

JASUBHAI M. PATEL

*. "High schools are provided with benches for seating their students.
I find it hard to believe that the tender backs of little children attending primary school
are stronger"*

I would like to be known as someone who used his personal hobbies to improve the quality of primary education. I have always endeavoured to increase the knowledge base of children through my collections of stamps (Indian and foreign), envelopes, post cards, inland letters, coins and currency notes.

Stamp collections as teaching aids

During my childhood, when I was in class 1 or 2, I used to paste torn off calendar leaves on to the plain windows of my house. Indian stamps also found a place on my windows. This was before 1947. Stamp collection emerged as a natural sequel. My father was a farmer and I had to help him during the day. But in the evenings I used to review my collection of Indian stamps and dream of enlarging it. My parents did not care for my fascination with stamps. When I asked for small amounts of money for stamps they thought I was wasting their money. I had to lie that this work would fetch me a lot of money in the future. This satisfied them. I cannot forget the indirect inspiration that they always provided. Unfortunately they died before I could receive the state and national best teacher awards.

When I became a teacher in 1958 I came into contact with a person who knew English. He wrote to some people in Europe who sent me some foreign stamps. My salary at that time was about Rs. 60 a month and I used to spend a lot of money on notebooks for the stamps, and buying old stamps. One day it struck me that my knowledge about other countries was increasing. But what about the children who were under me? Shouldn't they also benefit from my pleasure? My stamps were of various types and they had to be organised if they were to be of educational value.

I classified them according to different themes and pasted them on post-card size pieces of cardboard. Each card contained brief descriptions of the stamps and the themes which were culled from various reference books. The cards had to be small because children could not handle large cards with ease. Some of the topics which I have covered over the years include freedom fighters, poets, writers, social reformers, saints, animals, birds, butterflies and other natural life, mother and child, workers, great personalities, Presidents, Indian dances, parts of the body, railways, aeroplanes, planets, boats, Gandhiji, Nehru, housing, women, geometry, and many others. I also prepared a special section on achievements in outer space. Sometimes I classified the stamps according to their shapes. My special collections include Indian leaders and a comparative set of stamps from India, England and America.

Initially I asked the students to just go through the cards. They found them very

interesting. They were delighted to touch the stamps and read the information I had written down. There was an element of novelty and fun in such experiments. They could travel all around the world at no cost. Later on I started using the cards as supplementary teaching aids to illustrate regular subjects. I generally use my stamps in all classes. The themes used most often are the human body, animals and birds, and household items in the lower primary classes, and cultural events, saints, reformers, freedom movement, geographical landmarks and historical events in the upper primary. I am now planning to teach the subject of environment through stamps. I have formulated my own syllabus and teaching methodology for this purpose.

Children have been motivated to collect stamps on their own and I have seen them deriving personal satisfaction from the fact that they could create something on their own. Whenever I obtained new collections we had lecture sessions on the depictions on the stamps. The curiosity of children increased.

Extension of the hobby

I have extended the stamp collection to include the following:

- A range of Indian postcards, from the earliest post cards issued to the latest. Likewise I prepared a collection of postal envelopes, from the earliest times to the present.
- Another collection included ancient and modern coins of India and some foreign countries.
- An album of Indian currency notes and foreign currency notes, old and new.

Every one has supported me-my students, family, colleagues, friends. Friends with similar interests have helped me in adding to my collections. However, my relatively weak economic status has made it difficult for me to maintain my hobbies, which are quite expensive. I compensate by spending my holidays and sometimes many hours during the night in using waste paper and other material to make albums. My son helps in the cataloguing and in maintaining newspaper clippings which are of relevance to the stamps in my collection. Some people ask me, "What is the use of this activity?" "Joy of working is my standard answer. Of late many teachers have been coming to see my hobbies in operation in the school. This is my greatest reward. My regret is that I have not been able to motivate many teachers who have been working with me to take up similar activities. I have also exhibited my collection of stamps on achievements in space at various science fairs. I have even displayed my collection of coins and stamps in an agricultural fair.

Libraries and education

Another aspect of education which motivates me is the poor condition of libraries. In 1963 I was transferred to Bandhni village. There was nothing like a library. I held discussions with *panchayat* leaders and worked out ways of establishing a good library. It took us ten years to set up a well-functioning library. At this stage we decided to mobilise a fund since the credibility of the library had been established. We formed a trust in 1974 and raised Rs. 70,000 from within the village and from members of the village who had migrated. I was associated with this library for 26 years before the pressure of my other library-related activities forced me to give up the work. I also served as secretary of the Petlad Taluka library. Some of the other libraries with which I am associated include the Petlad Children's library, Library Association, District Library, Taluka Teachers' library.

Essays and songs

I have found that my regular participation in essay writing competitions for teachers has helped in my personal development. I was winner for six consecutive years at the district level and thrice at state level. These essays have never been used by others. I wanted to publish this that teachers and children could read them, but economic constraints have prevented me from doing so till now. I write free verse. A manuscript *Vedna na Van* (Forest of Suffering) is ready but has not found any publisher. I have also prepared a collection of children's songs (Talo Tamko). I have just convinced a publisher to accept a collection of prayer songs which is aimed at enabling children to learn correct pronunciation. My publication efforts are meant to be non-profit ventures. I have also attempted to reach out to other teachers. Between 1963 and 1975 I worked as secretary of our teacher study circle meetings. During these twelve years I was involved in informal training of teachers.

Promoting enrolment in a problem village

In 1981 I was posted in a village called Jedvapura. This was supposed to be a problem village. I surveyed the village and found out that only 48 percent of the children of school-going age were attending school. There were many social problems in the village. I was saddened by the low importance attached to the education of girls. I felt that there was no communication between the parents and the school. My fellow teachers and I worked out a plan for contacting every parent regularly with the purpose of creating an environment for education. The idea was to meet the regularly, at frequent intervals, so that our concern got communicated to them. This plan succeeded and during the next year the enrolment crossed 75 percent. After this initial breakthrough there were no further problems. Given the success in this village, and helped by the policy of establishing schools where there were children, seven new schools with Classes 1 and 2 were started at the same time in the surrounding villages. I saw this development positively and told my fellow teachers to keep in mind the proverb 'blind leaders can only lead their followers into the well'. We worked hard on the quality of education we provided. People of the surrounding area noticed our enrolments increased. They also set up a school fund, each parent contributing according to his or her capacity. I used this fund for buying teaching material which was essential to attract children of deprived

communities to school.

Are tender backs stronger?

I feel angry with the way primary education is treated in our country. A few non-governmental agencies run well-endowed schools, but they are the exceptions. The majority of the public-funded schools are neglected. This neglect, and low status, extend to the primary school teacher. I think this is a general failing in our society - the closer the worker is to the grassroots and the people, lower the status.

One cannot ignore the sorry state of most primary school buildings and the educational facilities they contain. Some schools contain television sets, but to what extent are they used for educational purposes? The question one hears most often is who is going to pay the electricity bills? The mid-day meal scheme is a good idea. But are our institutions able to run it honestly and efficiently? Our public funding is biased in favour of high schools and higher education. High schools are provided with benches for seating their students. I find it hard to believe that the tender backs of little children attending primary school are stronger.

End note

I have two more years before I retire. My 36 years of teaching have been very satisfying. Throughout I have been motivated by just one dictum: do full justice to your profession. Time has always been in short supply and doing the various things that I have done has demanded a great deal of attention to planning my time. I would like to do my doctoral studies, if it is possible, on my innovations. After retirement, I plan to visit a developed country with the financial help of some of my former students and well wishers, in order to study the primary schools there.