Bharat Vidhyalaya Karadi, my amazing experience 2002-2018 by Mahesh Karadia

In 2001 when my father passed away in India, I went for his funeral. After doing the rituals, I decided to stay in India and spend some time there. While visiting nearby villages I noticed groups of youngsters gathered on street corners and various other places just sitting idle and gossiping. On asking people, I gathered that they were youths who had left school and had no employment. Finding out about their education, I came to know that most of them had studied in their local Gujarati medium schools where they did not have any career guidance. Their English was poor and therefore had limitations.

I decided to talk to some youngsters who were educated and came to know that most had been to English medium schools away from their villages. I asked these educated youngsters if they would help me to organize a seminar and whether they would be prepared to give a talk on the benefits of education in English. All of them agreed and thought it was a wonderful idea. So the planning began. Anand Dandiker took the responsibility of getting together information of people who might be interested.

In the meantime, in 2002 I was asked to attend an annual general meeting at our school in Karadi. They were to elect a new Chairperson to head the school as the last chair had sadly passed away. I did not know the history of the school except that my both parents had taught there pre-independence. I was asked to say a few words about education and what sort of person be elected as the new chair. Personally I was not educated or qualified enough to make any statement or offer my advice. I had only studied upto Std X and did not make it to college. But I was an experienced business person, well travelled and was the President of Shree Mandhata Samaj Sahayak Mandal Leicester where I had gained enormous experience of how to work in the community.

I talked about the present and future of our youngsters and the importance of English and career guidance. To my surprise I was clapped upon and nominated to be elected as the new chair. I made it clear to all present about my poor educational background but nobody listened and there I was, elected as the 18th President of Bharat Vidyalaya Kelavani Mandal, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel the Iron Man of India being the Life President of the school that was established in 1921. The school consisted of three sections, Gujarati Medium Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary , all run and funded by the Government. I took on the challenge as I had found a new platform to further my educational dream project.

On hearing the news of my new post, the team of youngsters helping me organize the seminar were delighted and that gave them more encouragement. Within a few weeks a database of more than sixty people was created consisting of those working in education and the community. Usha Academy in Navsari was selected as the venue to host our first seminar.

Many prominent local people from our community, some school heads and a few NRI's attended the seminar. My team of youngsters spoke well about the need of education in English. Almost all the schools in our region were Gujarati medium schools. That meant all the subjects were taught in Gujarati and English was a subject on its own. What we were trying to get to the people was the need of an English medium school where all the subjects would be taught in English except Gujarati, Hindi and Sanskrit which would be subjects on their own. These schools were Government run and financed.

We failed in our attempt to convince the people at the seminar. The conclusion being that the Gujarati medium schools taught enough English for the kids to get by and there was no need for English medium schools. We were testing the waters and now knew that establishing an English medium school would not be that easy.

In the meantime at a special meeting held by Karadi Sangathan Mandal UK, it was decided to build a brand new school building to replace the deteriorating old school. At our Karadi's 25th Sneh Sammelan hosted by the Karadia family in memory of my father Hirabhai, my uncle Jamnadasbhai and uncle Lalitbhai Ranchhodbhai Karadia an amazing amount of GBP.55000 was pledged by the people and friends of Karadi in just 3 hours. This was so encouraging.

With the idea to build a new school building and to raise awareness on education with a few colleagues we travelled to Canada, South Africa and New Zealand in 2003-2004. In South Africa, the members of the Prema Panchia family donated their land for the new school buildings. Girishbhai from Canada also donated his land for the school project. In all these countries we got an overwhelming support. I knew we were on the right track.

By the end of 2005 we had enough funds that came from our Gaam Mandals in UK, Montreal, Toronto, South Africa and New Zealand. In UK one of my colleagues donated a Mercedes car as a lottery prize to raise funds for the school. In January 2006 the foundation stone was laid by now Late Ramjibhai Fakirbhai Patel of Patel Falia Karadi and resident of Leicester, a student and ex-teacher of Bharat Vidyalaya Karadi (pre independence) and also ex-president of Karadi Sangathan Mandal UK. Sadly the old and historic Gujarati Primary school buildings had to go to make room for the new ones. The verandas on which the salt satyagrahis slept during the famous and historic Dandi Salt March of 1930 led by the father of the nation 'Mahatma Gandhi'.

By the end of November 2006 the building work was nearing completion. Apart from 22 classrooms and 3 staffrooms the new buildings consisted an airconditioned large library, airconditioned computer lab with 21 laptop computers with internet facility, physics, chemistry and biology laboratories, an amphitheatre style music room, a huge amphitheatre with a sitting capacity of around 1000, a kitchen and dining hall, a swimming pool and 8 toilet blocks.

At our school meeting in Karadi it was decided to approach the then Chief Minister of Gujarat and now the Prime Minister of India Shri Narendra Modi to perform the opening ceremony. With the help of our MLA for Jalalpore Taluka Shri R C Patel we visited the Chief Minister in Gandhinagar who willingly accepted our invitation for the opening ceremony of the new school buildings on 26

December 2006. We also invited Shrimati Anandiben Patel the then Education Minister of Gujarat. The program would run for two days and most schools in Kantha Vibhag would partake in the celebration. Invitations went to all our overseas mandals, donors and well wishers locally and abroad.

As planned the opening ceremony was performed by Shri Narendra Modi on 26 December 2006 attended by nearly ten thousand people. Unfortunately Shrimati Anandiben Patel could not make it. In my opening speech I welcomed Shri Narendra Modi and in his response speech he declared that this school would become a role model school one day. We were sincerely blessed by his words. The entertainment program continued the next day with all the schools in Kantha Vibhag putting in their best performances. What a memorable show that was !

Soon after the opening ceremony we started advertising for our new English medium school. To make it easier for the children we decided to start with Nursery, Junior Kindergarten and Senior Kindergarten. Teachers were recruited and classrooms allocated. The new nursery was housed in the Bal Mandir building of Gandhi Smruti white the Junior and Senior KGs were housed in the Manibhai Smarak building. Applications started coming in and in June 2007 our first term started. We also purchased our first school bus to transport children from the nearby villages like Matwad, Samapur, Dandi, Machhad, Khandarak, Bodali, Nani Pethan, Moti Pethan, Kothamdi and Avda Falia. Both the sections of the Gujarati medium schools were also moved into the new buildings leaving the old secondary school premises empty.

To start Year 1 or Std 1 as they call it in India, permission was required from the Primary Education Board in Gandhinagar. Application was made for the following year 2008-2009. Permission was declined and we decided to appeal against the decision. I on behalf of the school argued the case and after a lengthy hearing, permission was finally granted in September 2007. Some local school teachers in Kantha Vibhag had objected to us opening an English medium school and that was the reason behind the permission being declined.

In June 2008 we started Std 1 (Year 1) in the new high school building with 27 children. The total strength of the English medium school had gone up to 106. Then every year we obtained permission for higher classes. Std 2 in 2009, Std 3 in 2010, Std 4 in 2011 and Std 5 in 2012. In June 2012 the school strength had risen to 275. In 2013 we were able to obtain permissions together for Std 6,7 and 8. Std 8 was now included in the Primary Section. Our school strength had risen to 316 by that time.

It was time to move into Secondary school which fell under a different education board. All preparations were made, a classroom was allocated, new teachers recruited and application made in early 2016 for Std 9. The school term was about to start on Monday in June 2016 when on Saturday we received a letter from the education board in Gandhinagar declining permission. We wrote to them explaining our situation and the future of the kids starting in Std 9. This did not make any difference and the answer was still no and if we did start teaching, legal action was threatened with imprisonment. We were also asked to display their refusal letter on the school notice board. We took advice from other schools and despite showing their willingness to help us they did nothing.

Instead of teaching in the allocated classroom we decided to put the children in the library and teach from there just in case somebody complained. We again appealed against their decision. After two weeks we decided to bring them back into their allocated classroom. Aware of the threat of legal action and imprisonment I as chair of the school took the courage to start teaching and was prepared to go to prison. We carried on teaching for the whole year and nothing happened. In the meantime we had made a few trips to Gandhinagar. Then two weeks before the end of the school year we received a letter granting us permission. What a relief ! By this time the school strength was 346 and we had four buses for transportation.

Again it was time to apply permission for Std 10, our final year. Luckily this was granted without any issue. This final year is equivalent to GCSE in UK and in India is know as SSC meaning Secondary School Certificate or the board exams. The exams are taken by the national board and children have to sit in their exams in different schools of Navsari. This was our first batch appearing for the SSC exams and was a test for us too. To reach this stage I sacrificed 16 years of my life for the school project from 2002 till 2018, Nursery to SSC. From childrens age of 3 years to 15.

It was a long time to give to any project and away from the family. My children and grandchildren wanted me back in the UK. I was missing them too. After having several meetings and nominating who should take over from me I handed in my resignation to Shri Maganbhai Bhanabhai Patel a senior trustee of our school on 7th February 2018. I requested a teacher's meeting to inform them of my resignation. This was a very emotional moment for me and all as I was leaving behind our school which from inception to now had grown from strength to strength. Almost all the teachers including me had tears in our eyes. I visited all the classrooms to say goodbye to all and wished good luck to children in Std 10 as their final exams were approaching.

The following month in March I came back to join my family and spend time with my grandchildren. I had three lovely grandchildren till then and my daughter gave birth to our beautiful granddaughter after my coming back home. What a joy, what a life. Only people with grandchildren will ever understand the joy and happiness of having them and enjoying with them. Maganbhai Bhana always used to say 'asal karta sud mithu lage' meaning interest is sweeter than capital.

In March the Std 10 children appeared for their SSC exams and imagine the joy and fulfillment I realized when the results came in. We had achieved a 100% result ! This was like icing on the cake and added seven stars to my career. What a finishing touch and my sacrifices well deserved. A successful project and an institution that will serve the people of Kantha Vibhag for many many years to come. Sadly to achieve this success story the Gujarati Medium Secondary school had to be sacrificed for which I sincerely apologise to the people of Karadi.

I hope you enjoyed reading my amazing journey and experiences in India.  My sincerest thanks to all the people who guided me, teachers who worked with me and those that supported me throughout this noble cause. A true team spirit that brought fruitful results.

Mahesh Karadia,
Ex President Bharat Vidyalaya Kelavani Mandal Karadi (2002-2018)