuals of the village. The amount was invested and the interest is being used for maintenance work. The youth club manages the affairs and the harvesting of produce should enable the repayment of the loans. For instance, one of the intended aims was to produce babool tooth sticks for the village. This has been realised.

We established a tradition in the village that on every *Ekadashi* day the village will get together and decide what cultural and developmental activities need to be taken up. Till today the sarpanch has been elected by consensus. Whenever any political party comes for electioneering, the sarpanch politely tells them that the village has the ability to judge the candidates and vote accordingly. All disputes are also settled internally. In my fifteen years there, we did not have a single court case. When the literacy drive was on I took it up seriously and ran five centres. For this effort, the school was presented a colour TV set by the government.

I consider these developmental activities, which I initiated outside school hours, very important in achieving my educational objectives. A teacher cannot remain aloof from the village community. Even if the village does not cooperate initially, it is up to the teacher to build healthy school-community relationships. This realisation has been the motivation for my involvement in village affairs. Educational performance will improve when the village gets involved in the school.

In the beginning in lakhanka there were only 12 children. After five years all children of school-going age were attending school. I also encouraged the children who were below school-going age to accompany their older siblings to school. I used to observe these children and if I sensed someone had potential, I allowed them to sit inside the classroom and play.

Initially, the *vaghri and harijan* children did not participate in the school. I decided that all castes needed to receive schooling. I kept track of such children and presented pen and reading material sets to them in order to motivate them to attend school. The teacher as to take such initiatives to create a mood for schooling among sections of society which have traditionally been outside school.

Valbhipur: Manas Primary School

From lakhanka I went to Valbhipur, my native place. I was located on the outskirts of the town inhabited mostly by the socially and economically backward castes. The school was in a rented room and had only 25 students. I conducted a survey of the locality and found about 150 children of school-going age who had never been to school. The school was an unattractive place, and to reach the other schools in the town, the children had to walk a long distance and, more importantly, cross a highway. I was determined to build a good school which would be appreciated by the children. I decided to construct on a larger scale than I had attempted till then since I found that it pays in the long run. I negotiated with the *panchayat* for a 2162 square yard plot that was lying unutilised, but had been earmarked for storage godowns. The *Panchayat* agreed, but laid down a condition that I build a school within two years. If I did not succeed, then the land would be used for other purposes.

I asked a local architect to work on a voluntary basis on the school project. The total cost of the school building and furniture-was fixed at Rs. 475,000. I was confident of

rnobilising this amount since it was for the cause of children. I never feel ashamed about asking for donations for the school. I believe in the transparency of my operations. I also believe that every paisa of a donor should be utilised efficiently. This gives me and the school a moral standing which can be tapped in case needs arise in the future. I formed a trust with people of integrity, to coordinate the building activity. I approached the religious leader who had helped me earlier. He was very appreciative of my work. During a tour abroad, he dedicated some of his discourses to my school and sent me Rs. 1 00,000. A wealthy donor wanted to set up a child-care centre. I met him and explained my work. I collected another Rs. 100,000 from him. A non-resident Indian donated a substantial sum. A friend in distant Surat city donated money for the furniture and other fittings. I also rnobilised fans, chairs from friends and donors. I kept all the donors informed of the progress of the school. I used to send photographs to the major donors.

The inauguration of the construction work of the school was carried out by my former friends of the youth club of Lakhanka, the Raghunandan Seva Parivar. The school was ready in early 1991, well before the deadline set by the *Panchayat*. The trust formally handed over the school to the government in the presence of the District Collector. In a significant move, the trust was dissolved at the same meeting, since it had served its purpose. During the meeting I also demanded two teachers for the school. I was granted this wish and was also allowed to select the teachers whom I knew were good. The school was named Manas school, after the *Ramcharit Manas*.

Over the last three years, I have enrolled about 150 children who had never seen a school. At present there are 396 children studying in classes 1 to 4, an improvement from the 25 children attending in 1989. In the Manas school I introduced a system of evaluation sheets. Each child has a card which is filled every month. The information recorded includes alphabet skills, reading and writing skills, attendance. On the basis of these sheets I group children according to their performance so that I can assign the best teacher to the weakest group.

My inspiration and beliefs

The inspiration for my efforts came from the bad conditions of the primary schools in the areas where I have worked. Children should feel welcomed in the schools. Whenever I travelled, I always visited the primary schools in order to learn from them. Early in my career I visited a school in Malpara in Bhavnagar district. The answers given by the class 1 children surprised and impressed me. I found out that the reason for their good performance was a language primer developed by a teacher of the school, Shri Prataprai Trivedi. That visit was an eye opener for me. I learned that developing an affectionate relationship with children, cultivating patience and developing a reflective capability are important. During my career I have taught classes 1 to 4, but I have always had a special regard for class 1 children since they are at an important stage of their lives. In my school, children can come at any time. One should not impose discipline in time matters. I have not had any problems with the inspectors with such flexible timings.

The quality of education-the close relationship with children and the physical environment of the school, attract and retain children. I was always flexible in the case of the girls of the labouring classes, because they had to combine work at home with their study. I used to allow them to attend in the afternoon, or for a part of the school time. This was bound to affect their learning: therefore, I made special efforts to teach them outside school hours.

Textbooks, writing materials and breakfast are very important items contributing to the children's motivation. These are always in short supply and I have mobilised these items from donors.

I believe in liberating the potential of the children through efforts to make them participate in craft work, drawing, charts and puppets. I developed systems for group work and identified bright children who could teach weak students. I have developed stories for children. Here my training with CCRT in puppetry helped. I have prepared stories on eating properly and road discipline by using animals as characters. This was motivated by a road accident in which a girl was killed while crossing the highway.

About seven schools have been inspired by my efforts to emphasise the physical environment. The charts which I had prepared have been copied by some teachers. Many teachers visit my school. The educational inspectors of Banaskantha district visited my school and were impressed. One of my teacher colleagues has prepared a story on environment. I try to be in touch with teachers who have done outstanding work. I know some of the good teachers in my area but we do not have a common platform where we can meet and share our views.

I am very satisfied with my 22 years in teaching. I believe that an ethical life has its rewards. I derive inspiration from a wood carver whom I once met. He was an outstanding artist. Sometimes, rarely, he had to cut a live tree for his work. He told me that whenever he went to do this, he first paid his respects to the tree, then he apologised for having to take away the wood but promised to use it productively. He then gave an undertaking to the tree that he would plant 25 saplings to compensate for the sacrifice it was making. This was his way of living ethically. As a teacher I try to treat children with love and provide them a pleasant physical environment which they can enjoy.