

## **RAMANLAL B. SONI**

*"The world is rapidly changing and teachers should be ready to learn all the time. That is professionalism"*

### **Early years: From cynicism to optimism**

I was married at a very young age. My wife became a school teacher in 1959. I decided to follow her example. This was very unconventional in those days. I became a teacher in 1960. My family's poor economic status also influenced my decision to find employment as a school teacher. I belong to an artisan caste and my father was a goldsmith. There wasn't much work. He used to give himself hair cuts to save on the expenses. To remind myself of the struggle of those bad days, even today, I cut my own hair. My early days as a teacher were very humiliating. Many of my friends told me that I had 'caught the wrong bus'. I knew that I had wanted to join the armed forces or become a doctor, but had had taken up this job under economic compulsions. I felt that I had made a mistake. The problem that was constantly on my mind was this: life is like a mathematical problem; any mistake at any step and the answer could go wrong. In mathematics one gets the opportunity to correct that step. In life one does not get a second chance. The derogatory way in which people used to call me 'master' added to my father my first guru. I went to him and blamed him for making me a teacher. He listened calmly and asked me a question, Are you interested in a religious pilgrimage without temples and without doing special favours, yoga, fasting? I said yes. He then told me, God, in the form of children appears before you everyday. Chat with them. But first you need to develop required *drishti* (way of looking at things). This will enable you to help others. At that moment all my embarrassment at being a primary teacher left me. I realised that if one is embarrassed about one's profession, there is no joy in working. I also came across a famous saying of Iqbal: if one has the three swords of firm decision making, capacity for tireless effort and love for all, that person can win any battle in life. I realised I had to become an optimist. I had been listening to cynics. I decided to change my 'antennae'.

Class one children have been the most important source of motivation for me. I taught class 1 for the first 15 years of my career. Many teachers consider Class 1 less important. I thought differently. When the time for allotment of classes came, I used to tell my principal that I would be ready to teach the class rejected by the others.

### **Teaching numbers 1 to 100**

While teaching young children I found they made simple mistakes in writing double-digit numbers. Very often the order of the numbers was reversed. For instance, when asked to write 26, the children wrote 62. The practice of following the spoken word also led to difficulties in understanding the rules for calling out and writing two-digit numbers ending in nine. For instance, the words for the number 29 mean 30 less one. This problem is peculiar to languages like Hindi and Gujarati. The English system of pronouncing numbers is a lot easier. Initially, I had a lot of difficulty in understanding these problems

of children. I sought the help of an official in 1964 but he ridiculed me. This made me more determined to do something on my own. Around this time I also read a newspaper report that a child had died after his father gave him a severe beating. Later on I came to know that the father was trying to teach the child how to deal with numbers. The incident shocked me. As a teacher, I felt responsible. A chance meeting with a Telugu primary teacher at this time gave me the breakthrough I was looking for. I tried to learn Telugu numbers from him and he attempted to learn Gujarati numbers from me. He found the task difficult, whereas I found mine easy. Then I started comparing the ways in which numbers were called out in English and in Indian languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam. After reflecting on the mistakes committed by the children I identified the source of the problem in the attempt of the children to imitate the spoken form of the number. For instance the number 26, in Gujarati, was called out six-twenty (chavvis), implying six and twenty. Since the six was spoken first, the children wrote the six first and then added the two, to represent the twenty.

Once I obtained the insights noted above, I changed my pedagogy of teaching children numbers. First I taught them the tens - 10, 20, 30, and so on, up to a hundred. Then I started teaching the units series. I also developed a system of calling out numbers in Gujarati which followed the pattern of the English and the South Indian languages. For instance, 26 would be pronounced twenty and six. By this method I could teach young children to write and read numbers, in words and figures, in just a 15-day period.

I then decided to improve my qualifications by studying on my own. I enrolled for a bachelor's degree in education. Before being admitted, I was asked by the interviewer, Dr. Dawood Ganchi, a well-known educationist, why I wanted a degree which was not necessary for a primary teacher. He suggested that my work would be better appreciated at the secondary school level. I explained that I wanted to remain a primary school teacher and that the number of children and the problems in primary schools were larger. Later on, he became a good friend and well wisher. I discussed with him my number experiments. He was the first person to appreciate my ideas and suggested that I should evaluate the idea. In 1980, I selected a large sample of primary and secondary school students. A set of 10 numbers, in words, and another set, in figures, were presented to the students. They had to translate the words into figures and the figures into words in five minutes. The results were very poor. I then taught them through my method of teaching numbers for one month. I repeated the test on the same students. Almost all the students could complete the test without any mistakes. For this research I got a National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) award. I elaborated this work and was awarded the CASTME (Commonwealth Association of Science, Technology and Mathematics Educators) award in 1982. I was a poor student till I finished my seventh standard. After I got the award I went to pay my respects to my primary school teacher. He was very happy. I still remember his words of advice to me when I became a teacher: never judge a child; do not attempt to predict that this particular child will be dull or weak in the future.

I was invited to London to accept the CASTME award. I was faced with three problems. Firstly, I did not know English. Secondly, I had to contribute some money towards my

travel and stay. Thirdly, I was not sure whether I would be able to get vegetarian food there. I did not want to go and sent a telex to the organisers. Some friends came to know of my decision. Dr. Ganchi insisted that I go to London and convinced me to withdraw the money that I was saving for my son's wedding. Some of my colleagues told me that primary teachers in general were a maligned lot and here was an opportunity to set right the picture. A businessman in Bombay who had some links with our village heard about my award. He immediately arranged for my travel to Bombay. He gave me warm clothing since it was winter. He also telephoned a Gujarati friend of his in London. This friend informed the organisers that I was in fact coming and came to pick me up at the airport. I was in a state of fear in the new surroundings, then I saw the friend holding a placard with my name written on it in Gujarati. In relief I garlanded the man with the flowers I had been presented in Bombay. I told him that the first person I meet in a new land is like a god to me. After that there were no problems. During the award ceremony the organisers announced my father's name by mistake. I felt happy because it was an appropriate mistake; my first guru had received the award. The most important lesson he taught me was my dominant thought during the ceremony: neither denigrate your profession nor blame your tools. As an artisan he always prayed to the tools that sustained him.

### **Developing reading skills**

Watching movies was one of my hobbies. I was surprised to know that some people could read the titles that were flashed on the screen. I found that the difficulties the children experienced in reading could be related to their limited span of vision. I therefore developed a method for training the eye muscles of the children to develop a broader span of vision. I started experiments with class 3 children of my school. I selected students who performed poorly in an initial reading skills test. I prepared a set of flash cards with one, two, three or four letter, words and sentences, and were arranged according to increasing complexity. I seated the children in a triangular formation. I flashed the cards from one side to the other; the children had to read them. I realised at that time that Gujarati is a graphical language and to read one has to move the eyes upwards and downwards constantly. An evaluation after six months showed that the children could read more rapidly than those who did not have this exposure. Two years later, I enrolled for my masters in education with the help of Dr. Ganchi. I read about developing reading skills and elaborated my flash card experiments for my thesis. I completed my degree in 1987.

### **Songs on the environment**

I have written about 150 songs, set to popular tunes, on the body, natural elements, social relationships, rural artisans and workers and functioning of everyday appliances like the primus stove and bicycle pump. These songs have not been published till now, but about 200 schools have asked for copies. I feel that children learn readily if subjects are taught in their own 'language' - the language of song and music. Also I feel that the principles underlying the functioning of common appliances like stoves, pumps, pressure cooker, syringe, need to be explained in an entertaining way. I had not understood the scientific

principles and functioning of the bicycle pump till I reached class 9. I have extended the song writing to preparing scripts for television.

### **Education through drama**

Children remember things which they see in action very well. Influenced by this idea, and also by a desire to make learning joyful, I created many dramas based on the *bhavai* style. In language which the children could understand. Some of the topics on which I have written plays are vitamins, types of plants stems and their functions, health and hygiene, pollution of water and air and noise pollution. I mobilised resources for musical instrument, amplifiers and filmstrip projector needed for the purpose. In addition I have also mobilised money from donors for infrastructure like toilets.

The novelty of learning through plays appeals to children. The play *Chhati Ankhen Andhapa* (The World of the illiterate is Dark) especially motivated the children. Many of my plays have been performed on radio or on stage

### **School-village activities**

Our village is famous for transport business. There are many drivers and conductors. Accidents may occur any time. With the help of the village *panchayat*, the school prepared a directory of the villagers with their blood groups. Everyone was educated on how to react in an emergency and whom to contact for blood. This was one way I thought the school could give something back to the community. This initiative has brought together the village, the primary school and the high school. I also have special knowledge of indigenous medicines which I gained from my father. Many people come to me for medicines. I also teach yoga and am associated with a nearby leprosy ashram. After retirement I will be working in this ashram.

### **Final comments**

Outstanding teachers should be utilised as trainers in the district and state level training institutes. I do not think much teachers will expect much in return. Only their travel and food expenses need to be taken care of. If I am requested to help other teachers. I am ready to do so. My advice to my younger colleagues is respect your profession and maintain your dignity. Let me give a personal example. The mid-day meal scheme was started with good intentions. But the way it is being treated angers me. Free food does not mean that the quality should be bad, or the surroundings unclean and unhygienic, or that malpractice should be allowed. I would not like to be associated with such a scheme, because I feel that children are being abused. However, I have made efforts on my own to maintain the dignity of the meal programme through initiatives like supplying good plates.

I consider dedication to the profession the most important quality that a teacher should develop. The world is rapidly changing and teachers should be ready to learn all the time. That is professionalism. I tell my colleagues that the English word master can be split up

in two ways in the Gujarati language: ma (mother) and sthar (status), that is teacher is one who loves and cares for children just as a mother looks after her children. The second way is mas (month) and thar (swim), swimming throughout the month in something we do not know much about or do not want to know about. The choice is ours.