



‘Everyone has a right to education and respect’ – Sangeeta Farasi

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The story of a person is worth telling and listening to when it encapsulates deep social concerns, a strong desire to address those concerns, and the determination to face the difficulties in this journey. The story of Sangeeta Farasi, a teacher at the Government Primary School, Gahad in the Srinagar district of Uttarakhand, is woven with such threads of hope.



Figure 1. Children enjoying a play activity together.

On a beautiful hillside in the city of Srinagar, Uttarakhand stands the Government Primary School, Gahad. A story is being written here by the school teacher, Sangeeta Farasi. Education and respect are the main characters of this story. It is the story of a community in the city that survives on begging. Education has remained a distant dream for this community, constantly struggling to secure two square meals a day. The community also faces allegations of theft and pickpocketing, which results in the police arresting them at any time, on any charge. This is a story about understanding their challenges and earning their trust. It is also about a teacher who has guided the children to school and helped these children

reach state-level competitions, sparking their interest in learning; and about the children, filled with confidence, who now embrace education.

To understand and work on inclusion, there are two critical aspects and Sangeeta Ma’am is continually striving to address both. The first is understanding the need for inclusion, which means identifying the issues that lead to exclusion, both in society and in school. The second is the process itself – inclusion should happen so naturally that no one even notices it, allowing all diverse identities to blend while retaining their uniqueness. Ten years ago, when Sangeeta Ma’am took her first steps in this

direction, she did not know how long the journey would be or how much change it would bring. Her efforts toward inclusion can be seen in two categories: social change and academic initiatives.



Figure 2. Social and geographical conditions do not come in the way of learning.

Social change

Understanding the context: Solving a problem is essential, but understanding its root causes is equally important. Sangeeta Ma'am did just that. When she came across this settlement (*basti*) where people, condemned to poverty caused by contempt, exploitation, and injustice, survived by begging, she realised that for those whose primary concerns were survival and identity, there was much to be done before even introducing the concept of education. There needed to be an effort to help this community understand the reasons behind their hardships and learn to trust her.

Earning trust: Gaining the trust of the community was a significant challenge. Sangeeta Ma'am understood their needs and said, 'I'll provide financial support equal to what your children earn by begging each day. Start sending your children to school.' She began providing groceries to the children's families, using her earnings. Before all this, she had started visiting the settlement daily, listening to the families' issues, understanding their struggles, and, to some extent, trying to address them.

Regularity a challenge: The issue of children regularly attending school remained a problem. They would often go out to beg, either due to habit or the pressure from their parents. To address this, Sangeeta Ma'am implemented two strategies. First, she decided that the mother whose child/children attended school regularly would receive the 'Best Mother Award'. This award would include groceries and clothes, all of which Sangeeta Ma'am bought herself. Second, she shared her concerns with Sub-Inspector Sandhya. As a solution, whenever the children were seen begging, Sub-Inspector Sandhya would lovingly guide them to the school.

These efforts resulted in improved regularity among the children. Naturally, this had a significant impact on their learning and provided them with better opportunities to study and acquire other skills. The first 'Best Mother Award' went to Ankul's mother. Ankul is now preparing for his high school exams and, in addition to motivating other children in the settlement to study, he also helps them with their studies.

Preparing for school: The children's regular attendance was still limited to Sangeeta Ma'am's house. Here, she would play games with them, tell stories, and explain the importance of education. The actual process of going to school had not yet begun. To prepare them for school, she had to teach the children how to interact with each other and with teachers. She also had to arrange for school uniforms, bags, books, shoes, and other necessities. Thankfully, gathering these materials had become easier as some people in the city started supporting the cause. The main challenge, however, was in their behaviour and language. The children had picked up foul language from their surroundings. They did not know how to communicate respectfully with adults. There was also the concern that this behaviour could cause problems for the other children in the school and their families. Sangeeta Ma'am explains, 'I had only two things to offer – patience and love. I knew this change would take time. Although there were times when I felt disheartened, then I would remember their innocent faces, and gain new energy.'

'Sangeeta Farasi is a dedicated teacher. The way she has taken parents into confidence to bring children into the mainstream can truly be compared to the work of a full-time organisation. Ensuring transportation for children to and from school using her own resources, and teaching them at her home in the evenings, is truly inspiring. The deep relationship she has built with the families in the community, winning their trust, is remarkable in itself.'

Ashwini Rawat, Block Education Officer, Khirsu,
District Pauri Garhwal, Uttarakhand

What will people say?: On one hand, there was the challenge of bringing the children to school, teaching them, preparing them, understanding the struggles of their families, finding solutions for them, and earning their trust. On the other, there was the challenge of hearing people say, 'This is madness,' or doubting her efforts with comments like, 'She must be doing this for some reward, and will not be able to keep it up for long,' or 'How long can she keep funding this from her own pocket?' and 'There must be some other intention behind all this.' It's not that Sangeeta Ma'am was unaffected by these remarks – she felt sad, discouraged, and weary at times. But her family stood by her. She would think of 'what people will say' and in the next instant, smile and head back to the settlement.

Giving children new experiences: Learning does not just happen in school or through books. Sangeeta Ma'am understood this and began to introduce new experiences into the children's lives, experiences they had not had before. For example, taking them to nearby places, talking about them, riding in a car, eating at a table sitting on chairs, watching TV, and so on. One such experience was taking the children to a restaurant to eat. It was a place where they were often chased away from the doorstep itself, but this time, they went there fearlessly, sat at a table together, ate, and celebrated. It felt like a new world had opened up. She recalls, 'That day, I was with the children at a restaurant. It was raining heavily. One child was looking out of the window, quietly, staring. I asked him, 'What are you looking at so intently?' He looked at me with eyes filled with tears and said, 'Because of you, we're here today. While the whole city is getting soaked in the rain, we aren't getting wet. Any other day, we wouldn't even be allowed to stand here to stay dry. People would chase us away. But today, even the ones who usually chase us away are getting wet.' Sangeeta Ma'am saw something in the child's eyes that still fills up her eyes with tears whenever she remembers that moment.



Figure 3. The vehicle arranged by the teacher for the children's commute to school.

Academic efforts

Before going to school, after coming back from school:

The children had become friendly with Sangeeta Ma'am, and even the parents had begun to trust her, but this was not enough. As the children started getting prepared for school, she sometimes visited the settlement and at other times, she invited the children to her home, and in this way, their studies began. In this initiative, two youngsters named Rekha and Anil supported her, and a community member, Shanti ji not only joined in but also gave encouragement. Sangeeta Ma'am says, 'We used to teach the children for a short while every day. The effort was to make sure they didn't get bored of studying. Sometimes, there were games they liked, sometimes songs, and food and drink, but books were always there. Conversations would start with stories and poems and then connect with recognising letters and using math in everyday life. For the children, it was exciting to realise that things like who pushed whom and how many times, or who ate how many pieces of bread, could also be math.'

The children's lives began to change. Dressed in their school uniforms, they would sit in the motor vehicle arranged by Ma'am to go to school. They spent the entire day at school with activities like sports and studies, and afterwards, returned to Ma'am's home, where they enjoyed a meal. This routine has continued for years. Even now, after school, the children can be seen at her house, where they eat, study, play, and watch TV. Their school bags stay at Ma'am's house, ready for them to pick up the next morning and head to school.

Before these children joined, there were only 11 students at the school; now there are 23. But this story goes beyond enrolment numbers. There is no discrimination among the children, and parents are fully supportive, as the children play and learn together.

Teaching with a context: Sangeeta Ma'am hugs each child, pats their heads, and boosts their spirits. This is the first



Figure 4. The teacher working with competency-based groups.

part of her teaching method. This is how she creates a child-friendly atmosphere for her pedagogy. The children feel so connected to her that they eagerly participate in every teaching-learning activity that she organises.

Until we understand the children's backgrounds, there remains a gap between teaching and learning. I realised this one day when I visited the school. In a small school with two rooms and a little veranda, the children were studying in organised groups. Sangeeta Ma'am was seated among them, surrounded by groups of students at different skill levels, with whom she was working one by one. I befriended the children – some were shy, but we soon became friends. I sat with a group of first graders who were learning to make words from letters and to recognise letters within words. I thought, why not talk about what they were studying? I asked, 'Alright, what other words start with the sound 'B'?' Without any hesitation, the children started listing words: *baarish* (rain), *bakri* (goat), *bekaar* (useless), *bak-bak* (chatter), *badboo* (stench), *ber* (a fruit). Then with 'K', *kabootar* (pigeon), *kooda* (garbage), *kachra* (trash), *kana* (one-eyed), *Kallu* (a name), *kachumber* (mash), and *kaddu* (pumpkin). Teaching children in their context was vital, and here the context was unfolding quite well. We then spent some time on oral math questions to help the children understand addition and subtraction. Later, I asked, 'What food items do you like?' The children replied: *dal* (lentils),

chawal (rice), *bhaat* (rice), *dal-bhaat* (lentils with rice), *khichdi* (a rice and lentil dish), and little else.

Using TLM and learning from each other: Sangeeta Ma'am tried to understand the children's interests to make learning enjoyable for them. She introduced games, toys, and Teaching Learning Materials (TLM). There were additions, subtractions, word games, stories to listen to and tell, and steps toward reading and writing. Encouragement was working wonders. When one child learned something, she encouraged them to teach it to another. She created groups with children of varying skill levels, so they could learn from each other. She ensured that reading and writing did not feel like a burden but was fun. Despite various challenges, children are now comfortable with reading and writing.

School resources and management were handed over to the children: The school has two rooms. One is a combined reading room and library with a variety of interesting books for children of different age groups, along with a comfortable reading area. The children themselves manage this library. The second room houses various Teaching Learning Materials (TLMs), projects, and models for subjects like Hindi, English, maths, and EVS, which the children created with the teacher's help. The children can explain each project in detail and articulate



Figure 5. TLMs created by the teacher and the students.

its purpose. There is a computer in this room that the children use independently. They know exactly where to find the links to stories and discussion questions, and they confidently use the computer, often borrowing Ma'am's phone for internet access. Her phone, in fact, feels like it is within the children's domain, and she happily lends it to them. And yes, the children study outside in the veranda where the light is better.

Through this collaborative approach, both learning and play are integrated here. That's how four of the school's children are set to participate in state-level sports competitions. Although society may exhibit various forms of discrimination, there is no room for it in this school. All the children play, study, and eat together, helping one another in learning. Ma'am has organised them into groups for mixing children from all backgrounds. The study groups differ from the play groups, ensuring there is no space for discrimination in the school environment. The children learn as much from observing as from instruction, and this environment reflects that beautifully.

'There's a garden here that the children created,' Sangeeta Ma'am said, handing me a glass of tea. 'This has lemon from the tree planted by the children,' she added with a smile, her eyes twinkling as she pointed to the lemon tree lovingly nurtured by the children.

Respect for every child: Referring to children or their families as 'these children', 'their families', or 'these people' is inappropriate. The children may not say anything, but they hear all of this, and it hurts them. Such language can categorise them as different. Sangeeta Ma'am neither uses nor allows such terms to be used. She is uncompromising when it comes to maintaining respect for the children.

Additional learning support: The journey to literacy has not been easy. But it was crucial to recognise that these children are no less than anyone else. Sangeeta Ma'am began additional teaching sessions for the children in collaboration with others. This effort helped bridge gaps in learning, and slowly, the children's progress picked up pace. When COVID hit, it seemed like this process would come to a halt. However, with courage and trust, and adhering to all safety guidelines, the children continued to learn and grow even during the pandemic.

The city that had much to say: Sangeeta Ma'am says, 'The city that once labelled my work as madness, or believed it wouldn't last, or thought I was doing it for fame or awards, has slowly shed these misunderstandings. Those who doubted me have now come to support me. The children have given me so much love and trust that it brings tears to my eyes. Once, when I fell ill and couldn't go to school, the children took such good care of me after school. One brought juice, another cut fruit, and one even made tea for me.'

'People might wonder why someone would spend their money, time, and energy on this work, but the satisfaction I feel seeing these children learn is priceless. It wouldn't be possible without my family's support. Other colleagues at the school support me too,' she says. Principal Lalit Mohan Bisht adds, 'Ma'am is doing wonderful work. I try to support her efforts as much as I can' Bhojan Mata Sunita Devi says, 'Ma'am loves all the children like her own children and takes great care of them all.'

Some regrets, some hope: Things are going well, but there is still much that needs improvement. Nearby schools do not give admission to these children. Many more children still need access to schooling. Offering occasional help or praise is one thing, but truly embracing these children is more important – and that is still lacking. 'I can only educate them up to class V, but their journey is longer. Everyone must understand that education is their right. It pains me that a student from my school, Ankul, is taking his class X exams privately because no school would admit him, even though he deserves a place in any of these schools. I hope Ankul completes his education, finds a job, and helps his community believe that they have as much of a place in this world as anyone else. Earning a living with dignity is not a dream. This is just the beginning, and we still have a long journey ahead...'

Education is the single most effective means to achieve social justice and equality. Equitable and inclusive education is not only a necessary goal in itself but also an essential step toward building an equitable and inclusive society, where every citizen has the opportunity to dream, grow, and contribute to the nation's welfare.

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