

Smt. Anutai Wagh

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Uplift and Welfare of Women and Children-1985

Born on March 17, 1910, Anutai was married at the age of 13 and became a child widow 6 months later. She returned to her parents' home. After passing the Vernacular Final (VII Std) examination, she took up primary teacher's training in Pune. In the final examination, she obtained a first class. She then served as a teacher for 3 years in villages, after which she joined the famous Hujur Paga School in Pune. While teaching there, she joined a Night School and passed matric in 1937. Later in 1950, she graduated from the S.N.D.T/ Women's University. For many years she had to support and educate her younger brother and sister. Anutai bore the burden of this domestic responsibility with cheer, but as the years went by, she longed to devote herself to social work in a rural area.

The turning point in Anutai's life came in 1945 when she met the late Smt. Tarabai Modak in a training camp for women village workers organized by Kasturba Memorial Trust at Borivli (Bombay). Tarabai was planning to start an experimental pre-primary school in a rural area, Bordi, in Dahanu Taluka. She asked Anutai whether she would like to join the proposed school and the latter readily agreed.

So began an educational partnership between the two women which was to last till Tarabai's death in 1973. The Gram Bal Shiksha Kendra (G.B.S.K.) started by both of them at Bordi in 1945, and moved to its present setting at Kosbad Hill in the heart of the tribal area in 1957, became a fountainhead of new ideas, exploratory ventures, experiments and innovations in education, all closely related to the needs and problems of the children of the most under-privileged sections of society. Today Anutai is Director of G.B.S.K. and Secretary of the parent body, the Nutan Bal Shikshan Sangh, and guides the host of educational activities which have been started at Kosbad.

The new concepts of Balvadi, Anganwadi and Kuran Shala (Meadow School) born out of her continuous thought and applied work in the tribal areas of Thane District, have been recognized as innovative and useful concepts in the history of education in this country. Her efforts to produce educational aids out of the indigenous material available in rural areas, has certainly revolutionized the pre-school learning methods in the country, and has provided a model to the other developing countries also.

Tarabai and Anutai had to confront the challenge posed by the indifference and apathy of tribal people towards education. But by dint of sustained work, patience and determination, they overcame this hurdle and laid the foundation of a system of education which was perfectly attuned to the needs, habits and culture of the Adivasis. Their success has been acclaimed by one and all. Today a wide range of visitors, eminent educationists in India and other countries, representatives from UNICEF and UNESCO and a variety of professionals interested in reforming education make a pilgrimage to Kosbad and return with a sense of fulfillment, having seen something new, dynamic and full of life.

In addition to her responsibility as the Director of Gram Bal Shiksha Kendra, Anutai has also been the President of another registered voluntary organization called "Thane District Stree Shakti Jagruti Samiti" since 1977. The teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and Acharya Vinoba Bhave, inspired her to take up the cause of women. She felt that an immeasurable spiritual strength lies hidden in women which, if released at the appropriate time, could profoundly influence the world beneficially. She felt that all possible efforts should be made to awaken the women community and make them realize that they must face and fight with courage the injustices, tyrannies and humiliations inflicted on them by society.

Under the auspices of this new organization, she has started many activities for the welfare of women and children. Many Mahila Melawas (Gatherings) have been organized where importance of Family Welfare Programmes, Health and Hygiene, Child Care, Nutrition, Cottage Industries, Evil Effects of Superstitions, and Social Education is brought home to the women through various methods of community contact. Some crèches have also been started in tribal hamlets for children of working women.

In June 1980 she started a school for the Dumb and Deaf poor children. She devotes a lot of time of her daily routine to the work of this organization.

She is the editor of a Marathi Magazine “ Shikshan Patrika” in which very useful literature for children, teachers and parents is regularly published.

Under the auspices of Stree Shakti Jagriti Samity, she started another monthly titled “Savitri” in 1981, when she received the first Award instituted by the Maharashtra State in memory of late Savitribai Phule. In this monthly, devoted to the problems and activities of the women community, Anutai gives details of the living and dead, who had done outstanding work for the welfare of the community.

A number of young girls and middle aged women, faced with some domestic or social crisis or problem came to Anutai to seek solution to their problems, Anutai takes them into confidence, understands their mind, shares their sufferings and anxieties and discusses with them in detail and shows them a convincing and logical solution

Anutai has recently (1983) started a totally new project called 'Gram-Mangal”, at Dabhon, a remote village. Dabhon is a typically tribal area, inhabited by Warlis, who are the most backward among the tribals. No other social work agency has penetrated into this area so far. Anutai selected the place for trying out her experiment of a Free School a school with no building and syllabus and the subjects taught would be those arising out of activities, which aim at all-sided development of the Walis, including improvement of their economic status.

Anutai fully acknowledges her debt to the late Tarabai Modak who had inspired and guided her and to the teachings of Gandhiji and Vinobaji which have profoundly influenced her from a young age. Whenever she finds herself faced with any serious problem in life, she immediately resorts to the book “Geeta Pravachan” written by Vinobaji and seeks her solution there.

Anutai has been the recipient of several honors, conferred on her by the Central Government, Maharashtra Government and various voluntary organizations. The major ones among them are : National Award for the Best Worker in the field of Child Welfare, title of 'Dalit Mitra', Ideal Teacher's Award, Savitribai Phule Award, F.I.E. Foundation (Ichalkaranji) Award..

