

## Pragat Shikshan Sanstha: A Grounded Growth

It is now thirty years since we started the Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (Progressive Education Society) in Phaltan, a small town in Western Maharashtra. Today under the umbrella of the Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) there are three major branches:

**Apli Shala (AS):** *Balwadi* (kindergarten), supplementary classes for school-going children of grades one to seven, sewing class for women, and birth and death registration office in Mangalwar Peth, the *Dalit* area of Phaltan. Total children: 190.

**Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan (KNB):** A full-time, Marathi medium government-recognized but unaided school, with classes from kindergarten to grade ten (SSC). Enrollment: 433.

**Educational Outreach (EO):** Extension programs for improvement of government (municipal and Zilla Parishad) schools. The major EO efforts at present are the Reading Improvement Program, the *Everyday English* program, and the Mobile Slide Library. Total number of children reached by EO programs : 10,282.

The Pragat Shikshan Sanstha has evolved gradually throughout the years, but whatever we have done has been informed by a basic vision: that every child should attend school, and that no child should be forced to attend a school that will mutilate her spirit.

### Early beginnings

Our work began informally in 1978 when a friend and I gathered a small group of out of school children from Mangalwar Peth, the *dalit* area of Phaltan, and started trying to teach them to read. For a few months we held the class outside, in the yard of a sympathetic neighbor, but when the rainy season started we had to stop for several months. Finally the Municipal Council agreed to let us use an old *dharmashala* (shelter for transients). It was a room about 18' x 12', incredibly dirty, but the Council spent a small amount on cleaning and repairing before turning it over to us.

Though almost everyone in Mangalwar Peth were *dalits*, there were sharp social differences among them. A few were educated, had jobs, and followed middle class mores. Among the parents of children who started coming to us, however, only two or three fathers had had any schooling. Most men were casual laborers, while a few were engaged in selling illicit liquor or

working as *matka* (numbers game) agents. The majority of women made a living by stealing grass from farmers' fields and selling it to the milkmen in town. A few who were slightly better off sold vegetables in the town market, or bananas from pushcarts.

At the beginning, I saw our goal as non-formal education in literacy and numeracy, but gradually as our work became structured, I could see that our main task was to prepare children to go to school, help to enroll them in school and help them to stay and succeed there.

As my own interest has always centered on language and literacy, I used this opportunity to experiment in the teaching of reading.

In 1986 the Pragat Shikshan Sanstha was registered as a society and a public trust.

### **Kamala Nimbkar Balbhavan**

For a number of years people had been suggesting that I start a full-time school. I had resisted the idea, saying that I had my hands full running PSS in addition to earning my living, which I did by collaborating with Jai Nimbkar in writing materials to teach Marathi to American college students, and by teaching Marathi in the ACM India Studies Program for ten weeks every other year—generally either at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota or at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin.

My resistance to starting a full-time school also stemmed from the fact that I believed in public school (that is, government school) education rather than private education. My own education up to high school graduation had been in the public schools of Escanaba, Michigan, where I as an immigrant laborer's daughter had the opportunity to study along with students from all walks of life.

Furthermore, I told those who wanted me to start a school, I wanted to devote my time to teaching the children of the *dalit*, not the elite.

In 1986, however, something happened to change my mind. When Sameera Qureshi, Jai Nimbkar's granddaughter, turned four, her mother Dr. Manjiri Nimbkar sent her to the *balak mandir* (pre-primary school). After two days Sameera announced that she was never going to go to school. Delighted at her spirited resistance to conventional education, I wanted to show her that school could be a happy place.

I decided to have a kindergarten class in my yard during the month of May. When I asked Sameera if she would come, her first response was a suspicious, "Will there be a teacher there?" I finally decided to have the class in town, in an old Nimbkar Seeds warehouse that was being used by Manjiri Nimbkar for her school for the mentally retarded. We talked to other parents and soon had a group of about 35 children. I recruited two teachers, and the three of us ran the class for a month.

Though the class was intended to be purely a one-time event, it proved too successful to stop. I also began to realize that there was a need for good schools for all children—from *dalit* to elite. Finally I decided that we should

start a full-time school. Mr. B.V. Nimbkar, Jai's husband, promised to contribute Rs. 10,000 a year to make up the difference between income and expenditure. I named the school in memory of Mr. Nimbkar's mother, Kamalabai Nimbkar (nee Elizabeth Lundy), an American who had settled in India. The naming of the school was not done at the request of Mr. Nimbkar, but was prompted by my desire to commemorate the pioneering work done by Kamalabai in the field of occupational therapy and rehabilitation, and also in early childhood education.

From the start we set ourselves the following goals.

- The school should have a free and happy atmosphere.
- The school should have children from all walks of life. There should be a concerted effort to enroll Backward Class children.
- The medium of instruction should be Marathi, but as the importance of English cannot be denied, English should be taught from the first standard.
- Class size should be limited.
- Innovative child-centered activity-based methods should be used.
- Environmental awareness should be inculcated.
- The school should be secular.
- The school should become a resource center for improvement of other schools—especially government schools.

We received recognition from the State Government as an unaided school which was exactly the status we wanted. The school developed by what is termed natural growth, that is, adding one grade each year. Our first batch of fourteen students passed out in 1997. In the SSC examination, all passed, a record we have maintained almost consistently ever since.

In the early 1990s Dr. Manjiri Nimbkar began helping part time with science teaching, and by 1995 she decided to leave her medical practice and devote full-time to the school. With her many gifts – as a teacher, administrator– along with her excellent command over English and a thorough grounding in Maharashtrian culture, Manjutai has helped shape the school, giving it both structure and financial stability, and at the same time helping to develop the implications of the original vision. Today she is the principal of the school, and she and I jointly serve as directors of the PSS.

## **Reading Improvement Program**

By 1990 there was just one point in the KNB agenda that had not been touched upon—the vision of the school as a resource center for developing other schools. That year, with the help of a fellowship from the Ashoka Foundation, I conducted a survey of basic literacy among third grade students in all the municipal schools in town, thirteen Zilla Parishad schools, and one large private school. The total number of children surveyed came to 1618.

The test results showed that there was a clear divide between the private school on the one hand and the government schools on the other. In the

government schools a large number of third standard students had not mastered the basic decoding skills. Among the government schools, the ZP schools scored somewhat better than the municipal schools.

There were a number of reasons for this significant disparity, most of which were related to the fact that the private school catered to the children of better-off, higher-caste families, while the government schools catered to the poor and the backward castes—especially the Scheduled Castes and Nomadic or Denotified Tribes. This was particularly true of the municipal schools, where only the most backward and the poorest of the poor sent their children.

From then on, the PSS has been working with government schools to improve the teaching of beginning reading. It has been difficult to obtain consistent cooperation from the municipal schools, but we have received strong support from the Block Education Officer of the Panchayat Samiti, who oversees the ZP schools in the taluka.

For the past three years Manjiri Nimbkar has been managing the Reading Improvement Program. Under her direction two resource persons regularly visit selected schools, monitor the teaching of reading in the first grade, administer tests and supply teaching aids in addition to our primer *Apan Vacu Ya*, which we have distributed free of cost to all students. Manjutai herself visits the schools from time to time, talks to the principals and to the members of the Village Education Committee. At present we are working in 20 schools. Test results show that the majority of children in our program achieve basic literacy by the end of the first grade.

For years a major problem has been that although we were allowed to conduct the program in ZP schools, no official was willing to give unambiguous permission to use our materials instead of the prescribed government textbook. This past year, however, we obtained such permission. It is still subject to review at the end of the year by the Block Education Officer, but it is a victory of sorts.

### **Everyday English Program**

Our Reading Improvement Program is now well established. The *Everyday English* Program, by contrast, is still relatively new. In 2005 the Sir Ratan Tata Trust gave us funds to produce and print 10,000 copies of *Everyday English, Book One* by Jane Sahi, a friend and colleague from Bangalore. The book was distributed at a nominal cost of Rs. 2 per copy to all students in grades five to seven in the taluka - a total of about 8,000 copies.

At that time several workshops were held to train teachers to use *Everyday English*. Teachers and students welcomed the book, but at that time we were not in a position to offer consistent support to the teachers. This past year, however, a contribution from Supriya Sule, M.P., has enabled us to reprint the book and distribute it free of cost to all students in grades five to seven. In the second term we held four workshops and for all teachers. In addition, two resource persons regularly visited 22 schools to offer teacher support. Tests administered to sixth standard students in the 22 selected schools



show that in a period of three months scores had improved in all but three schools.

At this point in time we are saying that *Everyday English* is a supplementary reader and is not intended to supplant the regular government textbook. But more and more teachers are saying that they would prefer to use *Everyday English*. The government has now recognized the program and given us permission to run it. It has also said that in the 22 schools selected for intensive work, the English activity books produced by the government under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan need not be used—another small victory!

Draft copies of *Everyday English, Book Two* are now complete and will be distributed to seventh grade students in the 22 schools. Jane Sahi is now planning *Everyday English, Book Three*.

### **Looking ahead**

This brief sketch has shown that the Pragat Shikshan Sanstha has evolved throughout the years with a vision of providing to children—from *dalit* to elite—an education that will enhance their spirit. In this effort, concern with developing language skills, both in the mother tongue and in English, has been central, and the Reading Improvement Program and the *Everyday English* program have been a natural outgrowth of this central concern.

Recently the Sir Ratan Tata Trust (SRTT) has given us an opportunity to carry this process forward. With their help we are developing within the PSS a unit that we have tentatively named the "Centre for Language, Literacy and Communication" (CLLC). The CLLC, headed by myself as Director, and Manjiri Nimbkar and Jane Sahi as Associate Directors, will attempt to address the twin problems of the widespread failure of children to learn to read and to learn adequate English. Our attempt will be to integrate our practical work in these areas with reflection on our experience, and with research, production of learning materials and films, dissemination of information, and promotion of debate on language pedagogy and educational policy.

We are not in a hurry to grow. In the foreseeable future we do not envision any major upscaling of our activities. What we want is to create a unit that will make an impact by the quality of its work and thought.

**Maxine Berntsen**