

Santosh Kumar (SK) talks to Professor Anita Ghai (AG)

Anita Ghai, currently a Professor of Psychology at the Ambedkar University Delhi, was earlier an Associate Professor at the Department of Psychology, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi. She is a disability rights activist in the areas of education, health, sexuality and gender. She has been a Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum Library, Teen Murti Bhawan and also the President of the Indian Association for Women's Studies.

She is on the editorial board of *Disability and Society*, and *Scandinavian Journal of Disability*. Some of her well-known books include *(Dis) Embodied Form: Issues of Disabled Women* (2003) and *The Mentally Handicapped – Prediction of the Work Performance* co-authored with Anima Sen.

anita.satyapal@gmail.com

Santosh Kumar (SK): Congratulations for your new position of Professor at Ambedkar University, Delhi (ADU). Prior to this, you were at Jesus and Mary College, Delhi University. This is what we know about you as a teacher. However, we would like to know more about you, especially the early days of your life – your education and the barriers you crossed successfully.

Anita Ghai (AG): Thank you. I remember, when I was two years old, polio struck. The first few years were spent hanging between the cure versus care thesis. I go against the cure part as one really doesn't get to the cure in spite of all the time spent for it. I failed in Class II, perhaps because I was in plaster for around 6 to 8 months. Also, I can recall that I had to shift schools three or four times, to find a school nearby. I have perhaps written about that experience in my book *(Dis) Embodied Form: Issues of Disabled Women*.

One of the school-teachers, I recall, was very cruel. I used to have crutches with callipers going to the back (Now, of course, I am on a wheelchair). It would usually be at the very end of my endurance that I used to speak out whenever I had to go to the toilet, and it sometimes happened that I would soil my clothes in the class - or in the corridor - and when I came back to the class, it was like in the poem "Shame shame poppy shame/ All the children

know your name". The teacher used to sometimes humiliate me, even slap me at times and when my father came to know about this, he took me out of that school and said – as did my mother too – that he would shift me to the New Era School, now quite a famous school. The school then began paying attention – for instance, I would be given a chance to recite a poem in the Annual Function, and was made a part of the orchestra too in which I would play the side-drum and thus I got involved in some activity or the other. This school was till Class VIII. My parents had come over to this side after Partition and my mother had not even passed Class X. In Panipat she would do embroidery, etc. and father worked in the private sector. I was the first girl-child and the whole family was very loving and would always try to keep things normal.

In the 9th I went to the Holy Child School, a good school, and I had Science in 9th, 10th and 11th. I wanted to study medical but we did not have as much information about it, and I finally filled up a form for this stream in the I.P.College for Women, Delhi but my name did not figure in the first list. The administrative-incharge there, one Mr. Pahwa, one of my father's companions for the morning walk, urged him to bring me along to the college. The Principal, Sheela Uttam Singh, consoled me when I started crying and said that I had good enough marks for Psychology and would be given admission,

which, indeed, did happen. Later on, the Principal informed us that I had qualified for the medical stream too. By then I had gradually developed some liking for Psychology and stayed back.

As against my experience with teachers in the schools, the experience in the college was different – the teachers were generally fine, they would neither under-estimate nor over-estimate me. They would give me a chance for some activities – for instance, when I started writing poetry, they would encourage me; then I got an award for essay-writing. Whatever I deserved, I got. You may well say that it was an integrated kind of education.

SK: Was it inclusive? Mainstream? With an inclusive, accessible environment?

AG: Yes, for instance, one of the labs was upstairs but those days I could ascend the stairs, and so I never considered this to be a difficulty. Except for this one lab, everything else was on the ground floor. They noted that I would not go for the sports, and just be sitting around. One of the teachers urged that I be sent for music and thus I started learning instrumental music - the harmonium. In this sense they were rather nice.

SK: How do you recall these years of your life, as a student in college?

AG: I suppose when I came to I.P. College, those three years were ones of unadulterated enjoyment - *bindaas*, as one might well say. I made friends in the class and in the hostel too. The difficulty I faced there about Indian-style toilets – I finally decided to forget and move on. I had also by then understood what studies were all about – I had developed an interest in Psychology, especially a bit of Adlerian

Psychology that was there in the first year of the course. Adler had worked on compensatory theory and inferiority complex; he himself used to be very ill, suffering as he was from rickets and I was attracted by his life-history. I topped the list in my college. We had to write a dissertation in the third year, which I did on social interaction - not on disability in that sense of the word. My interest then was like, for example, in things like this incident I remember - a teacher asked me to go and bring chalk for the board. Some of my classmates were angered by this, questioning as to why I was being put to this trouble. But the teacher's view was that this would help me gain confidence even though it might take an extra five minutes for the chalk to be brought by me. You can say that she became one of my mentors – she didn't call or treat me as someone helpless – that was not her understanding of disability. It was not the overcoming type of theory on disability, where, one would be called brave for overcoming it.

Those days there were three things to do – study, watch cricket and movies – these three were what being *bindaas* meant to me. My father would say, there should be no red mark, but that apart he would himself take me to the movies twice a week. He would take me to the cinema hall, even if I had to ascend the stairs, for I was quite fond of watching movies – not now, though, it is difficult now. My paternal uncles were very interested in cricket and I too would watch a lot of it. In the hostel there would sometimes be quarrels as I would switch on my radio at 3 or 4 in the morning to listen to the New Zealand vs Australia commentary, for instance, and my hostel-mates would raise objections and I had to lower the volume.

It was fun, and studies. I never missed a class, I would listen to the lecture and it would be lodged in my memory, and so there was no difficulty at all.

SK: What were your experiences like at the post-graduation level and thereafter?

AG: The hostel was no longer there. My father bought a second-hand car, Fiat, I think, but it would break down often and this led to a problem of transport for me but all of it ultimately got managed somehow or the other. I still remember the day the result was announced. We had gone to see a movie – yes, it was Rishi Kapoor’s ‘Karz’ – by the time we came back, there was quite a crowd outside our home. It seems that there was a call from the university informing that I had topped in my Masters!

Then I went to get a form for the IAS and they said – ‘you can’t apply’, and I asked – ‘why not?’

Those with 6/6 corrected glasses and the disabled can’t apply, they said. For the first time I got to understand that whether or not I considered myself disabled, they had surely considered me as one.

That was the first time I met Mr. Lal Advani and my relationship and orientation with NGOs began. 1981 was declared the International Year of the Disabled. Sometime around this year, I also had to undergo my first open-heart surgery - just about the time I had joined my M.Phil. I took two papers after I came back from the hospital - then left one, but ultimately earned an ‘A’ and then I got a job in I.P. College for 9 months. The National Eligibility Test (NET) was not yet in existence back then, on the basis of merit I got the UGC Junior and Senior Fellowships.

About Psychology, I was aware of the problems in the subject. The sense of criticism and how to go about it all came much later – say, when I came to the stage of doing my M.Phil. When again I worked on disability (after my MA project on issues around four disabilities) on the work-adjustment and open employment of the intellectually impaired. I took this work up to

my Ph.D., doing the follow-up study in Mumbai in a vocational rehabilitation centre where these people used to work in a sheltered workshop. I followed it up after two years and saw how many people can go into employment.

SK: What have been your experiences as a teacher? And what has been the trajectory of your growth thereafter?

AG: When I began to teach, I realised that you have to work very hard. But because I was in I.P. College, under Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Uma Chakravarti being in Miranda, an awareness had begun to be generated. Initially my inclination was not towards the disability movement but towards the women’s movement, and I was very active and when funds came from the government, we started running the Women’s Studies Centre in the college. I think it was around this time that the idea of womanhood began to hit me. The UPSC incident too involved some sort of a transformation – that’s when the disability thing first hit me. And then I can say that this other shift came – in 1994 – of the hysterectomies of the 14 girls, about which I wrote a paper.

SK: Are you talking about the Poona incident?

AG: Yes... the Poona case... that really hit me and then I felt angry with the women’s movement. In those days I happened to meet Javed Abidi who then used to work at the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation – he had not yet started the National Centre for Promotion of Employment for Disabled People. He suggested that we work on something. The Bill was on the anvil those days – and it came in 1995. But two years passed and there was no Commissioner yet and a candle-light vigil was organised and this was for me actually the starting point perhaps.

SK: You started touching issues of disability?

AG: Yes. That's the time I really started. I started talking with the women's movement and in 2001 I had an invitation from *Hypatia* (a journal of feminist philosophy) for a paper from the Indian perspective¹. That was my first international publication that became well known, it was the first time I tried to write about women with disabilities - earlier, in 2000 and in 1996, I had gone to the Society for Disability Studies, Washington and then I started getting to meet people. In the 1999 conference Michael Oliver, Colin Barnes, Mark Priestley asked me to write a chapter for their forthcoming book², and Miriam Corker, a good friend and wonderful human being who was deaf, said that she could send books to me for being reviewed. And Sally French also promised to send me some books. And so books began coming to me and I started studying a bit.

SK: Do please share some of your experiences on issues of education too. Borrowing from your personal experience as a teacher; what, for you, are the key issues in special education? How do you see inclusive education as a way out?

AG: I got B.El.Ed. started in Jesus and Mary College. Poonam Batra was also there, she had come from JNU and so B.El.Ed came to us for the first time and I came in contact with Anil Sadgopal ji. He asked me to make a proposal as to what sort of work I would like to do on Education and Children with Disabilities, and I worked on it and I got a deputation for two years. That is how my work with children began. As to your question about special education, I don't have an easy answer for this. To me this label of 'special' seems insidious, because when one says 'special education' it seems to me that

what will be imparted will not be in its entirety. For instance, many children - like me and many of my friends - never wanted to go to special schools. They wanted to take all the difficulties of "normal schools" and yet stay with normal schools.

SK: Could you please dwell a little on inclusive education and gender?

AG: Education of children with disabilities should start from the assumption that all children are competent, only the cognitive styles are different. As a psychologist, Vygotsky interested me. He talked about the 'zone of proximal development', saying that children should not be shown what the teacher knows. Rather, let the teacher see how much the child knows and take the child forward from there, thus facilitating the child. And then there were people like Paulo Friere and Karl Rogers who talked about 'freedom to learn'. Through Psychology I came to have a sense of what inclusion could be in genuine education. I worked for ten years in B.El.Ed. and conceptualised the paper on 'Human Relations in Education' - Poonam [Batra] and I devised the curriculum and both of us were psychologists and both had a feminist leaning too and so a framework on identity came up, taking Erikson Marcia's work into account. In a paper of 100 marks, 50 would be allotted for workshops in which issues like fear, co-operation, competition, disability would be brought in and we worked very hard on this for 10 years. And during this period I wrote another paper - on social change, in which I wrote about girls, around gender - how girls are not included in the normal strata and in the disability strata too.

SK: Vygotsky's idea of proximate learning obviously gives us the idea that there is a certain

role that teachers and administrators play in the learning of children with disabilities or even children in general. So, how do you perceive the role of teachers and administrators in special education? Could you tell us about the issues of methodology, curriculum framework, and basic issues a teacher has in her mind?

AG: We worked on Piaget too, when I was with AADI (Action for Ability Development and Inclusion), Renu (Addlakha) was with me too. We tried that the methodology should incorporate the good things of Psychology and lead to a change in the education-framework. In case one is teaching a blind child, for example, how would one do it? What would be the requirements of these children? I have felt that if teachers are taught that if they are to teach disabled children, they should themselves imagine what it is to be disabled, I mean, your phenomenology and that of the children. First it is this that needs to be understood - the curriculum will come later. What needs to come first is sensitivity. I think the tools need to be changed. Some teachers seem to be teaching disabled children very well and they have many methods of teaching too but because the courses even of the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI) are designed for the teaching of Special Education, there has been no change and there has also been no connect and I started feeling very dejected – which I still do.

SK: And there is the school part, they are not paying heed to guidelines, to the issues highlighted in the NCF 2005. National Curriculum Framework, the later version of it, does include some guidelines to cater to the needs of children with disabilities in inclusive education; however these guidelines are not being implemented by schools. How do you look upon this aspect?

AG: Well, they don't even admit the 25% economically weaker sections, that too is negated by giving arguments such as - if children from such sections come.....

SK: The milieu will be disturbed?

AG: The difference will remain. When such arguments are proffered, I come to feel that Special Schools are okay. I remember, a system was introduced in Delhi during the Congress government, if I am not mistaken - in Rajiv Gandhi's time, I think - the Bill too had come up in his time. A resource room was opened in MCD schools with a room for intellectually impaired children. This led to some interaction between children and the teachers. A few days back I had gone to Lady Irwin College for a lecture. They seem to have done some solid work, some things at least – but there too I did not sense that there were any disabled children, they were mostly normal. But they were studying disability. This attempt at congruence has, I think, been made quite beautifully. Schools in Delhi like Vasant Valley and Shri Ram and St. Mary's have done really good work. But all three are very costly. Only disabled kids whose parents are rich can go there. They don't take all children. Prof. Sadgopal has been advocating the cause of the common school, the neighbourhood school – we too supported this but it has not happened, and one is not sure if it will happen - and if it does, when. Moreover, the teachers of special schools are paid less than the other teachers – this too is a problem – teachers who work so hard on special children get paid less. And so, they either try to take tuitions for special education – or, in the given situation try to ultimately shift to mainstream schools.

SK: Let's now turn to Disability Studies which is making some waves here and there but it's

not getting the momentum it deserves to have. So what do you think is the scope and nature of this field in India?

AG: One can't really say that nothing has been done. I have been going to many schools and find that children are doing well. There are teachers and principals who are genuinely interested in kids like that. But if there is no epistemology of disability, and till such time as knowledge-production related to disability is in the concessional and charitable mode, we will not be able to achieve much. This is what I think. We need both theory and praxis. We have to make people learn and understand what disability is and what is the epistemology, knowledge-production and ontology of disability. But, as I said earlier, it is not that work has not been done.

And let me share something about my Ambedkar University, Delhi assignment. For the first paper in the undergraduate course in Ambedkar University, 53 students came – for the special interest course. I was happy that children are at least coming. But then there was the issue of assessment too, of these students. I started teaching them, little bit about education but also a bit about peer-group and through the movies, Hollywood, Bollywood and also did documentaries with them. And this gave me some more insights. The Elective Course that is now coming up, we have to see what it will be like. For example, there is the aspect of 'Experiencing Disability' that is the first topic for the Elective paper – so that what is the experience of disability, that comes to be read. I have given them quite a few books which include Ved Mehta, Tito Mukhopadhyay's book on Autism, Nancy Meyer, Lennard Davis, Shivani Gupta, Malini Chhib. These books do tell us about the phenomenology, at least. What I am trying to do is joining India with the West here.

I have a vision of Disability Studies, I would at least like and try to bring Elective courses in Disability just like there are in Education, and if approved, they could go to schools too.

SK: Before we conclude, what would be your message to disabled students and their parents and teachers?

AG: I think for the parents, I have to say, it is a difficult task. However, there is nothing in life that comes without struggle. And if we connect and relate, solidarity too comes. And if we are able to take struggle and solidarity together, we will be able to encourage our students as well – they need to realise that they are not helpless. As a friend says, "Don't fix us, we are not broken." As Psychology says – and I do, too – "to be normal, seems shockingly repellent to me." So it seems to me that to be "normal" is in itself a problem. All that I want to say is, do whatever you feel like – for instance, the slogan "nothing for us without us" and "no pity, no pity", "no charity, no charity". All this can be done. Let us understand that struggle is there for each and every human being. It is universal. And as my father would say – "*gaae na us ke muqaddar ki taareekii, phoonk diyaa jis ne apna ghar raushni ke liye/ Wahi to gul ke tabassum ka raaz samjhega, tamaam umr jo royaa ek aashiqui ke liye.*" (One who has set his own house on fire in search of light, will for ever suffer the darkness of his fate/ Only the one who has cried a life time for love, will appreciate the secret of the smile of the flower.)

He used to say the same to me. As a woman I too have endured some sorrow – for instance, marriage is not something very romantic, I have come to understand this at least at this age. My father used to say, you just go on, move on, and just see what comes by. So that's it.

SK: Thank you very much. I wish you all the best for Disability Studies at AUD.

(Translated from the original in Hindi by Ramnik Mohan. He works as a freelancer in the fields of translation and documentation.)

Endnotes

¹ Ghai, Anita. (2002). Disabled Women: An Excluded Agenda of Indian Feminism, *Hypatia*, 17.3, 49-66.

² Ghai, Anita. (2001). Marginalisation and Disability: Experiences from the Third World. In M. Priestley (Ed.) *Disability and the Life Course: Global Perspectives*, pp 26-37, Cambridge: CUP.

Santosh Kumar is pursuing his PhD on “Gender and Disability in Talk and Text” from the Department of Linguistics, University of Delhi.

santoshk.du@gmail.com