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"As a teacher the only question I ask myself is a very simple one: How can I make my students' life better? "

My parents were seasonal labourers who eked out a precarious existence. Both of them were illiterate and had known only exploitation. In the year 1952 there was a special enrolment campaign for bringing scheduled caste children into school. My father may have been illiterate, but he was wise. He did not want me to suffer the fate of most of my community members and sent me to school. I joined the school and almost dropped out soon after. My parents did not allow me to do so. The initial years were hard, especially since there were six members in our family. When I reached class 8, I was married. I completed my secondary schooling in 1963 and had to work for some time. In 1966 I joined the Sarvodaya Ashram at Shapur for my teachers' training course. It was here that I was exposed to social work, especially to the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1969 I was appointed as a teacher.

Local biodiversity and science fairs

Soon I was transferred to a remote school in the Gir forest. This school was handled by another teacher and myself. It had standards 1 to 5. The total number of children was only 54. All of them were from extremely poor families, mainly of the *Koli* caste. Initially I used stories, songs and pictures to make children attend school. Then I heard of a science fair that was going to be organised at the district level. I thought hard as to how a small school like mine could do something different and unique in order to gain some recognition. I thought this kind of recognition would attract children to the school. I had observed the people collecting fuel wood from the forests and discarding the thorns. It struck me that the local people would definitely be knowledgeable about the variety of spines that grew in that locality. I asked the children to gather all kinds of spines and thorns with the help of their parents. We organised the collection systematically and presented an interesting exhibition at the fair. It was well received and I was requested to repeat the performance at the state level. This initiative motivated the children; it also provoked the parents into taking an interest in the school since it had received recognition from outside.

Drama and education of girls

I also initiated the practice of using skits and drama to promote the cause of education of girls. These efforts were successful since they matched with the cultural experiences of the village people. The people went one-step further- they performed the drama in public and mobilised money for this cause.

Learn and earn initiatives

In 1974 I was transferred to my native place, Makhiyala. This school is a very old school

established in 1886. I felt that though the school was so old, it did not have a cultural life of its own. I started a scheme of 'learn and earn' for the students. Saplings and flowers were raised in the school compound itself. These were sold by the students who earned something and in the process generated some funds for the school. Castor was another crop we tried out in the school compound. We tried out a nursery experiment in the school compound for two years. The experiment went on for two years and the sale of saplings generated more than Rs. 3000. The money earned from all these activities was used to buy furniture, fans, cupboards and educational aids. We also made toys in the school from low-cost materials and sold them. Once I became principal of the school my administrative workload increased. However, I saw to it that we participated in every science fair. As a result of such initiatives the interest of the children in school went up. The children also created an awareness about schooling in their parents. For example, when some parents asked their children to look after their labour work the children expressed anxiety about missing school. This made the parents realise what was going on in the school. They reacted positively and even started contributing resources for the school activities.

Developing the stakes of the village in the school

The year 1986 was the centenary year of the school. We organised a one-day function to which former students, the villagers and departmental officials were invited. The school provided lunch for all the children on that day. There were many cultural programmes as well. This function put the school and village relationship on a firm footing. The people saw that the teachers had the interest of the children in mind. As a goodwill gesture they immediately levelled the undulating school compound and supplied sand for spreading on the open areas. The family of a teacher who had died just then constructed a water tank in the school in his memory. The *sarpanch* constructed a platform in the school compound. After a hundred years, the village-school relationship suddenly became very functional. This healthy partnership has continued. The village now has an active stake in the school development activities. Such a stake can help the village *panchayat* move beyond its current role in supporting the administration of primary education into improving the quality of education.

I have also extended my work, subject to constraints of time, to social welfare services. At present I am educating illiterates through the volunteers of the literacy mission. We move around in the villages and use prayers and folk songs to create a positive environment for literacy. My school has hosted various camps organised by other organisations. I also initiated *Sanchayika*, a scheme to motivate children to save. The money saved is spent only on books and uniforms.

We had planted 150 trees in our school compound out of which only about 80 survived. However, the act of planting served to demonstrate to the children that they could plant trees in their fields and around their wells. In 1984 my daughter passed away at a young age. In the waste land that serves as our burial ground I planted four trees at the corners of her grave. I levelled the land around this spot, planted some more trees and made a small green patch. The village people observed me and copied my actions. The village

panchayat also took note and constructed bathrooms for people who take part in funeral processions.

I have formed an informal organisation of my own community members in order to share the expenses we incur during social events. I collected five rupees from each family every month and once a sizeable amount was ready I bought a mandap, utensils, musical instruments etc. These are used by all the families on all occasions - auspicious or inauspicious.

Motivation

As a teacher the only question I ask myself is a very simple one: 'How can I make my students' life better? Sometimes the answers I provide may not be acceptable to all. Two incidents should clarify this point. I had compiled a prayer book, borrowing from many different religions and sources. The essence of the book was good conduct. I used my own money to print 1000 copies and started distributing it to various schools. Some people objected. I had to explain the purpose behind the publication. Now the publication is in great demand and many private schools have ordered copies for their students. Recently I initiated a community cleaning campaign in which the children had to help. Some parents objected and did not want their wards to help in cleaning. I met with these parents and convinced them that there was nothing derogatory in the cleaning work.

I feel that primary education is the base for the future career of children. In other words the primary schools decide the fate of the students. When those children who proceed to various occupations or higher education come and share their feelings, love and best wishes with us I feel that I have done my duty. Many of my former students are still in touch with me and have promised to help the school whenever they are called upon to do so. Personally, I am convinced that education of girls is what is going to be of vital social significance. I am satisfied with my work in this area. Almost all the girls in our village have a high school education and about 15 percent go to college.

I feel that creativity is a necessary quality in teachers. It enables a teacher to provide a complete education and overcome the standardisation of the textbooks. Village schools are also far behind urban schools in terms of the environment in which they operate, the infrastructure available and parental involvement in educating children. Teachers have to be enthusiastic, creative and persuasive. They will have to depend on activities like music, sports, picnics, drawings etc. to make education challenging and relevant in the rural areas that I have worked in. However, teachers work according to their own understanding of teaching. Some are interested in creative work; others are interested in traditional classroom pedagogy. Teachers are not gaining much out of the present system of in-service training. More thought needs to be given to this aspect. Since our school is a pay-centre school the schools associated with us have adopted many of the innovations introduced by us.

As a principal I always believed that one should create an environment in which teachers

can express their thoughts without any hesitation. In return I have received good support from staff. I gave up my post to work as an ordinary teacher and to concentrate on the educational activities I would like to take up in the future. When I received the state best teacher award I decided not to take any part of the money for myself. The amount was small but I donated part of it to a few local organisations working for social change. I formed a trust in memory of my daughter. I am planning to raise more resources for an *ashramshala* for the deprived children of our society.

The code of conduct that I have adopted is to find joy in giving. In front of my house there is a temple of Shri Ramdev Pir. Many poor people from other villages visit this temple. My doors are always open to them - for a snack and tea.