

# Trials and Triumphs of a Pioneering Bahujan Institution Builder

Chetana Sawai

**Abstract:** *Chetana Sawai participated in the discussions held by The Shared Mirror on Bahujan perspectives on the impact of the pandemic. She spoke about her father Dinesh Sawai's journey from childhood to emerging as a prolific institution builder serving the educational needs of rural Maharashtra. Chetana's current concerns about the immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic and lockdown on her students and staff form a significant portion of this talk. Further, she shares deep insights into the trials and triumphs of building autonomous minority institutions for Bahujan students.*

I don't know where to start. What is it that I do, or the people who work with me, what do they do? To be frank we are not doing anything great. This is our job and we get salaries for it. We are living a luxurious life here. We get two square meals every day, we have all the facilities here. So, if we are doing anything for the community or we are doing anything related to education we are not doing any favor to the community or to the society. I feel we should be doing this. But if I keep my father in the focus and then consider this it wouldn't be the same. You all must know about Nagaraj Manjule; his first film was Fandry and once my father and I were watching that film. There was a scene in which Jabya, the main character, his house is shown in the film. It wasn't a properly built house; it was a very small hut. In that scene Jabya's mother makes some *rotis* and keeps it for Jabya and leaves for work. When Jabya returns from school and enters the house and proceeds to eat his food a dog snatches the *roti* and runs away. When my father saw that scene, he started crying and I asked him why was he crying. He replied: this reminds me of myself and similar was the condition of my house.



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My father and his folks lived in the village and they never had a proper house. They lived by the riverside, close to the place where the pigs would live. Their work was to break stones on the river bank and that would earn them their two square meals. Their village was Paunar. Many of us must be aware of Vinoba Bhave, who is related to Bhoodaan movement: the land reform movement. At that time Vinoba Bhave had come to Paunar and set up his Ashram there. The Ashram was by the river and my father and his family and neighbors used to do the job of breaking stones there. Sometimes it would happen that the sound of breaking stones would disturb Vinoba Bhave and his disciples; they used to meditate or something, I never enquired about it. Since it was disturbing them they also stopped doing whatever they were doing. The caste we come from—Mahars—they are like artisans, the way Kunbis are peasants, Telis are oil pressers, Mahars were not like that. They would do whatever work they could find. When their stone breaking started disturbing Vinoba Bhave they lost their jobs and there was nothing for them to eat. What to do about those two square meals?

My grandmother used to go to Dumdum Sahib; there is a Muslim saint here, Sheikh Farid Baba, so every Monday one would roam around the village and collect flour in his name so that they could make *rotis* out of them and that is what sustained them. Once it so happened that they couldn't collect enough flour to feed them. And since there was no door sometimes the dogs and cats would also take away their food. They have gone through all this and thus the kind of things I can say about myself and my privilege such as getting proper food every day, I live comfortably, I have a car, the way I am enjoying my life etc. has not been true for my father. Today, when I see his journey from a small village to building a huge infrastructure, I feel that he has the right to say that I have grown out of and surpassed very difficult circumstances.

My father passed his class 10<sup>th</sup> from Paunar but then the question arose about the rest of his education. His elder brother was concerned saying 'I couldn't study but my youngest brother must get an education.' It must have been around 1961-62 when Babasaheb's Milind college was newly formed in Aurangabad and a lot of teachers from Aurangabad came to Vidarbha and went from village to village. They actually searched for students who wanted to study. My father's eldest brother learnt that some people from Babasaheb's college in Aurangabad have come and they want to teach the children here. That is how one of the teachers picked up my father and took him along to Aurangabad. He had no idea what was going to happen there, he only knew it was Babasaheb's college and he was supposed to go there. He only had two pairs of clothes to wear, those only included half pants. He did not have footwear. They went to the college and got admission there. The first thing they got after getting admitted was their scholarship. What would they have done with that scholarship money? They bought flip flops for themselves. And then my father transitioned from half pants to full pants. All this happened in Babasaheb's Milind college. All the people who had gone from Vidarbha to Aurangabad, including my father, had a kind of an agitation and assertion in them. My entire family here in Wardha: Grandmother, great grandmother—all of

them know how to operate *Dandpatta*, it is a kind of weapon, they also knew archery; they knew all the techniques of self-defense.

When my father went to Aurangabad he learnt what it means to have new books. A number of incidents there made them feel that we are Ambedkarites. Last time when I had done an interview with my father along with Pradnya, he had talked about the Shanti Nagar area. There were some hut settlements which had been set up by the goons on Babasaheb's 4 acres land. When my father and his people learnt about this my father and his friends decided to deal with this. Bhalchandra Mungekar and Yashwant Manohar were my father's batchmates. Yashwant Manohar was a poet so he wasn't into agitation and into physical altercation. But my father and his friends made a gang of sorts and carried out agitation and got Babasaheb's land vacated from those goons. I think some educational institutions were set up there later on. I also have been told that some of the girls studying in Milind college would get harassed by some people and that would hamper their studies. Those goons were also tackled by my father and his gang. All this led to serious allegations against my father and he ran away from there and came back to Wardha.

My father studied Physics, Chemistry and Maths. After returning to Wardha he established Dalit Panthers in Wardha. He was the first one and served as the president of Dalit Panthers for many years. There were many atrocities here and he would be the leader to fight against those atrocities. One of the persons who was involved in one such atrocity is now a well-known Godman here and he has established many educational institutes. He runs a group of institutions in Wardha. This person is from Uttar Pradesh, he is an Agnihotri. They call themselves Kshatriya. They had a lot of buffaloes. The Agnihotris had their colony there. Right next to it was the Mahar people's dwellings. They would constantly create trouble for Mahar and Maang people. When they would take their buffaloes for grazing they would go via Mahar and Maang neighborhoods and cause a lot of damage to their property. When my father learnt about it he made a plan with his gang and once the buffaloes were out my father barged into one of their houses and beat him up. This led to him being booked under IPC 307—attempt to murder.

They want to infuse skill development in the field of education. Skill development will definitely not require the study of science. Thus, through skill development they only want to create a service class. These will be those students who won't bring about a revolution by getting education. They will bring back the old times when people were only meant to do their caste-assigned duties. They want to bring back those times through education that doesn't require logical thinking. But what is this skill development? There are caste based skill skills—it includes peasants, garbage collectors, artisans like potters and others, barbers—they want to reinvigorate that skill based caste system. For example, the male members of the Maang community in Vidarbha region have traditionally been associated with playing drums and music in weddings and women generally work as masseuses. The purpose of skill development is to send these communities back to the traditional occupations assigned to them and that would lead to them getting employment. This clearly means

that if you are from the Maang community you won't be able to become a doctor or you won't be educated at a university, you won't become a professor, not a businessman either. Your job will be to carry out the same profession that your ancestors were assigned to do. Pandit Deen Dayal Yojna is being run at a very large scale and billions of rupees are being spent to put in place a skill development system. From my perspective as an educationist I believe for the Bahujan this is quite alarming a situation.

### **Impact of the lockdown on education of students in rural areas**

When I spoke to Anu didi a couple of months ago I had shared with her that we have a school here in Waigaon, Maharashtra. We get around 600-700 students from 25-30 nearby villages. Ever since the lockdown was announced in the wake of Covid-19 the schools haven't reopened here yet. The schools had reopened for 15 days but the lockdown was announced again. Students from the rural regions have been impacted quite badly due to the lockdown. We have a lockdown for the coming 36 hours in Wardha, many neighborhoods in Nagpur are also closed down. After seeing all this I feel the political rallies etc. are being taken out in full force but when it comes to education, lockdown is being used as a conspiracy against educating children. Many people have lost lives due to Covid-19 and I acknowledge its lethal presence but government doesn't yet have a solid plan with regard to continuing education so that we can say that even if there is lockdown and there is Covid-19 and the fact that schools have been closed down in rural regions but all that has not affected education; the government has not come up with any such plan.

When the lockdown was imposed, the education minister in Maharashtra, Varsha Gaikwad, and another MLA Bachchu Kadu, their first statements were that schools will be closed due to the lockdown and their second statements were that now schools' need not be paid the fee. As an educationist and someone with a Bahujan perspective I would expect them to say that now we are carrying out a drive under which all the school teachers will be given a special online training and through that training students will be educated. I haven't heard any such statement from the education ministry. Through social media such as WhatsApp groups an atmosphere has been created which is only focusing on the fee. I haven't read a single message that now when the students are going to learn online, we need to come up with a solution so that this facility also reaches the last student in the rural regions. I cannot imagine how educational practices have been removed from the lives of these students for a whole year, especially in the rural parts. In rural regions people's financial conditions are really bad due to the lockdown; students cannot even afford mobile phones.

I have also observed behavioral changes in school going children due to the lockdown—they are more irritable, stubborn, they show lack of focus, and their entire schedule has been disturbed. All these things can be understood by those parents who are educated and able to observe all this in

their children but those parents who aren't even remotely connected with education but all they want is that their child should study and 'I will work in the fields or I will do some other manual work but my child will attend the school, I couldn't study but she should study.' I don't think these latter parents may not have observed behavioral changes in their children. People in the education field, or those who know a little bit of science and psychology, may understand this.

In rural areas, the production of soybean, cotton and pulses has really come down. I don't know what the reason is because whenever there is low production the Minimum Support Price (MSP) offered by the government is much better. It is the same situation this time—production is very low and MSP is very high. But ultimately it is not going to benefit anyone other than the government. The entire brunt will be borne by the Dalit-Bahujan. parents of children do not have money in their hands so how will they pay the school fee?

Secondly, I have noticed that parents are under more pressure to find money for festivals. They don't have money to spend on education and books but have to spend on Diwali celebrations. It is my agony that they are so taken in by religion that they end up ignoring education, of course it is not applicable to everyone.

Then there is another dangerous policy of the government which says that come what may the student cannot fail in a class until she reaches 8<sup>th</sup> standard. Thus, there is a tendency that is emerging among parents that the child doesn't have to be sent to the school and since the government ministers have asked that the school fee doesn't have to be paid and my child will anyway move to the next class we don't have to worry. These things may seem good for the time being and may seem like a win-win situation. But if we look at it by keeping their future in perspective then it will come across to be quite dangerous, especially for the Bahujan. If educational practices are taken out of your life for a whole year I believe that you are thrown back by 50 years. Even then, at the school that we are running—Oxford Public School—we have bought an app recently which we are going to provide free of cost to the students and I hope it will help the students. A lot of harm has already been done but we aim to fix it in the time to come.

All this drama associated with online education has mentally harassed the teachers in the rural areas, particularly women teachers for women make for a large section of the teachers. All of a sudden, they were told that a lockdown has been imposed and schools are not going to reopen and you will have to teach online. But what is this online teaching? Teachers didn't even know about the apps meant for this kind of teaching. In the beginning, I held meetings with the teachers and I learnt that they did not know what Zoom or Google Meet was. If this is the state of learned teachers then what will become of the students living in the rural regions. Anyway, 6-7 months have already passed and students are slowly becoming aware but usual problems of connectivity and network issues are there. So, we decided to have a teacher-student contact program. Under this program the teachers go to the villages and hold cluster meetings, which means that students who come from far off villages are made to sit together in a cluster of 10-12 students each and they are taught there

in these makeshift classes. We got a good response to this. We are continuing with this program. It is better than having nothing at all, at least for the time being.

I can only speak confidently about the field I come from and as an educationist I can say that Covid-19 has harmed education in a big way, especially Bahujan people's education. Students that are well aware, they may be upper castes or living in urban areas, they do not have these problems. The maximum problems are faced by the people living around me or other people living in other rural regions. Something needs to be done about it, only discussions won't help. I hope this talk leads to some kind of an action program.

### **Trials and triumphs of building institutions to serve education of Bahujan children**

When my father won that case in the Nagpur bench of Bombay High Court it was the first Buddhist minority educational institute in Maharashtra. After that I searched a lot. It seems it was the first in the entire country.

When I read debates on social media about Buddhists and Mahars being minority and also about Bhima Koregaon, I feel it is wonderful to discuss all this and Bhima Koregaon does provide the strength to fight, but what now? What is the future for us? Babasaheb converted to Buddhism but he also gave you article 29 and 30 and the entire constitution, why do you not read it? We will need to educate ourselves more. And I believe that being an Ambedkarite you have that daring inbuilt in you, you do not need to borrow it from anywhere else.

When my father returned from Aurangabad to Wardha. He had a misunderstanding with his friend which led to a fight between them and his friend had remarked that if you are so great why don't you open a school! It was after that that he registered Deen Bandhu Education society and started a school under its banner. He had kept his same friends as members of the management of that school. Once school started, he started receiving grants and then the friends started saying that since I am one of the members I also have a share in this grant. My father said, ``Why do you want the share now when the school has just started, we have to go a long way—that was his vision. But he didn't fight with them much. He left that society, something he himself had registered and started and had done all the hard work for it. After that he started Chetana Education Society and then he chose the members from within the family, people who would follow his instructions and not contradict him and would run after the money. Thus, it is important to remember if you wish to open up an institution that the members that you use for the governing body should be the ones who would listen to you else it takes no time to break down the institution. It comes down to a One-Man Show! People are so learned around us and everyone has their own opinion, no one wants to listen to anyone and the mission and the goal is forgotten.

Every year from 3<sup>rd</sup> January to 12<sup>th</sup> January we celebrate as a 10-day long *Mahotsav* (festival). 3<sup>rd</sup> January is the birthday of Savitribai Phule and 10<sup>th</sup> January is the birthday of Mata Jijabai, mother of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. We have also given a name to this festival: *Satyashodhak Parv*. We have many cultural activities such as dance, drama, poster making competition, elocution competition, debate, poetry recitation etc. Mostly our focus is social reformation and social transformation. I want to share that the by-laws of both Subhedar Ramji Ambedkar Education Society and Chetana Education Society have been copy pasted from People's Education Society. And we haven't only copied and pasted them, we are also implementing them. All our cultural programs are focused on the social aspect of things, whatever route you take it has to reach Babasaheb! It starts and ends with him. At the level of school also we try to implement it. There are some limitations for students from different communities but we find ways to inculcate those values from Phule, Shahu to Anna Bhau Sathe in our students. There are Christian and Muslim minority schools where the recitation etc. relate only to their respective communities as far as their prayers and assembly recitations are concerned, we do not do that for there are constitutional values which we want to preserve and propagate.

My PhD research subject is also the same. Maharashtra has around 3-3.5 thousand minority colleges. And out of those only 90-100 are Buddhist minority colleges and we don't even know whether these colleges are functional or not. As per the data that I have there are only 4-5 Buddhist minority institutions in Vidarbha region and out of those one is Chetana Education Society and the other is Subhedar Ramji Ambedkar Education Society. So, our footprints in the education sector are close to zero or say minus. That we have to work on.

It was in 1969 when my father had registered Deen Bandhu Education Society under Public Trust Act 1950 and within that he started Babasaheb Ambedkar Vidyalaya. There is a very established Maratha entrepreneur called Bapurao Deshmukh, they have many engineering colleges and also own around 72 schools in different villages of Wardha, it is a very big Maratha lobby. They had a direct relationship with Yashwantrao Chavan. When they learnt that a Mahar boy has registered a school and that school is running in Bhim Nagar area, he called my father to his place and told him why are you going after this school business, nothing is going to come out of it; it will ruin your life. It will be better if you work for me, my father outrightly rejected it.

My father has always walked ahead by taking everyone along. Our organization has OBCs, it has Marathas, it has people from all backgrounds. He knows how to manage with everyone.

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**About Dinesh Sawai:** At the age of 24 he opened a school named Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar School in 1969. But due to internal disputes he handed over the entire society and school to his colleagues and stepped out. Then he established Chetana Education Society in 1972. He had tried to establish

many institutions ranging from Kindergarten, orphanages to old age homes. But from 1992 onwards he tried to focus on educational institutes by initiating a D.Ed college; since then, more than 20-30 thousand students have passed out of his institutions and thousands are currently enrolled.

Apart from Chetana Education Society, he has also established Subhedar Ramji Ambedkar Education Society in the year 1993 under which 2 government aided colleges and 3 others are functional. Under Chetana Education Society, there are a total 14 institutions functional including 2 hostels for girls and boys. Around 250-300 employees are working in both the societies as faculty and administrative staff.

He also established Dr. Ambedkar Shikshak Shkshakettar Karmachari Sahakari Patsanstha (co-operative bank) for employees working in the education sector.

*About Chetana Sawai:* Since her early twenties, Chetana has been actively helping in the management of the institutions serving in different roles, even as she continued to pursue higher education. She currently works as an assistant professor in social work. She serves as the director of Subhedar Ramji Ambedkar Education Society and the president of the Co-operative bank.

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