

The Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, Vadodara, was founded in 1996 by Padma Shri Dr Ganesh Devy. A professor of English Literature at M S University of Baroda, he took voluntary retirement to pursue research arising out of his deep concern about endangered or dying languages. In the course of his research, he found that the languages that stood to lose the most were those that belonged to largely tribal and nomadic communities. One of the most important reasons was that these languages did not have a script and existed mostly only orally.

It is well-known that in tribal contexts, social indicators present a dismal picture. Experts pointed out that education remained far removed from the context and the social reality of tribal groups, making it both unreal and irrelevant for them. Teachers even in other under-privileged environments reportedly have a disconnect with children which is exaggerated further in tribal environments. It is well-known that bridging these gaps requires a more engaged teacher community and greater emphasis on mother tongue and first language-based education.

The challenges

Since Indian states are divided on a linguistic basis and the medium of instruction in government village schools is the state language, the same rule applies to schools in tribal villages. The appointment of teachers in these schools is a centralised process and this can result in non-tribal teachers from a district far away from the tribal zones to be posted in tribal schools. So, while on paper, the matter is simple and obvious, in the classroom it becomes highly complex.

1. Rural children often go to class I directly at age 6 (or so) without the semi-formal protective/preparation bridge of the nursery-junior-senior kindergarten years that urban schools have. There are *anganwadis/balwadis* as pre-schools in many rural areas and there are many educators and groups engaged in pre-school education,

who are trying to empower these in pedagogy and early childhood education (EEC), yet the contribution and efficacy of the hundreds of *anganwadis/balwadis* across Indian villages in preparing the child for the class I curriculum has not been established.

2. According to the curriculum of individual state boards, a child in class I is expected to be able to read and write a full sentence and do single digit addition /subtraction. This is a huge challenge for the teacher when most children in the class have never done this or cannot do it.
3. This is made more difficult when the teacher's language (medium of instruction) and the child's language are not the same. So, neither understands the other.
4. Unable to follow what is going on in the class, most children drop out and rarely get the opportunity to return to school.

One of the tools devised to get answers to this problem was designing the *Pictorial Glossary* for every tribal language, a simple illustrated notation of 1200-1500 words that an average child understands by the age of 6 (age for entry into class I). The word, in the tribal language, is visually communicated via an illustration and its translated word/meaning in Gujarati/English/Hindi is also offered. The teacher (non-tribal or one who is unfamiliar with the language of the region where he/she is posted) can use the *Pictorial Glossary* of a language that is largely spoken in the region of his/her school, to communicate with the children in the class. Simple one-day workshops are designed to train teachers in the optimum use of the glossaries, so that they pick up commonly used words and phrases in the prevalent language. Some of our glossaries are used by the *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan* in Gujarat for distribution to the teachers of schools in areas where that tribal language is predominant. Till date, we have created sixteen *Pictorial Glossaries*, twelve for tribal languages and five for nomadic languages.

The Vasantshala model

Bhashaⁱ started the residential schooling programme, *Vasantshala*, in 2005. Before that, we had gathered several years of experience, conducting non-formal schooling of construction labourers' children (mostly tribal families from the Chota Udaipur region) at large building sites in Vadodara, followed by several years of working with school-going children in the villages of Panchmahal and Chota Udaipur talukas/districts. These were limited-year projects and when they ended, the students were again left to their own devices. We felt this method of work was highly unfair to the children and so we decided to run a schooling programme ourselves.

That was how *Vasantshala* came to be conceptualised. We admit sixty out-of-school boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 12 from very poor, migrant families who would otherwise have no chance to go to school. Over the first two years, we found that these children generally belonged to Rathwa, Dungra Bhili, Tadvi and Bhili tribal communities and each community has its own language that its children spoke. They did not speak much Gujarati, the state language. They could barely understand any of the other three tribal languages, except their own. So, we had a complex mix of languages with just sixty children. The tribal teachers we engaged with, had some education, but their main qualification was their desire and ability to learn all the languages that their students spoke. But even more important was their love of teaching, their ability to actually deliver in the classroom and their fondness for children.

The Vasantshala pedagogy

At the beginning of the academic year (now April from 2020 as per the new Government rules), all newly admitted children are assessed for their learning levels, comprehension ability grasp of taught matter, aptitude, socialisation patterns and for any special talents as some of them may have gone to a school at some point in time. Based on the assessment analysis of their learning levels and abilities, the teachers decide the age-appropriate learning level to be achieved by each child and distribute them into five learning groups:

- a. Jagruti: Grades 1 and 2
- b. Prakriti: Grades 3 and 4
- c. Sanskriti: Grade 5

d. Svakriti: Grade 6

e. Pragati: Grade 7

However, a child is free to attend one or more groups simultaneously as per her/his ability in a particular subject. Assessment is a continuous process. While formal tests are conducted every three months, teachers keep track of the children's progress through observation, classwork and participation, etc. We have found that most tribal children can 'pick up' academics very quickly and are also endowed with a certain amount of 'street smartness' that helps them in common interactions with people.

Academic subjects and content are at par with the Gujarat Board curriculum. An intern at *Vasantshala* was impressed by how well the teacher in a class he was observing explained the idea of *nagarpalika* to students who did not have any idea of positions above sarpanch in public administration. Did the children understand? Yes, they did, though a lot of them asked questions and framing the answers to their questions helped the teacher to explain the concept even more clearly.

While teaching classes begin immediately, the children are allowed to take time in the initial weeks to adjust to the new surroundings, be by themselves, make friends, get back to studies in class, get to know their teachers better and familiarise themselves with others at the Academy. Typically, a new batch settles down by August-September, when teachers and children turn their attention entirely to the teaching-learning process. Therefore, during these six months, there is more intensive classroom work. Extra-curricular activities are also designed to complement the learning process.

Since the children belong to three or four language communities (*Rathwi, Bhili, Chaudhary, Tadvi*), in the initial months, the children are taught in their mother-tongues. As is the practice at *Vasantshala*, they are actively encouraged to speak their mother tongues in the classroom and also outside of it while conversing with teachers and other children, playing games and during other extra-curricular activities. These languages are heard by other children and teachers and slowly others begin to use them as well. The teachers use them

ⁱBhasha Research and Publication Centre was founded in 1996 with the purpose of giving 'voice' to Adivasi communities in India. The Adivasi Academy is founded by Bhasha at Tejgadh in Chhotaudepur district of Gujarat.

for all subjects, including language. This process helps the child feel proud of his/her language and use it confidently. But more importantly, it helps the child gain/regain interest in studies – reading and writing – as her/his comprehension increases.

Once a child begins to acquire primary literacy in her/his mother tongue, s/he is introduced and transitioned to Gujarati and gradually to Hindi, Sanskrit and English and, of course, all the tribal languages the class speaks. This makes *Vasantshala* truly multilingual. For the last two years, two German gap-year students have been interning at *Vasantshala* and the children have picked up some German phrases and songs, while teaching them Gujarati!

A sample yearly plan

The *Vasantshala* programme engages with the students for around 300 days in a year, here is a glance at a typical yearly plan (June 2016 to April 2017):

MONTH	ACTIVITY
June	Arrival of existing students of <i>Vasantshala</i> . Making sure that the mainstreamed students from the previous academic year get well-settled in their new schools. New students identified and admitted. Teaching and all co-curricular activities begun. Books and stationery organised. Children measured for a pair of new clothes and sandals. The first term concentrates largely on schoolwork, because rains prevent outdoor activities.
July	Teaching and activities continue. The new children are helped to settle down.
August-September	Teaching and activities continue. Celebration of festivals. A short <i>Navratri</i> /Dussehra break.
October	Informal mid-term exam held.
October-November	Diwali break from 27th October to 9th November.
November	The second term allows for many more outdoor activities. There are more visitors on the campus as well as a lot of Academy activity, some of which the children participate in. 'Plantation Week' was observed from 19th to 25th November during which time, the children were introduced to agriculture and gardening. Children chose their own patch of land to create a garden and sowed seasonal vegetables such as <i>methi</i> , coriander, <i>palak</i> , <i>chana</i> and brinjals. The garden is tended by the children throughout their stay at <i>Vasantshala</i> . An earlier batch of children had also taken to vermicompost preparation. Gardening keeps the children in touch with nature, land and agriculture and also provides them an opportunity to contribute to the centre while learning from it. The Academy has its own canteen where our own produce is used. The children are also encouraged to spend some time in the canteen learning simple tasks related to cooking. This helps in inculcating teamwork and life skills. On 28th November, the <i>Vasantshala</i> teachers took the children to <i>Tejgadh</i> to visit the <i>haat</i> bazaar held every Monday. This is a weekly market held in a village where the communities come to buy and sell things needed in daily life, related

Bridging learning gaps

Between September and March, the teachers focus on bridging the learning gaps of those children who need to be mainstreamed in regular schools as they become age appropriate. They are prepared and coached to be able to enrol in class V or VI, according to their abilities in the government residential schools so that they can complete their schooling successfully. These schools are selected based on the aptitude of the child and how close the school is to the child's family village. On an average, 30 children are mainstreamed every year, and most manage to clear the class X examinations.

MONTH	ACTIVITY
	to the household, agriculture, animal husbandry, etc. The <i>haat</i> also serves as a social space where people from nearby villages meet to discuss marriage alliances, extend invitations for special occasions, sell cattle, etc. The children were taken to the <i>haat</i> to understand the significant role it plays in the village economy and in binding social relationships.
December-January	<p><i>Vasantshala</i> teachers combine the curriculum of the government schools with traditional songs, stories, dance, music and art of the communities. Since many researchers, scholars and students visit and stay in the Adivasi Academy all through the year, the children get opportunities to interact with them. This exposes them to different languages and cultures and builds their confidence to socialise with the wider world.</p> <p>The children are encouraged to participate in music and art workshops which the Adivasi Academy holds from time to time. This year, the children participated in a week-long Artists' Workshop organised from 10th to 17th December 2016 by Bhasha Centre at the Adivasi Academy and supported by the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation. Bhasha had invited Adivasi artists from Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. The children spent time after their classes with the artists to learn painting, terracotta pottery and bead jewellery. The artists held special sessions after their own work to teach their art to the children. The workshop acquainted the children with Adivasi arts practised in other regions of India. This also inculcates awareness and respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. During the workshop, the artists identified four children with special creativity whose talent should be nurtured.</p>
February	<i>Van Bhojan</i> , a day picnic to a nearby place is organised. Some of the older children travel to Vadodara with their teachers and others from the Academy to participate in the Vadodara Marathon's 5-km run, carrying placards about the importance of education, of linguistic diversity and tribal rights.
March-April	Holi is a very important festival for tribal communities and <i>Vasantshala</i> gives a short break for the children to go back home and celebrate with their families. The summer sets in and all attention is on studying and preparing those children who are to be mainstreamed in regular schools for exams.



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With a background in literature and a doctorate in social science, **Sonal Baxi** has worked closely with the Adivasi, de-notified and nomadic communities. Her experience combines research and grassroots interventions in diverse areas as education, art and culture, human rights and development. Her areas of specialisation include fundraising, project management and publishing. She may be reached at sonal.bhasha@gmail.com